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Citation

Willemars, I. F. D. M. R., & Martin, N. (2024). Modernity's irreplaceability: data, derivatives, and the fungibility of the flesh. In *The replaceability paradigm* (pp. 227-244). Berlin: De Gruyter.
doi:10.1515/9783111286402-013

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4171671>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Modernity's Irreplaceability: Data, Derivatives, and the Fungibility of the Flesh

Car le seuil de notre modernité n'est pas situé au moment où on a voulu appliquer à l'étude de l'homme des méthodes objectives, mais bien le jour où s'est constitué un doublet empirico-transcendantal qu'on a appelé *l'homme*. (Foucault 2014: 329–330)

[For the threshold of our modernity is situated not by the attempt to apply objective methods to the study of man, but rather by the constitution of an empirico-transcendental doublet which was called *man*. (Foucault, trans. Tavistock/Routledge 2007: 347)]

Throughout its different contributions, this volume has been preoccupied with the following question: how have processes of replacement, replaceability, and irreplaceability, structured our cultural present? Or again, how has replacement from Dante to Google's DeepDream influenced the way people conceive of themselves as individuals with reference to three related planes: the plane of signification, the plane of the subject, and the plane of the psyche. Borrowing Michel Foucault's term from *Les mots et les choses* [The Order of Things], we propose that the texts collected here deal with an "episteme" of replacement which may most aptly be studied through analyses of works of art on the one hand and technological and mediatic developments on the other. Like Foucault, we think that it is in aesthetics that an epistemic shift first becomes visible. And, like Walter Benjamin in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction], we think that changes in mediation and spectatorship are at the center of socio-political developments that coincide with the end of any episteme. If the preceding texts show how replacement and replaceability are reflected artistically and technologically, these concluding remarks frame those analyses not as analyses of an epistemological conjuncture of the present but as so many symptoms that that episteme is coming to an end.

Symptomatic irreplaceability and the replacement hypothesis

In 1903, the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel writes the following in an essay on metropolitan life titled “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben” [The Metropolis and Mental Life]:

Das 18. Jahrhundert fand das Individuum in vergewaltigenden, sinnlos gewordenen Bindungen politischer und agrarischer, zünftiger und religiöser Art vor – Beengungen, die dem Menschen gleichsam eine unnatürliche Form und längst ungerechte Ungleichheiten aufzwangen. In dieser Lage entstand der Ruf nach Freiheit und Gleichheit – der Glaube an die volle Bewegungsfreiheit des Individuums in allen sozialen und geistigen Verhältnissen, die sogleich in allen den gemeinsamen edlen Kern würde hervortreten lassen, wie die Natur ihn in jeden gelegt und Gesellschaft und Geschichte ihn nur verbildet hätten. (Simmel 1903: 204–205)

[The eighteenth century found the individual in the grip of powerful bonds which had become meaningless – bonds of a political, agrarian, guild and religious nature – delimitations which imposed upon the human being at the same time an unnatural form and for a long time an unjust inequality. In this situation arose the cry for freedom and equality – the belief in the full freedom of movement of the individual in all his social and intellectual relationships which would then permit the same noble essence to emerge equally from all individuals as Nature had placed it in them and as it had been distorted by social life and historical development. (Simmel, trans. Shils 2010: 338–339)]

Here, Simmel provides his origin story for humanism. A humanism that equalizes and frees the modern subject with reference to the notion that it is in the modern individual that a noble essence may be found; a noble essence that unfortunately was lost, and that, as a result, is in need of recovery. What he describes is the rise of the individual who is naturally gifted with an essence that has been distorted over time and must be retrieved if they are to become modern. This retrieval is, it will turn out, a retroactive gesture through which that which seems to be recovered is really invented for the first time and situated in a past that we are supposed to gain access to through self-investigation and discovery.

Simmel continues to situate a different modality of that same humanism in the following way:

Neben diesem Ideal des Liberalismus wuchs im 19. Jahrhundert, durch Goethe und die Romantik einerseits, die wirtschaftliche Arbeitsteilung andererseits, das weitere auf: die von den historischen Bindungen befreiten Individuen wollen sich nun auch voneinander unterscheiden. Nicht mehr der »allgemeine Mensch« in jedem Einzelnen, sondern gerade qualitative Einzigkeit und Unverwechselbarkeit sind jetzt die Träger seines Wertes. (Simmel 1903: 205)

[Alongside this liberalistic ideal grew up in the nineteenth century from Goethe and the Romantics, on the one hand, and from the economic division of labour, on the other, the further tendency, namely, that individuals who had been liberated from their historical bonds sought now to distinguish themselves from one another. No longer was it the "general human quality" in every individual but rather his qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability that now became the criteria of his value. (Simmel, trans. Shils 2010: 339)]

For our purposes, two elements in the above are important. The first is that Simmel registers a historical shift that he situates at the turn of the eighteenth century. A shift that, earlier in this volume, was referred to as a rupture that introduced a new episteme: the episteme of replacement. Throughout this volume, and in line with Simmel's argument, this episteme has invited self-defensive strategies of various sorts that are reflected in art and literature¹ (Simmel's "Goethe und die Romantik") and that take the shape of an emphasis on individuality, irreplaceability, and uniqueness on the part of the modern subject.

Secondly, Simmel urges us to consider that over the course of the nineteenth century, through a series of modernizations that relate both to the historical development of Capital as well as to artistic and literary interventions that he associates with Romanticism, the modern individual came to see itself as both qualitatively unique and irreplaceable. This newfound irreplaceability is situated, for Simmel, at the apex of modernity, and it is, paradoxically, always already responsive to the vicissitudes of modern metropolitan life. Irreplaceability turns out to be a modern concern for a self that is felt to be under threat and must be understood as a symptom of a larger political and socio-cultural development that emerges around the turn of the eighteenth century.

These two historical reflections on Simmel's part result in the following theoretical observations. First, irreplaceability is neither an ontological necessity associated with the human subject over time nor a foundational characteristic of modern subjectivity as part of the episteme of replacement itself. Instead, irreplaceability is a response (as opposed to a foundation) that is contingent on a specific historical conjuncture that began to take shape at the advent of what we have now come to call modernity. If Foucault states, on the final pages of *Les mots et les choses*, that the invention of "l'homme" [*man*] as a "doublet empirico-transcendental" [empirico-transcendental doublet (Foucault, trans. Tavistock/Routledge 2007: 347)] is a relatively new one – dated around the same time that Simmel dates our interest in irreplaceability – and one that can be traced histori-

¹ For more on the notion a self-defensive subject as central to the tradition of High Modernism in literature specifically, see Ernst van Alphen's "Configurations of the Self: Modernism and Dis-traction" from 2007.

cally and associated with the disciplines of the human sciences in particular, it is with the help of Simmel that we can come to realize how that invention has from the start been associated with issues of (ir)replaceability (Foucault 2014: 330).

Indeed, one of the central claims throughout this volume has been that anxieties caused by threats of replacement and replaceability know their riposte in a self-defensive emphasis on the supposed “qualitative Einzigkeit und Unverwechselbarkeit” [qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability” (Simmel, trans. Shils 2010: 339)] of the individual that finds itself threatened in this way (Simmel 1903: 205). What Simmel helps us understand is that this self-defense can be read as a symptom that may substantiate a hypothesis about the structure of the modern episteme itself. That hypothesis is that the problem of replaceability is the fundamental structure of a modernity that is now nearing its end. Claims of irreplaceability are the symptoms that the first part of such a hypothesis may be warranted. Evidence for the assumption that the structure of the modern episteme relies on the concept of replaceability exists in the Enlightenment’s insistence on the irreplaceable individual who must free itself from its self-imposed servitude to the opinions of others (Kant 1784: 481). And as with so many processes that show themselves only in mediated form, through their symptoms, this episteme too seems to have repressed² something of its essence. Contemporary anxieties around technological as well as racialized forms of replacement sparking new forms of reactionary and fascist politics today, indicate that we may be witnessing the final gasps of an episteme folding in on itself.

Anxious reductions: How the flesh contaminates Man

What Simmel fails to record in sociological terms is the fact that the very anxiety to find oneself replaced was not merely an external threat to the modern subject in the Global North, much less a result internal to metropolitan life. It was the

² We are, in a sense, already within the discourse of psychoanalysis here. If, for Freud, the unconscious always remains a hypothesis, it also remains forever in need of evidence (Freud 1915: 264). Evidence for the existence of the unconscious exists in the retelling of dreams, and in a range of symptoms that cannot, according to Freud, be otherwise explained and that are only ever mediated through consciousness. For more on the hypothesis of the unconscious and the way in which this plays a role in Freud’s own relationship to different disciplines see Isabelle Alfandary’s brilliant: “L’inconscient freudien entre science et fiction” [The Freudian Unconscious between Science and Fiction] from 2018.

result of a centrifugal force emanating from the disavowed and repressed center of the project of modernity: the plantations, the colonies, and the reduction of human beings to commodities with reference to a humanism unworthy of its name. This anxiety to be replaced is typical of what Sylvia Wynter calls the overrepresentation of Man, whose identity is structured around the exclusion of other genres of the human not so readily recognized within the scope of application of the project of Enlightenment reason in the modern episteme:

And this was to be the new “idea of order” on whose basis the coloniality of being, enacted by the dynamics of the relation between Man – overrepresented as the generic, ostensibly supracultural human – and its subjugated Human Others (i.e., Indians and Negroes), together with, as Quijano notes, the continuum of new categories of humans (i.e., mestizos and mulattos to which their human/subhuman value difference gave rise), was to be brought into existence as the foundational basis of modernity. With this revealing that, from the very origin, the issue of race, as the issue of the Colonial Question, the Nonwhite/Native Question, the Negro Question, yet as one that has hitherto had no name, was and is fundamentally the issue of the genre of the human, Man, in its two variants – the issue of its still ongoing production/reproduction in the form of the second variant. (Wynter 2003: 287–288)

What Wynter is arguing for, sometimes implicitly, is a more expansive form of humanism, one that can counter what Katherine McKittrick and she in conversation refer to as “liberal monohumanism’s *homo economicus*” and that would include those genres of the human that are, still today, excluded from the discourse surrounding Man (Wynter and McKittrick 2015: 10).

It is clear that whatever the nature of this humanism to come, it must be a form of humanism that ceases to focus on irreplaceability as the essential nature of the modern individual because it is this focus that results in replacement theories associated with the likes of Renaud Camus in France, Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands, or Lionel Shriver in the United States. Rinaldo Walcott, in a 2015 text, registers this issue in an instructive way when he writes in relation to the work of Wynter and the supposed irreplaceability of metropolitan modern Man:

One of the central apprehensions of that which is still “to come” is the place of the postcolonial migrant within the walls of the metropolitan city; this migratory presence signals the repeated limits of European humanism and the failure to reach beyond its limited conceptions of Man. (Walcott 2015: 194)

This apprehension, or anxiety, finds its root in the violent and economical reduction to flesh that Hortense J. Spillers theorizes with reference to Freud in the following way:

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. (Spillers 1987: 72)

In effect, then, it is at the moment of empire and colonialism and in the Global North that the mechanism of replacement is weaponized, and it is through a specific form of guilty consciousness that the modern subject feels itself threatened with the very force it has unleashed on the colonized and enslaved subject. Or, again, the self-defensive claim to irreplaceability is self-defensive in a double sense of the word. It is self-defensive in the sense that it seeks to defend a modern self that is fragile. But it is, at the same time, a defense against a self that has for the first time recognized its own power to transform a living subject into an object of exchange; a commodity; or, in Shakespearian vein, into a “pound of flesh” (Shakespeare 1911: 102).

The question of quantification and countability central to the development of Capital, and to the issue of exchange value and the fetishism of commodities more specifically (Marx 1990: 163–177), is, in Spillers’s estimation, a question of reducing a qualitative entity to measurement when she continues to write:

We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not “counted”/ “accounted,” or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. [. . .] The female in “Middle Passage,” as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies “less room” in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart. (Spillers 1987: 72)

The emphasis is on the word “possibility,” here effected through Spillers’s use of italics. But it is its *wildness* that comes to haunt the colonizer, the “slave-owner,” or the so-called irreplaceable individual. Indeed, it is the unruly nature of the logic of fungibility and exchange that contaminates the modern from within, and that is, in a self-defense against the brutality of the self, responded to through claims of irreplaceability and irreducibility. It is because the other is reduced to flesh that the self fears reduction and responds by turning its self-understanding into a symptom for an epistemic problem, the problem of replacement.

Symptomatic processes, reactionary responses

It is one thing to claim that the modern individual deems itself irreplaceable and that this irreplaceability is a symptom of a generalized condition of replaceability that modern Man finds itself confronted with in the metropolitan city. It is another thing to suggest that replacement is the structure that undergirds the logic of modernity as such and the colonial enterprise as well as the economics of slavery in particular. It is yet another thing to state that the self-defensive gesture of irreplaceability is reactionary in nature, or that it opens onto contemporary forms of racist rhetoric and fascist aestheticization of politics. It is this final claim that we seek to substantiate here.

Walter Benjamin famously shows how technological developments cause aura to disappear from the work of art. He defines the aura of a work of art as a specific relation to time and space that is lost when the work is reproduced. Aura, then, is that which is lost as a result of a technological development that strips the work of its relationship to tradition, of what Benjamin calls its cult value, that he associates with religious rituals and iconography (Benjamin 2007: 223). Benjamin introduces the notion of aura in the following way:

Man kann, was hier ausfällt, im Begriff der Aura zusammenfassen und sagen: was im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura. Der Vorgang ist symptomatisch; seine Bedeutung weist über den Bereich der Kunst hinaus. *Die Reproduktionstechnik, so ließe sich allgemein formulieren, lost das Reproduzierte aus dem Bereich der Tradition ab. Indem sie die Reproduktion vervielfältigt, setzt sie an die Stelle seines einmaligen Vorkommens sein massenweises.* (Benjamin 2001: 141)

[One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. (Benjamin, trans. Zohn 2007: 221)]

What we are dealing with, then, is yet another symptom of some underlying affliction – one to which we apparently cannot find direct access. *The loss of aura in art is a symptomatic process.* A curious way of phrasing things that fails to explain what the symptom is symptomatic for. We might speculate, given the context, that Benjamin simply means to say that the loss of aura is not only an issue in relation to works of art, but that other objects lose their aura as well – if they have one – through processes of reproduction. This seems to be in line with the sentence following the one that speaks about symptoms, and it has the additional

benefit of barring a discussion about what does and does not count as art for Benjamin or about which objects can or cannot lose their aura.

Unfortunately, however, this interpretation still fails to explain what the symptom is an index for. It explains one symptom in terms of the next without ever getting closer to the underlying affliction. A more convincing reading of this symptomatic process is that the loss of aura in art points towards some socio-cultural condition that bears a larger and more profound significance. This is the condition of substitutability or replaceability that is signaled in the final sentence of the quotation above. Indeed, what is at stake with the loss of aura as a symptomatic process, is a shift from uniqueness to plurality, a movement away from the irreplaceable and irreducible and towards the substitute, the copy, the manifold replacement. For Benjamin, this movement from uniqueness to plurality produces a political opportunity to respond for the masses and mass movements of his time that can either be progressive or reactionary in nature. The progressive response to the issue of substitution and replaceability would be to assume that aura is irrevocably lost, and to make use of the opportunities that this allows in terms of new forms of spectatorship and collectivity – Celia Graham-Dixon's text in this volume traces some of those possibilities.

For our purposes it is the reactionary response that warrants attention. Benjamin writes: "Kennzeichnend ist, daß auch heute noch besonders reaktionäre Autoren die Bedeutung des Films in der gleichen Richtung suchen und wenn nicht gerade im Sakralen so doch im Übernatürlichen." (Benjamin 2001: 150) [Characteristically, even today ultrareactionary authors give the film a similar contextual significance – if not an outright sacred one, then at least a supernatural one. (Benjamin 2007: 227–228)] The problem with this "ultrareactionary" response, for Benjamin, is not so much that these authors have ultrareactionary opinions outside or beyond their discussion of aura, but that they attempt to reintroduce aura in artistic works where it cannot be found. These authors are, in the literal sense of the word, reactionary: they react to the disappearance of aura, the disappearance of irreplaceability if you will, through a form of denial and forceful reintroduction of tradition and cultus where it has no place.

Like Simmel before him, and in line with Foucault, Benjamin too situates the episteme with which he is concerned as beginning around the eighteenth century. For him, a tradition that persisted even up until the turn of the nineteenth century was a tradition of individualized and hierarchic viewing experiences associated with and attached to the auratic in painting:

In den Kirchen und Klöstern des Mittelalters und an den Fürstenhöfen bis gegen Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts fand die Kollektivrezeption von Gemälden nicht simultan, sondern vielfach gestuft und hierarchisch vermittelt statt. Wenn das anders geworden ist, so

kommt darin der besondere Konflikt zum Ausdruck, in welchen die Malerei durch die technische Reproduzierbarkeit des Bildes verstrickt worden ist. Aber ob man auch unternahm, sie in Galerien und in Salons vor die Massen zu führen, so gab es doch keinen Weg, auf welchem die Massen in solche Rezeption sich selbst hätten organisieren und kontrollieren können. So muß eben dasselbe Publikum, das vor einem Groteskfilm fortschrittlich reagiert, vor dem Surrealismus zu einem rückständigen werden. (Benjamin 2001: 160)

[In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages and at the princely courts up to the end of the eighteenth century, a collective reception of paintings did not occur simultaneously, but by graduated and hierarchized mediation. The change that has come about is an expression of the particular conflict in which painting was implicated by the mechanical reproducibility of paintings. Although paintings began to be publicly exhibited in galleries and salons, there was no way for the masses to organize and control themselves in their reception. Thus, the same public which responds in a progressive manner toward a grotesque film is bound to respond in a reactionary manner to surrealism. (Benjamin, trans. Zohn 2007: 235)]

The division is between painting on the one hand and film on the other, where for Benjamin film allows for a collective and organized spectatorship, painting remained implicated in a history of hierarchy and individualism which invited the modern public to react in reactionary ways. Or, again, the response to surrealism is, for Benjamin, reactionary because it attempts to discover the holy grail of aura at a time when irreplaceability has already shown itself to be a strategy that will not defend the self against the dangers of replacement.

What the loss of aura is a symptom for, in other words, is a more generalized moment in which irreplaceability ceases to be useful as a self-defensive strategy for safeguarding individual uniqueness. And it is around the turn of the nineteenth century that this process, according to Benjamin, should have become evident. Technological innovations that showed themselves perhaps most obviously in art have the same repercussions not only for other objects but also for the human subject itself who, confronted with its own renewed sense of replaceability and in response to the failure of its tools for self-defense has a choice to make. Either assume the vulnerability that is at stake during the episteme of replacement or renounce that vulnerability and cling to a strategy of irreplaceability that has lost its tenability.

It is, unfortunately, this ultra-reactionary second response that the likes of Camus, Shriver, and Baudet insist on today. This option means that a contemporary political problem, that is to say, an epistemic conjuncture which sparks anxieties in response to the workings of Capital in general and to the reduction to flesh described by Spillers in particular, is transformed into a problem of aesthetics. The Lacanian formula "*je sais bien, mais quand même*" [I know very well, but nonetheless" (our translation)] is at work here: I know full well that I can be

replaced but I will claim irreplaceability nonetheless. According to this logic, in order to continue to recognize myself as irreplaceable, I have to hold on to the individualizing aesthetics of irreplaceability at the cost of repressing a political history of colonial and racist replacements that happened at my hands.

This is the rhetoric of the colonizer who, in Walcott's words, is increasingly apprehensive about "the place of the postcolonial migrant within the walls of the metropolitan city" (Walcott 2015: 194). To retain this rhetorical claim, one must insist, against one's better judgment, that one will not be replaced. If I am to keep my irreplaceability, say the Great Replacement "theorists," I must continue to disavow the possibility of my own replacement, even if it has happened to others at my hands, and will continue to happen – in sweat shops around the world or at the construction sites of football stadia in Qatar – for as long as I continue to claim my own invulnerability to this process. The culmination of this process is, according to Benjamin, war:

Alle Bemühungen um die Ästhetisierung der Politik gipfeln in einem Punkt. Dieser eine Punkt ist der Krieg. [. . .] Sie findet sie im Kriege, der mit seinen Zerstörungen den Beweis dafür antritt, daß die Gesellschaft nicht reif genug war, sich die Technik zu ihrem Organ zu machen, daß die Technik nicht ausgebildet genug war, die gesellschaftlichen Elementarkräfte zu bewältigen. (Benjamin 2001: 168–169)

[All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. [. . .] The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society. (Benjamin, trans. Zohn 2007: 241–242)]

War is the result of a political problem, then, which is rendered aesthetic. It is waged by those who are in dominant positions of power in order to hold on to that power. Modern war is, by definition, conservative in nature: it tries to defend existing power relations by refusing to accept technological transformations which make visible the replaceability of a self-defensive subject that unleashes the violence of replaceability on others in response. Tellingly, Benjamin helps us connect the dots by specifying the type of warfare with which we are faced here:

Der imperialistische Krieg ist ein Aufstand der Technik, die am »Menschenmaterial« die Ansprüche eintreibt, denen die Gesellschaft ihr natürliches Material entzogen hat. Anstatt Flüsse zu kanalisieren, lenkt sie den Menschenstrom in das Bett ihrer Schützengräben, anstatt Saaten aus ihren Aeroplanen zu streuen, streut sie Brandbomben über die Städte hin, und im Gaskrieg hat sie ein Mittel gefunden, die Aura auf neue Art abzuschaffen. (Benjamin 2001: 169)

[Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology which collects, in the form of 'human material,' the claims to which society has denied its natural material. Instead of draining rivers,

society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way. (Benjamin, trans. Zohn 2007: 242)

Like Spillers after him, Benjamin recognizes the reduction of human individuality so dear to the project of modernity to what he calls “human material”. The body reduced to flesh reappears here as the fodder for warfare that paradoxically emerges as the ultimate outcome of an insistence on irreplaceability. In other words: where the ultrareactionary claim of invulnerability to replacement first appears as a refusal to technological developments of replaceability and the disappearance of aura, those same responses come to haunt the self-defensive subject when the technologies of warfare reduce the “invulnerable” and “irreplaceable” subject-become-soldier to human material, forever replaceable by more bodies of the same kind. What we see in warfare, then, is the return of the repressed: it is the last gasp of an episteme of replacement that does not dare to speak its name.

The last gasp of an episteme: Reductions to data

Let us return to the present to gauge how the end of the episteme of replacement and its economic logic of replaceability announces a new paradigm that, with the financialization of Capital and the importance of information understood as data, produces completely new political problems and associated anxieties. If the authors in this volume have understood the episteme of replacement through the lenses of art and technology, and if we as its editors have insisted that the figure of the enslaved person understood as an economic “asset” is characteristic of that episteme, it is instructive to consider how financialized Capital produces new financial assets that introduce different threats and are symptomatic of a larger shift in the arrangement of knowledge itself.

Contemplating the end of an episteme does not, of course, entail that we are somehow beyond replacement, finally irreplaceable and truly unique, much less to deny the existence of contemporary forms of slavery and the continuation of what Spillers calls the hieroglyphics of the flesh. However, superimposed on the episteme of replacement, we suggest, is a new arrangement whose emergence introduces new modalities of racialization and racism, through new technological means. Ruha Benjamin has described this moment as “The New Jim Code” a term that she defines as “*the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era.*” (Benjamin 2019: 5–6) Where Benjamin enters the discussion from the perspective of algorithmic cul-

tures, machine learning, and AI, in *Race after Technology*, we would like to start from the perspective of a rather different technological invention: the derivative.

With the modulation of the replaceability/irreplaceability opposition outlined above, it appears that we are witnessing the emergence of a new historical moment which as yet lacks a proper name. One suggestion for such a name can be found in the work of Arjun Appadurai who, in *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance*, argues for the significance of the derivative as a more than purely financial concept. The derivative, Appadurai explains, is not merely the name for a financial product, but the name for a specific type of promise that takes the shape of a performative speech act. It is in its relation to the future, he suggests, that the derivative announces a new cultural logic. What we are witnessing is not merely the derivative nature of financialized Capital, but the derivative as a generalized model for thinking about the human subject.

In economic terms, a derivative is an asset that can be traded. It represents a belief about the value of a second asset which is called “underlying” in relation to the derivative itself. The derivative form is speculative in nature: it speculates on the price of the underlying asset at a certain point in the future. Further, and this may be the most important point: it operates as an insurance. What it insures is the value of the underlying asset for the party who agrees to sell said asset at a future date for a set price. In short, the derivative is a promise of one party that it will sell the underlying asset for a set price on a set date, and the promise of a second party that it will buy said asset for that given price and at that given time. The logic hinges on the idea that both parties have opposing expectations for the future price of the underlying asset, which is why Appadurai calls these promises “agonistic” (Appadurai 2016: 13). But the derivative itself is also an asset, meaning that it can be traded, just like the underlying asset which it is supposed to insure. If the owner of a derivative starts to suspect that the value of the derivative may go down at some point during its lifetime, that owner can decide to sell the derivative, or they can decide to enter into a new contract with a third party in an attempt to insure themselves against the potential decrease in value of the derivative. If that happens, a second derivative may be created, with as an underlying asset the first derivative that has as its underlying asset, for instance, a mortgage.

Although the derivative market contains within it the potential for endless and ever more ingenious forms of replacement, as the financial crisis of 2007–2008 made devastatingly clear, this process can continue only as long as people are happy to buy derivatives. It will grind to a halt as soon as there are no more people who believe that the underlying asset – in this case a mortgage usually owned by a bank – will go up in price. When that happens, no one will want to insure the bank

against the potential loss of value, and the derivative market will stop dead in its tracks. Appadurai describes this as follows:

Put another way, what collapsed in 2007–8 was a house of words made of contracts, each contract consisting of an agonistic pair of promises, together composing a performative chain as well as a performative mountain generated by the accrual of money value by the multiplication of wagers on uncertain future prices. When the market froze, [. . .] what collapsed was the architecture of promises on which financial profits are composed, in the age of the derivative form. (Appadurai 2016: 13–14)

The packaging of mortgages and the system for rating them in terms of risk and value was one of the main causes of the extreme decline in housing prices in the United States when the derivative market collapsed. Consider, however, the interesting paradox in the explanation above: it is through a system of insurances that the value of the underlying asset finally plummets. Or, again, it is as a result of what Appadurai calls an “architecture of promises” that were meant to insure an underlying asset against loss of value, that that very loss occurred. Where, at first, the value of any insurance depends on the value of the object insured and the risk of loss or damage to that object, that relationship essentially turns around when the derivative market started to collapse. The formula suddenly became: the value of the thing insured depends on the value of the insurance. The present, then, becomes meaningful in terms of what we predict will happen in the future. Predictability is key, and predictability relies on data. Paradoxically, this also means that in order for any derivative market, or speculative finance, to exist, those who partake in that market assume and must continue to assume that the reason they can make money is that the very market values that they aim to predict are never fully predictable. It is because they rely on someone with opposite predictions that money can be made. Or, again, it is because of an inherent unpredictability of the future that their predictions have any value whatsoever. Predictability is predicated on unpredictability, and the present becomes overdetermined by the future.

For Frederik Tygstrup, this shift in financial capital constitutes a shift in the very meaning of information and data:

Here, we are at the core of the phenomenon of information in the developed information society: it does not denote an object or property of an object, but a temporality: the speculative relationship between the object's present future and its future present. And hereby it invites me – and all the other objects it produces information about – to take part in its play with time, or as Rosamond had it: it measures me and intervenes in my time in one and the same gesture. (Tygstrup 2020: 19)

As data institutes a new economic logic of fragmentation – the dissolution of the individual into data points, the self, Tygstrup explains, is no longer something

from which information can be harvested, existing in a sense prior to that information, nor is it something at risk of being stripped of something, rather it is produced by virtue of a specific mode of using data to produce information. As he writes:

So how have ‘my’ data turned into valuable information? After my ‘I’ has been cut up into metrically manageable dividual slices, this data has been stacked with a host of other people’s data and then correlated vertically, among mine and others’ comparable dividual slices, and horizontally, between different stacked slices. What suddenly makes me interesting to the police, or the health authorities, or the bank, or the manufacturers, thus really has very little to do with the individual ‘me’ that was the starting point. A peculiar reversal is at stake here: usually we assume that information is a reference to or a predication of a given object. But in the information society, this hierarchical relationship between object and information is turned upside down. On the one hand, we have the data that give only a very limited and ‘dividualised’ representation of the individual object, and on the other hand the aggregated and correlated data that produce an entirely new object, which in turn might in fact only have little to do with the original object, but which nonetheless, by virtue of the information produced, makes it into an object of (a particular) interest (legal, political, mercantile, etc.). (Tygstrup 2020: 17)

Data, in Tygstrup’s account, thus inaugurates an era in which the irreplaceable is no longer that which is violated by the market’s reduction of the individual to predicted labor value, something that we once had but which is now lost, nor something which we possess and which is under threat from malevolent forces. Rather the irreplaceable now appears as a specter returning from a future invested with the authority of complete predictability. Consequently, although the threat of being replaced continues to inflame reactionary rhetoric, Tygstrup identifies a more insidious technological development that is already under way. Reductions to the flesh take on new forms as they become subject to algorithmic profiling and as the human body finds itself no longer measured only in terms of strength, size, or weight, but in terms of the volitions, predispositions and expressions which, as Bifo Berardi points out, were once the attributes of “the soul” (Berardi 2009). The modern dream of irreplaceability that Simmel theorized at the opening of this chapter has, in other words, undergone a profound modulation.

In trying to discern the implications of this latest shift in the fortunes of the irreplaceable, it is tempting to look back to Walter Benjamin’s analysis of aura and mechanical reproduction and note that the current moment too has the potential to invite new forms of reactionary and fascist responses, some of which are already alluded to in Tygstrup’s text. Tygstrup identifies the insidious logic of the predictive regime instituted by data and symptomatically expressed in the derivative when he writes:

In this sense, the derivative has become a paradigm for the kind of pre-emptive prevision that comes with the information regime of surveillance capitalism: a regime in which we constantly arrive a little too late in the future, overtaken by information about ourselves that we still don't even know about. (Tygstrup 2020: 21)

That pre-emptive prevision is, as we know, felt most directly by those who have always been excluded from the category of Man. Fragmentation into data-points turns out to be a re-interpretation of Spillers's reduction to flesh with a different temporal emphasis. Targeted today by technologies like the crime prediction software disproportionately affecting Black people discussed by Ruha Benjamin, or the predictive analytics employed by the US welfare system discussed by Virginia Eubanks in *Automating Inequality* (Benjamin 2019: 24; Eubanks 2019), the logic of reduction is still at work. The question is not, then, how to disavow those reductions or how to overcome the loss of aura. The question is not how to re-affirm a notion of irreplaceability inherited from Goethe and the Romantics. Instead, it is to consider and criticize those moments when irreplaceability re-appears in the form of data. Pre-emptive prevision, it seems, is only the latest reconfiguration of a self-defensive logic. One by which the irreplaceable subject re-emerges in a different guise, and from the future. Some "I" that I do not even know about takes my place in the here and now; some "you" that you have never chosen appears from the future and determines how criminal you will become, how liable you are to suffer from health problems, how risky it will be to offer you a loan. The irreplaceable and sovereign subject may soon be a phantom from the past but a specter of irreplaceability is already emerging from the future. The question is how to avoid this reactionary response to a loss of control?

Perhaps fragmentation, like the disappearance of aura, can become the occasion for new political alliances. What if the fear of being fragmented is countered not with the reactionary re-affirmation of an uninterrupted and original self that can be predicted and calculated to exist in a future and becomes a placeholder in the present, but with the recognition that my future "I" and your future "me" are always already implicated in one another. The realization that we are a combination of fragments that belong to neither one of us fully, and that continually fragment again and again.

Perhaps the end of one epoch of irreplaceability as a response to replacement will allow for a renewed sense of solidarity in which the modern and supposedly sovereign individual begins to recognize that what they considered to be their "qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability" was never theirs to begin with. Perhaps it is not too late yet to appropriate the logic of fragmentation and use it in what Benjamin would call a "progressive" way. Perhaps the idea of ownership so central to the episteme of replacement and to the rise of Capital more generally

may be countered with the affirmation that we do not belong to ourselves, just as our fragments do not belong to Google's DeepDream neural networks, or to Mark Zuckerberg's fantasies of a metaverse that takes the shape of a derivative of the here and now, where our current lives will be insured against future risk at the cost of the lives we are living in the present.

For this to happen, it seems to us, the very notion of the irreplaceable subject will have to make way – be it in the guise of a sovereign individual clinging on to a fantasy it can no longer afford, or in the shape of data-doubles that operate as placeholders for those who have been reduced to the logic of the count. Spillers's assertion, in the epigraph to our first chapter: "My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented." turns out to be as urgent today as it ever was. The episteme of replacement may be going through a convulsion, the irreplaceable self and the irreplaceable other continue to be produced by ever new means. Modern replacement may already be a thing of the past. And as the irreplaceable individual is clinging on to a fantasy that it can no longer sustain, we are witnessing an epistemic shift that announces itself in a less than imaginative financial product. It is against a loss of irreplaceability in the present that we insure ourselves with placeholders from the future.

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