

Aria Dean
**Notes on
Blacceleration**

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Nothing human makes it out of the near-future.

– Nick Land

If, at its most radical, accelerationism claims, in Camatte's words, that "there can be a revolution that is not for the human" and draws the consequences of this, then one can either take the side of an inherited image of the human against the universal history of capital and dream of "leaving this world," or one can accept that "the means of production are going for a revolution on their own."

– Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian

You get this sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human.

– Kodwo Eshun

Let it be said that this is not a unified theory of blaccelerationism. It is not a black accelerationism – that is, a "black perspective on accelerationism" – nor is it an accelerationist theory of blackness. It is not a critique of accelerationism from the position of blackness or black studies. These are notes on blaccelerationism. This portmanteau – binding blackness and accelerationism to one another – proposes that accelerationism always already exists in the territory of blackness, whether it knows it or not – and, conversely, that blackness is always already accelerationist. It is my modest proposition that activating this blaccelerationism serves to articulate a necessary alternative to right and left accelerationism.

At large, accelerationism and black radical thought – especially as delivered in afrofuturism and afropessimism – share a number of concerns. Both are occupied with "the future" or a lack thereof, with the end of the world, with the logic and tendencies of capital, and both are locked in a struggle with humanism. However, accelerationism's articulation is rife with absences. In particular, accelerationist thinkers absent their own relationship to black radical thought, feeling their way for answers in the dark. Most crucially and consistently, the accelerationist account passes over slavery's foundational role in of capital accumulation. The only accelerationist theory and politics that can contend with right accelerationism is one grounded in an understanding that "capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent."¹

Accelerationism is known to claim that the only way out of capitalism is through it. Capital is too quick for us. Mutating continually, it is capable of recuperating and manipulating all

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attempts to thwart it, restrict it, or slow it down. As a result, the only strategy for ending global capitalism is to burrow in further, “to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies.”²

Contemporary accelerationists trace their lineage to a loose constellation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, beginning with Marx himself. Eventually, this genealogy cleaves into right and left accelerationist camps. The right is represented by British philosopher Nick Land, formerly at the center – alongside Sadie Plant – of a cult of personality called CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit) at Warwick University, and now known to a wider audience as a leading neoreactionary thinker alongside Mencius Moldbug. Land’s right accelerationism advocates that capitalism be encouraged to run wild, and intensify itself toward its own destruction.³

Left accelerationism restages tragic Landian nihilism as a comedic urban romance with technology. In their 2013 “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue that Land confuses “speed with acceleration,” missing an understanding of “an acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a

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universal space of possibility.”⁴ If technology can just be accelerated, Srnicek and Williams argue, then a postcapitalist future should be possible through the appropriation of capitalist modes and structures toward another, better end. Their book *Inventing the Future* anticipates in particular the acceleration of automation towards a post-work society and a newly transcendent post-identitarian, anti-folk-political class consciousness.

Left accelerationism is waterlogged by a duty to grapple with identity politics, labor, and practicality. Well-meaning Srnicek and Williams are consumed with searching for a subject who can contend with the immeasurably vast and powerful forces of capital. This seems to be a knee-jerk, obligatory reaction against Land’s callous and aggressive inhumanism. They are troubled by the fact that Land’s account of capital’s acceleration is also an account of inevitable human obsolescence. What good is a revolution if we’re counted among its casualties?

If Land’s accelerationism proposes a schematic without a subject at its center, Srnicek and Williams’s attempt to reinsert or relocate the subject sheds much of what makes them accelerationist in the first place. Their commitment to retaining a properly human – and



Enslaved people are depicted being thrown overboard during the Zong massacre – the mass killing of 133 African people by the crew of the British slave ship in November 1781.

in this case recognizably proletarian – subject at the center of their politics, instead of centering capital itself makes a vintage mistake. Rather than ask how capital secretes the idea of the human as a way of covering its tracks, they’ve put the mask back on the villain and crossed their fingers. Now accelerationism confronts an apparently unresolvable conceptual fissure. On the right, Nick Land continues to loom large, racing gleefully toward destruction, waving an anti-humanist flag and tweeting endlessly. The left trudges slowly behind clutching an admirable politic, but one with a tenuous relationship to accelerationism. At the bottom of this gulf lies the question of the human.

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order that the potential this event offers to be fully exploited, we need a politics capable of fully evading even the kind of generic humanism Badiou’s politics (for example) proffers. For the impasse of the end of history can only be properly surmounted by a final nihilistic overcoming of humanism – in a sense even Badiou fails this test, his minimal-communist humanism not going far enough. What perhaps this might entail is a rethinking of a revolutionary position, built on the basis of a rethinking of the very notion of value itself.⁶



On January 14, 2017, Simon Reynolds posted this photograph on his blog, in a post titled “RIP Mark Fisher.” Reynolds’ caption: “Below is a photo from a party Joy and I (and Kieran) held during the summer of 2002, which was the last period we lived in England for any length of time. There’s Mark, and Kodwo Eshun, and Anjalika Sagar, and Steve Goodman aka Kode 9. A clusterfuck of genius!”

It is worthwhile to retrace this search for an accelerationist subject. It is difficult to do, as the chapters of this history are scattered across blogs and comment sections, some of which no longer exist. This contingent, hypertextual form is not a bug of accelerationism, but a feature. The best I can do here is map an impression of a nearly decade-old conversation, cobbled together from a mixture of block quotes, still-existing posts, and trips back in time through the Wayback Machine.⁵

In October of 2008, Alex Williams published “Xenoconomics and Capital Unbound” on his blog *Splintering Bone Ashes*. Written during the peak of the financial crisis, the post finds Williams asking how the crisis might be a hidden opportunity. He writes:

Perhaps what this crash offers however is a chink in the armour of late capital, a Badiouian event, evading the usual in-situational structural determinations ... In

Drawing on Land as well as on Ray Brassier’s speculative realism, Williams embraces their theories of capitalism as a machinic force with little to no concern for humanity, discussing the necessity for a new conception of capital as a “vast inhuman form.” He writes, “[Capital] intersects with us, it has us as moving parts, but it ultimately is not of or for-us.” It is an “alien life-form.” Williams then calls for a Xenoeconomics, which would take all of this into account in formulating a totally new theory of value that “[thinks] of capitalism outside of alienation.” It will be “a theory of value [that is not] predicated upon this original suffering, the voodoo process of soul-theft at the core of the alienation of labour in the commodity form.”

More interesting is what follows, when Williams turns directly to the question of the human as the grounds upon which this Xenoeconomics will be forged:

As the way out of the binaries of a leftism which is utterly and irretrievably moribund, and a neo-liberal economics which is ideologically bankrupt, we must bend both together in the face of an inhuman and indefatigable capitalism, to think how we might inculcate a new form of radically inhuman subjectivation. This entails the retrieval of the communist project for a new man, AND the liberation of the neo-liberal quest for a capitalism unbound, from both its subterranean dependence upon the state and the skeletal humanist discursive a priori which animates its ideological forms.⁷

Williams already edges up on the question that he and Srnicek would later try to answer eight years later: What kind of subject can possibly participate in the demise of this alien-machine we call capitalism? He recognizes that staid humanism won’t do it, and that “the impasse of the end of history can only be properly surmounted by a final nihilistic overcoming of

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humanism.” But the question remains for him, and for the reader: How do we get from point A to point B? And without following Nick Land down his amphetamine-lined rabbit hole?

The next day, the late British theorist Mark Fisher published a response to Williams’s “Xenoconomics and Capital Unbound” on his own blog, *k-punk*. In a post titled “Nihilism without Negativity,” Fisher poses what he calls “the problem of agency.” It is here – in the matter of what or who can be said to be doing what or who to who or what – that Williams’s nascent “leftist-spin on accelerationism” differs from Land’s neoreactive account most glaringly. Fisher writes:

Let’s suppose that such a Thing could emerge from the husk of late capitalism. One major difference between SBA’s accelerationism and Landianism is over the question of agency: for Landianism, Capital is the only agent of note, whereas for SBA, Capital must be assisted to become something else. But what form would this assistance take? As per Tronti’s question about the left after the demise of the workers’ movements, what group subject could emerge which would be both willing

and able to offer it? In the lack of a collective agent, wouldn’t we be back to a kind of theoretical parlour game that has no consequences?⁸

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Williams responds to Fisher a few days later with a long post that says less about how Williams conceives this potential agent than it does about the contours of the political hole that said agent will someday need to fill. In order to approach the question of agency, we are told, we first must approach the question of intent. Williams distinguishes two forms of accelerationism by their ends. First, there is a *weak accelerationism*, which merely argues that by “driving capitalism towards an accelerated position, the conditions for something resembling a communist revolution might be engendered.”⁹ Weak accelerationism chiefly seeks to invigorate an anti-ameliorative left politic. On the other hand, *strong accelerationism* maintains that acceleration doesn’t just open Pandora’s box, creating the conditions for revolution in a familiar form. Instead, strong accelerationism might be “the process necessary to erase the human altogether (as a form of subjectivation), to actualise something close to the dissolution of subjectivity.”



Parker Bright and others protest the inclusion and display of Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket* in the Whitney Biennial, 2017. The photograph was first published on Twitter on March 17 with the caption: “At the Whitney, a protest against Dana Schutz’ painting of Emmett Till: ‘She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma.’ – Scott Y. @hei_scott”

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So, prior to articulating what sort of “group subject,” “agent,” or “thing” can assist capital toward utter self-destruction, we have to answer a question for ourselves: How far are we willing to go? As a commenter on his original post pointed out when they pondered “To what end accelerationism? In order to provoke a crisis, as you say, in the system, but for what?” Williams doesn’t fully answer who he aligns himself with – the strong or the weak – but it appears that he identifies with the “strong” strain, judging by his terminology’s front-loaded value application, and the fact that his discussion of the inhuman continues, which a weak accelerationist position appears to reject. He leaves his readers with questions again: “How might one ground a politics which aims towards an inhuman becoming (or perhaps we ought to say de-subjectivation) ... How might we be able to ground the very need for an inhumanising desubjectivation at all?”

Fisher writes back promptly, gently reiterating his concerns about jettisoning the necessarily totalizing inhumanness at the center of Land, asking, “But what would it mean to reconfigure this picture so that human agency played a role? Would this make any sense at all?”¹⁰ Who, if anyone, is in the driver’s seat? Who

are the members of the “party of inhuman negativity”?

Williams was looking for two things in his original sketch of a left accelerationist position. One was a way of approaching capitalism that is rooted outside of alienation as its primary structuring relation. The other is a new inhuman subject. In fact, it is the ostensible *newness* attributed to this subject that has impeded the left accelerationist project. The model for this “radically inhuman subjectivation” – and with it a corresponding understanding of capital outside of alienation – already exists and has for some time. It is found in the black (non)subject, as it emerges in the history of capitalism that is nothing other than racial capitalism.

Racial capitalism, a concept introduced by Cedric Robinson, names a historical-theoretical position that does not consider the development of capitalism and capital separately from questions of race. Racial capitalism instead reads Atlantic capitalism as fundamentally undergirded specifically by black slave labor. Having been – as theorist Frank Wilderson writes – “kick-started by the rape of the African continent,” capital’s origins are rooted in “approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations of force, not by approaching



E.L.E. (Extinction Level Event): *The Final World Front* (1998) was the third studio album released by American rapper Busta Rhymes.

a white body with variable capital.”¹¹ Lyko Day:

In order to recuperate the frame of political economy, a focus on the dialectic of racial slavery and settler colonialism leads to important revisions of Karl Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation. In particular, Marx designates the transition from feudal to capitalist social relations as a violent process of primitive accumulation whereby “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part.” For Marx, this results in the expropriation of the worker, the proletariat, who becomes the privileged subject of capitalist revolution. If we consider primitive accumulation as a persistent structure rather than event, both Afro-pessimism and settler colonial studies destabilize normative conceptions of capitalism through the conceptual displacements of the proletariat ... If we extend the frame of primitive accumulation to the question of slavery, it is the dispossession of the slave’s body rather than the proletarianization of labor that both precedes and exceeds the frame of settler colonial and global modernity.¹²

Racial capitalism revises the received Marxist history of capital, which “assumes a subaltern structured by capital, not by white supremacy.”¹³ Any history of capital that reduces its structuring relations to exploitation, alienation, and wage labor cannot account for the position of the slave in class struggle. As elaborated by Wilderson, Spillers, Hartman, and others, racial capitalism proposes that there is an unthought position beyond the worker – that of the slave – that is crucial to the construction of civil society, and to “the drama of value,” in the first place. Any analysis of capital that does not begin here makes a fatal mistake.

However quickly capital might be moving now, accelerationism is always already out of gas to the extent that it fails to recognize what started it rolling in the first place. While the American instantiation of racial capitalism has a particular intimacy with chattel slavery, the concepts this history has generated – like the concept of the human – posture as universal, and it is precisely these concepts which begin to disintegrate as they approach the black. Nevertheless, tracing the inextricable relationship between slavery and capital opens new territories for accelerationist thinking. First, beginning to think racial capitalism alongside accelerationism provides an account of capitalism and value that is “outside of alienation,” as Williams calls it. Second, it insists

on the non-allegorical existence of an inhuman subject: “the black.”

Thinking racial capitalism provides a view of capitalism whose structuring antagonism is necessarily beyond alienation, laying the groundwork for a theory of value that performs as Williams hoped, avoiding “a [predication] upon this original suffering [of alienation], the voodoo process of soul-theft at the core of the alienation of labour in the commodity form.”¹⁴ In “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” Wilderson describes the exclusion of the slave from any transaction of value, having no “symbolic currency or material labor power to exchange.”¹⁵

The importance of thinking slavery and capital together goes beyond understanding their co-implication in modernity, or their influence on how black individuals engage with capitalist structures like labor and consumer markets. Rather, slavery and capital’s entanglement is also about the subjectivation of the slave, the black nonsubject that it engenders. Under racial capitalism, from the Middle Passage onward, the was-African-made-black is a miraculous paradox, human-but-not. She is an object-subject. As Ronald Judy writes:

Niggers, by definition, are labor commodities ... A nigger is both productive labor and value, a quantitative abstraction of exchange: the equivalent of three-fifths of a single unit of representational value. The value of the nigger is not in the physical body itself but in the energy, the potential force, that the body contains.¹⁶

What are we to make of a person who is a commodity-thing? Of subjects who are not workers whose labor is exploited and converted into capital, but who are capital themselves, bought and sold on a speculative market?¹⁷ In the “after-life of slavery,” as Christina Sharpe calls it, black people may not literally be bought and sold, but the logic of racial capitalism persists through embedded white supremacist ideologies.¹⁸ It’s Hartman-esque ready-for-the-taking, where black people still cannot lay serious claim to our selves or our own images – crystallized, for example, in this summer’s prolonged scuffle over white American painter Dana Schutz’s representation of the famous image of Emmett Till’s mutilated body in the Whitney Biennial. As Jared Sexton reflected, “What is taken to be black is taken for granted, openly available to all.”¹⁹ Perhaps not always immediately available as raw, manual labor, black people and blackness continue to embody a speculative and semiotic value thirsted after by a white marketplace.

Meaning what for accelerationism? Most

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directly, the black interrupts and prevents the establishment of a human/capital binary on which left and right might take sides. The black is always already mutually co-constituting capital and subjecthood simultaneously. The trajectory followed by black people in the New World blurs the line set out by accelerationists between capital and its will and the human agents who are caught in its midst. This is not to say that the black subject fits neatly into the escape pod Williams set out in his blog posts. On the contrary, it is to say that to speak of transversing or travestyng humanism in favor of inhuman capital without recognizing the way in which the black is nothing other than the historical inevitability of this transgression – and has been for some time – circularly reinforces the white humanism these thinkers seek to disavow.

Kodwo Eshun once said that while listening to black American music, “you get this sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human.”²⁰ He – as well as Mark Fisher – caught onto the specific resonance between black American music and accelerationism, even if primarily through the aesthetics of afrofuturism and through techno’s cyborgian, postindustrial obsession. We could say that, at large, they understood that black culture in the twentieth century was drawn to the end of the world just as they and their then CCUR comrade Nick Land were.

More recently, theorists interested in accelerationism have begun to sniff out these connections. McKenzie Wark circles the question most closely, working through Eshun’s writing on black music in America and the UK as exemplary of a “Black Accelerationist” position – notably distinct from afrofuturism.²¹ For Wark, black accelerationism aims to recast the racist conclusions drawn over the arc of history about the inhumanity of the black-as-other as something positive to be harnessed. In his thinking, black accelerationism seems to be primarily an act of reclamation.

Blaccelerationism alternatively posits that there is no need for reclamation. A specific tradition of black radical thought has long claimed the inhumanity – or we could say anti-humanism – of blackness as a fundamental and decisive feature, and philosophically part of blackness’ gift to the world.²² Blaccelerationism also draws little distinction between a black acceleration and an afrofuturism. Instead it sees them as siblings and coconspirators. Masterworks of black art and culture that have been labeled examples of afrofuturism often participate equally in a blacceleration toward the end of the world. To give just one example: Busta Rhymes’s suite of apocalyptic albums (*The*

Coming, When Disaster Strikes, E.L.E (Extinction Level Event): The Final World Front, and Anarchy) are often called afrofuturist for their exploration of a near-future techno-apocalypse and their warped, cyborgian accompanying visuals. However, by putting the black man at the center of the apocalypse – as both the agent of the world’s demise and its inheritor – these works resonate more specifically with the child of these strange bedfellows, black radical thought and accelerationism, that I call blaccelerationism.

Accelerationist debates have left a number of questions unanswered, and some think they are better left alone. Read against the tradition of black radical thought, however, the clarity of the symptoms plaguing accelerationist thinking makes diagnosis irresistible. As a result, blaccelerationism neither “take[s] the side of an inherited image of the human against the universal history of capital and dream of ‘leaving this world,’” nor does it “accept that ‘the means of production are going for a revolution of their own.’” Rather, it takes a long view of history wherein these positions merge in the form of the living capital, speculative value, and accumulated time stored in the bodies of black already-inhuman (non)subjects. If Camatte claims that “there can be a revolution that is not for the human” – a statement that has been retroactively claimed by accelerationists – then this revolution is for the black.

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- 1 Frank Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003), 229.
- 2 Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, "Introduction," #Accelerate: *The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomics, 2014), 4.
- 3 In Land's own words: "There is no distinction to be made between the destruction of capitalism and its intensification. The auto-destruction of capitalism is what capitalism is. 'Creative destruction' is the whole of it, beside only its retardations, partial compensations, or inhibitions. Capital revolutionizes itself more thoroughly than any extrinsic 'revolution' possibly could. If subsequent history has not vindicated this point beyond all question, it has at least simulated such a vindication, to a maddening degree." Nick Land, "Psycho Politics," *Jacobite*, August 11, 2017 <https://jacobitemag.com/2017/08/11/psycho-politics/>.
- 4 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," *Critical Legal Thinking*, May 14, 2013 <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>.
- 5 I have archived a portion of these blog entries and sites on Rhizome's Webrecorder tool. They can be viewed at <https://webrecorder.io/ariadean/blaccelerationism>.
- 6 Alex Williams, "Xenoeconomics and Capital Unbound," *Splintering Bone Ashes*, October 19, 2008 <https://web.archive.org/web/20100805021724/http://splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/2008/10/xenoeconomics-and-capital-unbound.html>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Mark Fisher, "Nihilism without negativity," *k-punk*, October 20, 2008 <http://e-flux.com/journal>.
- 9 Alex Williams, "Post-Land: the paradoxes of a speculative realist politics," October 26, 2008, *Splintering Bone Ashes* <http://web.archive.org/web/20100805024039/http://splinteringboneashes.blogspot.com/2008/10/post-land-paradoxes-of-speculative.html>.
- 10 Mark Fisher, "Spectres of Accelerationism," *k-punk*, October 28, 2008 <http://k-punk.abstractdynamism.org/archives/010782.html>.
- 11 Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 229.
- 12 Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiracism, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 114.
- 13 Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 225.
- 14 Williams, "Xenoeconomics and Capital Unbound"
- 15 Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 231.
- 16 Ronald Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity," *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (1994).
- 17 Ian Baucom's *Spectres of the Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) delves into this historical relationship between slavery and late-capitalist speculation, arguing that the form of value that characterizes our time was workshopped through the Atlantic slave trade. We are "flesh as value." [footnote David Marriot, "On Decadence: Bling Bling," *e-flux journal* 79 (February 2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94430/on-decadence-bling-bling/>].
- 18 Sharpe introduces this phrase in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 19 Jared Sexton, "The Rage: Some Closing Comments on 'Open Casket,'" *Contemporary* <http://contemporary.org/the-rage-sexton/>.
- 20 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 192–93.
- 21 Mackenzie Wark, "Black Accelerationism," *Public Seminar*, January 27, 2017 <http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/01/black-accelerationism/>.
- 22 Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter theorizes this throughout her work, arguing that the category of human is a narrative constructed by European men for European men. Wynter develops a theory of "counterhumanism" in the face of this.