

### The Black Register.

Tendayi Sithole.

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*The Black Register* is singularly focused on the project of world-making, as undertaken through the process of ideas (i.e. theory development). Importantly, the process of theory development, as Sithole undertakes it, is concerned with revealing the fallacies that abound in relation to Black life, what he terms “an ontological scandal” (1). This is evinced in his opening remarks, when he observes that the desire of the Black being is “to be”. In explicating the desire “to be” in an antiblack world, he notes, “[t]his means that to be is to be at the receiving end of antiblackness—to be structured in relation to the world that militates against the existences of blacks—to have one’s humanity called into question” (1).

*The Black Register* treats this desire by applying itself to the work of thinkers that have theorised this sense of being in the world, from the loci of enunciation of the Black subject. This is done in six chapters that are flanked by an introductory essay and a concluding essay, both of which are substantive contributions in their own right. This engagement is done without a prescriptive definitional position, for Sithole (2) is weary of assuming an intellectually hubristic position when he writes: “The black register, hitherto described and not operationalized by any mode of definition, is here what might be referred to as the ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that are enunciated from existential struggle against antiblackness, and which dwell from the lived experience of being-black-in-an-antiblack-world which must be ended”.

Let me begin by conceptually clarifying aspects that were both interesting and useful in engaging with the text. Sithole (100) uses the concept of the “ontological density of the black subject” when he asserts that “[b]lackness is the opposite of whiteness and its place is the zone of non-being. In such a place blackness cannot make demands that are similar to those of subjects who have ontological density...” I wonder if the con-

cept of “ontological legitimacy” (Kumalo 3) might not be more apt? This inquiry is predicated on Hannah Arendt’s (182) thinking, when she frames the ontological condition of politics thusly, “[i]nsofar as the capacity for acting and speaking (and speaking is but another mode of acting), makes man [sic] a political being, and since acting has always meant to set something into motion that was not there before, birth, human natality which corresponds to human mortality, is the ontological condition *sine qua non* of all politics”. Owing to this subtlety, the reader will note I capitalise ‘Black’—to indicate this very difference between Sithole’s and my understanding of Black ontology. Mine, written with a capital ‘B’ recognises the imbrication of Blackness with Indigeneity, in the sense of Black as Indigenous to the land, while Sithole decapitalises the ‘b’ in his orthography—possibly as a way of centring the lack of ontological density of Blackness.

Sithole, could—however—object to my inquiry by directing me to Sartre’s opening remarks in *Being and Nothingness*, that “[t]he essence is not in the object; it is the meaning of the object, the principle of the series of appearances which disclose it” (5). Said objection finds its justification in Sithole’s assertion that “[Sylvia] Wynter makes a constant effort to expose the systems of meaning by means of imposed signification that give legitimacy to niggerization” (45). Sithole (44) preambles this objection by suggesting that “[e]ven if there are prospects of asserting existence, the presence of the mask means that there is no face, but a mask. To be signified as a nigger is to be faceless, that which contains layers and layers of masks”. The Sartrean ‘essence’ which is the basis of my objection—as said objection is premised on the fact of human natality as that which gives meaning to the object—is obfuscated through the systematic and systemic structure of an antiblack world in which the Black being exists. Obfuscation, thus construed, is what leads Sithole to make the claim that the black register is concerned with facilitating a state of being that allows the Black to be.

In response, and in returning to Sartre (5–6), I would direct the reader to the claim: “By not considering being as the condition of revelation, but rather being as an appearance which can be determined in concepts, we have understood first of all that knowledge can not by itself give an account of being; *that is, the being of the phenomenon can not be reduced to the phenomenon of being*” (emphasis added). “Thus negation would be ‘at the end’ of judgement without, however, being ‘in’ being” (Sartre 30). Viscerally, and in disclosing the conditions under which the Black exists, Sithole takes his cue from Wynter when he elegantly demonstrates

that “[as] the rebel, Wynter refuses to be in service of the Imperial Man whose gravitas of discursive formation ‘requires those being slaughtered to *pretend to be part of the living*’” (51). Here, the reader finds a concurrence between Sithole’s description of the antiblack world and Sartre’s (31) phenomenological proposition that “[the] world does not disclose its non-beings to one who has not first posited them as possibilities”. Herein lies the justification that runs throughout the monograph, in the assertion that it is the white world, whiteness *qua* white, that creates this ontological void which ultimately reduces the Black subject to a thing, an object that is defined by lack and exists perpetually in the zone of non-being.

In rejecting servitude to the Imperial Man, “[the] manner of opposition is coined as antagonism, which then creates the figure of the enemy of the state” (116). Moreover, “[in] addition to silence, the racist state requires obedience and complicity, and this is something that Biko defied as he pursued the opposite line of the political, the outlawed, but not the outlawed that he chose, the one that the racist state attributed to him” (114). Sithole’s proposition then, is the need for the end of the world as we know it and the creation of a new world—the focus returning to the project of world-making—as “the demands of blackness [are not only] insatiable, there is no rapport and relationality in the antiblack world as the form of life dispatched to blackness is that of wanton structural violence, which necessitates nothing but death” (257). This reveals the ontological scandal that Sithole diagnoses at the beginning of the treatise, in his aptly crystallised claim that “[the] discourses of moral condemnation calling Mari-kana a horror serve the function of calling for but not wanting change” in the antiblack world (238).

This does not, however, resolve the question of the aptitude of the concept of “ontological density” as opposed to “legitimacy”. Focusing on such a distinction is deliberate, in that the concept of density might lead the reader to assume that there is—implicitly—already an ontology that is recognised by whiteness. Whereas, in my engagement with the text, and in the prognosis that “[t]here is no transition, breakthrough, or democratization; there is a total end and a new beginning—*tabula rasa*” (240), I understand Sithole to be systematically and fundamentally defending the propositional claim that there is no recognition of the Black subject, whatsoever. Simply, and using my notion of “ontological legitimacy”, I would follow Sartre’s suggestion to “let anyone deny being whatever he [sic] wishes, he [sic] can not cause it *not to be*, thanks to the very fact that he denies that it is this or that” (39). Here, there is con-

vergence once more, in that Sithole (255), in advocating for the creation of this new world—suggests that “[b]lackness rises in its own name, in order *to be*, the subject emerges from the ruins of existence in its own register and grammar of suffering”.

Irrespective of and in response to this jostling that I have tried to ameliorate by way of wading through a process of conceptual clarification, *The Black Register* follows Bongani Nyoka’s (xi) recommendation in *The Social and Political Thought of Archie Mafeje*, wherein he suggests that we ought to transcend “the call [to decolonise] and to get into the actual business of decolonising”, which is demonstrable in how Sithole’s work gives us the vocabulary with which to understand the political instability (*de facto*, what was an act of domestic terrorism) that played out between 10 and 15 July 2021. In this respect, I go back to the Zulu aphorism that declares that *isihlahla kasinyelwa*, in giving gratitude to Sithole’s timely, erudite and systematic political thought that engages the task of developing theory that responds to our contextual realities, while advancing global disciplinary trajectories.

#### Works Cited

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