Criminalizing Black Reason

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the nexus between the scientific method and the study of race in the contemporary world. It begins by historicizing the emergence of the scientific method as indispensable to the advent of European modernity. The development of modernity collapsed into the racialization of black subjects as subhuman and criminal. This criminalization of blackness occurs at two critical junctures: the arrest of blacks via plantation enslavement and the concomitant imprisoning of black bodies of thought. The consequence of modernity’s carceral methods implicates the study of race, particularly the formation of Black Studies, by criminalizing black reason. As such, the paper contends for an Aframodern scientific revolution, understood as the emancipation of method and the decarceralizing of science in order to procure black liberation in the modern world.

Introduction

The question of science and its methods of inquiry forms the basis of modern human society. It perhaps goes without saying that the science of medicine (biology), of numbers (mathematics), of government (political science), of society (sociology) — as well as countless other disciplines spanning the breadth of the natural and social sciences — represent important advancements in scientific knowledge and the acquisition of truths around which the human world coheres. It is here that I want to focus on the method of such sciences. For method is best practiced as an expression of such scientific innovations, one which led Alexis de Tocqueville, in his own study of democracy, to conclude, “[a] new political science is needed for a totally new world” (2003, 16). What Tocqueville refers to is the innovation of method itself as a precondition for the study of an evolving political world. This explains C.L.R. James in Notes on Dialectics who observes in his analysis that “Scientific method is the examination of an object in its changes and the examination of our concepts of that object, watching how both change, doing it consciously, clearly, with knowledge and understanding” (1981, 55). Therefore, the evolution of method is an essential facet to scientific inquiry. The problem, then, lies not in science in and of itself, but rather the static nature of scientific methods; it is a problem of the scientific method collapsing into either scientism or methodism 11See Sheldon Wolin’s diagnosis of what he dubs “methodism” within political science, which “presupposes a viewpoint” that results in an “impoverished…scientific imagination” (1063;1073, 1969). Therefore, the challenge to science as such, is the possibility, or more pointedly, the reality of its epistemic closure — its carceral arrest, as it were. Under this view, the subjectivist trappings of science allow for an a priori methodological turn, where there is a corruption of science by human prejudices, where the object of study (objective phenomenon) are already determined, and the applied methodological inquiry functions to reaffirm rather than investigate the hypothesis. This is the precisely the problem that Carter G. Woodson identified when the scientific method becomes arrested by racialist ideologies: “From the teaching of science the Negro was likewise eliminated” (2009, 33). This elimination, I ascribed to a Euromodern methodological turn where race becomes indivisibly cleaved unto the instruments of inquiry. For this reason, the colonizing of method raises important questions about the pursuit of truth, for it engenders a distorted view of social facts, the social sciences, and the study of human phenomena, writ large. It is these historical errors, including
a falsified appraisal of the philosophical anthropology of the human being that allowed for a genealogy of an unscientific “science” that sought to “prove” a racial hierarchy of human subjects. It is for these reasons that the colonial relation between modernity and method is co-constitutive and, consequently, function as co-architects of a decadent scientific inquiry, leading to a crisis of human knowledge and the subsequent capture of Afrocentric modes of thought.

The colonizing of the scientific method, as a distorted perception of reality, gave way to specific formations within human sciences and conceptions about the modernization of political society. The totality of these scientific distorts implicates what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o articulates as a “Western modernity [that] is rooted in the looting of a continent” (cited in Rodney 2022, VIII). Absent European Enlightenment, the so-called “Dark Continent” became anti-scientific and therefore, anti-modern. This crisis of the scientific method introduces a form of methodological solipsism where method collapses into itself, becoming its own unit of self-justification. This raises fundamental questions about method when calibrated on a racial axis, or as Charles Mills notes, “[t]he New World is being intellectually grasped with the tools of the Old World” (2017, 114). Moreover, this essay explores this arresting effect of those methodological “tools” with their dehumanizing racial co-efficient: the negrification of blackness, where, for instance, “Black males possess pathogenic traits of criminality that must be eradicated…[through] science” (Ruwe 2022, 665). In what follows, I historicize European modernity as incarcerating method for the purposes of both colonization and racialization. From there, I explore method’s imperialistic practices in fortifying the relation between the plantation and the penitentiary in order to explain contemporary logics around the criminalization of black people. The paper then turns to the criminalization of black bodies of reason, understood as an arrest of discursive labors as seen in part in Black Studies. Finally, it concludes with the inauguration of Afromodernity wherein liberation also occurs through the emancipation of method, that is, the decarceralizing of science.

**Historicizing the Racialization of the Scientific Method**

By scientific method I mean a system of analysis utilizing specific tools of inquiry around the study of objects and phenomenon. Yet, a scientific method that meets the threshold of rigor is one that is inherently conscious of itself—of its own methodological practices as an internal object of inquiry (Sartre 1968). It is not only a method for but also a method of . Put simply, its object of inquiry is not disarticulated from its philosophy on inquiry, “scientific method cannot examine the object alone but must at the same time and equally examine the categories with which it examines the object” (James 1981, 50). For instance, some argue: “what makes the [Socratic] method rigorous is the Socratic demand always to question one’s own assumptions about what makes for a good reason” (2012, 645). To be sure, there are manifold methods within the human sciences, or more narrowly, within philosophical practice, from the dialectical method to the Socratic method, from a phenomenological-existential method to a psychoanalytic method (Fanon 2008), among others. Yet, not all methods are conceived or rendered equally. For example, Lewis R. Gordon discusses what he calls “the twentieth-century person of color symbolizes a crisis of European Man,” wherein race already decides the question of the human being (1995, 7). The Euromodern methodological practice becomes a carceral method insofar as its racial and racist entrenchment arrests black subjects, both their ontology and epistemology. This racialization of the scientific method, that is, the anchoring of its worst practices, precisely the crisis of Euromodern world.

Stuart Hall once asked: “Is Europe the product of a universal idea…?” (2021, 374). The result, according to Hall, was a discursive mapping of both the internal (and external) “others” within and outside its borders. Part of this discursive machinery lies in Europe’s academe: “there was the vast literature devoted to classifying the ‘monstrous races of Mankind,’ from Hesiod to Pliny’s *Natural History*, a repertory of exotic marvels. Herodotus helped to construct early prototypes of Western Man, against whom the monsters, hybrids, hermaphrodites and anthropophagi of the classical periphery could be measured and placed” (2021, 382). It is from this vantage point that the European scientific method contoured a new social geography, separating civilization from barbarism, or as Hall contends, “between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (2021, 381). From Aristotle through to early modern thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, the social geometrics of civilized and barbarian mapped itself onto a new political geography, human and sub-human.
The early and mid-18th century would see the thoughts of European botanist, Carl Linnaeus, gain prominence. Within his work, he reasoned, “the first step of wisdom is to know these [human] bodies; and be able, by those marks imprinted on them by nature, to distinguish them from each other, and to affix to every object its proper name. These are the elements of all sciences” (Eze 1997, 13). The reduction of science to natural, somatic markers would serve as the classificatory scheme or method to “mark” human bodies and human difference. Put differently, the “corpus” became co-extensive with both natural and discursive bodies. Notably, within this rigid biological schema, Linnaeus classified the Hottentot (or Khoekhoe) as “monstrous” and “less fertile,” while the European was marked as “fair, sanguine, brawny” (Eze 1997, 13). Not only did natural geography predetermine the social and political conditions of its inhabitants, but the reversed became equally true: inhabitants telegraphed something about the desirability or even the superiority of different climates (Eze 1997). In this evolutionary chain of European thought, it was no longer sufficient to merely implicate European superiority, the black subject had to be sedimented as the embodiment of devolutionary barbarism. In this war, whiteness also became embodied as the only fully-formed and rational corpus of human reason.

European rationality functioned as a substitute for human reason itself, “these popular travel writings contributed significantly to the perception of Europe as familiar and ‘civilized,’ living in the Age of Light, while the peoples of other lands (Asia, Africa, America) were of ‘strange’ habits and mores.” (Eze 1997, 5). The European empirical enterprise, rearticulated as disciplinary bodies of thought, culminated into its own scientific method. Euromodern sciences justify themselves through their universality. This is the argument of Anténor Firmin, in *The Equality of the Human Races*, where he states that “the White race, lacking neither in self-esteem nor in self-confidence, dominates everywhere and puts its imprint on every corner of the world. . . . Why should it be otherwise? After all, it controls science, that is, the highest source of power, the most respectable and least unchallenged authority” (2002, 387). In other words, Firmin’s anthropological critique of European science made clear its anti-humanist attitude, owing to its institutionalizing of untruth as scientific doctrine, that is, “[t]urning their back to the truth, they [European scientists] declare that Blacks have no social history and so have never influenced the march of humanity” (2002, 390). This is to say, the systematized control of science hardened as the arrest of method. Science and its instruments of methodological inquiry became beholden to prejudicial postulates whose universal decrees were obeyed and accepted, uncritically. Consequently, the raced systematicity of the European scientific method became weaponized to rationalize the barbarism of Africanity, whilst maintaining Europanity qua modernity. That is, to be European meant an exclusive hold on civilizational progress across the broad expanse of the arts and sciences: “Europeans usurp the concept of civilization and debase the most beautiful scientific ideas in order to support their greed and justify their reprehensible materialism” (Firmin 2002, 383). European Enlightenment, through the maturation of its scientific method, became a formative basis for the rise of Euromodernity. This co-articulated historical phenomenon, with far-reaching anti-democratic ramifications, I term the Euromodern method.

This method, then, attempts to colonize non-white participation in the genealogy of human development; it is an attempt to ensure and enforce civilizational displacement by making the non-European actor (the black subject) an exiled political phenomenon. This explains George Lamming’s observance: “To be colonial is to be a man in a certain relation; and this relation is an example of exile” (2004, 156). As Lamming intimates, the colonial subject is displaced from both their native land and native reason. The black exilic subject, then, is thought as being outside the genealogy of human epistemic practices and deprived of rational faculty. Furthermore, Paget Henry notes that the matrix of European rationality and its fields of scientific discursivity, from Shakespearean literature to parliamentary politics, was one of domestication. He writes: “Caliban (the Carib) was identical with nature—a cannibal, a child, a monster without language, and hence a potential slave to be subdued and domesticated along with nature and history” (2000, 5). The transmutation from native to black was seamless in the history of Euromodern political arrangements, “[w]ith the arrival of slave from Africa, Caliban [the Carib] became African” (ibid). The naturalization of ecological bodies (of land
and climes) collapsed into corporeal bodies. This specific relation between natural and human phenomena birthed a racial totality that was the invention of the link between method and modernity. As such, European rationality reformulates and thus enganges blackness as subrational being, or at worse, as anti-rational non-being. It is for this reason, scholars held that Euromodernity commits “the error of collapsing ‘modern’ into its European forms” (Gordon 2015, 87).

Yet, within Euromodernity, black historicity is erased. If, as Walter D. Mignolo argues, “modernity (and obviously, post-modernity) maintained the imaginary of Western civilization as a pristine development from ancient Greece to eighteenth-century Europe,” then the effect of the Age of Reason or “colonial enlightenment” (Scott 2004), along with its development of the scientific method, constitutes a crisis in knowledge and the ways of knowing itself (2008, 228). The problems inaugurated by the Age of Reason re-inscribed European rationality as a universal idea, which, of course, negated subaltern epistemologies, that is, the emergence of reason from below. This includes, for example, what Africana thinkers call black reason, alongside a complex matrix of diverse Global South epistemologies (from Latinx thought to Indigenous epistemological practices).

As such, the epistemic decadence of what would constitute the Westernization of scientific thought planted its roots in an ecology of Euromodern political systems and pedagogical practices: “Enlightenment science, philosophy, and social sciences, all founded their conceptual vocabulary on the Greek and Latin languages, worked together to disqualify any and all coexisting frames of knowledge and understanding in non-European and non-Western civilizational languages” (Mignolo & Walsh 2018, 113-114). The obscuring and displacing of other fecund sites of knowledge production manifested itself as a form of epistemic closure—the quarantining and/or the eradicating of truth. The tragic genesis of Euromodern method lies in its hardening of not social facts but European myths, including its most prominent racial fantasy of “how deeply intertwined in the history of Europe are the values of ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’…Their purpose was to establish, symbolically, the dividing line between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Hall 2021, 381). The consequence, then, of the co-constitutive relation between modernity and method meant “Black Africans and American Indians were not taken into account when knowledge and social organization were at stake” (Mignolo 2008, 231). The Euromodern signification of blackness as subrational and therefore subhuman led to the institutionalizing of bodies of disciplinary thought whose teleological imperative was the pathologizing of black existence itself. From anthropology to sociology, philosophy to biology, and even the study of law, scientific racism reified the co-articulation of the fraught nexus between method and modernity. Under this view, science functions as a methodological expression of modernity, whose rational consequence materializes as “scientific racism (one of modernity’s more durable intellectual products)” (Gilroy 1993, 44). Given this decided colonial turn, the social sciences, broadly conceived, became captive to a decadent Euromodern empire, whereby blackness collapsed into an already known, objectified quantity—without flux, without contingency. This is to say, blackness was, and always is, tribal barbarism, violently catapulted outside the bounds of civilizational—modern—politics. This is why Du Bois, in “Science and Empire,” described the bewilderment of an Euromodern academe at the study of blackness beyond what was already calcified in the Western economy of Euromodern knowledge:

Whites said, Why study the obvious? Blacks said, Are we animals to be dissected and by an unknown Negro at that? Yet, I made a study of the Philadelphia Negro so thorough that it has withstood the criticism of forty years. It was as complete a scientific study and answer as could have then been given, with defective facts and statistics, one lone worker and little money. It revealed the Negro group as a symptom, not a cause; as a striving, palpitating group, and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long historic development and not a transient occurrence (2007, 30).

Ultimately, blackness as a “sick body of crime” could neither withstand empirical critique nor maintain rational coherence. In the face of “scientific accuracy and [the] search for truth,” Euromodern methods collapse (Du Bois 2007, 28). In contrast, Du Bois upholds an Aframodern “scientific attitude” that treats reality as open: “I began to conceive of the world as a continuing growth rather than a finished product” (2007, 26). European modernity colonizes method in order to invent a formulaic social calculus: the hierarchization of being. Euromodern method, therefore, fossilizes the world in an old binary logic, of us against them, of barbarians against the civilized. The study of difference under the microscope of Euromodern method led
to the biologizing of blackness as unnatural phenomena, what Frederick Douglass diagnosed as a reduction to brutishness: “the grand aim of slavery, which, always and everywhere, is to reduce man to a level with the brute” (2003, 32). This genealogical trope of blackness as monstrosity hews the prevailing scientific line of unnatural deviation. These cohering racial typologies of blackness as sub-human, and later, non-human, would implicate the study of human phenomena and the concomitant development of political society under the auspices of Euromodern method. The nexus between modernity and method becomes the basis for the inevitable formation of two critical modern institutions: plantation and penitentiary. Within this uninterrupted racial longue durée, black people and black bodies of reason become imprisoned through methods of whiteness.

**Plantation To Penitentiary: The Arrest of Black Reason**

The extant relation between method and modernity is one that possess the capacity to construct and reconstruct our political imaginary. Within the European scientific imagination, presumptions around blackness become engrained and alternative views are suspended as non-evidence as its hypotheses are treated as conclusions. Such a scientific method paradoxically disavows any claim to scientificity. For example, the consequence of Euromodern method ushered a science in crisis, “[s]ocial science was shaped, not only by the European founding fathers, but also by the Social Darwinist currents of the period,” whose effect unfolded an “epoch of the emergence of modern social science in the United States [that] coincided with a sustained period of racial reaction, marked by the institutionalizing of Jim Crow in the South...and the rise of Eugenics” (Omi and Winant 2015, 5). Method and modernity stand as co-architects of racial domination. The centrality of the black subject as an object of scientific fossilization, without historical agency, occasioned a discursive construction of blackness as barbaric monstrosity. An examination of the lengthy historical discourse about prison as penitentiary—the space and place for restitution and repentance—corroborates the exiling of black subjects from political society through the systematizing of their imprisonment and execution. The penitentiary locks blackness into an eternal struggle for performative restitution. Under this view, blackness incurs punishment for the crime of being an illicit embodiment. As W.E.B Du Bois surmises, “the accusation of being black, which is still a crime in the United States,” means blackness reifies criminality, which becomes the cause and effect of Euromodern method, as a colonial apparatus (1998, 419). If the “pen,” as prison is sometimes referred, is an enclosure for domestic animals, then the penitentiary functions as an enclosure for the domestication of blacks, who “[w]e are very close to regarding him as being half-way between beast and man” (Tocqueville 2003, 401). This is why Ruth Wilson Gilmore reframes penitentiaries as “women and men living in cages” (1999, 171). If Euromodernity functions as a portal for historical and political exile, a way of eliminating black barbarity and monstrosity, then the penitentiary becomes its institutional codification. Euromodern method, correspondingly, offers a juridical justification for its existence through appeals to law and order (see Dawson and Francis 2015; Taylor 2016; Gottschalk 2014) due, in part, because “crime is thus one of the masquerades behind which ‘race,’...mobilizes old public fears” (Davis 1997, 266). As Du Bois noted, the “Negro Problem,” as a Euro-American phenomenon, is “closely connected with the question of Negro crime” (1994, 107). The result is a Negrophobic modernity and a carceral method that collapse American democracy into a neo-plantocracy.

After all, the penitentiary is, in part, a reconstituted plantation. The totality of which leads to a singularly unified phenomenon, what some scholars describe as “plantation imprisonment” (Logue 1981, 7) and others as “prison plantations” (Gilmore 2022, 190). This connecting node between penitentiary and plantation became so interlaced that the former settled as a determinative basis for the rearticulation of the latter. In a word, penitentiaries are modern plantations: “Bound to the plantation by...‘the carceral landscape’ established by both planters and state authorities, few enslaved women and men interacted with the formal justice system. Still, jails and prisons in the southern United States emerged as critical mechanism to reinforce the institution of slavery” (Hinton and Cook 2021, 265). The Euromodern penitentiary’s *raison d’être* namely lies in its mandate to political exclude barbaric subjects through systems of control and elimination. For instance, prison plantations have a particular relationship with blackness: “[t]he police system of the South was primarily designed to control slaves” (Du Bois 1994, 107). This historical view makes plain that blacks are disproportionately incarcerated in contemporary American penitentiaries (Davis 1997) because of their
presumed incompatibility with the modern world. The deploying of urban criminology as scientific proof is just part of its methods: “The statistical evidence of black criminality remained rooted in the concept of black inferiority or black pathology despite a shift in the social scientific discourse on the origins of race and crime” (Muhammad 2019, 9). While a shift from biological inferiority to cultural inferiority may become the new frontier for a scientific explanation of black criminality, the methods are always meant to provide the same answers. Euromodern method and its accoutrements of the human sciences, offer themselves as an epistemic regularization of anti-black dictates. As such, the co-articulation of method and modernity acts simultaneously as a co-constitutive anchor for their respective emergence. Put differently, Euromodernity’s racialization of the scientific method generates the conditions for the emergence of the penitentiary. It is as Michel Foucault posits, “[t]he carceral network constituted one of the armatures of this power-knowledge that has made the human sciences historically possible” because “in fabricating delinquency, it gave to criminal justice a unitary field of objects, authenticated by the ‘sciences’, and thus enabled it to function on a general horizon of ‘truth’” (1995, 305; 256). It is not merely that method confers scientific justification for Euromodernity’s penitentiary, but through a co-constitutive relation, the penitentiary, in turn, legitimize the science—the outcome births what Foucault explicates as “penitentiary science,” from which criminal justice is given its fullest carceral expression (1995, 255). Moreover, as a matter of Euromodern epistemic practice, the association between black bodies as criminal became analogous to bodies of black thought being treated as outlawed.

The fraught relation between method and modernity permitted American physician Samuel Cartwright to diagnose a disease within the Negro race: the first, “drapetomania, or the disease causing negroes to run away” (1967 [1851]). Black agitation with, and escape from, the plantation, the sphere of political exile, denote the presence of a psycho-pathological condition. Black freedom is both a somatic and social disease. The result is an ethno-psychiatry that made Frantz Fanon conclude: “Science should be ashamed of itself!” (2008, 100). Under the gaze of method, black freedom, “a disease of the mind,” is psychologized as insanity—a condition to be institutionally treated through Euromodern reason (Cartwright 1967 [1851]). Pre-emancipation, the plantation was therapy, and post-emancipation, the penitentiary is remedy; hence, the often termed black “school-to-prison pipeline” becomes reimagined as a contemporary form of black rehabilitation (Dawson and Francis, 2015, 45). The liminality of the black subject hardened as a carceral embodiment, so much so that “whoever says ‘prison’ says black” (Wilderson 2020, 249). Within Western modernity, black freedom (de)forms into black criminality. The penitentiary thus functions as a power regime for “the unchecked power of the police state, the lack of conviction rates for police murdering blacks, the prison industrial complex and the modern reenslavement of an entire generation” (Warren 2018, 3-4). Prisons are often just post-slavery plantations.

In addition, Euromodernity’s schema of racial ordering ensures not only an imprisoning of the black body but also of black reason. The collapse of the slave into the prisoner generates a similar carceral outcome, or as Wilderson puts it, “the Black subject” is but “a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting” (2020, 251). The racial calculus of Euromodern method formulates a social arithmetic where Afrocentricity always equals a breach of civil society and therefore, warrants an expulsion from the body politic—of politics itself. Depoliticizing the black subject as political pathology, as monstrous embodiment, engenders a racial outlaw, a political felon—one who is perpetually conceived as a fugitive of modernity.

Euromodernity’s racial stratification became its most inviolable organizing principle. This separatist imperative of colonial modernity reveals that the need to separate the civilized from the barbarian will always requires an apparatus of control and containment. For this reason, Sarah Haley calls this configuration, “Jim Crow Modernity,” which is “the maintenance of this racial-gendered order vital to a nuanced understanding of the southern carceral regime” (2016, 3). Euromodernity or Jim Crow modernity is both an arrest of black political mobility and deeper still, a seizure of black futurity. What manifests is the displacement of blacks as felons—wards of the carceral state. The penitentiary, in its ongoing racial segregation, remained one of the last bastions of post-Reconstruction segregation: “It is as if the jail were a microcosm of Jim Crow and the organization of the jail an elaboration of a persistent social norm” (Robin 2019, 51). The grammar of Euromodernity also crystallizes what Steve Biko argued to be Apartheid’s defining feature, “a policy of racial
segregation based on white superiority and ‘custodianship’ of and political exclusion of blacks” (2002, xxxiii). Custodianship, in its juridical sense, simply means blacks are held in custody—handcuffed—to their white proprietor. Like the plantation before it, the penitentiary stands as the new field of forced labor, whose teleological imperative is black exile, not merely from the temporal present as rights-bearing beings, but equally exile from both past and future. “[T]he history of our day,” as Du Bois observes, is a history of scientific imperialism: “That history may be epitomized in one word—Empire” (2007, 48). Euromodern method, in the Du Boisian view, was a captive enterprise which disavowed to avow “the domination of white Europe over black Africa and yellow Asia, through political power built on the economic control of labor, income and ideas” (ibid). Scientific imperialism constituted Euromodernity’s custody of ideas and its relation to an economy of forced labor regimes.

The penitentiary facilitates the circuitry of an imperial science through penal servitude. The black prisoner self-constitutes a modern crime; after all, during the 20th century, “one in four African American men between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine is in prison” (Gilmore 2022, 89). In the 21st century, “[t]he latest projection is that roughly one in three African American boys born in 2001 will eventually be incarcerated at some point in his life” (Muhammad 2019, 281). Blackness as carcerality is an ongoing fatal condition in the Euromodern world—it is temporal imprisonment. Or, to put it plainly, as James Baldwin does, “America has at last found a way of dealing with the Negro problem. ‘They don’t want us—period!’” (1998, 738). Penal servitude systemizes ways and means to ensure black exile from the domain of politics through forced labor regimes: “In 2016 some 24,000 prisoners in 29 prisons across the United States went on strike to protest inhuman conditions and unfair pay for work” (Patterson and Zhuo 2018, 421). These anti-black state-sanctioned policies of control and expulsion illuminate a penal matrix of racism, institutionalism and economism, the combination of which produces, “a new neoliberal racial order” that “continue[s] to perpetuate racial inequality in the modern era” (Dawson and Francis 2015, 30). This tragic commerce between race and economics, held together by their culminating effect, would manufacture a form of scientific method colonized by ethno-class logics.

The result births a colonial nexus of capital and labor, what Kenyan thinker Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o labels as the emergence of capitalist modernity: “Colonization with all its interlinked economic, political, cultural and even psychic dimensions, has been central to the making of capitalist modernity” (cited in Rodney 2022, VII). This methodological turn toward capitalist modernity reproduces what Walter Rodney condemns as “bourgeois empiricism,” whose mode of rationalist justification substitutes black radical truth-telling for European myth-making (2007, 48). As such, Du Bois posits “industrial imperialism in America” was the consequence of Euromodern method and its mode of bourgeois empiricism, owing to the longstanding historical relation between science and empire (2007, 48). This formula of colonial-imperialism mass produced human subjects for the explicit purposes of captivity—a capture of both mind and body. The penitentiary towers as modernity’s indispensable instrument for enacting such a neoliberal racial regime. This nexus between method and Euromodernity enacted “the expulsion of black men from American democracy,” reproduced in its contemporary form through mass incarceration as a form of racial “caste control” (Du Bois 2007, 48). Race, as a modern caste system, anchors itself as the locus of power in the Euromodern world through the hierarchization of hues—this method was, as it were, a commerce of color. The existence of the plantation-penitentiary also conditions the formation of carceral subjectivities raced as black felons. In the final analysis, the captivity of the black body from plantation to penitentiary witnesses its completion through the imprisoning of black bodies of thought in order to annihilate any contravening, emancipatory methods.

The Euromodern Incarceration of Black Studies

Katherine McKittrick posits the existential weight of “science” for the black thinker who has to bear heavily a “monumental system of knowledge that is fueled by colonial and plantocratic logics,” a weightiness that “bears down on all black people, inside and outside the academy, and puts pressure on their physiological and psychic and political well-being” (2021, 3). Sedimented by colonial epistemologies that reconstructs the fields of plantocratic captivity, the recursive violence of Euromodern method occasions the arrest of black
dialectical thought. Nowhere is this more certain than in the quest for a black humanism outside the narrow precincts of European Enlightenment, beyond the discursive corridors of Euromodernity. Frederick Douglass’ “Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered” made manifest the epistemic unrest and racial violence inherent in the Euromodern scientific apparatus. For the black subject, method incarcerates humanhood within the cages of brutishness so as “to enslave and imbrute him” (1854, 34). Yet, in contesting modernity’s concretion of blackness as being anterior to, or outside of, the “natural history of man,” Douglass critically interrogates the category of Euromodern humanism by chronicling the epistemic failures of method, or what he dubs, “ethnological science” (1854, 3; 5). Deeper still, at the crux of Douglass’ dialectical method—the negation of a negation (disavowing method’s unscientific science)—lies a radical recasting of black humanism outside the carceral trappings of Euromodern methodologies of being: “Away, therefore, with all the scientific moonshine that would connect men with monkeys; that would have the world believe that humanity, instead of resting on its own characteristic pedestal—gloriously independent—is a sort of sliding scale” (1854, 8). This hierarchization of being is a consequence of a liberal modernity or as Lisa Lowe states: “[m]odern hierarchies of race appear to have emerged in the contradiction between liberal aspirations to universality and the needs of modern colonial regimes to manage work” (2015, 36). Therefore, in the modernization of plantocratic logics—whether in agricultural fields or discursive fields—imposed penal labor practices culminate to produce carceral bodies of reason—the violent capture of black reason through the scientific apparatus of Euromodern method. Stuart Hall maintains, “[i]t is not the status of racist discourse as ‘scientific’ but the fact that its elements function discursively which enables it to have ‘real effects’” (2021, 347). The historical movement from black barbarity to black criminality is hardly an abstraction. Understood as a zone of cultural dissolution, policing, raiding, and the accosting of black life ends in either natural or discursive death. Genocide is accompanied by ethnocide, or more surgically, *Negrocide*—black political elimination. This arresting of blackness reveals itself at two critical junctures: slave labor then and discursive labor now. What, then, might it mean to be “laboring subjects of history” within the fields of discursive labor practices (Lowe 2015, 143)? What are black bodies of reason if not captives to carceral methodologies?

The inaugural turn to Black Studies as a historicizing of the black subject, and her ways of being human, stood as a denial, or at the very least, a contestation of Euromodernity and its hierarchy of racial configurations. Sylvia Wynter argues Black Studies was actualized as a product of the radical imaginary of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, with “original transgressive intentions,” whose revolutionary ire partly fueled not only by the arrest of anti-racist black thought, but also due to its embodied assassination à la “the 1968 murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.” (2006, 109; 108). That radical posture of the resituation and reconstruction of the black subject became a form of discursive laboring, whose effect induced a violent penal counterreaction. Perhaps this explains the imprisoning of black reason, in its disciplinary appearance, as a field of thought. For example, Hortense J. Spillers argues, “in the past, detractors of Black Studies model disparaged it because it was said to be an unresearched field” (2003, 467). Such carceral methodologies enabled Euromodernity’s ongoing arrest of Afrocentric discursive labor: “Still called ‘victim studies’ by those who have no idea what its architects were aiming for, and who have no interest in knowing, it is, to their mind, the sign of ‘Africanity’—the illegitimate issue of an unnamed and unnamable source” (2003, 470). Black Studies is one congealed and prefigured in an ahistorical account around the “natural history of man.” Put another way, Euromodernity instituted the naturalization of black humanity by eternally suspending the question of its capacity for historical contingency. As such, blackness became an already known quantity and locked up, as it were, in an Old World racial historiography. This is what Du Bois means when he writes, “If the Negro was admittedly sub-human, what need to waste time delving into his…history?” (1998, 727).

The question, then, of the sub-discipline of Black Studies, as it is still sometimes referred, becomes reducible to blackness as sub-human. The latter lacks the civilizational development of the human being, the former lacks the epistemic maturity of a scientific method. As a logical consequence, and to little surprise, Black Studies, as a sub-discipline, lacks canonical infrastructure in Europe. The scientific archeology of blackness, underwritten by the co-articulation of method and modernity, avows Black Studies as carceral reason. Accordingly, Black Studies is condemned as being outside the discursive field and therefore, exoticized as a site of affect over and above reason. Captive to plantocratic logics, Black Studies become conceptually contained
and canonically confined. For instance, short-circuited funding and other forms of pecuniary disinvestments plague Black Studies programs since their early inception (see Alkalimat 2021). What’s more, following the surge in recognition in 2020 around the Black Lives Matter Movement, there was a deluge of race-conscious “cluster hires” across the landscape of the American academe for the re-absorption of black faculty, arguably under the banner of liberal modernity’s Equity, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives. However, those hiring trajectories have largely waned. Ad hoc hiring and funding mechanisms continuously reveal the liminal zone to which black reason is trapped. In the main, liminality, or as Patterson once labelled it, “institutionalized liminality,” is a form of imprisonment to the margins (2018, 340). To be sure, the consequences are far reaching across the symbolic universe of political practice, for an arrested Black Studies cannot relink the ruptures between praxis and theory. Nevertheless, even there, the possibility of eruptions and irruptions are made manifest in a Black Studies that functions as both decarceral and abolitionist praxis: “What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society” (Harney and Moten 2013, 42). The potentiality of Black Studies, and even beyond it, black reason, lies in building a culture of transformation. Or, as Amílcar Cabral restates it, there must be a re instituted truth-based scientific order for the ongoing demands of cultural transformation: “we have to base our culture on science. We have to rid our culture of everything insofar as it is antiscientific” (2016, 124). Euromodern carceral methods delimit Black Studies as “antiscientific” phenomena, by which I mean to say its subject of study is always already illicit. Stuart Hall explains these cohering plantocratic logics as follows:

The cultural functions of science, in the languages and discourses of racism, have been to provide precisely that guarantee and certainty of absolute difference which no other systems of knowledge up until that point have been able to provide. And that is why scientific trace remains such a remarkably powerful instrument in human thinking, not only in academy but everywhere in people’s ordinary common-sense discourse. For centuries, the struggle was to establish a binary distinction between two kinds of people...one bit of the species is different—more barbarous, more backwards, more civilized—than another part (2021, 366-367).

There is a criminalization of science as much as there is by science. This explains America’s cultural conditioning—consecrated by the sociology of crime statistics—that blacks are hounded by police patrols because they are more crime prone. In a word, blackness is crime, crime is blackness; the cause becomes the effect, the effect becomes the cause. It is as Frederick Douglass laments: “the very crimes of slavery become slavery’s best defence” (1854, 15). In this recursive loop, a feature of carceral method, Deva R. Woody would come to remark, “I was shocked by the excuses that were made for wanton police violence in public discourse, the ways that the Black victims of aggression and assault were demonized, always already deemed terminally guilty of something ” (2022, xii). The systemic cultural brutalization of blacks in the “age of science” becomes Euromodernity’s touchstone (Douglass 1854, 9). Therefore, Black Studies must contest Euromodern Negrophobia, whilst resisting methodological co-option. For these reasons, Spillers warns: “commercialization is the ‘selling’ of an ‘object,’ however we identify it, for purposes of self-aggrandizement and gain, even though it is not always clearly the case and even though the outcome could well benefit many others, and that is the subtext of African-American studies as a business, or an enterprise, today” (2003, 465). The “sell-out” of Black Studies functions as colonial co-option, falling squarely inside the genealogical arc of capitalist modernity. In such a space, it becomes constrained and captive to modernity’s carceral method. Wynter spotlights this de-liberated arrest: “...like Black Studies as a whole, were to find their original transgressive intentions defused, their energies rechanneled as they came to be defined...in new ‘multicultural terms’ as African-American Studies,” she concludes, “as such, this field appeared as but one of the many diverse ‘Ethnic Studies’ that now serve to re-verify the very thesis of Liberal universalism against which the challenge of [Black Studies] had been directed in the first place” (2006, 109). If the alteration of Black Studies toward other liberal multicultural forms signals an evacuation of the radical politics of democratic transformation, then a dialectical method that allows for a violent clash of opposites—European humanism against black humanism—becomes forfeited, precluding the possibility of the emergence of a third phenomenon, what James and Grace Lee Boggs calls, “a more human human being” (2008, 19).
political reality could relocate and resituate Black Studies outside the constellations of European modernity and its regime of knowledge.

Such a radical turn becomes a transgressive moment because as the carceral state engenders “[t]he systematic overimprisonment of Black people, and Black men in particular,” Black Studies is tasked with an abolitionist mandate: to enact discursive labor as decarceral praxis (Taylor 2016, 3). It is precisely the captivity of discursive labor practices at the moment of radical conception that carceral method attempts, and in some respects, succeeds in the abhorrent of black dialectical thought. If it is, as Du Bois posits, that “in propaganda against the Negro since emancipation in this land, we face one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science…” witnessed today in the criminalizing of black bodies of reason vis-à-vis Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, and the discursive field of race-conscious prints—what Fanon once called “combat literature”—then the forging of a new, subaltern modernity becomes all the more indispensable for the emancipation of method (1998, 727; 2004, 173). Afterall, much like the plantation that preceded it, pedagogy becomes a carceral field of labor. So situated upon a Du Boisian “abolition-democracy,” the emancipation of method necessarily turns on Black Studies enacting discursive labor as decarceral praxis for both cultural change and democratic transformation (1998, 83).

Afromodernity & the Emancipation of Method: Toward a Decarceral Scientific Revolution

The emancipation of method is a question of historical necessity. At its core lies a search for truth. The co-production of method and modernity—as seen in the culmination of a Euromodern method—calcifies political reality and fossilizes black historical production, “[a]ssuming, therefore, as axiomatic the endless inferiority of the Negro race” (Du Bois 1998, 727). That “endless inferiority” becomes rearticulated by Fred Moten as “the brutal history of criminalization in public policy, and at the intersection of biological, psychological, and sociological discourse, [which] ought not obscure the already existing ontic-ontological criminality of/as blackness” (2018, 150). As such, cultural fluency with the phrase “black criminal” already decides the question of both blackness and criminality, so much so that democratic continuity erects itself upon the American pillars of law and order—sites of ongoing carceral methodologies. Method becomes fatally static. Yet, the search for truth is neither pre-scientific nor post-scientific, that is, before or after method, but consists of a dialectical relation: “as a student of science, I want to be fair, objective and judicial; to let no searing of the memory by intolerable insult and cruelty make me fail to sympathize with human frailties and contradiction, in the eternal paradox of good and bad” (Du Bois 1998, 725). It is the science of those contradictions, of the paradoxical nature of opposites, that impels a radical opening outside the pre-inscribed limits of black demonization or black deification because this “may be fine romance, but it is not science. This may be inspiring, but it is certainly not the truth” (Du Bois 1998, 723). Du Bois contends for a wrestling at, and against, the edges of political imagination. Discursive labor, as decarceral praxis, requires not disavowing modernity in toto, but must be an agonal struggle for dialectical possibility. Put differently, a scientific revolution cannot be disarticulated from a modernity reimagined and reconstituted: “no history is accurate and no ‘political science’ scientific that starts with the gratuitous assumption that the Negro race has been proven incapable of modern civilization” (Du Bois 1998, 382). In a word, political modernization mandates scientific revolution.

Euromodernity’s Negrophobia, expressed through a systemic anti-black racism and its “assumed criminality of black people,” means its methods are not merely anachronistic, they are wholly anti-scientific (Davis 1997, 268). The co-constitutive relation between method and modernity exiles the black through an arrest of both the body and bodies of reason. Contrastingly, an Afrmodern turn, conceived as a new umbilical cord of political growth, offers a decarceral method that is additive not subtractive. Euromodernity’s sum total of civilizational progress requires black regress—the subtraction of the black as a “barbarian” people-group. Afrmodernity instead conceives itself as a new modern grammar of being human; it is a new political relation and an alternate orientation to systems of power, knowledge-generation, and historical production.

The naturalizing of modernity as outside the temporal-cum-political precinct of blackness is a European myth. Quijano diagnoses this as the “Eurocentric pretension that Europe is the original producer of mo-
modernity” (2000, 546). Here, modernity becomes fortified in an epistemic prison. Against this backdrop, Geo Maher contends, “[i]f it is a central pretension of Western modernity that nature is a vast prison that stands opposed to human liberation and freedom, then here we find something far different, turning such notions on their head” (2022, 3). Turning plantocratic logics on their head requires a Du Boisian search for truth—for alternatives—beyond the extant global order. Whereas Euromodernity handcuffs blackness to a criminal ontology, Aframodernity instead seeks to emancipate them with methods to seeing reality accurately, facilitated by demonstrable evidence. If new methods are not produced, blacks will continue to be accosted with the endless “criminalization of forward movement that is irrevocably bound to the scream,” which, in embodied terms, is the scream of Eric Garner, of George Floyd: I can’t breathe (Moten 2017, 124). It is black death by carceral asphyxiation. Or, in the words of Woodyly, it is “[t]he grim spectacle of a public lynching” (2022, 209). Asphyxiation induced by the carceral state amounts to a new era of modernity’s lynchings—lives and discursive fields are subjected to a black death. This what Ida B. Wells means when she says, “he is bound hand and foot and swung into eternity” (2016, 147). Euromodernity seeks the eternalization of black discursive and embodied death. As a radical displacement, Aframodernity stands, in part, as the decriminalization of black futurity. It is the emancipation of possibility.

What, then, is Aframodernity? Lewis R. Gordon posits: “A future existence—whether as hybrids, creolized subjects, or some other collective form in which their identity as a people could be maintained—meant that they could offer alternative modernities since Euromodernity demanded their future absence. For black people, such a project is Aframodernity” (2018, 29). Yet, the question of not only of a black, but also a genuine humanist, alternative to the carceral methodologies of Euromodernity, understood here as the imprisoning of black political futures, entails a revolution of thought. As a matter of form and function, the emancipation of method, as the unchaining of reason, requires a dialectical possibility: “Dialectically, Afro-Modernity can be seen as the negation of the idea of African and African-derived peoples as the antithesis of modernity” (Hanchard 1999, 247). This negation of the negation—countermodernity against modernity—yields a new radical configuration toward an Aframodern scientific revolution: “[t]he Afro-modern tradition of political thought…has forged a distinct intellectual configuration” (Gooding-Williams 2009, 2). That intellectual configuration is part of the discursive labor enacted throughout the Black radical tradition. Decarceral praxis is an unlocking—a release of—black reason. This warrants a form of discursive labor Christina Sharpe charts to be a potentiated symmetry between an emancipated method and Aframodernity’s struggle for scientific revolution:

In the anti-black ‘post-racial’ social reality animated and subtended by…non-humans weaponized sidewalks; shoot ourselves while handcuffed in the back of police cars; are brutally murdered while asking for help; incarcerated, assaulted, and stopped and frisked for walking, driving, and breathing while black. What will be the work of black studies now to defend those who are subject to such overwhelming and gratuitous, narrative and actual, discursive and material death” (2014, 61).

While “discursive and material death” stands as a reality within Euromodernity, where “racial terror is not merely compatible with occidental rationality but cheerfully complicit with it,” Aframodernity also seeks to develop weapons of theory (Gilroy 1993, 56). These forms of racial terror manifest across the vast epochal span of black presence in the Americas (and beyond, as witnessed with African (neo)colonialism and South African Apartheid), yet its contemporary emergence remains grounded in America’s pathological romance with prisons, in its material and discursive forms. As Sharpe maintains, Black Studies (or sometimes termed, Africana Studies), must offer itself as a radical turn towards a scientific revolution within the ambit of Aframodernity. It must be “truth-seeking” because “[t]he American Negro deserves study for the great end of advancing science in general” (cited in Du Bois 2007, 31). Under the Du Boisian view, this triple relation among method, modernity, and (hu)manhood become inextricably woven into the social fabric of democratic life—where the emancipation of method is co-extensive with the “emancipation of man” (1998, 16). The nature of such a surgical study of blackness, and its attendant methodological instruments, must cohere around a pluralistic, transdisciplinary enterprise (see Marsh and Stoker 2002). For instance, those instruments may be Afrological in nature, “methods of black oriented social scientists and humanists” (Asante 2003, 77); they may be thematized nominally as a “black social science” (see Alkalimat 1969); or, those practices may yet be
under construction, for “[t]here is still work to do” (Alkalimat 2021, 302). Alternatively, the emancipation of method as an Afromodern, decarceral science must manifest as a radical commitment to freeing truth from the scientific imaginary of Euromodernity. This means a re-invention of new histories of scientific progress across the human sciences. This can be seen in the discovery of a new science of state-making, as witnessed in the Haitian Revolution (Casimir 2020; Chevannes 2023), or in the decolonial relation to the social sciences evident in Fanon’s sociodiagnostic method (2008). In the final analysis, the emancipation of method necessarily means “Black Studies is an adventure into the struggles over the suppression and liberation of ‘subjugated knowledges’” (Gordon and Gordon 2006, xxvi). This retrieval of black reason, once exiled from modernity and entrapped within the carceral cages of barbarism, now fashions the conditions of possibility for decolonizing method. This enacts an epistemic rupture, where Black Studies “confront[s] Euro-American knowledge systems of the world” (Rinaldo Walcott 2021, 91).

The emergence of Afromodernity creates a new epistemic portal for the excavation of reason from below. The consequence of this modernist turn enriches and re-verifies not only Black Studies, but also other sites of subaltern knowledges, including Asian American Studies, “AAPT [Asian American Political Thought] and Africana political theory consist in common questions more than common consciousness” (Lee 2018, 513). Afromodern method thus aims to pollinate across fields of thought, so as to better distil and excavate social truths in their complex textures. Deorbiting the racial terror constitutive of Euromodern rationality—witnessed through the Negrophobic arrest of black bodies, from Toussaint Louverture to Martin Luther King Jr., from Steve Biko to George Floyd, from Walter Rodney to Angela Davis, and the millions of masses unnamed—results in new epistemic constellations and indexes a new decarceral order open to historical reclamation and thus, the reconstruction of black futures. To do so, an Afromodern scientific revolution is not separate from the performance of radical democratic politics but woven into it. Olufumi Táíwò argues that “to fashion new modes of being human for all humanity to embrace...[m]odernity and the elements that issue from it—from the novel as a literary genre to liberal democracy and the scientific revolution—are the most important of these possible sources” (2022, 89). A scientific revolution is constitutive of an Afromodern turn when its effect leads to the emancipation of method. Du Bois understood abolitionism not as a provisional measure or an ad hoc ideal to provide amelioration, rather it is a dialectic that necessitated an ongoing enactment of political contestation. He argued “abolition-democracy [was] based on freedom, intelligence and power for all men” (1998, 182). In other words, the looming slavocratic threat to American democracy, with its plantocratic logics, demands abolition as political necessity. It follows, then, that the principles of democratic transformation must permeate as an abolitionist commitment. Thus, method must be transformed to be an abolitionist science.

At the threshold of Afromodernity lies the emancipation from Euromodern methods, which necessarily means science itself must be decarceral. This revolution of scientific thought may partly manifest as canonical or corporeal, as Black Studies or as embodied “black radical theory,” but it is not one or the other; it is a dialectical relation to both (Robinson 1983, 5). To be sure, a scientific revolution within the Afromodern world is not a call for a black canon as redemptive savior—it is not canonization. In her aptly titled “Black Manifesto,” Wynter warns against this very slippage, “[t]o define our liberation in terms of a canon or the multiculturalization of knowledge therefore simply serves to continue our ongoing destruction as a population” (1994, 9). Therefore, an Afromodern scientific revolution begins by negating the fatal paradox of interiorizing Euromodern criminalization, by imprisoning the black self within its own canonical field of thought.

In the end, decarceralizing science liberates blackness from an arresting Euromodern method, which allows for a reimagination of blacks not as embodied criminality but as modern subjects with world-making possibilities. Therefore, a scientific revolution within Afromodernity moves beyond form, as science proper but towards function, as a truly social science—a genuine human method of relations. This is what Rodney intends as he struggles for, “a methodology that begins its analysis of any society, of any situation, by seeking relations that arise in production between men...[f]orcing man’s consciousness” (2022, 37). Such a humanistic method generates political consciousness, giving substance to the movement’s revolutionary content. This entails new genres of method, such as grassroots social media, “[f]or example, ‘Black Twitter’ is such a community,” with its now world-making hashtag: #BlackLivesMatter (Woodly 2022, 178). This is to say, a mass revolutionary
movement, what Maher inscribes as, “a new generation of struggles against white supremacy, policing, and capitalism” (2022, 16); what Woody dubs, “broad decarceral trends” (2022, 161); what Taylor names, “a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor” (2016, 198), functions as a new social location of blackness, a radical shift from carceral corridors to decarceral domains. This new mapping of human relations fashions Afromodernity and with it, the emancipation of method as a scientific revolution towards truth. This potentiated symmetry between truth and liberation unleashes, at once, revolutionary change; or, in the observations of James H. Cone, “our survival and liberation depend upon our recognition of the truth... If we cannot recognize the truth, then it cannot liberate us from untruth” (1997, 28). The decarcelizing of science, as the emancipation of method, frees Black Studies and beyond it, black reason. It is not singularly a science of abolitionism but too, an abolitionist science, as it liberates black actors from Euromodern carceral holds. In the critique of the study of race, such revolutionary potentialities inhere in an Afromodern method—it is a method of being free.

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