

Extended Abstract

Antiblackness as Modernity's Historical A Priori: The Binary That Generates

This paper examines how modernity is not merely accompanied by antiblackness but is fundamentally structured by it. Modern thought does not simply accommodate racial hierarchies; rather, it depends on antiblackness as its epistemic foundation. Scholars in Black Studies have long argued that antiblackness is not just one form of racial oppression but the structuring condition of modernity itself (Wilderson 2020; Marriott 2024; Sharpe 2016). Wilderson (2020) frames antiblackness as paradigmatic violence that forecloses Black social and political relationality, while Sharpe (2016) conceptualizes the wake of slavery as an ongoing condition through which Black life is continuously negated and ungrievable. Marriott (2024) extends these arguments by theorizing Blackness as constituted through effacement—an ontological absence that modernity requires to sustain its coherence. These insights reveal that modernity does not simply exclude Blackness; rather, it actively requires Blackness as a fundamental negation in order to function as an epistemic system.

Yet, mainstream sociology—particularly the sociology of race—often reduces antiblackness to one form of inequality among many, failing to reckon with its role as modernity's fundamental condition. Jung (2019) critiques sociology's foundational categories for their inability to fully register antiblackness, as they assume the social as an inclusive and universal domain. Instead of treating antiblackness as a discrete form of racial domination within the social, this paper argues that it must be understood as an epistemic order that structures modern knowledge itself.

To make this case, this paper brings together historical sociology and critical theory, drawing on Foucault's concept of the historical a priori and Durkheim's framework of classification. Foucault ([1969] 2002) argues that knowledge is not neutral but historically contingent, governed by epistemic rules that determine what can be known, who can be a knowing subject, and what must remain illegible. Durkheim ([1912] 1995) demonstrates how classification—particularly through binary structures—shapes the way societies organize meaning. While his work focuses on the sacred/profane distinction, this paper extends his insights by arguing that modernity relies on an absolute distinction between the human (rational, sacred, social) and Blackness (irrational, profane, outside the social). Through this framework, antiblackness is revealed not simply as an ideological effect of racial hierarchies but as a generative force that underwrites the very categories of modern thought.

Durkheim's theory of classification demonstrates that the social requires differentiation to maintain coherence. The sacred/profane binary is not just about moral distinctions but about the very conditions under which knowledge and order become intelligible. Yet, what Durkheim does not explicitly theorize is what happens when this binary is not simply an internal differentiation within the social, but an absolute negation that exists outside it. This paper builds on Durkheim's insights while departing from his implicit assumption that all classification occurs within the social. Instead, I argue that Blackness is not merely a marginalized category within social classification but the constitutive outside—the necessary negation that enables the coherence of the human, the social, and modern knowledge itself.

In this way, Durkheim's framework allows us to see the fragility of these categories. If the social must continuously define itself through negation, then its boundaries are never fully secure. The paradox of using Durkheim is that his work provides the very tools to expose the instability of modernity's epistemic structure—an instability that antiblackness, as its foundational logic, must constantly adapt to sustain.

Antiblackness does not operate solely through exclusion; it is also productive. Just as Foucault argues that power does not merely repress but also produces, antiblackness actively generates modern disciplines,

institutions, and epistemic formations. The very coherence of modernity's claims to universality, reason, and historical progress depends on the positioning of Blackness as the limit of intelligibility. Modernity secures its epistemic order by continuously reinscribing Blackness as absence, negation, and the outside of thought.

This insight enables an examination of how antiblackness structures modernity even beyond locations directly shaped by the Middle Passage. While Black Studies scholarship has largely focused on transatlantic slavery and its afterlives, Marriott's (2024) concept of effacement allows us to move beyond the corporeal presence of Black people and examine how antiblackness functions as an epistemic necessity across different contexts. This shift reveals that antiblackness is not merely a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade but a structuring logic that modernity reproduces globally—even in societies where Blackness appears absent or is rendered illegible.

This epistemic logic becomes particularly clear in East Asia. While prior scholarship on East Asian modernity has examined its political economy, nationalism, and cultural hybridity, this paper asks a deeper epistemic question: How was modernity itself structured through the categorical negation of Blackness? The formation of modern nations in Japan, China, and Korea was not simply about racial differentiation but an active epistemic commitment to non-Blackness. Their very capacity to be recognized as modern—to claim membership in "civilization"—depended on positioning Blackness as its negated other. This was not only a matter of aligning with European racial hierarchies but an internalized structuring logic that shaped their self-conceptions, governance, and racial imaginaries (Kim and Lee forthcoming). Iran, by contrast, illustrates another mode of antiblackness. Unlike East Asia, where modernity was secured through the epistemic position of yellowness as non-Black, Iran's modern nationhood required the erasure of its history of enslavement. The abolition of slavery in Iran was not an act of racial justice but a process of historical amnesia, a deliberate restructuring of national identity to disavow its past while maintaining the epistemic order of antiblackness. This historical erasure functioned to secure Iran's own non-Blackness, reinforcing an epistemic and ontological order in which Blackness remained outside the human (Baghoolizadeh 2024). Together, these cases demonstrate that modernity does not require direct participation in the transatlantic slave trade or European colonialism to be structured through antiblackness. What it requires is an epistemic commitment to the categorical negation of Blackness—whether through differentiation, erasure, or historical reconfiguration—as the basis of modern knowledge.

The global adaptability of antiblackness demonstrates that it is not merely a contingent historical effect but a structuring logic that modernity continuously reproduces. Whether through direct subjugation, differentiation, or erasure, antiblackness remains foundational to the very categories that define the modern world. If this is the case, then resistance must be reconsidered: Can opposition to antiblackness ever escape the historical *a priori* that produces it? If modernity is dependent on the continual negation of Blackness, does resistance always risk reaffirming the very conditions it seeks to undo?

Unlike Wilderson (2020), who argues that Blackness is ontologically foreclosed from relationality, or Sharpe (2016), who conceptualizes Black life as structured within the wake of slavery, this paper engages Foucault's analysis of power to reconsider resistance in an epistemic framework. While Foucault emphasizes that power is never total—resistance always emerges from within power structures rather than from an external position—the generative nature of antiblackness complicates this insight. If modernity continuously reproduces itself through antiblackness as a structuring logic, then does resistance always remain bound within the very knowledge formations that sustain it? Rather than assuming that modernity can be reformed from within, this paper considers whether breaking from its epistemic structure requires a fundamental rupture—not just of institutions but of the conditions that determine knowledge itself.

Regardless, what is certain is that the epistemic condition must adapt. It must continuously reconfigure itself. In this way, tracing these generative adaptations becomes a critical task of global and historical sociology. Within these adaptations lies the potential for rupture—not necessarily a total break but what might be called a fissural rupture.

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