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Nobody Knows Her Name: Making Sakia Legible

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In 2004, I heard a story about a Black masculine woman who had been shot in the face at a subway station in New York after telling a man she wasn't interested in him because she was a lesbian. For years I never knew the name of this woman, I didn't know if the story I heard was true or not, but I believed it. I feared that one day I might also be victim of this type of hate crime, being a Black masculine woman myself. I am not sure how that story traveled to me back in my dorm in Williamstown, but once I knew it, I held on to it.

A few years later, I discovered the name of that young woman: Sakia Gunn, a fifteen-year-old gender transgressive lesbian. In 2003, she was murdered while on her way home to Newark, New Jersey from a night out at New York City's Christopher Street Pier. Gunn waited for the bus, a few blocks away from Newark's Penn Station and directly across the street from an empty police booth. While she waited, two Black men drove up and made sexual advances. When she refused those advances, an altercation ensued, and Gunn was fatally stabbed.

This story is just one of many that illuminate, in Sharon Holland's words, "who resides in the nation's imaginary 'space of death'"(Holland 4). My aim in this paper is to discuss how the Black masculine lesbian resides in multiple and simultaneous spaces of *the other* or *spaces of death* and how the narrative of Sakia Gunn's death, as exemplified by the 2008 documentary film, Dreams Deferred: The Sakia Gunn Project, participates in a tradition of politicizing Black death while also exposing that very tradition of *political death*, as, ironically, the very cultural formation that allows the Gunn murder to remain unknown in U.S. public culture.

There have been several iconic instances of anti-Black or anti-queer death before Gunn's murder that demonstrate a connection between nationalism, death, race, and the male body.

Black nationhood, in particular, has historically been imagined through Black masculinity (Lubiano 1998), and figures like Malcolm X, Emmet Till and even more recently, Oscar Grant have often been symbolically resurrected as Black masculine symbols that enable the "imagined community" of African Americans (Holland). Similarly, the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard has also come to serve as a platform for queer political movements. These particular deaths have formed the overdetermining stories of what I call a subjunctive life, the life that the dead subject *could have had* but would never be able to fully live; the memory of these particular deaths became, then, a tool for those in the present, a call to act against anti-racist and anti-queer violence.

While Till, Malcolm, and Shepard's bodies quickly became a lesson in dying—that is, usable as narratives of *political death* or martyrdom, Gunn's death would not function as a typical symbol of racial or queer injury. Her death, I argue, failed to *mean* in the larger national/international frames of nationalist and civil rights politics, which have both historically held fast to investments in "heteropatriarchy" (Ferguson). Dreams Deferred works against the ideological link between political value and male death by trying to attach political value to Gunn's murder through various instances of public mourning. As in the 1996 film Set it Off, in which, as Kara Keeling argues, the Black masculine character, Cleo, is only granted "entry into the realm of value" through "ghettocentric common sense," Dreams Deferred creates affective value through the sensibilities of the *loss* projected onto a presumed Black working class audience. Here, the Gunn family's public mourning affirms not simply a ghettocentric notion of common sense, but also what Wahneema Lubiano calls Black nationalist commonsense, which mirrors state-sponsored forms of patriarchy which depend upon the policing of Black women's and queer sexualities.

Never is this schizophrenic attempt to make Gunn's murder *mean* culturally within a narrative framework of political that always already *disallows* queer subjectivity made more apparent than in the courtroom scenes, in which the Gunn family is shown trying to convince a judge that Sakia's life was valuable. As the film opens, the viewer watches a black screen and hears the sounds of a chorus singing in perfect harmony the slave spiritual or *sorrow song*, "There is trouble all over this world, Children;" and as the screen fades from black to white a photograph of Sakia Gunn in her casket, with her all-white outfit and a pillow that also has her face printed on it, and a rainbow which has the name Sakia embroidered. [clip]

The photograph and the sorrow song work here to link Sakia's death to a history of black terror and martyrdom: it conjures, and literally laments, a history of captivity and terror that invokes slavery and Emmet Till, attempting to compel recognition of Sakia's humanity. Courtney Baker recounts how the Emmet Till funeral—and the photographs of his mutilated body that circulated throughout American culture—"forces a recognition" of human life that has been unlawfully destroyed precisely through its public mourning of masculinity. I read Gunn's open casket as symbolic of the film's double-labor of making Gunn's death within a gendered cultural logic of martyrdom while producing an uncanny encounter with her image. As her body is presented upon the screen, the viewer, who knows nothing of Sakia Gunn, may indeed believe this to be the body of a young Black boy. In this way, the film hopes to produce an affect that beckons a long history of the tragic and senseless death of Black males; but of course, it is the gap between Sakia's gender and her gender presentation that make her death wholly insignificant in the first place.

The camera offers the viewer a privileged perspective of witness as the defense lawyer argues that Gunn's murderer, Richard McCullough, has, except for a minor drug incident, a clean

record. The family responds by saying that Sakia has *never* been in trouble with the state, not even a minor drug offense. These two working class Black families work to make themselves more valuable to the state by competing for who can most align themselves with the normative values upheld by the state—whose life matters more—and, accordingly, none of the public mourners mentions Sakia's sexuality, though her photos, which people bring up to the stand as they give testimony, speak for themselves through the silence. Because there seems to be less talk of Sakia's sexuality and her gender transgressiveness, it also makes space for the silence to exist regarding the reality of this being a hate crime. To announce these *deviancies* would be to make her less legible to the state as valuable, in the same way she may have been made less valuable if she had been a drug dealer or prostitute. Hence the public mourning attempts to make Sakia's death *mean* politically precisely through its appeals to codes of respectability, the very codes that make her sexuality "unspeakable" even as her masculine gender-presentation silently haunts the scene.

What happens in the film is similar to what Black feminists scholar Hawley Fogg-Davis does in her recent essay, "Theorizing Black Lesbians within Black Feminism: A Critique of Same-Race Street Harassment,"(2006). She writes, that while the "political vocabulary of intersectional analysis" that black feminist employ "offers a useful framework for portraying the indivisibility of race and gender in black women's lives…the extension of intersectional criticism to capture black lesbians' political vulnerability within black politics and civic life has been neither automatic nor consistent in black feminist theory," (1). This is an intervention in not only Black Feminist scholarship that has ignored lesbian women, but also an in later scholarship which actively inserts Black lesbians into Black feminist discourse only to situate them in the logic of victimization as Black heterosexual women. Fogg-Davis illuminates a history of a Black

Feminist thought that, while dedicated to the study of the intersections of race, class and gender as a theoretical framework, has either ignored sexuality as an essential component of this framework or simply understood sexuality as additive to the intersectional paradigm without sustaining serious critical engagement with sexuality as essential to the history of Black feminist scholarship.

Fogg-Davis, in her critique of foundational Black feminist studies such as Patricia Hill Collins', Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (200), takes up the issue of street terror in lives of heterosexual and Black lesbians. While Fogg-Davis's discussion of Sakia Gunn, shows how lesbian women are often ignored in analyses of gender and violence, she does not discuss the gender politics that challenge her narrative of female victimization. Privileging the male assailant-female victim paradigm, she does not tell how Sakia Gunn, even before she spoke back to her street-harrasser, was hypervisible because of her masculine appearance: she wore men's clothing and a short haircut. Gunn's masculine gender presentation complicates the story because it troubles her being understood as "any or every black woman" victim of Black patriarchy.

I would like to close by asking you to think about the double potential of gender transgression—as being policed by the state as well as confounding in its attempts to police—which is captured well by the classic Freudian formulation of *the uncanny*. Sharon Holland asked the question: "What if some subjects never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the 'living'? What if these subjects merely haunt the periphery of the encountering person's vision, remaining like the past…at one with the dead—seldom recognized and…often unnamed?" (Holland 15). Sakia Gunn's story allows me to work through these questions, but also add: What happens when we try to *name* or *make visible* these subjects who have be regulated to spaces of

death; and, is there something to be said for their very *unnameability*? How does the encounter with marginalized subjects, by way of its uncanny and ghostly nature, prove to be a dangerous and/or frightening reality that disrupts, critiques and at times has the ability to escape classist, racist, sexist, and homophobic structures of power and being? In other words, can we see something emancipatory in the way that Sakia's death cannot be used as Malcolm X or Matthew Shepard? Is she the ghost that haunts in way that is beyond our grasps unlike the image of Malcolm which have been commodified and used/misused for political work? The category of human, as an expression of Western modernity, is a gendered category and the impossibility of naming or placing the subject who resists gendering is both a source of psychic and social injury. But also, by marking him/her as *non*-human—*and* the thing that makes him/her not fully legible to state power, in which case he or she experiences the lack of proper gender is emancipatory or in the very least, it creates as a productive tension.

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