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Ordinary Failures: Toward a Diasporan Ethics

by

Ianna Hawkins Owen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

African American Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Darieck Scott, Chair  
Professor Leigh Raiford  
Professor Juana María Rodríguez  
Professor Michael Cohen

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Abstract

Ordinary Failures: Toward a Diasporan Ethics

by

Ianna Hawkins Owen

Doctor of Philosophy in African American Studies

and the Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Darieck Scott, Chair

In *Ordinary Failures* I develop a new conception of “diaspora” as the ordinary failure of recognitions and solidarities founded on ideological and ancestral ties. Informed by the queer studies turn toward negativity and the relational turn in African diaspora studies, my project examines the interventions of artists and writers of the diaspora who opt to recite intraracial failure (between blacks) in the face of their structurally overdetermined failure as minoritized subjects. I identify in textual and visual objects an engagement with the promise of intimacy attendant to the artist’s lived experience of diaspora and there I aim to expose the limits of diaspora discourse. My explorations of the failures of diaspora are aided by pushing on queer theories of negativity to speak to race. This project departs from traditional approaches to black failure such as the black mainstream’s condemnation or eschewal of black failure in favor of respectability politics and the black left’s redemption of failure through revisionist narratives of resistance. In doing so, this project holds space for betrayal, exhaustion, and laziness without fear of reifying speculations on the failures of blackness to allow for visions of blackness that are unbound by the binary racial logic of success and failure and instead turn our eyes toward instances in which resistance and defeat are overlapping.

In the first chapter, “Reciting Diaspora,” I examine diasporic misrecognitions in the memoirs *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman, *Triangular Road* by Paule Marshall, and *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid to interrogate what is at stake for the black diasporic memoirist in reciting failure, and the strategies these authors employ to reconcile themselves with the damage incurred in these moments of misrecognition. The second chapter, “The Repetition of Betrayal,” wrestles with the “cruel optimism” of racial solidarity and the afterlife of the suggestion of betrayal in the artwork of Wilmer Jennings to understand how the repetitive and reductive form of wood engravings contributes to a visual language of intraracial solidarity, vulnerability, and intimacy. Chapter three, “A woman should have something of her own,” examines black feminine tiredness in the neo-slave narrative *Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler, the history of slave suicide, and challenges readings of resistance. The final chapter, “Desireless Diasporans,” examines black asexuality and black idleness and argues for the liberatory potential of failing to contribute to normative social and economic reproductivity.



## **Dedication**

For my parents, Cynthia Hawkins and John Owen. You inspire me every single day.

For my grandparents, Helen and Berwin Owen, Robert Hawkins, and especially Elease Coger aka Grandma Hawkins, who always called me Dr. Owen ever since I was small.

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It's incredible to see now, on the other side of the doctoral process, that the days that seemed alternately so precious or so devastating at the time are a blur now. A few words of this Episcopalian prayer of thanksgiving convey it all: *Accept, O Lord, my thanks and praise for all that you have done for me... Thank you for setting me at tasks which demand my best efforts, and for leading me to accomplishments which satisfy and delight me. Thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead me to acknowledge my dependence on you alone.* Thank you also to those agents of the divine who have surrounded me with love and care who I now name.

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Stephanie Ho, Aurora Ortiz, John Merz, Will Scott, and especially Erica Wandner and Stephen McHale—thank you for offering your lanterns to light my inner life and spiritual journey. Most of all, thank you to God for the gift of knowing you through both success and failure, for this precious little life, for my Mom and Dad for their fierce love, hard work and funny bread, brilliance, uncompromising expectations, commitment to justice, and for inspiring me every single day; for my brothers, Zac, Ric, and Sean, who are always there for me and who can make me laugh like no others on any day of the week but especially in moments when I need it; for null null null for holding my heart and my hand and saying the thing and supporting me with both patience and spontaneity and a love so strong it feels like it has always been there; and for the support of my grandparents Helen and Berwin Owen, Robert Hawkins, and especially Eleese Coger aka Grandma Hawkins, who always called me Dr. Owen ever since I was small.

## Introduction

*Friends you need. But often, lovers you need more. A little close human contact. Sex isn't essential. Closeness may well be. My only consolation is that the lack of these things may give me information too.*

—Octavia E. Butler (OEB #1188, August 2, 1976)

In *Ordinary Failures: Toward a Diasporan Ethics*, I develop a new conception of “diaspora” as the ordinary failure of recognitions and solidarities founded on ideological and ancestral ties. Informed by the queer studies turn toward negativity and the relational turn in African diaspora studies, this project examines the representation of racialized failure in literary and visual art objects in order to claim the recitation and repetition of black failure as an ethical project. I examine the interventions of artists and writers of the diaspora who opt to recite intraracial failure (between blacks) in the face of their structurally overdetermined failure as minoritized subjects.

In response to innovative diaspora scholarship concerned with genres of movement (coercive, voluntary, circulatory) in order to track the flow of people, culture, or politics across time and space, I am interested in the stymied flow of the hopes and promises of what diaspora can do and what it owes those who utter its name. I identify in textual and visual objects an engagement with the promise of intimacy attendant to the artist’s lived experience of diaspora. I examine these promises to expose the limits of diaspora discourse. My explorations of the failures of diaspora are aided by pushing on queer theories of negativity to speak to race. Departing from traditional tendencies of the black mainstream to eschew failure for respectability and strategies on the black left to rewrite failure as resistance, my work meditates on the counterintuitive recitation and repetition of black failure without revision or redemption as generative. More broadly, this project offers a critique of an underlying optimism that holds the term diaspora together and, I assert, also stages its undoing.

As an interdisciplinary project, *Ordinary Failures* analyzes the articulation of failure in a variety of mediums in part because it is inspired by foundational African American Studies texts like W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, which asserts that the only way to fully wrestle with the tender and resilient realities of black interiority is to approach them lovingly, rigorously, and painfully from all sides. This approach also aligns itself with contemporary efforts to offer a new theoretical contribution by looking for resonance across many objects and experiences. My central sites of analysis are the travel memoirs *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman, and *Triangular Road* by Paule Marshall; the works of art *Rendezvous* and *Harangue* by Wilmer Jennings; the science fiction neo-slave narrative novel *Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler; and *The Playground (melting into stationary things)* and other multimedia art by ruby onyinyechi amanze. Each of these works and its authors hazard to recite or represent intraracial black failure in myriad forms without hesitation or apology and tread in the gray area between resistance and defeat. It is my hope that working with both well-studied and under-studied objects in multiple genres and mediums will demonstrate the broad reach of the theoretical interventions of *Ordinary Failures*.

To examine these works I employ a multi-method approach. Foremost among these methods, I perform close readings of scenes in memoirs, novels, and poetry, as well as prints,

drawings, photographs, and a painting. The simultaneous savoring and interrogation of every word and punctuation mark in a scene, the context cropped outside of the photograph, the shifts in tone and lighting from one medium to another all contribute to the steady meditation that earns the distinction of “close” in close reading. Because close reading is not an exact science it is well-suited to a project on failure because even an unsuccessful close reading forces an encounter that transforms the object in the viewer’s hand or line of sight.

In conversation with a method of close reading, I conducted an interview with Corrine Jennings, the daughter of Wilmer Jennings (1910-1990), who is the focus of chapter two. Speaking with her is part of an approach to visual culture that disrupts the idea that the art alone can speak for itself and rather historical and familial contexts enrich the study of Jennings’s life, work, and interventions. As the conservator of many of his works and the founder and director of the Wilmer Jennings Gallery in Manhattan, the opportunity to speak with Corrine Jennings about her father’s work and legacy was incredibly valuable. This interview gave me the opportunity to follow up with comments and observations she made in an earlier interview with curator Claude Elliott for the catalogue *Pressing On: The Graphic Art of Wilmer Jennings*. Their discussion of *Rendezvous* and *Harangue*, their collective reading of the sabotage unfolding in or between the two images instigated my interest in writing about Jennings’s work.

For chapters exploring a single work or single author in-depth, the method of archival research propelled this project forward. I visited archives and libraries to view collections of African American art, rare catalogues, photographs, early drafts, journals, and correspondence which allowed me to construct a fuller picture of the artist’s context, aims, ambitions, and difficulties. These institutions included Kenkeleba House to view *Harangue* and *Rendezvous*, interview Corrine Jennings, and to view her collection of African American prints—particularly those by Wilmer Jennings and Hale Woodruff. I also visited the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to view photographs of the artist and of James Lesesne Wells, and the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building of the New York Public Library to view catalogues on African American printmaking and some of Wilmer Jennings’s commissioned graphics work on microfilm. At the Rhode Island College James P. Adams Library I was able to view another rare catalogue, *4 From Providence* (1978). I also visited the Minskoff Center for Prints, Drawings, and Photographs of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum to view another copy of *Harangue* and additional prints by Jennings. Last but far from least, I visited the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA to view Octavia E. Butler’s papers which include 8,000 items and 80 boxes of ephemera (Russell 12). There, I examined her diaries, commonplace books, newspaper clippings, early drafts, fragments, drawings, and letters. The arrangement of my objects of inquiry, which stretch from the 1800s to 2016, are gathered together to broach the question of how reciting, rendering, and embodying failure in public serves the subjects whom the term diaspora hails. These recitations of failure, both radically available to us (not hidden or denied) and also radically refusing to neatly fit resistance narratives or even counsel us through rocky and painful terrain, are in and of themselves valuable contributions to the study of blackness, which is what I aim to show here in *Ordinary Failures*.

By maintaining a suspicion of diaspora, as I recall my chair Darieck Scott inviting on the first day of his introductory diaspora theory course, I assert that we let a little light in not only for other desires but also for desirelessness, as Eunjung Kim’s work has opened my eyes to. My central questions are many but they all circle the drain of intraracial disappointment, injury, and pain. What is risked in our attempt to build intimacy where we acknowledge there is none readily available? How do we parse or begin to build fluency in a visual language of constituency and its

corruption? How do the strongest among us define freedom when living itself becomes a habit? In what ways do resistance and defeat begin to look the same at a distance? To return to the opening epigraph, what does the absence of these things teach us? Not just the absence of success, but the absence of closeness, of trust, of belonging, of intimacy, of energy, of desire, of desirability, of effort, of inclusion? What does the space and experience of affective lack—the “lack” within “black”—allow? I am interested in the contemplative position that unredeemed black failure, in its myriad forms, makes possible.

The first chapter, “Reciting Diaspora,” introduces my intervention in diaspora theory and the central questions of the dissertation via a curated walk through influential texts, theories and moments that have helped shape the project before you. My analysis of the travel memoirs by Hartman, Marshall, and Kincaid hones in on the dissonance that comes of misrecognition and the strategies that these writers develop to process and emerge from that experience. In so doing, I demonstrate that diaspora is the failed promise of post-Middle Passage mutual recognition between subjects with ideological or ancestral ties, and expectations of “Africa” and of family as ideas that don’t quite line up with their realities. The first chapter interrogates what is at stake for the black diasporic memoirist in reciting failure and these authors’ attempts to reconcile themselves with the damage incurred in these moments of misrecognition. The chapter also sets up subtle staging for the dissertation’s larger arc which aims to demonstrate instances in which resistance and defeat are overlapping. In this chapter the resistance to misrecognition in the home country collides with misrecognitions abroad that pose a self-defeating obstacle to intersubjectively built belonging.

The second chapter, “Wilmer Jennings and the Repetition of Betrayal,” takes the notion of diaspora as failure to a bleaker place than the previous chapter’s claim of the instability of levying the term “diaspora” without the intersubjective work required to bridge the two figures “diaspora” presumes to connect. Instead, I examine an organizing scene in which figures gathered under the sign of blackness *are* engaged in a collaborative project with the aim of building power together and yet such work still results in failure. In this chapter, I draw on Lauren Berlant’s work to meditate on the “cruel optimism” of racial solidarity that allows the safe passage of so-called black informants, particularly as it relates to the circulation of readings of the work of African American artist Wilmer Jennings. The oil painting *Rendezvous* (1942) and the later, reduced wood-engraving *Harangue* (1942) offer variations on black men engaged in a political gathering. I employ close reading methods to reflect on the meanings that arise amidst the two versions of the scene depicted by Jennings. Operating on both declarative and implicit registers, the visual and verbal repetitions mirror one another to suggest that the most elemental characteristic of racial constituency is its failure to attain the stability it promises its adherents. The afterlife of suspicion, but also its misdirection, threatens to undo the collective project through the vulnerabilities that arise with the expectation of intraracial solidarity. In this chapter, which gains more solid traction with the project arc, the intimacy developed in resistance to political oppression is co-constitutive of the defeat of political resistance, as the intimacy that makes organizing stronger also makes sabotage more devastating.

The third chapter, “‘A woman should have something of her own’: Suicide in Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed*,” examines the themes of femininity, exhaustion, and suicide in the neo-slave narrative, with reference to a contextualizing historiography of slave self-destruction. This chapter explores the entanglement of race, reproduction, intimacy and exhaustion in *Wild Seed* in conversation with the African American literary and historiographical trope of suicide as an act of resistance for the enslaved, who are thought to refuse to submit or to return to various homelands. In particular, this chapter contemplates the theme of tiredness that gives way to termination; Butler

writes of the main character in *Wild Seed* in a September 19, 1977 journal entry that “It must take [Anyanwu] a long, painful time to give up” (OEB #3217)—and it does. In this chapter, I work to argue for a more capacious reading practice surrounding the suicide of the slave, such that we not only read it as an instance of either revolutionary resistance or embittered defeat, but possibly that the enslaved, too, performed more inwardly oriented action that cannot be categorized comfortably as only resistance or defeat.

The fourth and final chapter, “Desireless Diasporans: Asexuality and Idleness,” examines departures from normative modes of reproductivity (sexual and economic reproduction) in the forms of black asexuality and black idleness. This chapter takes up the apparent paradox of the overlap of excess and absence at the site of the black asexual and the black idler and interrogates the perhaps liberatory potential of failing to contribute to normative social and economic reproductivity as a desireless diasporan subject. The chapter tentatively takes a step back toward narratives of empowerment by situating the archetypal figure of the mammy, whose ideological design mandates sexual silence, to suggest she may have an autonomous relationship to silence. The chapter closes with an examination of the theme of idleness in the drawings by the Nigerian artist ruby onyinyechi amanze, whose work is replete with inviting, yawning empty space and playful figures. As a more abstract chapter, the kind of failure that takes center stage is less the particular action of silence or idleness but the ideological reification of the failings of black subjects. In this chapter, I offer that those figures that we read as defeatist regarding the cause of black resistance might instead offer empowering postures that refuse to expend energy in correcting the discourse that fixes them.

I must say that I, perhaps foolishly, didn’t expect to become so emotionally entangled with parts of the project. But Butler did, as she promised she would, “hold” and “stimulate” me “to the highest awareness.” She continues “and the world will fall to a shattering end when my tales are ended. I shall be an experience to return to again and again. I shall be... loved” (OEB #3113, January 24, 1968, ellipses in original). It is not just the end of her tales that shatters us, but the end of her. As a late comer to her work assigned to me in graduate school, I couldn’t help but be overcome by curious emotions in the reading room paging through her life, wanting to reach through time and tell an anxious young Butler who wondered “what would it be like to win instead of mere <nearly> break even” that she would win the MacArthur Grant in 1995—the first science fiction recipient, at that (OEB #3217, November 19, 1977). As she wonders whether what she is struggling toward is worth it in her early diaries, I want to tell her a Star Choir would be written to celebrate her *Parable* series, and that it would be but one part of a *year-long* series of events held in her memory. The list goes on. But I also find myself laughing out loud with the audacious woman who would muse confidently in cursive in her journal, “And there was that guy on the bus this morning, mmm. Come on look if you’re free, man. Let’s see if you’re interesting enough to want” (OEB #3113, January 19, 1968). And further still, befriend the awkward black girl who wrote, “Wondering how I’ve been [programmed]—what script has been written for me <and, of course, in part, by me> to make me so insecure with other people—so insecure that I make them nervous and they go away” and tell her, she’s not alone (OEB #3217, February 11, 1978).

The *Mind of My Mind*-style psychic thread that Butler has planted in me from the beyond, that emotionally and intellectually tugs at me, is a testament to the powerful connection between the past and the present, the archive and the humble (nosy?) researcher. And as this dissertation, which feels so fleshly fragile and timid to me now, rapidly begins to recede into the past, I hope that something useful in it still stretches out to reach you and, from time to time, gives you a little tug.

### Works Cited: Introduction

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## Chapter One

### Reciting Diaspora

...he liked the people who won, even though he was among the things that had been won.

—Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother* (783)

In a rare moment of identification, novelist Jamaica Kincaid compares adolescent thefts with her brother Devon, thirteen years her junior. As a child she liked to steal novels while her brother preferred history textbooks. Surveying his bookshelf along with his too-brief life, she notes that everything Devon has to his name had been stolen one way or another. What attracts him to the history of “hero-thieves” like John Hawkins—a captain instrumental in the Atlantic slave trade—is not the scale of his thefts but rather the extravagant recitation of Hawkins’s triumphs. Devon’s identification with the thief, as Kincaid relays it, seems in contradiction with the fact of his own historical context as a spoil of that conquest, bringing to mind affect theorist Lauren Berlant’s observation that “fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire” (*Cruel Optimism* 122). In his act of misrecognition, Devon not only witnesses alongside the colonist who would quantify him individually but also, more broadly, his identification with the slave traders ratifies the genesis of diasporic relationships, according to those who would define diaspora as forced dispersal. In other words, Devon believes in diaspora to the extent that a profit has been made from it. That profit is not the transatlantic possibility of solidarity and cultural production but rather the literal monetary profit of proto-capitalist accumulation resultant of the flesh trade. His fantasy of being a historical subject (which is, possessing a coherent and linear origin) satisfies the desire for success, recasting his thefts in a language of colonial and therefore heroic victory. Kincaid notes that her brother’s reading of history embraced its entertaining heroism and inspired admiration in him—seeing the “defeat” of his own people as “inevitable and even fun” (780-782). While Devon is at one level embracing diaspora (as dispersal), his recognition of diaspora as a worthwhile relation stems not from an act of mutual recognition at the level of valuing black life, but rather he identifies with accrual via theft and “success,” despite what this means for the body that signifies blackness—even his own.

Allegiance to success is not simply a matter of betting on the more attractive outcome but also an endorsement of the structural and affective regimes of power that tether black bodies to adjectives like backward, behind, and at the bottom. Success is a tricky thing, if not altogether foreclosed for African diasporans whose overdetermined failure haunts even the most conventionally accomplished among the group. As a racial category of value, success and those who can achieve it are not governed by the same rules of engagement as the losers and failures. Certainly, this is old news. We see this in Hegel’s wholesale dismissal of Africa and Moynihan’s enduring condemnation of the black family. To put it rather crassly, Devon’s choice suggests the reification of discourses that designate capture and export as a *favor* to Africans, putting them in proximity to models of success as “civilization” and including them in the recitation of the historical record. Trickier still than Devon’s preference for a seat at the victor’s table, his casual allegiance points us to the discomfiting rupture between bodies made to signify “diaspora.” Neither

traditional conceptions of the connection in the blood nor contemporary cultural and historical grounds for political unity are compelling enough to hold together the fiction of readily available solidarity on the grounds of diasporic belonging.

Material though the consequences of its overdetermination may be, black failure is both the foil and integral support beam to the common sense of white success. Taken together, W.E.B. Du Bois's revelation that blackness is endowed with the gift of second sight and Charles Mills's observation that whiteness is an agreement to misrecognize the world combine to suggest that the recitation of failure is a practice only available to the subject who can recognize themselves, their not-selves, and the intersubjective relationships that constitute each. To clarify, in his canonical *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes the doubledness, the twoness of sight and consciousness and feeling and sense, for the (in his words) American Negro resultant from perceiving oneself not just through one's own eyes but also through the eyes of others ("with amused contempt") as a caricature and a failure. Betwixt these two warring visions of self, Du Bois describes a "longing...to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (5). And yet, the problem of the color line persists as a central problem of the subsequent century. With diminishing hope for others recognizing a successful image of blackness, instead my interest is in the black diasporan's vision (and feeling, sensation, and consciousness) of her own failures—not through the eyes of others, but by one's own eyes; not the invented failures and misrecognitions of blackness, but one's own honest and intersubjective pain and disappointment. Rather than as evidence of inadequacy, black failure is a constitutive part of the diasporic encounter. The rendering, recitation, and repetition of black diasporic failure in this sense is a powerful contemplative position between the projection of failure upon blackness and the contractarian mystification of whiteness as success.

Literary scholar Kenneth Warren's "Appeals for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing Diaspora" offers that diaspora is best understood as an entanglement of misrecognition and recognition. Misrecognition is the tension between "what one claims to be" (the super-liminal and confessional citational practice) and that assertion's hailing of, or haunting, by alternative recognitions (the boundaries of these assertions). The appeal to diasporan subjectivity emerges out of the desires and frustrations of connectedness that often stand unstably on imaginings of Africa and African America (among other places)—their wheres and their whens, across time and across space. As Warren directs our attention to various examples of Langston Hughes's exploitations, denials, and fantasies of relationality, he notes that "Hughes's willingness to report [an] embarrassing episode suggests that a central concern of [his memoir] *The Big Sea* is not to hide, but to explore the various failures to secure black transatlantic aims" (401). For example, Hughes writes of witnessing and walking out on the sexual assault of an African woman sex worker, deceiving the locals of a French colony with counterfeit bills, and being called white by other black shipmates. What is a "black transatlantic aim" and how might it be achieved in sharing the ways in which Harlem's poet laureate failed his peers and, if you're feeling sentimental, us as well? Hughes's "willingness to fail" on the page, a public recitation that Fred Moten argues we can hear also on Billie Holiday records, and the availability of the subject for misrecognition and vulnerability, contribute to what Warren identifies in diasporic thought as "a desire to speak...contradictions in a single voice" (Moten, *In the Break* 103; Warren 405). What if it is true that diasporic blackness *is* failure? Or, what if "diaspora" does not elevate the single voice but instead invites the flood of every voice, unmediated? Contradiction becomes clearest when we cannot distinguish any one voice at all. We must be overwhelmed by failure and find in diaspora the willingness to drown.

I am concerned with the fantasies of belonging that we commonly hold to be constitutive of a kind of relation named “diaspora” in tension with articulations of intraracial failure. The application of “diaspora” as a term of any certainty whatsoever requires a series of misrecognitions variously comforting, stymieing, and painful. *Ordinary Failures* meditates on artists and writers of the diaspora who have chosen to render, recite, and repeat intraracial failure rather than traditionally optimistic models and visions of success. My concern with these recitations racializes the interventions of queer theorist Heather Love's work in *Feeling Backward* by asking how reciting and preserving failure serves diasporic subjects. This project attempts a disentangling of blackness from a rhetoric of overdetermined failure in order to examine, on their own terms, black recitations of failed moments of diasporic relationality. My conviction is that the reproduction of such moments in art and literature allows us to understand diasporic failures, betrayals, and disappointments as valuable not because they teach us something but, perhaps, because they refuse to counsel us and they persist in spite of all our desires to the contrary.

In this chapter, I examine recitations of failure in the form of misrecognition between the imagined familial relations of diasporan subjects as they are distilled and displayed in the travel memoir. Focusing on this genre takes seriously the common-ground assumptions of diaspora as movement and encounter and treats them delicately by looking at a kind of diasporic propulsion unhinged from coercion—instead, relational and ordinary—but nonetheless painful. *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman, and *Triangular Road* by Paule Marshall involve movement within and through the United States, England, Ghana, Nigeria, and Antigua while the authors engage relationships of mothers and siblings as well as distant and symbolic relatives. Each memoir includes moments of meeting between author and other that exhibit diasporic relational possibility but ultimately recount failing to mutually recognize one another and, even, outright reject or violate the other.

By looking at the example of transnational memoir, I begin my search for the “how” of diaspora, its structures of feeling, and the weaknesses and failures of those structures. I approach diaspora through naming. Heather Love notes the anachronism of backwardly projected naming practices and the disservice this may do to “queer” or queered predecessors. I would add that names exchanged or applied in one’s contemporary moment have their shortcomings, too. Names approximate meaning but ultimately fail (then and now) and so “diaspora” as a name (“one voice”) given to many projects and tendencies must also fail or name a process of failure. In tandem, diaspora is a name bestowed upon the other in a process of misrecognition between black subjects that results in physical and psychic violence, at once alienating and generative, and ultimately dangerous.

Author and diplomat Rene Maran serves as a site for literary theorist Brent Hayes Edwards’s development of the notion of reciprocity as “mutual answerability: articulations of diaspora in tension and dissonance, without necessary resolution or synthesis” in place of the more traditional African American Studies construct of call-and-response (*The Practice* 110). This resonates with anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s caution against the reduction of diaspora to easy and uncontested solidarities along with literary theorist Bed Prasad Giri’s observation that diaspora captures both radical and conservative tendencies. Edwards’s attention to the component of diaspora that is reciprocity means that “diaspora can be conceived only as the uneasy and unfinished *practice* of such dialogue—where each text both fulfills the demand of the other’s ‘call’ and at the same time exposes its necessary ‘misrecognitions,’ its particular distortions of the way race travels beyond the borders of nation and language” (Edwards 110, emphasis in original). Arguably, the most uneasy of contributions to diasporic dialogue is that of the memoir, anchoring

all critiques of racial discourse in the individual confessor, with nowhere to hide. In an interview for *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, Saidiya Hartman shares,

I never thought that I would write anything that anyone could attach the label memoir to.... That's not me, and we know all the critiques of confessional discourse... So I had to inhabit a rhetorical position that was discredited on numerous fronts. To write *Lose Your Mother* I had to imperil myself and make myself vulnerable to critiques from [all sides]. (Saunders 4)

What is it about memoir writing that makes it such a perilous crossing, even as late as the twenty first century? The necessary vulnerabilities attendant to the black memoir form here are not personal but structural as the failures described therein are not restricted to the individual but stick to the race. There is a racialized risk in writing failure in much the same way that the speech or actions of individual people of color are taken to represent, credit, or stain the larger group. The pronouncement of black failure cannot be contained, however casual. In its slipperiness, it gets all over you, it gets all over me. The minoritarian social group's reticence to recite failure lies in the unwieldiness of the afterlife of recitation. The articulation of failure, both as narrative and as a touching/meeting, animates representations of the individual *and* the race as well as the individual *as* the race. As Hartman admits, memoir writing is an act of imperilment, not only for the confessor/confessed but equally so for those who refuse the confession and even those out of earshot. Critiques come from philosophical and political corners but they also come from the family, who enjoin us to keep the laundry where no one will see it. Both the citadels and the bottoms of blackness are vulnerable to the slip and the splash of failure in public. The resignation to contamination, the choice (if we can call it that) to depict not just interracial failure but *intraracial* failure means that the recitation confirms what hegemonic racial paradigms of success and failure have always hailed in the black body, from the dandy to the mammy: excessive inadequacy. Failing to achieve the ideals associated with whiteness (work, reason, maturity, or love, for example) is part of the mundane expectations of post-emancipation/post-independence blackness. Just as the self requires an other for definition, the constitution of whiteness as the sign of success is accomplished through the “presumption of incompetence” assigned to the body made to signify blackness.

What happens when the diasporan memoirist offers the public her recollections not just of interracial failure, but intraracial failure—enunciations of blacks failing one another or when blackness fails itself? With reference to Jean Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Frantz Fanon agrees that the category of race is fabricated; that the racist needs and goes so far as to create the raced. In taking up the question of the normal, Fanon writes that contact with the white world begets the abnormality of the black figure. “The white family is the agent of a certain system,” contact with which renders the black child abnormal (*Black Skin, White Masks* 148). Fanon critiques the collective unconscious as not neutral or organic, but as the “imposition of a culture,” pointing to the internalization of blackness as failure (191). Compounded with rape, with savageness, Fanon writes, the “Negro is the symbol of the biological,” overdetermined by pigmentation (167). He describes that as whites presume the guilt of blacks, blacks presume their own guilt as well, against even the evidence of personal experience, since the association of blackness with evil runs deep in the Western socialization process and reason is the marked territory of whiteness. Fanon writes, “All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good” (167). So effective is

the coercive blackening of the body, the gun might be merely ornamental. The body is unable to pass, the consciousness misrecognizes itself and volunteers its own failure. Sharing as Fanon does, “I know that I’m no good,” reveals the ways that false consciousness rushes in to fill the gap vacated by double consciousness. But it might also be misread as an endorsement of black guilt. Why take that risk?

Fanon’s racialization of Hegel’s master/slave relationship reveals that what is at stake here is not mutual recognition for both parties, that this relationship is not one of parallel strivings. Rather, while the slave might desire “to be considered” which marks him beyond “thingness” (becoming a being-in-itself), the master laughs and desires only the work of the slave, not his mutual recognition (220). As such, we might take this nudge from Fanon to center intraracial (mis)recognitions as the valuable and vulnerable site of inquiry, rather than interracial ones. What is black failure for itself? To begin to answer this question, I examine recitations of failure in black and diasporic family relations. Meditating on each of these I hope to contribute to thinking about an ethics of representing and reciting failure without need of redemption. We witness the imperilment of Kincaid, Hartman, and Marshall across the doubly disavowed terrain of black failure and confessional projects. Each include moments of meeting as reunion in the diaspora between author and (m)other, engaging in familiar acts of misrecognition. Each relates distinctly to the construction of the mother: Hartman goes in search of matrilineal legacy, Kincaid testifies to having no maternal bondedness, and Marshall elaborates a fictive relationship.

### **Familiar Acts**

In *My Brother*, Jamaica Kincaid recounts her intrafamilial relations stretched taut across this thing we call diaspora and her refusal to redeem the dead and the living. Published in 1997, the memoir chronicles her youngest brother’s death from complications from AIDS in Antigua. Throughout, she is preoccupied by the problem of familial love that, though mandated, may not be felt. The memoir acts a model for “thinking about grief in a way that resists, or at least interrogates, the recuperative pressures” traditionally placed on the survivor like revisionist sentimentality or legacy maintenance (Brophy 266). She recalls the fraught place of memory in her upbringing:

When I was a child, I would hear [my mother] recount events that we both had witnessed and she would leave out small details; when I filled them in, she would look at me with wonder and pleasure and praise me for my extraordinary memory. . . . As I grew up, my mother came to hate this about me, because I would remember things that she wanted everybody to forget. I can see clearly even now the moment she turned on me with that razorlike ability to cut the ground out from beneath her children, and said I remembered too much (“You mine long, you know”). By then it was too late to tell me that. (Kincaid 641-646)

Kincaid’s publicly recited ambivalence about her brothers, and her “too good memory” of her family’s humiliations, present a problem for the politics of diaspora as an intersubjective network of love and solidarity. This generalized set of expectations and anxieties is perhaps best captured by Jacqueline Nassy Brown in a meta-ethnographic moment of *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail*. Joseph, an interviewee, expresses concern upon reading her manuscript that Brown’s project on Liverpool-born blacks has omitted, undermined, or “failed to contribute” to what he calls black “unity.” She responds “[d]iaspora must never be made synonymous with the project of unity--nor with origins, authenticity, difference, roots, routes, or hybridity. These terms just give voice to the

discrepant desires and discontents of counter/parts” (128). By including Joseph’s comments, he enters Brown’s text as a representative of black subjects looking to diaspora as a promise of solidarity and connection and as well as the feelings of frustration and betrayal that arise when it is interrogated as anything but.

The recitations of Kincaid’s long mind in *My Brother* enact the difficult work of “taking care of the past without attempting to fix it” and in doing so, “living with bad attachments” and “identifying through loss,” to quote Love (43). Kincaid’s semi-fictional/semi-autobiographical work broadly, and her memoir in particular, bring us intimately—but also quite publicly—face to face and heart to ambivalent heart with the bare and unsentimental facts of diaspora that disrupt its promise of intraracial love, solidarity, recognition, and value. Despite her strained (to put it lightly) relationship with her mother, Annie Drew, and with her mother country, Antigua, Kincaid is drawn back into the world of both through her brother Devon’s illness and need of AZT, a drug Kincaid can facilitate access to from the United States. Here, it makes sense to echo Devon’s pragmatic investment in “diaspora” with Annie Drew’s. Devon’s mother endorses Kincaid’s diasporan status to the extent that it facilitates privileged access to goods—in this case, medicine—even though global regimes of racialized economic dependence underwrite Antiguan national acceptance of HIV as, in any other case, a death sentence. Moreover, Kincaid’s “too good memory” reminds us that Annie Drew had hoped to obstruct (through book-burning) the very education that ultimately allowed Kincaid to secure life-extending treatment. She recalls the scene from her childhood, “I had been reading instead of taking care of [Devon], I did not notice that in his diaper was a deposit of my brother’s stool, and by the time my mother returned from her errands... the deposit of stool had hardened and taken the shape of a measure of weight, something used in a grocery store.” She goes on to explicitly point to the stool’s symbolic value as capturing and concretizing the despair of an overburdened family, the absence of prospects, a future unfolding to likewise reveal “only shit” (1090).

When [she] saw his unchanged diaper, it was the realization of this that released in her a fury toward me... she looked in every crevice of our yard, under our house, under my bed... and in all those places she found my books, the things that had come between me and the smooth flow of her life, her many children that she could not support, that she and her husband... could not support, and in this fury, which she was conscious of then but cannot now remember, but which to her regret I can, she gathered all the books of mine she could find, and placing them on her stone heap... she doused them with kerosene (oil from the kerosene lamp by the light of which I used to strain my eyes reading some of the books that I was about to lose) and then set fire to them. (1090-1744)

The recollection is as much about wrath as it is about transubstantiation. Readers witness the conversion of resources into waste, and soft innocence (a baby’s feces) into hard sentences (economic doom). What once illuminated, now blots out. Liquid becomes fire. Paper becomes ash. In the memoir’s present tense, Annie Drew states that Kincaid will be blessed for bringing AZT to Devon and Kincaid reflects that “Had my life stayed on the path where my mother had set it, the path of no university education, my brother would have been dead by now. ...she did not remember that if it had been up to her, I would not have been in a position to be blessed by any God, I might in fact be in the same position as my brother right now” (636-637, 640-641). Annie’s interest in access then as a form of status allows her to revise her opinion about her daughter’s exodus from the island. It would not be fair, however, to say that any of the relationships changed in this

moment. Kincaid seems to have a bottomless supply of destructive memories of her familial relationships and so if anything, this early scene seems only to flesh out the rift. In spite of its titling, the memoir focuses on matriarchal damage; Devon's body is merely a conduit between Annie Drew and Jamaica. Kincaid's depictions of her mother reify, rather than refute, enduring tropes of the failures of black women as unable to properly care for their families or raise productive, laboring heterosexual subjects and, as heads of household, are therefore pathological, perverse, and enable dependency. Kincaid asserts Annie Drew has too many children as to condemn the family to poverty, feeds off of the failure of her children to achieve self-sufficiency and, even more morbidly, their failure to outlive her (1091). Compounding this, Annie Drew eclipses her own child's titular dedication.

One can't help but ask, What's in a name? Why call this text *My Brother* instead of *My Mother*? Certainly both share the estranged root word "other"; the memoir by any other name would read as coolly. This displacement might not be so bad except that, as Kincaid describes it, Devon passes on with nothing to his name: "in his life there had been no flowering, his life was the opposite of that, a flowering, his life was like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls off at your feet" (1354). The illness of Devon becomes the occasion on which Jamaica and Annie Drew must encounter one another in forced reunion and the death of Devon serves as a kind of closure via voluntary re-dispersal. There is something about Devon's death from which Kincaid feels she must save herself: the alternate timeline of her life where, after her books burned, she remained in Antigua, in her mother's house and out of school, until she became pregnant or ill herself. Even Devon's death in this sense is not his own, but is a phantom (for she barely knew/knows him) of the pieces of herself that might have remained.

One of the most rudimentary elements of the term diaspora describes a longing to return to the place of origins. Kincaid harbors no such longing and instead confesses, as she reacts to ministerial reassurances at her brother's funeral, "I did not want to be with any of these people again in another world. I had had enough of them in this one" (1620). In this sense, while in her teenage years she embarks upon and embraces relocation that we can commonly call diasporic, she rejects one of the primary tenets of this genre of movement, refusing sentimentality over the mother (country) of origin. More than this, her refusals are quite public, circulating in the memoir form.

In his reading of *My Brother*, Rinaldo Walcott asks, "Black mothers are endowed with the responsibilities of raising black heterosexual children. But how might we make sense of the context when they fail to produce the proper black subject?" (76). Re-centering the Moynihan Report to which the Afrocentric discourse of Walcott's concern reacts, we recognize Annie Drew's portrait as an almost paint-by-number of the report's black matriarch: producing failures (queers and writers) ironically makes Annie Drew a kind of success--an affirmation of black abjection. The Moynihan thesis draws upon the historical lineage of the controlling image of the archetypal "mammy" who served elite white families as a surrogate mother figure in the plantation household. Her care for said family was understood by contrasting it with constructions of mammy's inability to love their own children.<sup>1</sup> Bearing this in mind, Kincaid's postulations regarding her own mother take a more insidious and structurally satisfying shape: "It never has occurred to her that her way of loving us might not be the best thing for us. It has never occurred to her that her way of loving us might have served her better than it served us. And why should it? Perhaps all love is self-serving" (126-128).

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am reference Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Consider Kincaid's skepticism of love alongside historian Michelle Stephens's final and optimistic question in *Black Empire* where she asks, "What does it mean to imagine black love and its related terms, black femininity and masculinity throughout the diaspora, without the securities of home, nation, and heterosexuality?" (280). The question seeks black love on the outside of the socially legible and politically acceptable locales. I must ask, what does it mean to imagine "the diaspora" without the security of love? If whiteness is the sign of value, and blackness is the sign of depreciation, then diaspora is the promise of love and value in an alternative meaning system, within the dominant meaning system but pointing beyond. A promise of love somehow outside and within modernity's black/white binary racial meaning system of success and failure in which the manifestation of the failure of one enhances the success and value of the other. And, yet, diaspora also fails. Kincaid's memoir helps us to understand, through intimate familial portraiture, that living in the diaspora, or being hailed by its name, is an expression of the expectation of reciprocal love. Instead of failing the subjects of whiteness it fails blackness, it fails itself and its subjects fail each other.

Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" is the investiture of promises in objects that actually obstruct the realization of those promises and hopes. I am certain that "diaspora" is such an object, one that promises and fails in the delivery of post-Middle Passage intraracial mutual recognition. The invocation of the name "diaspora" presumes a simultaneously intimate and trans-Atlantic relationality that cannot be guaranteed upon its biological occurrence or ideological utterance. Kincaid, for example, refuses to participate in the alternative and "humanizing" mode of diaspora and instead offers an account of her mother's psychological cruelty (pictured above) and her brother's physical humiliation and degradation, seen in passages like the following summary of Devon's life:

I stood looking at him for a long time before he realized I was there. And then when he did, he suddenly threw the sheets away from himself, tore his pajama bottoms away from his waist, revealing his penis, and then he grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus. When he grabbed his penis in his hand, he suddenly pointed it at me, a sort of thrusting gesture, and he said in a voice that was full of deep panic and deep fear, "Jamaica, look at this, just look at this." Everything about this one gesture was disorienting; what to do, what to say; to see my brother's grown-up-man penis, and to see his penis looking like that, to see him no longer able to understand that perhaps he shouldn't just show me—his sister—his penis, without preparing me to see his penis. (735-742)

Postcolonial literary theorist Bed Prasad Giri states that diaspora is no guarantee of a particular kind of politics "uniquely radical or utopian" and points to the enduring problems of "normative ideologies" repeated by diasporans (Giri 222). Kincaid's response to her brother's diagnosis is an inward turn, and the condition of her own preservation is the displacement of Devon from the text of his only titular dedication. Kincaid's memoir, which suggests a sibling relationship but does not deliver one, allows us to consider a position of ambivalence to diasporic commandments of love and solidarity by displacing not only Devon from his biography with an account of his mother but also, and ultimately, with an account of Kincaid's own survival of a similar fate by leaving him behind (not once, but twice) and by saving her own life when faced with the imminent loss of his. She shares with us, "I became a writer out of desperation, so when



I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would write about his dying. When I was young, younger than I am now, I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life” (1635-1637).

What is diaspora without love? All three family members articulate passing interest in “diaspora” that is self-serving; Devon’s interest in accrual, Annie’s interest in access,<sup>2</sup> and Kincaid’s interest in estrangement. Diaspora for each becomes an opportunity to act out of something that is not traditionally intelligible as love. Kincaid recalls the family without revision, recalls what her mother would like to forget, despite the racial embargo on airing the literal and figurative dirty laundry. *My Brother* stands in defiance of the security of expected forms of diasporic love in a racially inhospitable world. Kincaid offers us a portrait of ordinary relations and family dysfunction, hazarding to tell a story of negative expressions of black love in the face of controlling narratives about the failures of the black family. She also responds to the criticisms of her “long mind” by testifying to her bad attachments and identification amidst loss by engaging in the memoir form, inhabiting a contemplative position between overdetermined failure and disavowals of failure to produce *My Brother*, which is also to say, *herself*.

### **Failure**

Narratives of empowerment and optimistic discursive framings have a seductive allure that is difficult for the scholar and the activist alike to resist. As a project concerned with nuancing failure as a racialized meaning system, specifically staking out failure as a blackened form of ethical communion, my aim here is to join the company of negativity scholars in resisting the above-mentioned temptation. The bruised fruits of my contemplation in this project fall from the broken branch of diaspora and urge us to think critically about failure without polishing, without hoping. In resisting the pull toward productive and agentive reframings of black life, I look to queer theories of failure as I stage this project because Heather Love and Lauren Berlant, for example, inaugurated critical and political moves to embrace failure, backwardness, disgust, disappointment, and death, in ways that serve to further illuminate black diasporic failure. As Valerie Rohy has demonstrated in her *Anachronisms and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality*, the analogous renderings of black and queer subjects (though not equivalent, overlapping) means that these subjects offer tools to interrogate and explicate each other.

Yet, the work of exploring the ethical import of reciting black failure is only possible if certain disaggregations are allowed. Namely, the common sense overdetermination of black failure superstructurally and black diasporic disavowals of such failure must be disentangled (however abstractly) from black diasporic *depictions* of failure. The depiction of interest here is not of blacks as failures assigned to the bottom of a white-dominated social order or social contract, but of blacks failing and betraying each other and themselves. Thinking diasporic failure begins with recognizing the ways that diaspora and diasporans fail, not to always insist on reading resistance into those moments but to instead hold that space without disavowing it or revising it. The work of Heather Love examines queers failing their predecessors through naming practices in particular and it is the practice of naming, or the expectation of cohabiting one name, that is of particular interest to me. Whereas Love’s subjects look “backward” to rename/redeem the dead who cannot

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<sup>2</sup> When Annie Drew celebrates Jamaica Kincaid’s ability to bring AZT to Devon as a blessing, Kincaid recalls Annie Drew’s obstruction of her education via book-burning as well as pulling her out of school early to support the family—a move that leads to Kincaid’s decision to emigrate to the United States. “she did not remember that if it had been up to her, I would not have been in a position to be blessed by any God, I might in fact be in the same position as my brother right now” (640-641).

voice opposition (or who did and we, contemporarily, easily refuse to hear), my subjects look across or look presently to rename the living, with various consequences.

In this section of the chapter, I curate interventions in the theorization of failure to give shape to *Ordinary Failures*. Love directs us not to redeem, but to hold space. Fred Moten demonstrates that blackness is generative while Lee Edelman describes for us a politics that can function without fantasies of the future. Jonathan Lear confronts the epistemological break of “no future” for the racial group and points to the ways in which meaning must be suspended. Hortense Spillers suggests that even in the context of an overdetermined exterior state of crisis the black interior is capable of self-knowledge and self-determination. And finally, Judith Butler ties failure and success to the concept of recitation.

In *Feeling Backward*, Love confronts the impulse to write queer history that insists on “rescuing” figures from the past who actually might have preferred not to be saved from their alienation and loneliness. She writes, “Taking care of the past without attempting to fix it means living with bad attachments, identifying through loss, allowing ourselves to be haunted” (43). Was Nancy Green, the former slave hired to perform “Aunt Jemima” for commercial pancake mix at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, alienated as she donned the mask? Was she lonely with her compensation? Did she disavow her work or was she proud? Are we capable of including her in our sense of diasporic solidarity without redeeming her to meet today’s standards of black resistance if we somehow found her smile was not forced? What gestures, what recitations and images disrupt progress narratives aspired to by various black political moments and what might a focus on failure reveal about diasporic relationality? Love’s project pushes us to see that the good political feelings of “hope, anger, solidarity--have done a lot,” and yet “not nearly enough” and asks that we mine “forms of failure that are less closely tied to action” (27, 161). The queer “feeling backward” raises in mind the black corollary or species/specification “backward people” to describe the affective space of blackness in the West--the historical constructions of blackness and failure as overlapping and overdetermined, not just developmentally behind in the psychological sense but also technologically and governmentally. Such conditions understandably generate a stifling environment for actual failure since anything done by the black body is thought to depreciate in value, regardless of quality.

If this failure is overdetermined and simultaneously not an option, methods and modes like respectability politics, “keeping it in the family” and “hiding the dirty laundry” become the only options. Yet, Love’s work has us ask, what if we don’t redeem or remediate the past or even, by extension, the disappointing present? What happens if we remember Langston Hughes’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” alongside the knowledge that on his first trip across the big sea he cheated the West Africans he met with counterfeit money? Why did he tell us in the first place? If Hughes felt strongly enough to include his failures in his memoirs, as Kenneth Warren argues in “Appeals for (Mis)recognition,” it is incumbent upon us as his heirs to wrestle with those recitations, touch them, and, in our own way, use them.

If failure is useful, what is the value of an object oriented toward failure? Fred Moten’s *In The Break* moves against Marx’s assertion that the commodity cannot speak; Moten points us toward the speech, scream, and song of the slave as evidence of “[t]he spirit of the *material*” (215). Two things are of consequence here. First, Moten confronts Marx’s categorization of the slave laborer as “use-value,” “no-value,” “outside of exchange” in order to point out that the slave’s outsideness to “the field of exchange” can only render her as a “non-commodity” to the extent that Marx is “not hearing” or “overlooking” (17). And second, with Frederick Douglass’s observations in mind that mothers under slavery are myths, Moten is searching for the *mater* of *materiality*. He

finds that “enslavement--and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness... is a *being material* that is indistinguishable from a *being maternal*” (16). Moten observes in Douglass “a theory of value” since, according to Marx, Moten writes, the “value of the commodity is tied precisely to the impossibility of its speaking, for if the commodity could speak it would have intrinsic value, it would be infused with a certain spirit, a certain value given not from the outside, and would, therefore, contradict the thesis on value--that it is not intrinsic” (11, 13). This Douglass-inspired theory of value asserts that both the speech and the labor of the black/slave are interventions, contractions in which “apparent nonvalue functions as a creator of value” (251, 18). Where blacks are objects of fixed/fixing failure, material is concrete and vacated of intrinsic value and dynamism is determined by the field of exchange. Through a return to the linguistic and ancestral root, as well as through Aunt Hester’s audibility, Moten disrupts the categorization of blackness by resituating black material as a speaking, generative commodity.

Taking this a step further, an embrace of failure *by* diasporans in recitational practice affirms both the capacity for speech and intrinsic value *all the while* using that capacity to *confirm* the hegemonic logic of black failure, suggesting something is intrinsic to blackness yet casting doubt over whether what is intrinsic to blackness is indeed valuable. Departing from the hegemonic and anxious repetition of failure to offer autonomously authored recitations of failure, can the diasporan recitation of failure make the “no-use” of blackness inhabitable? Must it always be disavowed? Disentangling from the cycle of overdetermination and disavowal, we seek to clarify the *material* (generative, not foreclosed) value of the intentional recitation of failure by diasporans (subjects of specified (species) failure). Put simply, what is the *material* of recited failure?

From another angle on the question of the value of failure, Lee Edelman's *No Future* describes heterosexuality's cultural role in signifying futurity through socially sanctioned sexual reproduction and the maintenance of the social order through fantasies of the future staged around “the Child.” In such a social/civil order queerness signifies failure both to the Left and the Right: to the Right as the absence of procreation, to the Left as being “nothing more” than an orientation. Rather than positioning queer failure as a merely oppositional identity, Edelman suggests that the potential of queerness’s particular failings lies in its position in distinction from a kind of politics that cannot function without white fantasies of a white future. By embracing the double condemnation to fail, Edelman writes that we find “real strategic value” in queerness’s possible “resistance to a Symbolic reality” of reproducing the Child: the death drive holds out pleasures to queers that are foreclosed to subjects of futurity, whose relations are rooted in reproducibility (24). The resignation to or preference for categorical backwardness gifted to us by Love and the anti-future of Edelman's project orient failing subjects toward a temporal positionality that only becomes more compelling when we begin to incorporate concerns with race and racialization.

To do this, we might also consider philosopher Jonathan Lear’s *Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, which takes up “no future” from yet another position. Lear's text examines the ethical meaning system of the Crow Indians and how to live during a time of catastrophic change (relocation to reservations, broken treaties, and the extinction of the buffalo) when meaning systems break down. In reviewing the recitation of the autobiographical narrative of Chief Plenty Coups at the end of his life (to Frank Linderman), Lear centers his interrogation around Coups’s statement that after the tribe moved onto the reservation and the buffalo died “nothing happened” (32-77). In Coups’s statement, everything that came after could not be made sense of according to the Crow meaning system—without tribal rituals things like death and food have no context, so they are said not to “happen.” Lear argues that through the culturally accepted form of prophetic dream, Coups was able to transform destruction into suspension; a preexisting framework of

spiritual guidance allowed him to anticipate a time when definitions of courage or ethical action would go through a period of revision so unimaginable as to require both the suspension of the meaning system and the radical hope that a new one would take its place (937, 1476-1477).

With Lear in conversation with Edelman, we might ask: How does queerness intervene in the construction of socially ordered meaning at the moment of epistemological change? Is queerness like the dream that prepares us to imagine life after (familial) destruction? Might it redefine the ethical life? Lear's take on "no future" racially and culturally roots Edelman's politics without a future, such that they might be made to speak to a diasporan sense of failure in the following ways. If the Middle Passage can be taken as a "no future" in Lear's sense of an "after this, nothing happened" moment, there is a need for new paradigms of understanding in order to apprehend diaspora *as a happening*. As a moment of "unmaking" (to use Hortense Spillers's phrasing), Middle Passage is a process of transformation from membership to some known social organization to *something else entirely*. The catastrophic change under the umbrella of Middle Passage is a radical disruption of community and tradition. Is this limbo the space of new negotiation? Anthropologists Sydney Mintz and Richard Price resolve that "the development of... social bonds, even before the Africans had set foot in the New World, already announced the birth of new societies based on new kinds of principles... Just as the development of new social ties marked the initial enslavement experience, so also new *cultural systems* were beginning to take shape" (44). The construction of New World ethical systems must, too, have transformed what it means to submit to "no future" with a host of happenings like suicide, jumping overboard or practicing diaspora. On the one hand, Edelman's claims of no-future-ness as an agentive choice become limited, even problematic when we consider the reproductive options of the black (slave and free) have historically and routinely been withheld, circumscribed or destroyed. And yet, Edelman is also a necessary model of how to create imaginative space that mobilizes the overdetermination of failure, to be without future, as a modality of value.

In "All the Things That You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother" Hortense Spillers reveals that the promise of the oedipal complex (resolution to the crisis of finding one's place in the social order) is broken for the black subject, in a constant state of irresolution. Whether the Father is rival or the Father is intermediary, by dint of Middle Passage and enslavement, he is destroyed and with him, continuity in the form of the Law of the Ancestors. With as little reduction as possible, we might say that Spillers and Edelman overlap in their assertion that the abject signifies an opening or rupture in the social order, yet they arrive at markedly different optimisms. While Edelman sublimates the abstract injunction against queer reproduction and finds in this the possibility of inhabiting a death drive emancipated from the shrine of the Child, Spillers finds the positionality of the "abandoned son" is poised to ethically reevaluate the Father as functionary not creator, making the space for self-knowing under a new regime: Spillers's Law of the Living. In both we find a criticism of the reproductive family unit, while Edelman's work transforms the overdetermined queer orientation toward pleasure and death as the site of critique of the social order, Spillers's work begins with the failure of the family (enslaved, and later, Moynihaned) as mode of new ethical possibilities for autodidactic psychoanalysis and healing. The Law of the Living that Spillers proposes is concerned not with a reification of the shrine of the Child (Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and others remind us no such altar exists for the black child, as he is always already a man, a threat—"no angel" as the *New York Times* said of Michael Brown)<sup>3</sup>, but rather, such a Law for the black diasporan holds space for the

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<sup>3</sup> The newspaper came under fire for the characterization of the slain unarmed teenager Michael Brown as "no angel" in the first few paragraphs of a portrait of him, see: Eligon, John. "Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks

progeny of failure to self-determine his interior life, even as the exterior world he inhabits is structurally hemmed in on all sides.

Finally, thinking on the overdetermination of failure in the social order requires Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, which lends itself to questions concerning the potential that failure stages for the diasporan by centering the act of recitation. In Butler's text, bodies that fail in their citation of the Law of Sex are bodies that fail to materialize, they constitute the outside boundaries of legibility and support for bodies that do matter (and count as "living"). The materialization of cited norms forms the subject as a participant of a reiterative regulatory regime. The subject cannot be an agent outside but can be located beyond the boundaries of the norms and therefore not constitute a body that matters in the dominant sense of being grievable. Yet, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, black bodies are bodies that do, in fact matter through their utility in the production of exclusions ("The After-life" 24). Failure, in Butler's work, appears as a site of resistance: *failure to reiterate* doesn't change the law's demand, and in fact is a constitutive part of the law, but it nevertheless produces instability (Butler 15, 105). In fact, "Since the law must be repeated to remain an authoritative law, the law perpetually reinstates the possibility of its own failure" (Butler 108). Put differently, "the law [is] dependent upon what it polices" (Sexton 36). I am interested in this idea of the failure to reiterate and what happens when the inverse is uttered. What happens when we *reiterate failure*? It is true, as Butler writes, that "[t]he paradox... is that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms," resistance is contained within the practice of citation and not external to it (15). Butler's citations reference the law of sex; perhaps, in a law of race, whiteness might be the faithful recitation. This formation echoes Fanon's 1952 claim that "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" but, we know he will never attain it since blackness is the limit of whiteness (228). I assert that blackness, foreclosed to that success and therefore closed to a faithful reiteration of any law, might it itself be a reiteration of failure.

### **Black Diaspora Theory**

In what follows I highlight a constellation of relational theories of diaspora that lend themselves to thinking failure. Brent Hayes Edwards's study of internationalist print culture in *The Practice of Diaspora* and his development of *decalage*, the "haunting gap or discrepancy" to describe the failures inherent and attendant to translation, are a mainstay of theories of diasporic relationality (15). Edwards urges not only must we accept that communications between diasporans will, of both necessity and accident, always be filtered and approximated, but that we must also accept that our own preference for the word or frame "diaspora" both stems from and allows that "[t]he accepted risk is that the term's analytic focus 'fluctuates'" (Edwards "Uses" 54). Yet, I am drawn instead to Edwards's lesser cited "Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora" in which he reveals that originary Jewish invocations of "diaspora" and "galut (exile)" are imbued with futurity, in contrast to the black studies' use of the term, which is always linked to the past. While diaspora theory debates traditionally center types of movement (physical, psychic, cultural), zones of movement (landed, oceanic, digital), and the question of the subject of movement (bodies, products, words, imaginations), Edwards's article here resituates or prioritizes the *time* of diasporic

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Grappling With Problems and Promise." *The New York Times*, 24 August 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html>. More context about this article can found here: Sullivan, Margaret. "An Ill-Chosen Phrase, 'No Angel,' Brings a Storm of Protest." *The New York Times: Public Editor's Journal*, 25 August 2014, <http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/an-ill-chosen-phrase-no-angel-brings-a-storm-of-protest/>.

movement: toward what, when. Through an analysis of Franco war poems by Hughes, Edwards finds evidence of the Jewish-inflected “eschatological quality of diaspora” in the poet’s calls for and suggestions of international solidarity. Hailing Stuart Hall, he posits the possibility of African diaspora as a “critique of globalization... without guarantees” (Edwards “Langston” 705).

The absence of guarantees is taken up in Bed Prasad Giri’s “Diasporic Postcolonialism and Its Antinomies” where he observes contemporary theorists’ revision of the term diaspora moves away from loss and nation toward new socialities (216). He challenges the idea, though, that hybridity or diaspora are “uniquely radical or utopian,” pointing to the enduring problems of nationalism and “normative ideologies” repeated by diasporans (222). Rather than a counter-discursive/mere reversal of “writing back” or “striking back,” he argues that diasporic writers “write back and forth” (229). In this way, Giri is aligned not just with a cultural iteration of the diaspora-as-flow-of-culture tradition (à la Gilroy) but also representative of the scholars I cite here interested in the ambiguities of diaspora. Most compelling about Giri’s intervention, however, is his claim that diaspora is ordinary. It seems we cannot count on diaspora to be anything but “without guarantee.” The writers and artists I examine in this dissertation who opt to recite intraracial failure at once dangerously confirm the suspicions of the white western majority *and* reach beyond the group’s injunction to condemn, eschew, or hide failure. Written by members of a group presumed to fail, memoirs insisting on the recitation of failure straddle the limits of self-determination and over-determination.

South Asian diaspora theorist Gayatri Gopinath’s *Impossible Desires* follows Giri’s challenges to the limiting nationalist rhetoric diaspora, this time grounded in specific critiques of the heteronormativity perpetuated not only by paradigms of the reproductive family unit and blood but even by “privilege[ing] gay male subjectivity as the place from which to [theorize] a queer diaspora” (78). Interested in the “spatializations” of queer diasporic desire that defy Eve Sedgwick’s focus on the closet, Gopinath finds that visibility itself might be a narrowly western aspiration and offers instead the site of “female homoerotic desire” beneath the quilt, rather than out of the closet. Under rather than out disrupts and exceeds the binary relation of inside/outside (145-151) and force us to wrestle with diasporic movement as not merely across cardinal directions and national borders but also within domestic spaces and more intimate coordinates.

In *Dropping Anchor* Jacqueline Nassy Brown identifies diaspora as not a condition but a relation that is not merely transnational but also local, deepening our concern with the spatialization of diasporic considerations (38). While race is defined as an “axis of power,” she notes that it is “lived” through “ambiguity,” and “fundamentally shaped by place” which she situates as a “structure of feeling” (72, 213, 200, 248). The entangled role of race and place at the national level is clear in Brown’s critique of the permanent installation of an exhibit on the transatlantic slave trade. Brown is concerned that the placement of the exhibit in the blackened locale of Liverpool allows white Britons to travel to the port as a container for the absolution of their racial guilt. The placement of the museum in Liverpool “contracts” rather than “expands” the “territory of liberal antiracist feeling” such that Liverpool becomes the designated zone in which to think about race, absolving white visitors and the rest of England from thinking or feeling it elsewhere. “Such would not be possible if the slave-trading past were ritually and insistently narrated and denounced not only in the other 12 British slave ports but everywhere” (186). In this way, the black “place” is the zone or home for the contemplation of failure.

That place here or there as a structure of feeling might be expectation-laden is no surprise. Following Brown’s attention to place and ports over ships, political anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones’s contribution to the edited volume *Black/Queer/Diaspora* flips Paul Gilroy’s interest in the

sea in favor of the sand. Sand as the product of erosion, the unceasing watery pounding of shell and bone and glass, is the residue of both disaster and desire; in Martinique its volcanic color, as well as its lodging in the body the morning after, recall liberal liaisons before the devastation of the 1903 eruption of Mount Pelee as well as, and intermingle with, the reimagined sexual cultures of the present moment. Centering erosion, as Agard-Jones does, we might see in sand the productive possibilities of embracing diaspora-as-failure in that, we do not ask the sand to hold its shape but rely instead on its continual breaking-down to offer us a site of witness and connection. Agard-Jones writes, “Throughout the region Martinicans continue to be understood as products of a kind of modernist failure, having not followed the standard postcolonial teleology to independence as did the majority of the other territories of the global South” (327). A failure among failures (has standard postcolonial independence really meant success for any black nation?), the sands of Martinique offer the absence of a “definitive record” in form of “the slow erosion of all things putatively concrete” (339). Once again, no guarantees.

### **Our Sister From the Diaspora**

“My pessimism was stronger than my longing.”

--Saidiya Hartman (*Lose* 54)

Forced to leave behind the libraries and oral histories that have not preserved the story she seeks, Saidiya Hartman instead mobilizes nontraditional sources, the landscape,<sup>4</sup> biological material, and jump rope songs to write her now canonical *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. The hybrid memoir lends itself almost too easily to an articulation of diaspora as a mode of failure through the confession of expectations of recognition, belonging, and naming. Throughout, Hartman recounts moments in her travels in Ghana where her expectations of diasporic connection and solidarity were not met (5, 57, 73, 156, 165, 196, 215, 218). She notes that locals call her “obruni,” meaning stranger, when she expects to be counted as a sister (though this familial appellation, too, is filtered through dissatisfaction) (3-5). An expatriate friend counters her disappointment with, “When you go to Chicago, do you expect black folks there to welcome you because you're from New York? ...Why should it be any different here?” (5). The difference is temporal. Diaspora's promise, for Hartman, is a when not a where. As Warren points to in his work on Hughes, “Africa is always imagined in retrospect—as the place one has come from—or in the retrospective prospect—as the home one is going to. In either case, the contemporary “reality” of Africa and Africans is largely occluded by retrospective and prospective visions” (395). The expat makes a similar point. Chicago and New York belong to the same temporal category, descendants of the Great Migration move between metropolises without the pomp and fantasy of homecoming. Yet many African Americans—for Hartman is not alone—recount an expectation of being able to live *with* the past where travel to the African continent is concerned. What are these attachments and why do they hurt so?

Again, I turn to Berlant's cruel optimism, the investiture of promises in objects that actually obstruct the realization of those promises and hopes. Might “diaspora” be such an object? If diaspora names a kind of post-Atlantic Slave Trade relationality (whether that relation is defined

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4. Reading the landscape as diasporic archive is a move that Agard-Jones also embraces, “Sand emerges as a compelling metaphor here, as a repository from which we might read traces of gender and sexual alterity on the landscape” (326).

by dispersal or whatever else), the invocation of that name presumes levels of participation and mutual recognition that cannot be guaranteed upon its utterance. In a way, the name diaspora produces a series of failures, failures that are generated (recall Moten's *mater*) by the impossibility of satisfying the promise presupposed in the act of naming: recognition. Yet, this failure or series of failures present as a praxic process with the capacity to create the conditions for intersubjective recognition and critical intercourse--however painful--if failure is not treated as an end in itself, as the termination of activity.

Paulo Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that names developed in isolation are not true words--they are false because they are not linked to a process involving the agents in question. How might the moment-to-moment deployment of "diaspora" be the product of an isolated process? Hartman's expectation of belonging both answers and leaves open the question--*to what?* Belonging to what? Failure in this instance is generated by the expectation that diaspora means something outside the relational work of witnessing. The failure here is that the naming process ("diaspora") is performed in the absence of the African "other." By projecting the word diaspora, expecting it to perform, so-called diasporans like Hartman experience the violence of rejection, while those they encounter experience the violence of being named. The failures of diaspora are violent for all parties involved. The author arrives in a place of relation without concrete (as opposed to theoretical) relationships that would ratify such a name or pronounce that name inter-subjectively. We might observe this in her interaction with the chief of Salaga:

"It's not like we're looking for a particular place or person when we come here, but it's just the feeling that something is missing back home..."

"Do you find it here?" the chief asked.

"No" was on our lips, but none of us said it. (198)

Put another way, Edwards's line "The homeland that haunts the black American psyche is not Africa, finally, but an imaginary and, one might add, an entirely exegetical ideal" succinctly captures Hartman's experience (*Practice* 142). The promise of signing up for an identity "in diaspora" is the desperate hope for an elsewhere and a company of others among whom no explanations are needed and, with almost heavenly and paradisiac welcome. Instead, Hartman notices that fellow scholars on a research trip call to each other comfortably and casually but refer to Hartman as our "friend from the diaspora" (215). In this instance, diaspora is deployed to name alienation rather than kinship. Hartman's insistence on being a member of the diaspora is recognized but not reciprocated, and answered by her colleagues' removal of themselves from that same subjectivity: "'My friend from the diaspora,' was how Akam addressed me, in contrast to the rest of the group whom he called his brothers and sisters from the continent. Diaspora was really just a euphemism for stranger" (215). Ghanaian poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang confirms the problematics of presuming relation: "on both sides there is ignorance and a failure to understand one another's lives" (73). Hartman does not try to ameliorate this disconnect in understanding. Instead, she recites her anxiety about it, her pain, and most importantly, her participation in it matter of factly.

"The coup failed?" Hartman asks her host, after a night of hiding, peeing, and praying in the dark (21). One of the earliest scenes of *Lose Your Mother* recounts mistaking the coincidence of a neighbor's fire and nighttime military practice as a political overthrow during her first week back in Ghana. Journaling and dozing before bed, Hartman is startled awake by Stella, the housekeeper of cheap guesthouse in Accra, commanding her to turn out the bedroom lights before



ushing out as quickly as she came. Guided by the perceived “terror” of Stella’s face, Hartman “obeys,” while the narrative lingers a moment on the body of her host: “She was naked except for a towel wrapped around her, which barely covered her breasts and privates” (20). While this is the only description we receive of Stella’s body before Hartman departs for her long-term accommodations across town a week later, it is one of many observations of the woman’s economic conditions, the too-small towel in place of a robe in a worn building stiff with dirt, smelling of mildew. The African woman’s body heralds the crisis of the nation, never far from the surface (like Stella’s nipples). A peek behind the wrap of the house (curtains) suggests a danger Hartman fears enough to surrender control of herself.

That the fabricated conclusion of a coup comes as quickly to Hartman as the urine that flows down her legs, it seems appropriate to emphasize what Hartman suggests by sharing her humiliation: subjection to overdetermined assumptions and expectations of Africa, even as a critical scholar. While she attempts a second time to urinate in her rented room and fails to keep the process contained, again, we can start to see the scene as a flawed baptism. Rather than receiving, she begins the slow process of rejecting the ghost—here, the haunting of the diasporan by the promise of redemption. With a name meaning “star,” Stella’s brief but brilliant appearance is capped off by her and her daughter’s laughter at, not with, Hartman as they exit the narrative.<sup>5</sup> The author soberly reflects at the close of this section, “When I moved out of the guesthouse at the end of the week, I doubted whether my way of seeing things had any footing in reality” (22). What do we do with this kind of uncertainty, in the face of the failure of that which we have placed our hope in for so long? In what follows, Paule Marshall takes a somewhat different approach to wrestling with the fictions of readily available diasporic belonging.

### **Marshall’s *Mater***

Barbadian/Brooklyn novelist Paule Marshall’s 2009 memoir *Triangular Road* looks back over her long career in which, James C. Hall and Heather Hathaway note, “has come to be seen as a vital link between the writing of Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Petry, and Margaret Walker in the forties and fifties and the “renaissance” in African American women’s writing that emerged in the seventies, featuring Toni Morrison and Alice Walker” (xi). *Triangular Road* includes recollections of Marshall’s experiences in Nigeria at an international gathering under the mantle of “diaspora” in 1977. Despite the unprecedented scale of the state-sponsored Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC ’77) in Lagos, few artists and attendees have published their experiences.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in 2014 the San Francisco Public Library, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the SFMOMA partnered to host an installation by Chimurenga Library, the research wing of a similarly named magazine based in South Africa and meaning “struggle.” The installation responded to the dearth of results coded in the SF library’s catalogue system to respond to searches for information on FESTAC. The collaboration intervened in the stacks themselves; a wooden

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ning Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. University of Michigan Press, 2008. The lights, so we wouldn’t burn too.” / “Did the soldiers set the house on fire?” / “There was no coup.” / “But I saw the soldiers on the road.” / “The army barracks are near here, just a little ways down Military Road. They practice their maneuvers at night.” / She laughed again. And her nine-year-old daughter Abena snickered at the *obruni* talking foolishness to her mother. (Hartman *Lose* 21-22)

6. For a few cursory first-hand reflections, check out: “FESTAC ‘77” *The Black Perspective in Music*, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring 1977, pp. 104-117; Kay, Iris. “Festac 1977.” *African Arts*, vol. 11, no. 1, Oct. 1977, pp. 50-51; Monroe, Arthur. “FESTAC ’77 – The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture: Lagos, Nigeria.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 9, no. 1, Sept. 1977, pp. 34-37.

support, red thread, and a paper tag were added to any materials on the shelves that mention or reflect on the festival.



Fig. 1: Detail of installation “Chimurenga Library,” a collaboration between Chimurenga, the San Francisco Public Library, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Source: Art, Music and Recreation Center of the San Francisco Public Library.

“[D]espite its epic scale and ambition, the story of FESTAC is neither widely known nor well understood” (Chimurenga) before the installation, only one item was flagged in the library catalogue for its relation to FESTAC, by the opening reception of the exhibit six hundred books were identified with tags hung from the shelves. This project revealed “how seemingly invisible but actually how present [FESTAC] is in this area [San Francisco]” (Adesokan, Apter, and Hardy). Words were printed and adhered to the walls and floors of the library; books newly tagged were elevated on the shelf with wedges and marked with tasseled tags. That an entire one of Marshall’s four essays focuses on the festival makes *Triangular Road* an important artifact of self-reflection on participation in the nationally staged and funded elaboration of a new and tenuously more inclusive articulation of the black diaspora on the continent.

FESTAC sought to represent the “full expression of the Black Personality” (qtd. in Kulla 166). As the third celebration of its kind, it sold out 100,000 stadium seats leaving many local Nigerians without access to the festivities. “Not to be deterred,” Marshall writes,

daredevil young men attempted to scale the stadium's high walls. A few of them actually succeeded, only to encounter the wrath of the ticketholders in the stands as they came crashing down in the midst. Some of the men in the audience flung the gatecrashers tier by tier down the stands until they landed on the playing field. A number were seriously injured. Two, in fact, later died... (154)

As a pageant of black values, the staging of a state-sponsored elaboration of global blackness, issues of admittance and inclusion took on continental, not just stadium-level, significance. Costing billions of dollars, FESTAC ’77 stimulated a debate concerning conflicting visions of defining and locating blackness as the criterion for participation. Leopold Senghor, co-patron of the festival, pushed forward a negritude-based criteria and objected to Arab national participation,

at odds with broader calls for inclusion by other organizers. The Nigerian Planning Committee ultimately took control and used communities rather than countries to define participation (and blackness) by including participants in liberation struggles outside of Africa and resulting in sizable participation of those from the United States and European nations. Anthropologist Andrew Apter attributes this move not only to Nigerian pan-Africanism but moreover to the “optimism of the oil boom,” then-recent membership in OPEC, yielding “political opposition to economic integration.” Apter situates FESTAC as a component of Nigeria’s goal in developing its own industrial modernity.<sup>7</sup>

The first Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, held in Dakar in 1966, was sponsored by France, Senegal, UNESCO, and other organizations (Kulla 168). The intermediate festival in Algiers 1969 was sponsored by the Organization of African Unity and guided by a “strongly worded” pan-Africanism (167). While at the official level, FESTAC ’77 represented itself as the progressively all-inclusive iteration in a genealogy of festivals, there were many intellectual and political critiques and concerns, not the least of which being military oversight of the festival. Yet, writer Akin Adesokan notes, for people like Wole Soyinka, “it was inconceivable not to participate in the scale of FESTAC”—many found themselves embracing its contradictions.<sup>8</sup>

In the midst of this international articulation of “sui genesis” black cultural citizenship, Marshall’s memoir gives us insight to another, more intimate negotiation of inclusion, a more deliberate or self-aware instance of misrecognition. While walking with the African American contingent of the opening ceremonies of FESTAC, Marshall connects the “disarray” of her party and the “nonstop” applause of the majority African witnesses to a “large measure of guilt and sorrow” and “complicity” in what she dubs “the nefarious trade” (159). Marshall locates an elderly Nigerian woman in the crowd and imagines her standing as a witness not just to the ceremony but also to the sales and traffic of human cargo hundreds of years prior. In the heat and jubilation, Marshall asks herself, “Were those tears on the timeless face under the gold-threaded *gelee*? Or simply perspiration, rivulets of perspiration, given the steam-bath heat and humidity of Lagos? I took them to be tears.” And, with a paragraph break, on a line all its own, Marshall writes, “All’s forgiven” (161).

What does one subject need from another to make the category of diasporan inhabitable? Hall puts this question another way, “How can we stage this dialogue so that, finally, we can place it, without terror of violence, rather than being forever placed by it?” (“Cultural Identity” 233). Marshall, acknowledging that the body fluid could be sweat or could be tears, chooses to see tears in order to dole out diasporic absolution that is not ostensibly being petitioned for. She seems able to inhabit the so-called homecoming and reconciliation of diasporans to the continent if it is accompanied by remorse over the genesis of diaspora itself as dispersal—even if this confession is acted out on or extracted from an unconsenting, and apparently arbitrary, body. In an interview with Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie at University of Ibadan while in Nigeria for the festival, Marshall opines on the urgent work of literature, “History has been hidden from us, especially in the western hemisphere. I feel we have to go back and re-create that past so that we can use the lessons from that to aid us in the present struggle. I’m using the past as a way of “existing” using the present

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7. This section is informed by: Adesokan, Akin, Andrew Apter, and Stacy Hardy. “Opening Event.” Collaborative Intervention: Chimurenga Library. *Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa*, 24 May 2014, San Francisco Public Library Main Branch, San Francisco. See also pages of Chimurenga’s project on FESTAC here: Chimurenga. “Black Communities and the Practice of Diaspora.” *Chimurenga Library*, <http://chimurengalibrary.co.za/festac-77/black-communities-and-the-practice-of-diaspora>. Accessed 6 August 2016.

8. Other modes of dealing with the contradictions of FESTAC include Fela Kuti’s “counter-FESTAC” party/shrine (Adesokan, Apter, and Hardy).

and in the future” (Ogundipe-Leslie 39). Far from arbitrary, Marshall recruits the matronly body to assist in the project of “reconciliation, cooperation, love and unity between us,”<sup>9</sup> drawing on the female body’s capacity for (re)production and the African body’s hegemonic transtemporality.

In a conversation with visual artist Renée Green, Homi Bhabha asks, “is it very necessary to make a misrecognition in order to create another kind of recognition? Are you worried by people saying this is not really useful because it needs too sophisticated and subtle a perspective?” (“Artists’ Dialogue” 155). Her response that disorientation is a day to day reality holds space not just for the “strangeness” of living that happens to you, *but also for the subject to “opt in” to disorientation*. Marshall describes two interpretations of the glistening old woman and informs us that she makes a choice. If, according to Warren, misrecognition arises in moments when more than one interpretation of a relationship is available, Marshall avails herself of the opportunity to misrecognize her elder in order to reap another kind of recognition from her would-be spectator. As a choose-your-own-adventure version of the diasporic encounter, we witness rather plainly the experience of Du Bois’s double consciousness and second sight between blacks and behind the veil, rather than across the color line.

Violence destroys but violence also creates. Perhaps the function it serves is revealed in the ways diasporans (inclusive of Africans) are constructed through mutual acts of violence (naming, misrecognition, and disavowal) that obviate the possibility of apprehending priority or what comes first. As the substantiation of a post-Middle Passage relationship between bodies with ancestral and ideological ties to New World formations of blackness in and out of “place,” diaspora is a cyclical interpellation. Bodies are hailed into its discourse to do its work, willing or not. Both Hartman and Marshall arrive with expectations of a spiritual reunification to take the place of the alienation of being diasporan in their countries of residence. Hartman’s close listening allows her readers to overhear that we do not always already belong *anywhere*. Marshall’s strategy, on the other hand, a kind of refusal to be refused, and reads at a distance from which remorse and exhaustion appear to look the same.

### **Conclusion: Remarkably Ordinary**

Acts of recitation are a double-edged sword. While for Hartman it is the imperilment of the self, for Kincaid it is a self-saving act of reflection. Failure is frightening, evidentiary, divisive, disappointing, but it is also a rather ordinary fact. In the memoirs enumerated above the misrecognitions we encounter uttered by our diasporans are the usual suspects: the foreclosure of Africa to the past, the expectation of homecoming, the reification of the broken family. According to Giri, “understanding... the cultural politics of diasporic culture as ambivalent, existing anywhere between the twin poles of ideology and utopia, of power and its critique, does not mean that life in diaspora, or its art, is somehow inauthentic; it simply means that it is ordinary” (232). When articulated by its would-be members, diaspora as a name for particular solidarities begins to fracture. Kincaid’s first response to her brother’s diagnosis is an inward turn, and the condition of her own preservation is the displacement of Devon from the text of his only titular dedication. Hartman hopes for diasporic connection and is disappointed, projects the name diaspora expecting reciprocation. In sharp contrast, Marshall manipulates reality to meet her hopes. Ringing the pedestal of diaspora with our demands, our doubts, and our revisions, the pillar begins to rock this way and that. It is not made sturdy by ideological unity nor loving identification, instead it is propped up by our misrecognition of one another—at once a move that holds out the opportunity

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9. The longer quotation, from a 1991 *Washington Post* interview, is “I try to express my hope for reconciliation, cooperation, love and unity between us. And respect for each other” (qtd. in Hall and Hathaway xiii).

for solidarity and simultaneously sets the stage for its undoing. In the chapter that follows, I explore work by African American visual artist Wilmer Jennings—the painting *Rendezvous* and the print *Harangue* each take seriously the cruel optimism of racial intimacy and solidarity as both necessary to political organizing for social change and also are vulnerable, because of their need of intimacy and solidarity, to infiltration and sabotage. This subsequent chapter takes an unsettling step forward toward betrayal as not merely the absence of recognition but a motivated misrecognition that aims to take advantage of avenues of belonging.

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## Chapter Two

### Wilmer Jennings and the Repetition of Betrayal

*...the history of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing.*

—Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” (13)

*Several circumstances seemed to point SANDY out as our betrayer...and yet, we could not suspect him. We all loved him too well to think it possible that he could have betrayed us. So we rolled the guilt on other shoulders.*

—Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855 (222)

In this chapter, I explore two works of art by African American visual artist Wilmer Jennings (1910-1990) in order to further my argument that wrestling with black failure requires that we resist revisionist resistance narratives as much as it requires resisting community-minded disavowals of group shortcomings. Here I build upon my interest in the post-Middle Passage relationship between bodies with ancestral and ideological ties to New World formations of blackness and my argument that diaspora is a practice of failure, a relationship of cyclical interpellation. Bodies are hailed into diaspora’s discourse to fulfill its promises of solidarity, willing or not, by the seeker wielding its name. The name “diaspora” signals a series of misrecognitions that assume solidarity between bodies made to signify blackness, always already available and ultimately disappointing. This chapter on the work of Jennings takes a bleaker step forward and toward betrayal as not merely the absence of recognition but a motivated misrecognition that is funded, institutionalized, punitive and even deadly. One that relies precisely on the cruel optimism of assumed solidarity. This is nothing new. In *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy*, historian Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. notes black informants of the 1910s and 20s were able to assume leadership roles and penetrate inner circles on behalf of state surveillance programs by building intimacy that begins on the ground of assumed mutual recognition. The solidarity built by informants is only possible because it is accompanied by or rooted in the solidarity promised by the hail of diaspora through the sign of “blackness.” And, yet, queer feminist Cheryl Clarke asks painfully and pointedly amidst her critique of racial solidarities, “Have not black people suffered betrayal from our own people?” (135). Of course. Carrying this knowledge, but also these suspicions, my interest lies in asking how do we care for this history, as queer theorist Heather Love would say, these “bad attachments,” this sense of loss that lingers decades later?

Allow me to give a more contemporary example of the slipperiness of assumed solidarity. During July 2015 in Oklahoma City, local news organization KFOR reported that a protest supporting the display of the confederate flag was led by a self-proclaimed “Black Rebel,” an African American man by the name of Andrew Duncomb. The Association of Critical Race Art History (ACRAH) shared the story with the email subject line, ““Without guarantees” -- Stuart



Hall.” In the midst of the Black Lives Matter mass movement and the Rachel Dolezal scandal,<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Francis of ACRAH suggests we reconsider the nature of presumed and assumed solidarity threading this local news report. If membership in black communities in a general sense is based on a mutual recognition that is grounded in phenotypical legibility, then Dolezal and others like her more than qualify through a process of material drag, body modification, and race traitorism (in the generous Noel Ignatiev/radical white abolitionist sense of the phrase). Yet, Francis’s post instead suggests that Duncomb, who also qualifies for membership under the rubric of scopic legibility, reveals the limit of the guarantee of communal allegiance founded on an ideological category signified by a series of physical features (not quite biological but available through corporeal alteration). Duncomb calls himself both black and confederate, inhabiting two ideological positionalities that seem to be at odds; nostalgia or allegiance for a national formation that fought to maintain the subjugation of the other formation. Whether the Venn diagram of blackness and confederacy yields “slave” every time is irrelevant to this chapter, what is interesting here is that optics cannot tell the full story of allegiance and membership is more complicated—vulnerable to the shortcomings of assumed solidarity grounded in scopic belonging. I will wrestle with this theme through a close reading of a print by Wilmer Jennings, first considering the artist’s broader work, next comparing suspicions that arise in the painting and the print (who does and does not belong?), and finally land on the risks and attendant anxieties of building intimacy.

### **On Printmaking and the Printer**

During the late nineteenth century, the New School of American Wood-Engraving developed techniques which impressively imitated “painterly effects” earning international renown and distinction from printmaking as purely an artisan’s trade (Watrous 21). In 1898 Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell published the first art historical volume on *Lithography and Lithographers*—combined with Joseph’s broader career of artistic production and advocacy he earned the moniker of “Dean of American Printmaking” (28, 40).<sup>11</sup> By the 1910s, American printmaking began to overcome its decline at the expense of photomechanical inventions and print clubs experienced a “revival” (29). However, the Federal Art Project’s Graphic Division established in 1935 proved to be a most “powerful impetus,” overseeing the production of over 11,000 prints and positioning printmaking as an independent art form (Watrous 98, Langa 2). The teaching positions, training and access to presses offered by the WPA-FAP Harlem Community Art Center played a role not only in the democratization of the form but also in the increase in black printmakers specifically. However, Helen Langa notes “No African Americans were hired at the [Graphics Division] printmaking workshop” which retained proofs of produced work, unlike HCAC, contributing to “leaving the record of African American printmakers’ achievements in the 1930s very incomplete” (23, 32). In addition, the medium fit well into Federal Art Project’s mission to integrate art into the public. For example, the *America Today: One Hundred Prints* (1936) exhibition was able to cultivate a common national experience by mounting the same show in thirty locations simultaneously (Langa 20).

African American artists were drawn to the affordability and wider circulation of the printmaking medium and also drew inspiration from Mexican muralists of the period like Diego Rivera who advocated public art as a means of educating and lifting the “self-esteem” of the working classes about social and political history. In fact, Jennings’s mentor studied under Rivera

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<sup>10</sup> In 2015 Rachel Dolezal, who was born white, was exposed in national news for passing as a black woman.

<sup>11</sup> While many factors contribute to the marginalization of black printmakers, the record of one so central to the burgeoning field as Pennell holding anti-black and anti-immigrant beliefs gives one pause (Watrous 41).

(Pollack 60). Art historian Harry Henderson points out that the intervention of the African American printmaker of the 1930s and '40s also functioned as a challenge to the print as an instrument of "long-lasting psychic damage," positioning older lithographic caricatures of black people as an arm of racial hegemony and control (Hyun and Hawkins 5). The 1979 catalog *Impressions/expressions: Black American graphics* observes that, against a backdrop the period's increased "social consciousness and criticism," black printmakers took up themes of labor, nation, unity, race, and sociality (*Impressions/expressions* 11).

Wilmer Jennings, to whom I now turn, is one such artist belonging to the early cadre of black American printmakers. Born in 1910 in Atlanta to a middle class family, Wilmer Jennings's early interest in the arts was nurtured by his mother who arranged for "lessons from graphic artist John Henry Adams" (Elliott and Jennings 14). Jennings graduated from Morehouse College in 1934, where he majored in mathematics and studied linoleum and woodblock printmaking with Hale Woodruff whom he would remain close to throughout his life (15). As an early student of Woodruff, "Jennings was among a small number of artists trained as printmakers" before the establishment of the WPA (18). Following this he studied painting and jewelry making at the Rhode Island School of Design with the support of a John Hope fellowship in addition to supporting himself with stage design and illustration work. He even "played college football for a short time in order to eat better since the team was accorded certain dining privileges" in order to make ends meet after a family tragedy (15). Only a couple texts are dedicated to his life and work. The earliest is a catalog for a 1978 exhibition held at Rhode Island College titled *4 From Providence: Black Artists in the Rhode Island Social Landscape*. A joint collaboration of Rhode Island College and the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, this exhibition also showcased the work of Edward M. Bannister, Elizabeth Nancy Prophet and Frank Alston, Jr. While at Morehouse Jennings also took a sculpture course with Prophet which Claude Elliott suggests "surely had an impact on how he cut his blocks for wood engravings" (16). Three years later Jennings was featured in another RISD exhibition, this time alongside Aaron Douglas and James VanDerZee. And most recent and complete is a catalog for *Pressing On: The Graphic Art of Wilmer Jennings*, his retrospective curated by Claude Elliott and held at RISD in 2000. His work has also been featured in exhibitions organized by the Harmon Foundation and at prestigious venues such as the New York World's Fair (1939-1940) and the American Negro Exposition in Chicago (1940) in addition to shows at the Rockland Center for the Arts, the Newark Museum, Atlanta University, the Library of Congress, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago (*4 From Providence* 14; Hyun and Hawkins 13).

Jennings's work during the Great Depression involved mural painting in Atlanta and Rhode Island. His surviving multi-panel mural at Booker T. Washington High School "depicted the contributions of black labor to Southern economic development" (Elliott and Jennings 17). Jennings himself graduated from the school before attending Morehouse and the mural commissioned by Atlanta's Civil Works Administration's Public Works of Art Project would later be seen by a young Martin Luther King, Jr. who would also attend the school. This regionalist mural, which merited coverage in *The Crisis*, depicted "bare-chested muscular figures... employed in harmonious work, both helping themselves succeed and their communities flourish" (Pollack 59-60). Black women are observed writing with feathered quill, practicing chemistry and measuring fluid in a test tube, and cooking a soup soon to be served. Black men observed in the mural are engaged in construction, industrial labor, and music. A commission from a branch of the National Urban League to produce graphics work for a report on the black population of Baltimore in 1935 also survives. This included designing small gendered figures to represent professionals,

“business folk,” skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers, domestics and personal servants (see Figure 1 below).

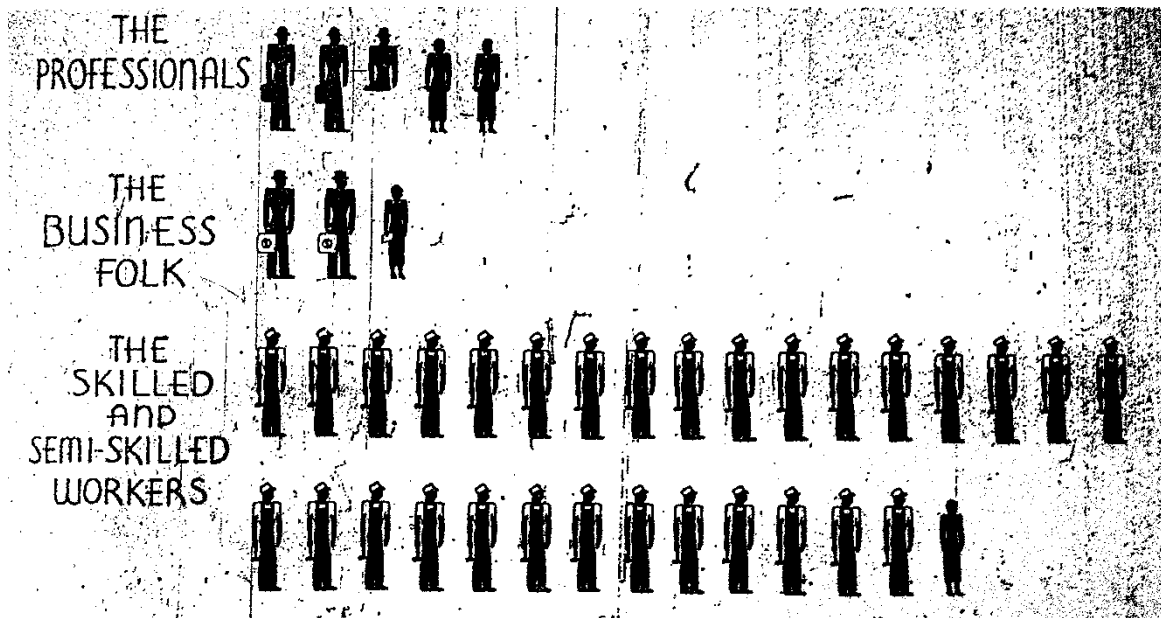


Fig 2: Detail of “The Negro Workers of Baltimore” drawing by Wilmer Jennings appears on page 24 of *The Negro Community of Baltimore: A Summary Report of a Social Study conducted for The Baltimore Urban League* (1935) by Ira De A. Reid. Source: New York Public Library microform. Photograph by Ianna Hawkins Owen.

His later art works would depict working class figures engaged in their trades, for example the industrial scenes conveyed in *Ironworkers* (undated) and *Men Pulling Ropes* (undated) as well as the rural labor of *Plowman* (1945) and even *Just Plain Ornerly* (1938), a print that conveys a bit of Jennings’s sense of humor as a man and his donkey are depicted in disagreement about whether or not to move the wooden cart behind them (Elliott and Jennings 27).

In Providence, Jennings made his living as chief jewelry designer and model maker for the Imperial Pearl Company and as a graphic artist, although his engraving work would come to an end in 1957 after an injury to his right hand. The refusal of Miriam Hospital to treat black people resulted in irreversible damage to his tendons by the time he reached surgery across town at Rhode Island Hospital. Recollections of Jennings’s personality are deeply entwined with the power of the artist’s hands. His daughter, Corrine Jennings, recalls “I always see his hands with their great strength and long fingers. When he used his engraving tools, I would watch the veins extend and turn indigo. He had a wonderful grasp that allowed him to make a steady, precise line” (9). His wife Mary Jennings nee Cupit, as well, “thinks printmaking suited his temperament and his attitudes” (9). As a multi-step process from drafting to drying, a work like *Harangue* is cut over a period of months one section at a time, requiring mindful patience, deliberation and dedication. The same could be said, again, of Jennings’s personality—he “believed in humility and chose not to use words lightly. He thought deeply and sometimes barely spoke at all” (7). We observe the same deliberate strokes in his cuts and engravings, the same meditated geometry in his jewelry designs.

The remaining body of prints reflects the value he placed on quietude. A good number of his works feature buildings with darkened windows and no figures present. Instead, viewing these works one has the feeling of stumbling upon an emptied town, you are there alone in stillness with the luxury of looking. The majority of the movement in these works is suggested by the cuts

rendering the clouds in the sky and the direction of the sunlight—movement is meditative, unhurried and witnessless. On the other hand, Jennings has also executed a number of works featuring solitary figures engaged in a range of activities from labor to idleness. *Pressing On* opens with *Tram Trance* (1940) in which three black figures ride in a public transit car with closed eyes, relaxed knees where the cuts are thickest—suggesting the warm, expansive touch of the sun—and resting hands. There are no other figures surrounding the family and the vehicle’s windows are in complete relief—except for some raised speckles of linoleum left behind—opaque like our access to their thoughts save for the indication of pleasant rest on their closed lips slightly upturned and relaxed brows. The movement in the image feels slow and easy like the wide cuts in the soft linoleum, as if the figures sway gently with the rhythm of traffic. In *Day Dream* (1936) a man stands in a field with his hands resting on the handle of a shovel, his gaze is elevated and fixed on something beyond our view. Evidence of his labor marks the tilled land behind him while the suggestion of what, abstractly, the effort is all for marks his face. The short, thick, gritty-edged linoleum cuts of *Day Dream* convey the energy expenditure on difficult land, the exhaustion at the base of dreaming. *Lazy Bone* (1939) on the other hand, depicts a man in socks napping on his porch with the house door open. The white of the stair edges draws the viewers eye first to our subject’s seat and then sends the eye up to his precariously placed hat which may be lost in the next gust of wind, noted by the eye as it continues to the laundry blowing in the breezy background. The absence of work boots and the title combine to suggest that the figure is enjoying this time alone because the neighbors are themselves engaged in the workday. This stolen moment (or, afternoon) also invites us to consider the wide-ranging qualities of quiet and (sleepy) deliberation. Jennings’s mentor, Hale Woodruff described his work thusly:

His compositions are not fragments of larger unrealized concepts; they are total entities, complete and compelling. In addition to the large patterns of dark and light...as well as strong linear movement, Wilmer Jennings, in his figure compositions, makes expert use of the quality of “gesture”. (*4 From Providence* 14)

Several of Jennings’s surviving prints depict laborers, mentioned earlier, and at least one addresses racial violence in the subtle arrangement of a still life. Shown in the NAACP show, *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, Jennings’s *At the End of the Rope* (1935) features many kinds of natural branches which combine to somewhat camouflage a twisted, hanging rope. A head with closed eyes is nestled in the base of the foliage of leaves, flowers and berries. Although the face’s lips are parted, the image is still and silent. This body of work suggests a sustained concern with black laborers and black rights in the period of the 1930s and 1940s. Against this backdrop, I will now turn to the painting and print pair of *Rendezvous* and *Harangue*, which are the focus of this chapter. Far from quiet, these images convey an intense sense of feeling and movement. The raised arm of the man on a soapbox alone stands out as a rare instance in which Jennings’s employment of gesture commands our notice rather than invites the eye with more organic and gentle positionings.

Without alluding to a specific event, the catalogue *Pressing On* positions *Rendezvous* and *Harangue* as “documents” of “black participation in the labor movement, union organizing” (Elliott and Jennings 27-28). This oil painting in soft colors contains nineteen black men crowded together in the foreground, listening with various levels of interest to a speaker, whose left arm is raised, authoritative finger pointing, and right hand balled in a fist. The protest signs carried by the men at the back of the crowd give us the context that this is a rally or organizing meeting: “We

Are Americans Too,” and “All Men Are Created Equal.” Behind the crowd, six klansmen approach under a flaming cross and the southern town scene recedes into the background. Does the title *Rendezvous* refer to the approaching encounter between the two parties? Or does it refer to an accidental or agreed meeting of two listeners in the crowd?



Fig. 3: *Rendezvous* (1942) oil painting by Wilmer Jennings. Source: Kenkeleba House. Photograph by Ianna Hawkins Owen.

What is also striking about the crowds in *Rendezvous* and *Harangue* is that, on the whole, crowds do not much figure into Jennings’s work. James Glisson, Assistant Curator for American Art at the Huntington, writes in the exhibition catalogue for *A World of Strangers: Crowds in American Art* (October 2015 - April 2016) that “Being connected in one sense can mean being disconnected in others. These crowd pictures tell us what we know innately: being in a group isn’t the same as being part of it” (12). Many of the pieces on view for the exhibition were drawn from the 1920s and 30s, a moment in American art interested in representing industrialization and the crowding not just of bodies but also machines. In the painting, Jennings plays with variations on the crowd--we see the crowd as mob in the far background, its members anonymized by the trappings of membership but also by pardon; though their numbers be few, the masking of participants lends itself to a local knowledge that anyone can wear the hood, which acts on behalf of and with the endorsement of others who do not. We also see the crowd as mass meeting where the benefit of gathering is measured in numbers but so too is its vulnerability. The gatherers faces



are clearly rendered, recognizable to any interested onlooker—extending the vulnerability of recognition beyond their present moment, into the treacherous night and onto the job.

While many of the men fix their gazes on the elevated speaker, a few in the crowd have concentrated their attentions elsewhere. In the foreground a man turns his back to the crowd and lights his cigarette while another, a few paces behind, watches the smoker intently with his arms crossed. A hatless man on the right wears gloves and seems lost in thought, while the man slightly behind him, also with arms crossed, peers sternly at either the man in the green hat or, over his shoulder, at the smoker. We can see so much of the back of the green-hatted man's head, hair, ears, that it would seem his face is tilted downward, toward the ground—is he listening, or trying to remember something? His hands are clasped behind his back, large and open.



Fig. 4: *Harangue* 1942 wood engraving by Wilmer Jennings. Source: Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Minskoff Center for Prints, Drawings, and Photographs. Photograph by Ianna Hawkins Owen.

Within the year, the scene is reproduced, stripped down in scale and in palette, as a wood engraving titled *Harangue*.<sup>12</sup> The number of figures is significantly reduced, and the daytime town scene seems transformed to night, perhaps under a city street lamp. Rather than complete relief, the darkness of the night is rendered with a fine blade (perhaps homemade). The glow of light that hugs the figures is composed of very tightly carved lines that become sparser at a distance from the men. The darkened scene and shrunken participation feels more clandestine. Notably absent are the klansmen, the protest signs, and at least one of the men watching.

### **Reproducing Suspicion**

In 1999 Assistant Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at the RISD Museum Claude Elliott interviewed and collaborated with Wilmer Jennings's daughter Corrine Jennings, executive director and co-founder of Kenkeleba House, former professor of English and wife of artist Joe Overstreet, for the creation of the catalogue *Pressing On*. Her contribution to the catalogue paints a more intimate portrait of the artist's daily life and family life in addition to offering insightful commentary on the works on view. She shared suspicions that implicate the smoker and also "the man with hands crossed behind his back" who collectively, Jennings indicates, "seem to be giving signals to the factory owner and manager, suggesting the theme of black solidarity threatened by treachery" (27-28). Reading this very interview is what drew me in to the print and produced my interest in the reproduction of betrayal.

I conducted an interview in August 2014 with Corrine. She shared with me her mother's interest in and her father's wariness of the Communist Party because of his "southern experience" and his perception that the party had "a way of co-opting black artists that was almost never to the advantage of the artists they gathered [and] supported." His body of work along with this sentiment, then, suggests an interest in workers but an unsettled feeling about organization.<sup>13</sup> In *New Negro, Old Left* William Maxwell finds that contrary to the Harold Cruse school of thought on the threat to and co-optation of African American art by communists as an anti-Harlem Renaissance force, the 1920s and 1930s black engagement with "bolshevism" was far more complex nationally than the reductionist argument of co-optation and constrained intellectual freedom. Rather, Maxwell argues "the crossing of Comintern and Harlem Marxisms altered the trajectory of both" (92). Maxwell counters the claims of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* by rectifying the obscured history of black, communist, and black communist collaboration in the 1930s. Alain Locke's celebrated *New Negro* collection was later admitted by the Dean of the Harlem Renaissance himself to be a curatorial project with a "less radical design" (49) and acknowledged "Communist Nancy Cunard[s]... *Negro* (1934) as 'the finest anthology in every sense of the word ever compiled on the Negro'" (qtd in Maxwell 49). This is not to say that co-optation did not happen. But, Jennings's impressions alongside the record of federal surveillance color the work as well as history. The twinned manipulation by both the radical left and the federal right conveys the sense of being surrounded. One is easily reminded of the common knowledge of the federal surveillance and infiltration of movements like the UNIA, civil rights, the panthers, and so on.

Standing before the painting hanging on the north wall of Kenkeleba House, Corrine explains to me, "So, this is what is going on: ["the one who's lighting the cigarette"] is signaling...

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<sup>12</sup> Although there was a small initial run of 10 or 15 prints of *Harangue* Corrine Jennings later convinced her father to make an additional print as a gift to the CUNY Queens College SEEK Program whose mission supports the admission and retention of underrepresented students.

<sup>13</sup> Special thanks to the Q&A session of our panel at *Black Portraitures* 2015.

The guy in the white hat, he is watching the informant. So is this other guy over here,” she indicated the man with crossed arms and rolled sleeves on our left and continued, “You see the match and the Klan, the fire and the cross, the doubling of the idea.” In the light or shadow cast by Jennings’s suspicions, I wonder at the reduction of the print and what the work of the figures in the background might be. Are the Klansmen materially present in the painted scene or do they function simply to draw our attention to the lighted cigarette? If the Klansmen were physically marching, would the listeners turn to face them, have sensed them by the time they were this close on an open street, mid-day? The crowd and bystanders appear oblivious. The background figures and the details they offer (the cross and the placards) seem, when we look at the reduced print, to serve merely to indicate the orientation of members of the crowds almost like thought-bubbles. Then again, perhaps they are still there in the print, just beyond the edge of light.

The innovation and appeal of printmaking is the opportunity to produce “multiple/original works of art” (*Impressions/expressions* 54). And so I must ask, what is made possible, what is generated by this reproducibility? According to diaspora theorist Avtar Brah, “each repetitive act is expected to construct new meanings” (14). What new meanings arise out of the reduced and reproduced *Harangue*? Further, what alternative readings are no longer possible after the accusation “informant” is levied? As a print, the scale and figures are reduced, but so too is the viewers’ trust. Indeed, the thing that grows is anxiety and the audience who will listen to it, as Corrine told Claude and Claude told me and I am telling you now.

Poet Rowan Ricardo Philips suggests in *when blackness rhymes with blackness* that repetition is an intentional form of contemplation capable of intervening in the involuntary act of recollection. Whether we read the scene rightly or wrongly, the fact that it was multiply rendered on canvas and wood and ink by Wilmer Jennings suggests an enduring intention. The reduced reproduction hails in mind South Korean artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Presence Absence* (1975), an artist book comprised of successive photocopies of a family photograph. Each page is a copy of the one that came before it so that the photograph is reduced in quality until it becomes an illegible spray of dots—grains of sand that reference a story until there is nothing left. In the case of the transformation from *Rendezvous* to *Harangue*, the details suffer remove in a manner that suggests that both need be assembled to tell the full story. In Cha’s case, the assembly of photocopies not only allows us to view the uncorrupted image but also, the appearance of each page holding a place in the continuum from legibility and memory to illegibility and erasure tell a complete story not otherwise captured by the unadulterated photograph alone. In the case at hand, the painting informs the print in which the scene shrinks and our trust shrinks. With only the print on hand, detail is lost, the clues to their gathering are fewer—lending itself to a reading that points to the difficulty of fingering informants with only part of the picture. On the other hand, the print may lack background figures but the engraving communicates mood more starkly with the use of light and dark. The shadowed night hugs and hangs thickly around the gathered men while light that emanates from them in thin, inkless white lines with increasing distance. Suspicious feeling is amplified even though context is lost. Then again, once reduced to print, the image and details are sustained unlike Cha’s photograph. Each repetition of the image becomes stable, reliable like a heartbeat or looping breath or nervous tic of a traumatized organizer. The anxieties of suspicion become self-sustaining even in the absence of concrete information. Rumor, after all, does not require fact to take flight and instead survives fragmented repetition.

Returning to the print’s content, we might repeat a question of visual artist Lyle Ashton Harris more broadly, “To what extent is engaging in a calculated refusal a level of betrayal?” (“Artists’ Dialogue” 151). Does the suggestion of an informant stand in as an articulation of dissent



against the signs celebrating or demanding citizenship? Is the betrayal an actual relay of reports to bosses and bureaus, or is the skepticism of a back turned on an impassioned speaker enough to break the trust of viewers invested in the cruel optimism of black solidarity? When black solidarity is considered sacred, doubt or disinterest may be taken so personally as to be painful; misrecognition's affective repercussions expand from individual disappointment to collective betrayal.

### **Black Solidarity: The Sacred and the Profane**

Jennings was known to create his own implements to achieve his artistic visions, including “very fine tools for his wood engravings” (Elliott and Jennings 7). In what follows we will continue to consider the parallel rendering of fine lines in Jennings’s unusual print, drawing out further dimensions of the tenuousness of solidarity therein. In what follows I consider Judas Iscariot, one of the most famous informants in Western representation. The accepted story goes that he betrayed Jesus Christ, tipped off the authorities in exchange for silver. The debate is ongoing as to whether or not fulfilling a prophecy actually constitutes an act of betrayal if it is not only foretold but required in order to arrive at the story of redemption. The 2006 publication of the Gnostic text the “Gospel of Judas” translated by Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst has shed further light on the ethical dimensions of the Judas figure. In this text, Jesus laughs at his disciples for knowing so little and is ultimately drawn to Judas who is depicted as the only among them who understands the origin and mission of Jesus. In this translation, Jesus asks for Judas’s help to “sacrifice the man that clothes me” (7).

Judas's hands are the appendages around which the iconography of betrayal hangs thickly. His fingers in the salt at the Last Supper, his grip around the coin purse, his embrace of Jesus at the scene of his arrest. Judas makes us look at our own hands with suspicion. Are we capable of this too? More interesting, still are those other appendages of Judas’s: his lips, which deliver the betraying kiss. As mentioned earlier, Jennings was formally trained at Morehouse and RISD and therefore would be well acquainted with religious imagery and the iconography of betrayal in Western art. With this kind of intimacy in mind, I argue that there is a third listener in the crowd worthy of our concentration. The man on the right who holds his hat in his hand and looks left, the only figure in full profile, the odd man out. Perhaps he is also looking at the “informant” but he doesn’t wear the hard expression of the other watchers in the painting nor the single watcher in the print. His face seems open, like his mouth. No one faces this man and so we seem to know the least about him. For the contemporary viewer, he is in some ways sadly reminiscent of the effects of COINTELPRO in that, we now know that successful plants were able to go unnoticed while legitimate organization members accused each other of infiltration. His hand, holding his hat, rests at his side, in contrast to the full-bodied speech of the soapboxer. There is a stillness around him. What is he looking at? The hat he holds is wide brimmed and presumably pinched on each side of the cap to produce, from our position, rippling effect. Though convex to the viewer in the painting, in the print the projection is less clear, lending itself instead to a reading of the hat as concave. Stripped down from the busyness of the painting, the hat draws more attention and, through the depiction of depth, invites the viewer in. Just as the crowd has a center, so too does this hat. Positioned to the right of one of the named informants’ centered hands it becomes necessary to read the hat in conversation with them. Acting as a center within the center, inviting us further into the print, scene, dark center in a dark night, a layering that, despite the masculine-presenting crowd, feels rather feminine. Alongside the open hands the viewer has been instructed to recognize as treacherous, this second opening seems vulnerable.

In *Harangue*, with fewer figures involved and the change of time and obscured setting, alongside the preservation of the informants, the cutting back of the watchers and the improved enunciation of the hatless man (signaled by the cuts of light falling upon his face) suggests that the “new meaning” of this “multiple/original” is to shift the focus from keeping a vigil for the informants to do something more. The hard look and the long look, are they so different? I argue that this figure holds space for desire in *Harangue* and in doing so reveals the constitutive power of intimacy in the process of (making) betrayal.

Judas kisses Jesus in a move that registers as betrayal only to the extent that it is founded on adoration--whether he does Jesus's bidding or his own. In order to execute a betrayal you have to be close, close enough for secrets to pass between you, between lips. The man holding his hat, at once open and closed to us, suggests that betrayal is coterminous with desire; they share not just a border but the territory itself. Betrayal requires intimacy. *Harangue* exposes the contradictions that blackness -- a lifeline as well as a death sentence -- dark, diffuse and imprecise, offers cover to whomever takes it, undiscerning and engulfing. Of course we don't desire informants, but the desire for solidarity on the terms of racial blackness lubricates the safe passage of the informant. Perhaps I am reaching while disidentifying the hat-holding-man but organizing is always a stretch, and if we did not imperil ourselves we would be just as alone in the end, if not more so.

### **PS: Still Suspicious**

In presenting this work I've encountered another sort of suspicion about the belonging of Jennings's figures in *Harangue*: Are the men in the print “still” black? It is a stirring sort of anxiety but a useful one by which to metabolize the persistent ambiguities of the work. In addition to the reduction of the crowd, the cloaking of the klan, the failing evening light that swallows every bit of scenery—the features of flesh (too narrow?), bone and hair (too straight(ened)?) manifest in the print have upset for some the continuity of the crowd from color to (aptly) black and white. A paranoid reading of an image and a chapter about betrayal lend themselves to suspicion of belonging in the print in multiple ways, begging the question: What can we know by sight? The print is a series of cuts amounting to outlines rendering an image in patches of black and white—like a silhouette that operates by blocking the presence or absence of light. The print performs under similar circumstances—in the presence or absence of ink. Ann Wagner writes of the silhouette—and it seems appropriate here, too—“Of course our certainty can be shaken...how swiftly our eyes move and refocus, a figure can become background, rabbit morph into duck” (94). A comrade into an enemy, and even the anxieties about racial difference and belonging can be triggered by details emerging from a shift of attention. Our life long psychic catalogues of attributes fitting physiognomic commonsense collide with cuts in the wood that upset expectation. What does it mean that our racial assuredness can be undone, by Jennings or Walker or Duncomb?



Fig. 5: Cover art by Gwendolyn Bennett for the July 1926 issue of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*. Source: Jerry Langley and Sandra Govan.

We might approach the question from another vantage point—the interior. Gwendolyn Bennett, although best known for her fiction and poetry, was also a trained visual artist and integral cultural worker and supporter of black visual artists during the Harlem Renaissance from various administrative and pedagogical positions including her leadership at the Harlem Community Art Center before being targeted by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (betrayed by colleagues Selma Burke and Augusta Savage) (Langley and Govan 11-12). She studied art at Pratt, Academie Coloresse, Academie Julien, and Ecole de Pantheon. Although almost all of her work has been lost, a handful have been preserved on the covers of *The Crisis* (December 1923 and March 1924) and *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* (January and July 1926 and December 1930). Although skilled in watercolor and oil painting, the works preserved on these magazine covers showcase her line drawings. In some of these covers she employs shading techniques to indicate the darker skin of some of the figures. For example, one of the visitors bearing a gift for the infant Jesus and his mother Mary on the January 1926 cover is shaded in swirling and sweeping patterns while also sporting a large hoop earring and close cropped curly hair. These features combine to suggest African origin. Mary and the others in her company are bounded by the same black lines but the territory of their skin is unshaded, empty. On the other hand, the illustration for the July 1926 cover of *Opportunity* walks a different line. A slender, dancing woman graces the cover—in high heels, a clingy low-cut dress gathers at her waist beneath a black flower. Dancing, her hips lean forward, her shoulders are caught mid-shimmy, asymmetrical upon which hang two arms in motion, turned with palms open and grasping the music. Her head is turned exposing a long, beautiful neck and a large hoop earring hanging below a full, dark afro. Her full lips seem to kiss her own shoulder in the contortion of the dance and her broad nose sits sweetly there above. What is striking about this woman is that, unlike the drawings preserved on other issues this one features a woman we've been trained to recognize as black despite the fact that her skin is white, remains unshaded, empty between the thin drawn lines that give her shape and movement. Although the

eye recognizes that the blank white magazine page purports to color her body, the mind processes additional information and resolves the confusion in favor of racial blackness—despite the solid inky black background that fills the top half of the cover upon which her figure appears. At her knees Bennett conveys the inspiration for her dance and the lineage of her body. In a sense, the dancer is superimposed on another illustration, one in which three black silhouettes of women, partially or fully nude dance with abandon in the company of palm trees and a rising sun. This base or primary image prepares us, in some sense, for a reading of the second image, not only through the repetition of the movement and the natural hair but also through the rhyming work of inversion.

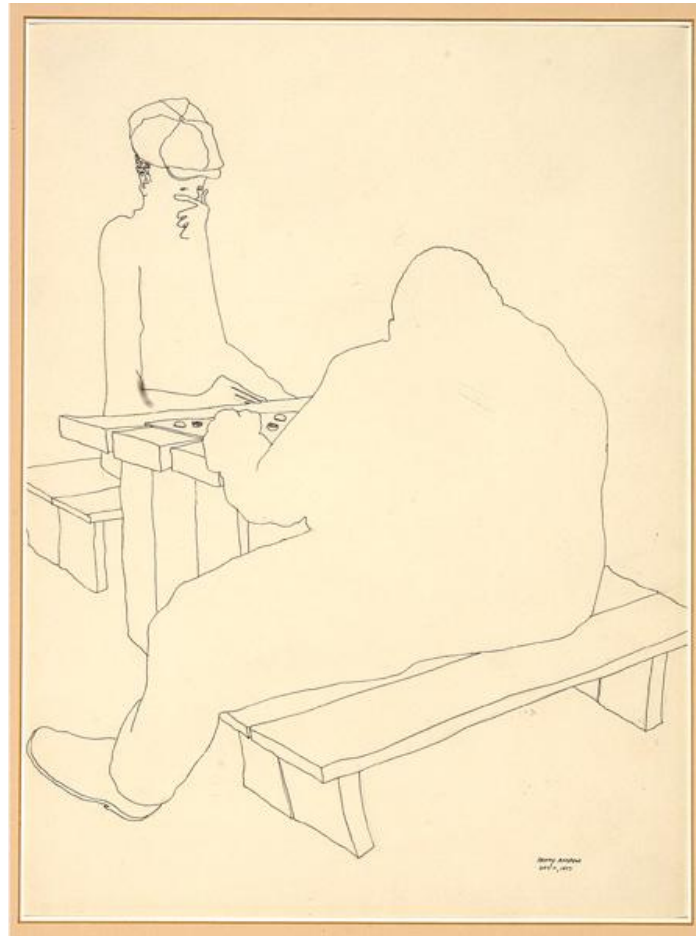


Fig. 6: “HmMMM” (no date) pen and ink by Benny Andrews. Source: Georgia Council of the Arts.

In a later example, the African American artist and activist Benny Andrews (1930-2006) worked in a wide-range of mediums including painting, collage, etching and drawing. He is perhaps best known for founding the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in response to the 1968 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* which did not include any black fine artists (Pellom). Andrews produced many works inspired by his childhood in the South, such as the pen and ink drawing *Front Porch Conversation* (1969) in which an older black woman chats with an overall-clad visitor from her wrap-around porch. *HmMMM* (no date) shows two figures playing checkers. The figure facing us takes his time to consider his next move, resting the bottom half of his face in his hand, in the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, a small nose pokes

out just above it and small eyes peer at the board. A few tight curls lead up to a hat. His game partner has his back to us, seemingly bald, heavy set, and wearing a shoe. The bench has more definition than the checker players. As a spare pen and ink drawing like *Porch* with no shading, the mind easily resolves the race of the figures when supplemented with the knowledge Andrews himself states 95% of his figures are black (Boondoggle). Having worked in painting and collage often, his corpus is unquestionably black in color—despite his engagement with the practice of unshaded flesh in line drawings, sparser still than Bennett’s. Andrews’s bodies at times yield more ambiguity, were it not for the context of the artist’s lifetime of work. If there is any question for the reader as to the race of the gathered men in *Harangue*, I hope that the question can instead double back to the petitioner. Two other works of Jennings’s feature groups of people without traditionally signifying markers of blackness: *The Stretch* (1947) and *Ballet* (1942) are noted by Elliott for being a depiction of his brother-in-law (the former) and of Margo Humphrey and company (the latter), despite not employing traditional visual languages of blackness.

Perhaps the suggestion of betrayal calls into question other forms of belonging. And, yet, the shadow of blackness has been already cast by the painting. Optimistically or not, under Jim Crow in 1942 in the United States a little bit of blood (or pigment, as the case may be) barred membership in whiteness. Regardless of your or my or Wilmer’s hope for these men, they still have cause to gather and shout or whisper in the night that “we are Americans,” too. Perhaps the prospect of undermined solidarity so far in advance of any direct action is so disheartening that viewers begin checking credentials at the (door) frame, resorting to boundary policing because the reality of “disunity” is too much.

On the note of “disunity” I will close with some reflections on the recent past a document called the “Willie Lynch” letter that emerged online purporting to be an instructional speech about how to discipline and undermine black unity in the early 1700s and for generations to come.<sup>14</sup> Historian Jelani Cobb offers a critique of the viability of the mythical “Willie Lynch” letter to which the origins of “black disunity” have been attributed. Terms and connotations such as “program,” “out-line” and the capitalized “Black” all indicate that the letter was not written in 1712 when it claims to have been produced. Furthermore, Cobb argues that the sudden appearance of the document online without an historical paper trail detailing its discovery along with the lack of academic debate around its merit suggests that it is not an authentic document, not having been engaged in the traditional venues of research into American slavery. And, yet, the document has enjoyed wide-ranging and prolific circulation, not just in popular culture but also assigned in classrooms as an historical document rather than as creative writing. As any instructor of introductory African American Studies will surely have encountered, the piece is popular among incoming undergraduates who cite its authority. And yet, as Cobb has argued, the document is a fraud. So, why does its appeal endure? What is so attractive about this work of fiction? How does it depart from other works of fiction like *Beloved* for example, which is heralded as a successful reanimation of the ghosts of black bondage? Neo-slave narratives do not assert themselves as fact but rather aim to fill in the silences and gaps constitutive of the institution of slavery which barred black testimony and obliterated black consent. The document purports to be true and not merely ‘based on a true story’ or, ironically responding to a ‘true story’ as Ishmael Reeds’ *Flight to Canada* for example, which takes the tropes of slavery and the neo-slave narrative to its most absurd and breaking points. Willie Lynch aims to alleviate the sense of collective guilt arising from the capacity for white supremacist superstructures to convince us that the fault of our

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<sup>14</sup> The *Internet Archive* hosts a copy of the letter in the collection titled “Community Texts.” It was uploaded by user kaprikious on 19 September 2010 and can be viewed here: <https://archive.org/details/WillieLynchLetter1712>

inferiority is all our own. His conspiratorial puppetry helps young black people to make sense of *today's* program of systematic disinheritance, oppression, underfunding and incarceration of black communities by offering a neat origin story instead of the messy historical realities of the entangled origins of race, capitalism, and misogynoir<sup>15</sup> whose precise temporal origins matter less, perhaps, than the hows of their operationalization and the whys of their compelling dominance.

Willie Lynch's letter and the purported historical reality of an individual mastermind behind the affective and material conditions of black folk lends itself to companion fantasies of individualist resistance (If I had a time machine I would...) and genius (Someone needs to write a new letter...) that displaces both the far more overwhelming task of confronting a slippery system that does not require one genius but many adherents, beneficiaries, and many more people just willing to go along with the mob. It also affords readers of the epistle the luxury of disavowing ownership over the elements of "disunity" that we actively contribute to daily—just as racial formations are projects that require continual reaffirmation according to Michael Omi and Howard Winant. When I first presented my work on Wilmer Jennings at a black studies conference a few years ago the first comment I received was an indignant response that my paper was making the case that black people cannot have unity—which mystified me. Having since become acquainted with the letter, I can see why a paper questioning the terms upon which solidarity is available and able to be built might trigger the Willie Lynch nerve in any of us.

## Conclusion

The violence of projecting diasporic logics upon untested relationships is mirrored in the literal violence of the carving of woodblock. By the same token, the cutting of the grain is slow and meditative, like choosing the right word. There are multiple moments for reflection and recommitment. The final scarred result of the ink-soaked surface, bearing the mark of being pressed to paper offers anxiety, disappointment and critique in a more ambiguous and private fashion than the memoir which inhabits the confessional lucid mode. I cannot claim, of course, that the artist's ultimate intention was to make a statement about racial intimacy but the rendering of the figures and the afterlives of other readings lend themselves to my cause as well as to a sort of common cause about staking a claim in the enduring value and relevance of the work of Wilmer Jennings. But it is never clear which impression you will be left with. Intimacy is enabling—people interested in taking advantage of it will do so. Even the briefest experiences with political organizing will confirm "being in the midst of others has been sometimes lonely, sometimes uplifting, sometimes awful" (Glisson 12).

Hartman suggests in the epigraph that opened this chapter the history of black radical projects is a history of failure because the reins of history are held so taut by dominant antiblack ideologies and historians on the ideological and psychological payroll of white supremacy, but I propose another reading of her claim. A reading that says more plainly that the history of black radical projects is a history of failure, more baldly, not only because their record is obstructed from piercing the veil but because we also obstruct one another. That failing to get free and failing each other is as much a part of our history as any thing else we've been up to. The second epigraph, taken from Frederick Douglass's second memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom*, gestures toward the emotional disbelief that accompanies disruptions of racial intimacy. Douglass's friend and traitor, Sandy Jenkins, earned Douglass's trust while healing him and providing him a root for

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<sup>15</sup> A term coined by Moya Bailey to describe the confluence of misogyny and anti-blackness experienced by black women. Bailey, Moya. "They aren't talking about me..." *The Crunk Feminist Collective*, 14 March 2010, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/>.

protection but, he subsequently exposed their escape plan to the slaving authorities. Douglass notes that his and his co-conspirators' love for Sandy is stronger than the concrete evidence against him. But this powerful investment in one another is not only detrimental, it is also sustaining. Under arrest and with the threat of being sold to the deep south and separated forever, he recalls "Our confidence in each other was unshaken; and we were quite resolved to succeed or fail together—as much after the [betrayal] which had befallen us, as before" (221). Failure doesn't mean we stop trying or close our hearts to risky intimacies. Rather, we keep shuffling forward into the darkness, enduring the repetition of betrayal that love enables hoping that the next cut will offer a little light, a little relief.



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## Chapter Three

### “A woman should have something of her own”: Suicide in Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed*

*Brethren, our last word to you is to bid you be of good cheer, and not to despair of your deliverance. Do not abandon yourselves, as have many thousands of American slaves, to the crime of suicide.*

—“Letter to the American Slaves From Those Who Have Fled From American Slavery,” Cazenovia Fugitive Slave Law Convention, August 1850

*We have never known an instance where so much firmness was exhibited by any person as was by this negro. The place from which she suspended herself was not high enough to prevent her feet from touching the floor; and it was only by drawing her legs up and remaining in that position that she succeeded in her determined purpose.*

—“What has the North to do with Slavery?” *Colored American*, 17 February 1838

*we are TIRED. ya'll we are tired. we give everything. we give everything for our people. we put our all into the streets. #MarshawnMcCarrel*

—@Ellevation\_, Twitter.com, 9 February 2016. A black queer femme’s response to the suicide of #blacklivesmatter activist MarShawn McCarrel

#### Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I offered for consideration failure in the forms of misrecognition and betrayal as they occur in the recitational practice of memoir writing and the repetitive practice of printmaking. This chapter returns to the written word, as well as the historical record, in the form of the neo-slave narrative which revisits not just the structure of the slave narrative genre but, more over, builds upon the critical interventions of the narrative that first proposed black people as authorities and authors of their own experience (even though legitimating forwards and letters from prominent whites were requisite of the genre). Neo-slave narratives in particular intervene to fill in the thin or absent data resultant from the illegality of black literacy and also to broach irretrievable archival losses, to flesh out the fragments and intimations in those stories which one could not “pass on” such as those of sexual and other violences. By intervening where the archive has failed, or dared not go, the neo-slave narrative challenges linearity as an organizational logic of history. In 1993 Paul Gilroy issued a call stating “[t]he time has come for the primal history of modernity to be reconstructed from the slaves’ point of view” (55); his was a social scientific imperative directed to historians, philosophers, and sociologists but this work, as we shall see, is also carried out in the humanities by the neo-slave narrative author beginning in the 1960s. The neo-slave narrative helps us to grapple with the temporality of being diasporan, of looking backward, feeling backward, reading and desiring and holding space for what remains.

In 1976, a 28-year-old emerging black speculative fiction writer who would go on to win the MacArthur, Nebula, and Hugo awards, Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) expressed concern about entering the what she judged to be a saturated neo-slave narrative publishing market (before it gained the titular distinction of a subgenre in 1987) and worried further in a journal entry, “you don’t see that you have anything new to say about slavery. You are intimidated by those who’ve gone before you, many of them slaves themselves” (OEB #1183, April 26, 1976). Ultimately, she said something utterly new about slavery with her genre-bending and path-breaking *Kindred* (1979) which tells the story of a black woman of the 1970s time traveling to repeatedly save the life of her white, slave-owning ancestor. Butler’s contemporaneous concerns may also account for the departures that *Wild Seed* (1980), published one year later than *Kindred* and the subject of this chapter, makes from its original conceptualization as a novel more strictly structured around the standard plot points of the slave novel. Traditionally, the trajectory of the neo-slave narrative replicates that of the slave narrative—possibly beginning before capture (like the slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano), the autobiographical account of enslavement, escape, and the attainment of some form of freedom. Circa 1975 an early character creation sheet for *Wild Seed*’s protagonist Emma (who would later be renamed Anyanwu), produced on a typewriter, notes “She might be sold into slavery. Or, her village might be attacked...” and continues to list the anticipated progression of the novel and its options, “Emma’s Ebo [sic] time as prologue, or as [chapter] one flowing into (Jumping to) the middle passage. The strange land, the auction, the plantation or city, north or south” (OEB #2938). Early page drafts bear out Anyanwu’s original conception as a slave in early America just coming to understand her shape-shifting powers and her encounters with an early Doro after escaping slavery only to come under his power instead and “she is re[e]nslaved” (OEB # 2944).

In the final, published version of the novel follows Anyanwu, a healer and shapeshifter, and Doro, a possessive spirit engaged in a superhuman breeding project that ultimately ensnares Anyanwu and her descendants. The basic plot structure includes Anyanwu’s life as a priestess in her home country with full understanding of her supernatural abilities; her meeting with Doro, the breeder of magical people; her somewhat willing somewhat coerced ascent onto his ship masquerading as a traditional slaving vessel and full of current and future breeding project participants; Anyanwu’s arrival at one of his colonies in America and the betrayal of Doro’s promise of marriage; Anyanwu’s submission to marrying Doro’s son and her submission to sex with anyone Doro brings her for breeding purposes; Anyanwu’s flight after her kind husband (and Doro’s favorite song) Isaac’s death; Doro’s discovery of Anyanwu’s new, free and interracial family compound masquerading as a slave plantation; Anyanwu’s resubmission to Doro and the submission of her family; Anyanwu’s decision to end her life; Doro’s submission to Anyanwu and confession of loneliness; Anyanwu’s decision to live and the renegotiation of the conditions of life for herself and others while continuing to participate in the breeding project. The power relations deviate from the expected dynamics of the neo-slave genre in that, Doro and Anyanwu do not line up with the master/slave relationship perfectly; both possess supernatural powers and the presence or the absence of the other implies a real threat to each (Doro can easily consume Anyanwu, but the loss of Anyanwu would set Doro back centuries on his breeding goals). As such, Anyanwu is able to push the limits of her subjugation from time to time. And yet, these power relationships also seem to be extensions of the conventions Butler established for herself in *Kindred* in which the protagonist, Dana, must conform herself to the posture of the slave and the racial commonsense of the era subjects her to all manner of brutalization but, as a time traveler hailing from the late twentieth century she is endowed with powers that hold her apart and gain her advantages with her

so-called masters (knowledge of modern medicine and literacy, for example). As her life-saving purpose becomes clear she comes to exercise the mysteries of her time traveling for leverage.

Valerie Smith indicates that *Kindred* fits what Ashraf Rushdy calls the “palimpsest narrative” of the neo-slave narrative genre which describes novels in “late twentieth century characters are haunted by their enslaved ancestors” (172). I would argue that the name meanings in *Wild Seed* (Anyanwu meaning “sun” and Doro meaning “east”), coupled with Doro’s suspicion that Anyanwu is a distant descendant of himself, mean that Butler is again playing with aspects of the palimpsest narrative form (OEB #2947, May 1, 1976). Because Doro is immortal, Anyanwu literally comes face to face with her past but, instead of confronting an ancestral enslavement, her powerful past instead subjugates *her*. Although in a different form, the novel goes on to meditate on the common themes of the genre including “the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom” (Smith 169). How will someone as powerful as Anyanwu define freedom as the parameters of her life narrow and living itself becomes a habit?

Despite the publishing chronology, the *narrative* chronology places *Wild Seed* (1980) as the first book in Butler’s *Patternist* series followed by *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Clay’s Ark* (1984), and *Patternmaster* (1976).<sup>16</sup> Because *Mind* was published three years earlier than *Wild Seed*, readers would likely already be aware that Emma (Anyanwu’s Western name in the novel) commits suicide at the close of *Mind*. Her passing is mentioned without feeling (“It was just as well”) by Mary, *Mind*’s protagonist and Doro’s successful spawn after a many centuries long project (*Seed to Harvest* 452). *Wild Seed* is, then, ultimately two things: 1) an opportunity to flesh out the terrain of suicide in the life of Emma/Anyanwu and 2) a story of the failure to achieve the central project in the narrative. To explain the latter, I refer to a letter Butler wrote to a friend named Maggie:

I have to figure out someday (sic) for my two immortal characters to have a complete story themselves—a story that can [exist] apart from MIND OF MY MIND... The problem is, their goal is to build a new race around themselves, but they don’t succeed until MIND OF MY MIND. So for COVENANT [*Wild Seed*], they need—I need—to accomplish something else that will bring the novel to a satisfactory conclusion. I don’t know where I picked up this working-backward style of mine. ... Emma can only be partially successful. If she actually managed to stop Doro from breeding people, MIND OF MY MIND would never take place. (OEB #3217, October 19, 1977)<sup>17</sup>

The kind of failure I take up here in this chapter is still more painful than the disappointments yielded by misrecognition, more devastating than the anxieties produced by the rupture of trust. This failure is of another sort: suicide. Its relationship to the term failure is multivalent: condemnatory of those who take such action; laced with guilt, anger and regret for those who surround the actor. More abstractly, the failure that emanates from suicide is one in which the

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<sup>16</sup> The four novels have been reprinted in narrative chronological order as a collection under the title *Seed to Harvest*. Butler has disavowed the technical fourth novel in the series titled *Survivor* (1978), calling it her “Star Trek novel” for its settler colonial-styled encounter with the people of another planet (Littleton).

<sup>17</sup> In addition, she describes the drama between Emma and Doro as “just ordinary enough... to make up for the extraordinary people making their way through the book.” This letter is taped inside of the commonplace book and evidently never sent. On the back in blue ink Butler wrote, “I really don’t know why I bothered to write this letter. I think I’ll wait a day to send this. It doesn’t seem that bad of a letter. Not good, but not that bad. Repetitive.” I, for one, am grateful that she waited a day and encouraged to see hints of her interest in failure and ordinariness tucked away in one place for almost forty years.

black actor fails to live up to the communal values, or dominant projections, of strength in suffering. Finally, of course, there is the very concrete failure to carry on. I am interested here to write about the intersection of failure and suicide because I think, though difficult, it is a crucial site for thinking about a diasporan ethics of failure because the tendency to read resistance into the suicidal act is so strong. This stems from the long-standing example of captured Africans jumping over-board during the middle passage (or, as one of my students surreally put it, “hopping in the water.”) The entanglement of black suicide with an ethical praxis taps, too, Harlem Renaissance author Claude McKay’s renowned and sobering revolutionary suicide poem which begins, “If we must die, let it not be like hogs” (43). The tactical move to embrace the inevitability of death while pointing to the capacity to stake out a claim in one’s own death has a long history. But, our contemporary moment is no less influenced by the weight of black suicide as a complicated response to the pressures of ethical living and dying for the black subject. Recall, for example, North Carolina native and American Idol winner Fantasia Barrino’s comments about her 2010 suicide attempt as connected to the controlling image of the strong black woman. In her first interview two weeks after the attempt she explained, “I just got very, very tired” (fariq).<sup>18</sup> Barrino’s statement on black feminine tiredness, simultaneously plain and opaque, ultimately gets to the heart of this chapter’s concern.

To explore this theme, this chapter examines the planned suicide of protagonist Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*. The narrative builds slowly toward her decision to take her life, the plan is developed over the course her sexual and emotional servitude to Doro. At times it is a consensual investment but, even when their relationship feels loving, it is haunted by the specter of wrongful death as Doro comes to her wearing new bodies that he must possess with regularity in order to satisfy his hunger and remain immortal. At other times Anyanwu’s submission is compelled by threats that apply pressure to Anyanwu where she is most vulnerable: her identification with maternity. The structure of the novel complements her identification with this form, as breasts bookend *Wild Seed*. As Doro feels out Anyanwu over the course of their first encounter in her land, alternately threatening her and inviting her to join him, he concludes, “It was not until she began to grow breasts that he knew for certain he had won” (*Seed to Harvest* 24). Here the breasts signal the characters’ imminent sexual encounter, both his enjoyment of her body but also a foreshadowing of the reproductive labor in both birthing and various forms of caretaking that will be extracted from her for decades to come. At the close of the novel, following the emotional climax of the text and after months of expecting her suicide, we learn that Anyanwu has *not* taken her life with the single line, “[Doro] slept, finally, exhausted, his head on her breast, and at sunrise when he awoke, that breast was still warm, still rising and falling gently with her breathing” (251). It is her breast in motion, again (first growing, now rising), that signal’s Doro’s victory over Anyanwu’s agential refusals. But of warmth Lauren Berlant writes, it “is an atmosphere that allows life and death to be in the same place as what’s potentially unbearable in love every minute, the having and losing that’s both ultimate and ordinary” (*Sex, or the Unbearable* 25). Re-reading the line, we learn that Anyanwu’s breast is warm before we learn that it is animated. Its warmth suggests life but, too, leaves space before the comma, for the recession of life—for what’s warm to cool. For one

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<sup>18</sup> *The Crunk Feminist Collective* connects her suicide attempt to this myth, “Black women’s strength is the single stereotype that is disguised as a compliment, and we oftentimes don’t want to relinquish it. But what does it mean to be strong? What happens when we don’t feel it, when we are tired of it, when sadness, hopelessness and strength trade places?” (rboylorn); also remarked up on the Huffington Post (Popps) and raised again in *Ebony* with the title, “Is ‘Strong Black Womanhood’ Killing Our Sisters?” (Moody and Williams).

punctuated breath, the reader is afforded the luxury of imagining that Anyanwu has only recently passed.

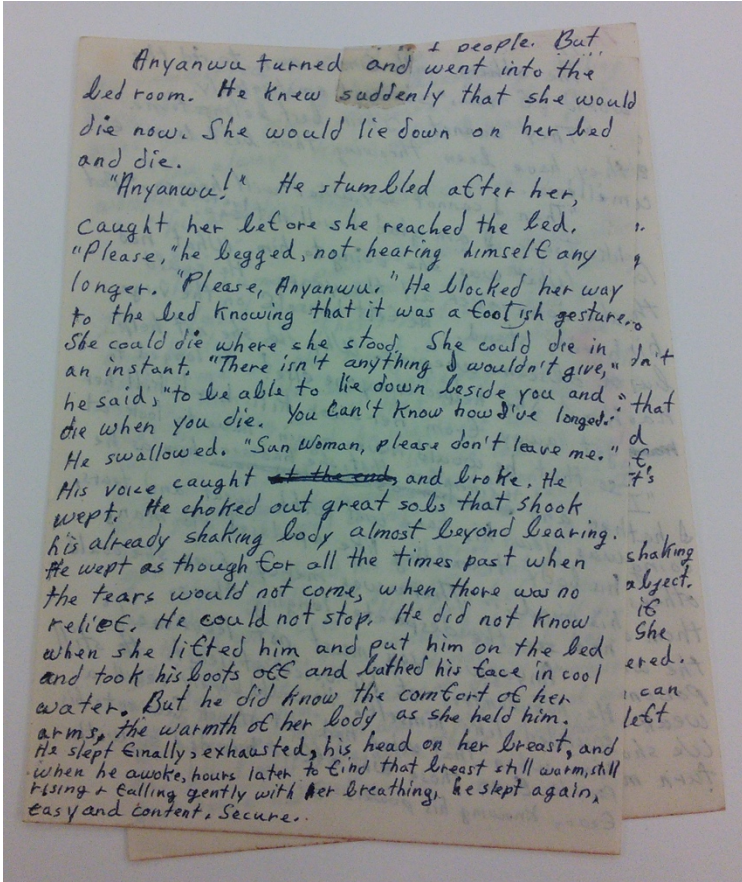


Fig. 7: This image shows a draft of Anyanwu and Doron's confrontation about her planned suicide and her "still warm" breast the following morning. The pages are 14cm in size. Source: OEB #2948 "Wild Seed: novel: fragment" circa 1978, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Photograph by Ianna Hawkins Owen.

But why luxuriate in the speculative demise of the novel's leading and most sympathetic character? This chapter considers the scholastic construction of slave suicide as a collective act of resistance against a landscape of black feminine foreclosures in order to hold space for desirelessness and exhaustion in diasporic consciousness. Unable to conceptualize slave suicide outside group resistance or group suffering, I argue that available frameworks cannot account for individual desirelessness, slaves who refuse diaspora or are refused by it when they fail, even in death, to get in formation. I reflect on the space Butler's work opens up for alternative readings of suicide for the tired black female body by reviewing scholarship on slave suicide and reconsider negativity in the black Atlantic. I then move closer to the present moment while considering paradigms of exhaustion and conclude by considering the overlap of resistance and defeat. The questions that arise in this chapter on slave suicide would be difficult to broach from any angle but neo-slave narrative fiction because successful slave suicides leave no independent narratives and failed or witnessed ones are twisted by time and (well-meaning) advocacy. Not only a fictional character, but an immortal one, Anyanwu and her dilemma serve a heuristic purpose that lends itself to an understanding of the afterlife of slave suicide now and, moreover, demonstrate that

even the resiliency endowed to her by healing powers is not enough to maintain the image of the strong black woman forever.

While *Wild Seed* is my primary site of analysis, this chapter moves on a few different fronts. The keyword diaspora is revisited again in the context of slave suicide at several points to consider those who are lost to the collective and those who refuse it. Slave suicide scholarship gives us a sense of the historical realities, while the interpretations of slave suicide motivations are evaluated as limiting. Butler's use of suicide as a device in her other works comes up for consideration before performing some close readings of passages from *Wild Seed*. In particular, Anyanwu's investment in womanhood and motherhood is examined and compared to other recitations of black feminine tiredness in *Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove and of course, the character Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The chapter draws to a close with a meditation on the overlap of resistance and defeat.

### **Diaspora: Revisiting the Keyword**

In chapter one I claim that levying the term 'diasporan' is an act of violence for all involved. Because the term, in its use by travel memoir writers, is applied to subjects engaged in fleeting but historically overdetermined encounters, the use of the term presupposes a relationship without or ahead of the intersubjective work involved in making the word work, making the word mean(ingful). Revisiting the middle passage, as an epistemological break, becomes the occasion (the ongoing, cyclical occurrence) for which we have to grapple with the interjection of the violent name "diaspora" in order to name the violence of *being made* diasporic. In this way, the resultant and ever-unfolding catachrestic violence that was the middle passage is perhaps best named by a word that reaches and fails to capture the relationships that emerge from it. A word spun from misrecognitions, its inaugural adoptive usage wraps back around, attempts to name the solution to its own emergence. That is, diasporic solidarity to remedy the disruptions triggered by becoming diasporic. For this reason, I have asserted in chapter two there can be no solidarity on the terms of diasporan blackness alone. Invoking the middle passage might seem to signal a wholesale commitment to its epistemology, which Michelle Wright so beautifully critiques for its incapacity to accommodate the stories of blackness that emerge alongside of, before, and after it, that defy the shape of the triangular trade, even as they cross paths with it. Yet, as we recognize its limitations I commit myself to a meditation within the limits of this epistemology for the simple reason that its structuring dominance continues to dictate popular imaginings of diaspora, of blackness, and of freedom. When we think about diaspora we cannot help but trace its roots to the routes of middle passage, even if these lines of flight are inadequate to capture the full or future stories of blackness. And so, with the problematized narrative, we still have a story to tell that begins in the hull of a ship and, for some, ends at its railing.

I argue for a revisitation of the phenomenon of suicide in slavery scholarship, of people who refuse to become or remain diasporans within their extremely restricted agency, and on their own terms, even when then those terms spell their demise. Does the story of diaspora have its roots in compulsion? Is there such a thing as diasporan subjectivity that does not stem from suffering and surviving, from ripping and gaps? Is there space for rudderlessness alongside or slightly adrift of roots and routes? Captured Africans on board ships whose names we remember well, as well as those we don't, certainly survived and their descendants continue to become. But, like Saidiya Hartman, I am after not just the stories but the interiority of those who left no records, who made no generations, whose siblings perhaps inherit their losses, but little else in the New World.

As it turns out, the suicide of those transported in the middle passage was so common that nets were erected over the rails of ships in order to catch any cargo that made the attempt (Bly 181). On board, devices like the speculum oris were devised to break the jaws of those who refused to eat in order to force feed them. When weapons were within reach, others found the strength to slit their own throats. During the voyage and in the New World, early suicide prevention for chattel slaves took the form of mutilation. Those who succeeded but left their bodies on board the ship or on the grounds of the plantation were made examples of through decapitation, for example, as a deterrent to those who remained to suggest that the integrity of the returning body/spirit was compromised. In later generations as Christianity was more widely imposed and/or practiced, slaveholders emphasized suicide as a sin to dissuade its use as a mode of escape (Bell “Suicide by Slaves”; Bly; Piersen 151, 154-5). On the flip side, for insurance reasons, runaways were often preferred returned dead rather than alive, and in this case it seems the pursuer or captor of the runaway and the runaway themselves were engaged in a race to see who would take that life first (Watson 323).

Slaveholder theories of suicide prevention were accompanied by stereotypes about which African ethnicities were more or less prone to suicide and which were their methods of choice. Historian William D. Piersen’s article “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs,” collects the guidance of slave traders like Henry Coor and Thomas Ewbank who hypothesize, beyond the commonness of drowning, that “Gold Coast Negroes” were more apt to “cut their throats” while the Ibo and those specifically “shipped from the port of Elmina” tended toward hanging (Piersen 152-153). More interestingly, and perhaps lastingly, we see the belief among slavers that blacks possessed magical qualities, “able to bring on death simply by holding their breaths or by swallowing their tongues” intentionally or were skilled in poisons (Piersen 153). Slave suicide was underreported, perhaps because of the questions the collection of such data might introduce to the tenuous borders of who counts as human for the chattel slavery system (Bell “Suicide by Slaves” 494). Piersen estimates “Only a small minority of [enslaved Africans] willfully ended their lives. But since these suicides were part of one of the world’s largest intercontinental migrations [sic], their numbers were probably into the hundreds of thousands over the three century span of the Atlantic slave trade” (154). Richard Bell adds that scholars estimate instances of suicide among the enslaved were far higher than “that among free persons of color” (“Suicide by Slaves” 494). Again, in addition to the difficulty in giving accurate estimates, we have the difficulty of accurately reflecting their affective dimensions and motivation. On the other hand, the undertakings of neo-slave narrative and science fiction both build on the available research and temporal distance (either from the past or the future) to gesture toward the blanks before us, as we shall discuss below.

### **Suicide in Science Fiction and the Historical Record**

Suicidal crises are a common theme in science fiction. Carlos Gutiérrez-Jones situates suicidal ideation in the genre as a kind of trope of “creative self-destruction” or “rebooting” in order to induce radical changes in the life of the character in question, to emancipate them from habits and patterns (1-2, 8, 10, 14). He finds, “[i]n most cases, these characters significantly alter or break their attachments to these habits of thought while going through their suicidal crises” (2). In Butler’s short story *Bloodchild*, about a symbiotic relationship on an alien world, for example, Gutiérrez-Jones claims that it is protagonist Gan’s move toward creative self-destruction via contraband rifle, potentially silencing himself forever, that actually creates the conditions for Gan to find and use his voice as a *consenting* participant in an egg implantation (7-8). Overall, he estimates that suicidality in science fiction is a generative, “beneficial” force (1, 3).



In the neo-slave narrative speculative fiction of Butler, suicide and suicidal thoughts are a recurring struggle for her characters. Another example comes from her neo-slave narrative *Kindred* which, as mentioned earlier, tells the story of a black woman named Dana time traveling from the 1970s to the era of her white, slave-owning ancestor, Rufus, and her black enslaved ancestor, Alice. Alice takes her own life by hanging in a barn. Her reasons are twofold; her ongoing sexual assault by Rufus and her unwillingness to witness in close proximity Dana's freedom of movement across both space and time (which Alice will never have). Dana also attempts to take her own life, in the latter half of the novel, though not successfully. While the scientific mechanics of Dana's time traveling remain intentionally undefined, both protagonist and reader come to understand that Dana's travel to the past is triggered by threats to her ancestor Rufus's life—so that she might save him—and her return travel to her contemporary moment in the 1970s is triggered by threats to her own life—effectively saving herself, keeping her available for future (past) interventions. There comes a point in her travel between eras where she is no longer afraid of the environment nor the figures in it, she knows everyone in the small world of the plantation too well and familiarity seems to mollify threat. She is too precious to all involved. In order to make the jump between time periods, she must threaten her life in one of the only risky avenues left to her—and so she slits her wrists in a basin of warm water.

Butler's *Patternist* series follows the breeding project that births a race of supernaturally gifted Patternist telepaths and the emergence of their rivals, the Clayarks, who are animated by an extraterrestrial disease. Both groups vie for the growth of their own group and the destruction of the other. Suicidality is consistently employed in the subplots of each novel in the series including Emma's success and Page's attempt in *Mind of My Mind*, Zeriam's success in *Clay's Ark*, and Rayal's in *The Patternmaster*. Moreover, suicide as an option or optional outcome and as metaphor are mainstays of Butler's characters' morality. *Wild Seed* begins as a story of failure because *Mind of My Mind* is the success of Doro's project—the realization of a race of supernaturally gifted individuals called Patternists. Because *Mind* was published before *Wild Seed* it is likely that readers also understood that the central project of the novel would not (yet) succeed and that even Anyanwu's (aka Emma) suicide would be a failure, since she does not succeed in taking her life until the end of *Mind*. Despite this failure, it is treated with far more depth in *Wild Seed* than in those novels published earlier—indeed, suicidal ideation abounds in the series prequel. Doro often casually reflects on the proclivity of his people to take their lives in suicide, which he characterizes as a waste (*Seed to Harvest* 61, 84, 101, 127-128, 183-184). Although suicide attempts by the historically enslaved knew no temporal or situational limits, the majority of reported attempts on ship happened while still along the African coast and the majority of reported attempts on colonial American land happened within days of docking (Piersen 150-1). Butler taps the atmospheric pull of suicidal ideation on board the slave ship for Anyanwu's descendent (*Seed to Harvest* 49) and Anyanwu herself:

She pulled herself up onto the rail. “Anyanwu!” She did not quite hesitate. It was as though a mosquito had whined past her ear. A tiny distraction. “Anyanwu!” She would leap into the sea. Its waters would take her home, or they would swallow her. Either way, she would find peace. Her loneliness hurt her like some sickness of the body, some pain that her special ability could not find and heal. (58)

These are not Anyanwu's last suicidal thoughts, although they are the only instance in which she entertains the possibility (without conviction) that taking her life might return her to Nigeria. At

times, she wonders why certain people don't take their lives or take them faster than they were<sup>19</sup> and admires those in whom she perceives the bravery to see the act through to its completion (150, 211). Her husband Isaac's own mother, for example, hangs herself in order to escape Doro's reach, not unlike Alice escaping Rufus in *Kindred* (123). It is common knowledge among Doro's people that "the only sure way to escape him and cheat him out of the satisfaction of wearing your body" is suicide (97 and also 118-119, 122-123, 242-244). This is strikingly familiar to Piersen's observation "masters... could catch most runaways, but were helpless to retrieve the dead" (154). In this way, as Sharon P. Holland puts it, "the dead and their relations are perhaps the most lawless, unruly and potentially revolutionary inhabitants of any imagined territory" (23). In the case of self-destruction, Charles Ball, a former slave, shared in 1837 that "suicide amongst slaves is regarded as a... dangerous example" (qtd. in Bell, "Suicide by Slaves" 484). For this reason, Doro's method of suicide prevention is not so different from the slave masters of the historical record; by killing the slaves before they can kill themselves he is able to collect a last measure of usefulness and simultaneously warn others by wearing the body as his own—similarly, slave masters manipulated the body of the suicide through mutilation, reanimating the corpse in order to serve as a warning to others. Additionally, Doro is able to use the body for profit by breeding it while he wears it; the slave master was often able to profit from insurance policies or reimbursements from the colony for dead slaves.

If "some subjects never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the living" (Holland 21), we must hold space for alternative interpretations of the suicidal act performed by those beyond the pale of humanity—those who make their appearance in disappearance.<sup>20</sup> Three readings dominate scholarship on the motivation for slave suicide. The first is a spiritual return or in Alan Rice's words a "utopian act of homecoming" (Bly 181; Rice 86; Piersen 151) to the African homeland, the second a physical resistance to subordination in this life, in this land. For those believing in the certainty of return, or in release at the very least, the scholarship describes happiness, joy and pleasure as feelings animating the disposition of those taking their lives and their witnesses (Bly 181; Piersen 151). Fredrika Bremer notes that the passage of a suicide and communal belief in her return was sometimes used by survivors as a means of communication. Peers might place their headscarves on the body, believing "it will thus be conveyed to those who are dear to her in the mother country; and will bear a salutation from her. The corpse of a suicide slave has been covered with hundreds of such tokens" (qtd. in Piersen 151). The second, and I think most enduring, reading of slave suicide as an act of resistance is born out most clearly in the interpretations of successful suicides by their witnesses. For example, a slave's suicide by drowning covered by *The Liberator* in 1843 concludes: "George has tasted liberty!!!" (qtd. in Bell, "Slave Suicide" 543). Bell expands the definition of slave suicide beyond the violence directed against the actor's own body to include "decisions that slaves knowingly made that resulted in their eventual deaths. Thus, alongside hanging, drowning, and starving... we must place decisions to volunteer for back-breaking tasks or to pick fights with masters or overseers as other forms of suicidal behavior" ("Suicide by Slaves" 491; see also Piersen 150 and Bly 182). In doing so, he aims to include instances of overt resistance—Frederick Douglass's iconic struggle with the slave breaker Covey, for example—to be coded as a suicidal acts, though he acknowledges that such a capacious move is not without controversy.

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<sup>19</sup> To clarify, Anyanwu meets a man named Thomas who is in the midst of drinking his life to ruin—in her opinion, a slow death. She also thinks a mother fallen on hard times and engaging in sex work should consider suicide.

<sup>20</sup> With the phrase "appearance in disappearance," I'm referencing Stephen Best and Patrick Anderson, who are both referencing Peggy Phalen.

Some interpretations are, of course, even bolder. For example, Bly's language "many slaves *happily* preferred to die in the Atlantic rather than suffer" (185, emphasis mine) hails the suicidal slave body into an unapologetically rebellious discourse of death. Rice characterizes the political aim of suicide as obvious, beyond speculation, "It hardly needs to be said that suicide in itself struck a blow against the very institution of slavery, removing the productive body from its abuse in the system" (86). But I prefer to hold on to ambivalence when it comes to thinking about suicide-as-resistance. Bell argues that motives (and I would add, emotions) "imputed... to them by witnesses writing many years after the fact" ("Suicide by Slaves" 494) make it difficult to say with certainty how much of the rebellion was the property of the slave and how much is the product of the witness or researcher, rebelling against his own sense of desperation when engaging this dark archive in which both strength and surrender are overlapping.

In "Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance" Richard Bell finds that the framing of slave suicide in the first half of the nineteenth century was heavily gendered. Black men's suicide was viewed as an expression of resistance in line with the esteemed liberal-republican values of the American Revolution. The position waned following the panic of the Haitian revolution, and was reasserted again in the 1840s and 50s after a schism in the abolition movement and especially following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. In the intervening period of the 1820s and 30s a third standard for interpreting slave suicide predominated, the Garrisonian strategy of moral suasion, which emphasized the feminized victimhood of slave suicides and appealed to the "evangelical readers' self-image as these afflicted victims' last best hope" (534). Slave owners and the larger slavery system were blamed for black women's suicide—in line with an "assumption shared by many within the abolition movement that black women lacked the capacity for self-determination" (542). In addition to those instigating moments named about, another cause for the shift away from this strategy was the now (in)famous Margaret Garner (542).

Our recitation of these events is colored by those who lived to tell the tale as well as our contemporary moment, our value systems, and the limits of our understanding of what was possible. Of the record and reanimation of Margaret Garner who famously murdered her daughter to prevent her return to slavery, Mark Reinhardt notes that the way the story was reported in its own historical moment was very much influenced by the political pressures and interests of the day, and any language attributed to Garner was recorded or recited second hand. Similarly, the problem of what we can know to the point of satisfaction about the psychology of those taken and those who take themselves (back) through self-harm persists. Reinhardt writes that under conditions of extreme unfreedom, and in large part unable to testify, the black female slave may speak through her silence. Further still, the notable silence in the southern press suggest "[Garner committed] an act that could not safely be recorded in some key registers of antebellum culture. In this respect, subaltern as she was, she "spoke" powerfully, dangerously" (113). Surely this hypothesis is generative for our thinking, too, about slave suicide which was strategically under-reported. The agency of some slaves persists in our archives (named or unnamed), indeed only comes into being, through the (verbal or non-verbal) announcement of their suicidal passing. Their subaltern speech might pass through many pens to get to us, but the fact of their declarative silencing remains. Moreover, it persists as and through the impetus to its recording. Their self comes into being both textually (as a literal historical footnote) and as property (a master's loss, a journalist's headline) only in the moment of its destruction.

## **Negativity in the Black Atlantic**

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* makes space for a politics of negativity that has perhaps been overlooked amidst the emphasis on his roots/routes intervention in the circulation of black expressive culture. Remarking upon the prevalence of slave suicide in both fact and fiction, Gilroy asserts that the slave's preference for death over bondage illuminates two things. We pick up clues toward understanding how the unfree conceptualize freedom and we observe a distinctly diasporan ethical departure from Western value systems (68, 56). Meeting Bell's extended definition of slave suicidality, Gilroy writes "the repeated choice of death rather than bondage articulates a principle of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic of rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave's preference for bondage rather than death" (68). Failing or refusing to adhere to the dialectic's stabilizing relation (two emerge from the struggle, one master and one slave), we have the example of slaves who destabilize this relation (only one emerging from the assertion of dominance). While the master remains secure in his title over those others who have not died, the suicide does not remain a slave, having opted out, so to speak. The slave does not assume the pronoun of 'master' (clear from Douglass's accounts of titular stability, for example). Instead the suicide, failing to emerge *at all* from the struggle for power, suggests the slave interprets 'master' as a verb. Overcome, a word signifying both success *and* defeat, seems apt here. The slave overcomes bondage, asserts mastery over their own life by taking it away. This is the kernel of literary theorist Abdul JanMohamed's argument in *The Death Bound Subject*, in which the slave, who exists within a dialectic of death (social, actual, and symbolic), is made socially dead through the continual threat of his actual death. He "stress[es] the slave's . . . ability to choose his own death, a death that deprives the master of his most cherished form of coercion" (15-16). Stepping back, we may reconsider the context of Gilroy's conception of agential slave death. The slave is compelled to produce and reproduce; the "threat" of death is the substituted for the wage of the slave (11). The suicide of the slave we have seen can be read as a refusal to reproduce by canceling out the visceral self and any (re)production stemming from the chattel flesh. The nongenerative slave becomes a new kind of nonmaterial resource: she produces instability, according to the aforementioned Charles Ball. She both denies the slaveholder the pleasure of her labor—in its multiple meanings—and supplies herself with the "pleasure" or "joy" of her agential action (action including her in a genealogy of resistance and also removing her from relation).

But what else is generated by thinking about nongenerativity for the slave? Returning to *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu hypothesizes that the legibility of life requires the boundary of death. She believes that her and Doro's heretofore untested ability to die signifies their estrangement from the category of "human": for Anyanwu, as an immortal, it is her excessive life—rather than bare life—that shapes her enslavement to Doro. The long-term preparation of her suicide, lasting the length of a pregnancy, her prolonged "being-toward-death" makes the work of performance theorist Patrick Anderson on self-starvation relevant. In *So Much Wasted*, he outlines a "politics of morbidity" which describes "the embodied, interventional embrace of mortality and disappearance not as destructive, but as radically productive stagings of subject formations in which subjectivity and objecthood, presence and absence, life and death intertwine" (155-157). In his text, the anorexic and other political and artistic practitioners achieve representation, come into view, through loss by "literally shrink[ing] into oblivion" (284-286, 289-290). He writes, "death is at the center of self-starvation's capacity to forge a subject whose existence is endangered by the very practice through which she or he produces power" (330-331). Anyanwu's commitment to oblivion ultimately gains her a negotiating power that she was not necessarily bargaining for (but takes

advantage of). However, this chapter instead focuses on the impetus toward oblivion and not its aftermath.

Another logic that endures in shaping the study of slave suicide is an extension of the resistance narrative and we could tentatively call it collectivism. In “Come and Gone,” literary scholar Stephen Best offers diaspora studies a framework called black asceticism for thinking about “a philosophical project of self-divestiture, a project that often involves the failure to make an appearance” as part of a larger and longer posture shaping the black radical tradition (195). Expanding upon *Black Marxism*’s interest in the internal measure of defeat and victory in the black radical tradition, such that suicide is “more easily sustained... than assault” (Robinson qtd. in Best 196), Best argues that “self-annihilation presents a primary figure for diaspora” (198). The significance of asserting this is ultimately that self-negation and queer negative sociability unseat the prevailing narrative of positive, pan-ethnic unity and long-suffering dedication to social change, self-possession and self-improvement in the black radical tradition: in a word, resistance. While the “self” of self-divestiture and self-annihilation is open to both singular and plural interpretation, Best’s citations hone in on “shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective” (Robinson qtd. in Best 197) through scenes of mass suicide. Reviewing historical examples of collective black suicide by the Xhosa in 1856 and by the maroons of Nyasaland in 1915, he observes “[w]hat lends this tradition its ‘radical’ accent is as much the inwardness of the violence as the violence itself, the tradition’s actualization through self-abnegation rather than against it” (197). We see this historical move recalled in Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* where she recounts the end of the St. John revolt of 1733 when, “on a hill near Brimsbay,” somewhere between 25 and 300 engaged in a mass suicide by rifle rather than be overtaken by the French again (91-95). If diaspora, no matter who has theorized it over the last several decades, has always referred to networks, groups, and relational attachment, then an argument that diaspora is the logic by which collective being is preserved, inclusive of suicidal strategies (Best 197), potentially recasts slave suicide as an act of group creation or reunion but, at the very least, leaves little room to consider the place of the *individual* suicide in the canon of slave narratives (not organized—*disorganized*, even). What does it mean to examine an individual act following Best’s “logic of immurement” as Anyanwu does, “shutting off” herself (Butler 246), “sealing off” and “entombing” herself (Best 5), without the context of group effort? How can we ethically treat the practice of self-negation if we hold at bay the temptation to rationalize its desires for collective liberation? How can we hold space for resistance and defeat to look exactly the same? In this way, Michelle Wright’s question resurfaces about which stories are foreclosed not just by the Middle Passage epistemology but also by formulating diasporic history and theory entirely via the group. What happens when we just can’t “get in formation”?<sup>21</sup>

When she first learns that Doro plans to marry her to one of his sons for breeding, she disconnects her fallopian tubes and other reproductive apparatuses. It is clear from Anyanwu’s earlier descriptions of the manipulation of her inner workings that she could refuse to repair herself, even if at present her repairs are triggered instinctually. In this early moment as one of Doro’s new people, it is clear that defiance means death—a clear case of suicide as and through resistance. However, she ultimately submits herself to marriage with Isaac with the understanding that submission now might mean more humanity later, over the course of her and Doro’s eternal lives, for both Doro and herself. At the climax and close of the novel, Anyanwu’s motivation for suicide

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<sup>21</sup> This is an allusion to the Beyoncé song “Formation,” popular in the Summer of 2016, that visually communicates a revolutionary aesthetic of solidarity, featuring synchronized group dancing, while aurally instructing black women to “get in formation” which is suggestive of both dance formation and political formation.

is ultimately adrift of the standard typology of slave suicide concerned with the loss of families, with capture or the loss of her body as a punishment, rather her suicide proposes to liberate her from the exhaustion of trying to hold on to any of the above. In her own words, it stems from her tiredness. In *Sex or the Unbearable* Lee Edelman draws from and responds to the Latin to define failure: ““to be wanting, to be defective.” As if wanting as such were a defect; as if not to want were success. As if loss were a version of failure and failure a lack of aesthetic coherence, a condition of brokenness or incompleteness. In such a linguistic context I must respond to this claim of our failure, our *repetitive* failure, by saying “No”” (36). What is Anyanwu effectively saying “no” to and how?

Doro is identified most often as a man by more routinely possessing male bodies and also is consistently referred to by male pronouns by Butler’s cast of *Wild Seed*, though all agree he is at root some kind of evil spirit. His assigned and embraced traits of ruthlessness, economy, industry, absent sentimentality, proliferation of descendants (as breeding project), align him with traditional notions of masculinity. Having been married to many men over numerous lifetimes, Anyanwu recognizes early on that strategizing how to make Doro “value her and care for her” would be key to mustering “some leverage with him, some control over him later when she needed it” (31). Her husband Isaac points out to Anyanwu that her immortality makes her far more valuable to Doro than even he knows and that ultimately, all involved agree that her value to him is the only thing that stands between Doro and total loss of human feeling. Isaac shares, “I’m afraid the time will come when he won’t feel anything. If it does—there’s no end to the harm he could do. I’m glad I won’t have to live to see it” and adds “You [Anyanwu], though, could live to see it—or live to prevent it” (120-121). This is compatible with Reinhardt’s reflection on the same period of national narratives about motherhood prevalent during pre-Civil War America, he writes: “In a culture preoccupied with redemption, political discourse, especially that of sentimentalism, presented mothers and children as singularly capable of redeeming others” (94). Yet, by her own estimation, Anyanwu has failed to preserve the human feeling in Doro and so failed, more broadly, in her typecast womanly duties. At the close of the book Anyanwu’s temporary refusal to repair herself is also understood by Doro to be a refusal to repair *him*. With preparations finally complete, Anyanwu is confronted by Doro, ““Tell me what’s wrong?” “I’ve tried.” She climbed onto the bed. “Then try again!”” (249). We come to more fully understand the suicidal act as its own kind of *individualized* speech, on an alternative register that announces what is beyond the limits of the verbal: Anyanwu’s exhaustion with habituated living and submission. She is tired, and, moreover, tired of talking about it. This passage is an example of what the neo-slave narrative genre sets out to do, filling in the gaps and suggestive interiors, consistent with Gilroy’s observation that “[t]he extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery dictate that we recognize the anti-discursive and extra linguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts. There may, after all, be no reciprocity on the plantation outside of the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent mourning” (57). The suicidal act, in recognizing the impossibility of reciprocity, refuses further relation. The master may continue to be a master but, of who? *Not* me.

### **A New Position**

In an earlier scene that foreshadows Anyanwu’s decision, Doro asks to try something new—compared to the pleasure of “love-making” only “even more” (*Seed to Harvest* 230-234). Between mortals, this would seem like a simple enough request to try a new sexual position. For these immortals, however, Doro’s question takes the pair to “another kind of awareness” (233) where

Anyanwu experiences a new kind of vulnerability she has never allowed herself before: her own tiredness when faced with the visceral and spiritual reality of her own death. The new experience that Doro petitions Anyanwu to share first feels like falling in a manner she compares to a child's nightmare but giving the experience a second go, the feeling of falling gives way to something slower and more comfortable. A brightness in the darkness grows greater until "In a sense... she was blind" but still unharmed (232). She feels Doro's presence as a "touch[ing] of her spirit" that reveals to her his hunger, his restraint and his loneliness. "The loneliness formed a kinship between them" (233) which transformed the experience yet again, this time into one where both parties reached toward, blended into, each other. Yet, when Anyanwu's consent to this experience ended, Doro's restraint had also reached its end. She reflected solemnly on his promise and his betrayal of her safety, and finally accepted the inevitability of his relationship to meaning and to the lives of others. Both characters realize that Doro is consuming Anyanwu and she is not resisting; "he was killing her, little by little, digesting her" to which Anyanwu resigns, "Well then, so be it" (234). The optimism born of pleasure slid into the too bright light of lessons repeated often enough to finally be learned. With acceptance comes the permission to be tired. Edelman, again, summarizes in the dialogue "Sex Without Optimism," "we both see sex as a site for experiencing this intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being. And as Lauren [Berlant] and I both want to suggest, that encounter, viewed as traumatic or not, remains bound to the nonfutural insistence in sex of something nonproductive, nonteleological, and divorced from meaning making" (11). This stakes out this territory for conceptualizing sex as not just the unifying experience as it is popularly described, but as something *disorganizing* or disorienting. Although, the supposed sex in this scene is not just *le petit mort* but actual death, as Doro enters her body not just with his member but with his hungry spirit, attempting to hold himself in that sweet spot before totally consumption and displacement his partner. Anyanwu had been so accustomed to surviving that, she recounts, her gut reaction in several instances contravened her moral instincts (*Seed to Harvest* 6, 22, 52, 70)<sup>22</sup> and later describes living as a "habit" she has grown accustomed to (123, 179). For the first time in her life of more than 300 years, Anyanwu experiences something truly new, distinct her "accustomed ways of being" at the potential cost of her life: surrender—not sexually, but mortally. At about this time, she realizes that her situation in America and as one of "Doro's people" is intractable, her efforts had not transformed Doro's relationship to meaning—for him life consists only of "breeding and killing" (234). Their relationship, which for so long had been defined by the passion of fucking and fighting and running and seeking, would now be radically different.

Butler's construction and representation of Anyanwu's gender is central to the narrative. Doro's misogynist treatment of Anyanwu (his infantilization of her (13-14), his dismissal of her concerns (20), and his mulling over how to "tame" her and "breed" her through the manipulation of her identification with maternity (20, 87)), as I mentioned earlier, are structuring affects of the novel. In particular, in order to get Anyanwu to board his ship, a seeming slave vessel, he applies pressure to her identity as a mother in two key ways: threatens her existing children (15, 116-117) and he plays upon her grief as an immortal mother to mortal children (23). He feels assured that producing new children will tether her to the community of bondage that awaits her in his American colony (27-28, 87, 123). At the beginning of the novel the strength of the shapeshifter's identification with "womanhood" is underscored by her frequent reflection on her investment in motherhood and care-taking, and by her enjoyment of her feminine form in sex acts. Butler designs

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<sup>22</sup> These pages show examples of Anyanwu instinctually transforming in response to mortal danger, killing her attackers, and later expressing regret and remorse.

the character of Anyanwu to identify deeply as a mother and as a woman, and the conviction persists no matter what shape she takes. She can be understood to serve a heuristic purpose for *Wild Seed* readers; albeit supernatural, her name stands in for the hendiatriis of black and female and slave. Her ability to maintain a grasp on the identities of “mother” and “woman” feels specious when we consider Douglass’s assertion that under slavery mothers are “myths.” The institution of chattel slavery is constituted in part through the dissolution of claims to the mother-child connection through myriad tactics like separation, sale, theft of reproductive resources like breast milk, inherited legal condition, and the imposition of early death. In this way, the alienation of the enslaved child results in a relation more myth than maternal. We meet Anyanwu before she is enslaved and she attempts to import her conception of her womanhood and motherhood into the institution, attempts to preserve it despite the compromises she suffers or submits to, despite the hazards of holding to this conviction.

On the slave ship, in an attempt to calm her nephew’s suspicion of Doro as “something other than a man” Anyanwu shares, “I am something other than a woman” (50). Although in its immediate meaning, Anyanwu means to make Doro less strange via the comparison of her abilities, she also hails for us, heuristically, what Hortense Spillers has described as the process of ungendering of the black female body during the very trans-Atlantic voyage that Anyanwu is on at the moment of utterance—a process that destroys maternal relations and harnesses the body for its reproductive capacities. The Western category of woman was not available to the black female slave body; not accorded any of the protections or graces of the idealized white woman, barred from the sacrament of marriage, susceptible to insinuation. Sharon Holland summarizes, “It is not so much that captive peoples are not allowed gendered subjectivity but that these relationships mean nothing under a legal system that sanctions the treatment of humans as property” (46).

Doro is interested in Anyanwu’s capacity to bear children who inherit some of her abilities which include healing herself from any wound or disease, healing others by taking their own pain into her body for analysis and solution, submitting to terror, engaging in both pleasurable and breeding sex, and serving as a midwife in magical transitions as both cushion and grounding rod to reality (142). Anyanwu understands what Doro recognized when he first met her, that her strong identification with motherhood would “prolong her slavery” (123). Her submission to Doro’s will flimsily safeguards her children and her life (122-123, 179). This is consistent with Abdul R. JanMohamed’s observation under slavery, “death was conditionally commuted and could be revoked at the master’s whim. The implication is that, in order to live, the slave had to acquiesce in every way to his master; by asserting himself in any significant way against the master, he courted death” (16). Over time, Anyanwu notices a change in her relationship to her subjectivity which comes to a head in the “new position.” She notes that “she had formed a habit of submission” where early she thought she only lacked “the courage to die” she comes to see life as “too precious a habit” (*Seed to Harvest* 123). Overtime we grow weary of our habits, bored, and even abandon them. In her partially digested state, Anyanwu realizes she is ready to relinquish her habit. The revelation of her own tiredness with this paradigm, rather than defiance, leads to her decision to commit suicide. Her preparations last a full-term pregnancy. Unlike many of the slave suicides of the historical record, Anyanwu no longer harbors convictions nor intentions of returning to the continent or anywhere, for that matter.

On the topic of the courage to die in the series universe it is helpful to turn to book three of the *Patternist* series. The eponymous organism of *Clay’s Ark* prevents suicidal action once in control of the host (*Seed to Harvest* 469-470, 480, 481, 516, 518, 528). Only the minor character Zeriam is described as achieving suicide and only because the other hosts don’t know yet that they



need to help prevent suicide in the early stages of transition. Zeriam writes a letter to the lover Lorene he is leaving and also one to his unborn child in which he mentions “courage and cowardice and confusion” brought on by the “Clayark” infection (568). But, the letter is not shared with the reader; Butler leaves us to decide which acts of the hosts are courageous and which are cowardly, or whether and by what restraint a balance can be reached or measured. Anyanwu of Butler’s universe and the ex-slave Samuel Ajayi Crowther of our world do not mince words: suicide is the brave choice and that habituated living and the seduction of certainty are less than. Samuel’s estimation, it is not resilience that takes courage but suicide—he writes, “In several nights I attempted strangling myself with my band; but had not the courage enough to close the noose tight” (qtd. in Piersen 148).

Habituating the slave to slavery (no literacy, no family, no birthday), JanMohamed writes, “it is precisely life’s attachment to itself that produces its value, a value that can be appropriated by the threat of termination or, to put it differently, by the threat to unbind life’s categorical imperative to bind” (75). This concept of binding can also include relational binding. Indeed, it is Anyanwu’s “need for her people” that Doro exploits and it is this same need that eventually gets Anyanwu found again after she has been able to elude him for years as an animal. Further still, this binding is also what governs the pattern in later novels, *Mind of My Mind* and *Patternmaster*. Butler’s early notes in 1977 indicate that “[t]he Novel’s goal is to teach Emma [Anyanwu] that the price in human suffering and to her own peace of mind is too high. Emma turns away from the covenant goal [the race building project]—breaks the covenant and eventually decides to die” (OEB #3217, September 14, 1977). Doro’s casual and pleasurable murder of Susan (Butler 241),<sup>23</sup> Anyanwu’s adopted family member, *is* the tipping point—her loss undoes Anyanwu (OEB #2940, p. 3). The threats of unbinding Anyanwu to life and love are no longer effective; it is clear that her habituated submission does little to protect her loved ones. JanMohamed writes, “The transformation that defines symbolic-death cannot be merely a shift in the epistemological position of the subject; it must also include a destruction of practices, values, and attitudes that have been sedimented as habits, which are only partly conscious and predominantly unconscious” (67). Interestingly, it is the unceasing, repetitive reminder of subordination that habituates Anyanwu to her enslaved status and yet, this same repetition without limit continues to push Anyanwu past even her sedimented and precious “habit of living” to the point of exhaustion (Butler 179).

### **Paradigms of Exhaustion**

Building on an analysis of habitual submission and bridging it to the present, I’d like to take a moment to consider the affect and atmosphere of repetition, living with habits, and living through habits not only for enslaved black diasporans but also in the lives and afterlives of post-emancipation diasporans. This is, perhaps, best done by Rita Dove in her genealogical, third person persona poems in a collection titled *Thomas and Beulah*, named for the two working class protagonists whom the poems follow from youth to infirmity and death. Set over the first half of the 1900s, this work effectively conveys an atmosphere of thick air, slow movements, gendered and racialized exhaustion and tiredness that leans into oblivion.

The poem “Definition in the Face of Unnamed Fury” (29), concretizes around the theme of the passage of time, its simultaneous stillness “bloated,” “frozen” and its predictable and unceasing progression marked by the phrases: “A pendulum,” and “What else did you expect?” The anonymous question, “How long has it been...?” is answered by an omniscient narrator with

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<sup>23</sup> In the text, the possession reads: “he went out and took Susan. She was the kind of kill he needed now—very sensitive. As sweet and good to his mind as Anyanwu’s milk had been to his former body” (241).

whom we can all agree: “Too long.” Thomas comes into focus as his blisters are “[hidden] from the children,” so we know it is he who is “Hanging on by a thread,” tied to the clock like a cross, and he who promises “Some day . . . I’ll just let go.” In another poem, “Aurora Borealis” (31), we are given a glimpse of the broader social context in which Thomas and Beulah are moving, under what weight they meet and live and “churn.” Dove writes, “This is the end, / For it is 1943 / And they are tired.” Despite the order of the phrases, we see that the end of “it” (whether “it” is certainty or life or a way of life or the conditions of living or history itself) follows as a consequence of tiredness—a temporally specific tiredness (some combination of war and Jim Crow and the mundane march of time all rolled into one “it”). Inscribing the year numerically feels additive here, as if the people are counting up to it and have become, understandably, fatigued. Or as the contemporary saying goes: *Over it*.

“Daystar” (61) may be Dove’s most close-to-the-surface portrayal of black feminine tiredness. Intimated by the title, Beulah has almost no time for rest at all, her labors are in demand both day and night. We perceive the gendered detritus of her labors, diapers, dolls, children, and passive intercourse, some of which double as the evidence of the pleasure of others enjoyed at her expense (clean clothes, abandoned toys, naps, sex on silent demand). Many of the verbs of the poem communicate the sagging weight of repetition: “slumped,” “lugged,” and “lurched.” The poem begins with Beulah’s desire, “She wanted a little room for thinking;” and the second line’s beginning with “but . . .” tells us almost all we need to know about her fulfillment. She is wanting of room (line 1) and time (line 12). The “best” that she can do is savor a single hour for herself between children and husband for quiet contemplation of absences: the husk of cricket skin, the air that supports a lonely leaf. When Thomas “lurche[s]” into her, it is to this hour that she returns. “She would open her eyes / and think of the place that was hers / for an hour—where / she was nothing, / pure nothing in the middle of the day.” Recall again that she has no room, no time and the poem culminates in this claim that she is “nothing” or no-thing. This is not the first time that she has experienced the peculiar mixture of tiredness and nothingness.

In an earlier poem, “Weathering Out” (56), recounting one of her pregnancies, “When she leaned / against a door jamb to yawn, she disappeared entirely.” The most immediate meaning of the phrase might be to illustrate the fullness of her gravid body, coming in and out of view in parts. But in this poem it is not a leaf but Beulah who “float[s] from room to room,” she who is “placid.” Her yawn hails sleepiness here rather than tiredness as exhaustion that we hear in “Daystar” a few pages and years later. Her leaning toward oblivion here is not incidental to her posture as in the jamb but is slowly constructed with intention and stolen moments, and greater than a doorway—palatial, an ever-expanding void. A place (“where”) and a time (“middle of the day”) that she can cease to exist and, by extension, be responsible for nothing and no one. Eyes closed in the day time, eyes open in the night in sweet (disruptive) relief. Beulah’s (day)dream of relief as individuated nonexistence resonates with Anyanwu’s plan to achieve it.

Again, we must be grateful for Dove’s use of the threads of her own family history to aid in the expansion of the archive of tired black women whom we oft hear little of. Mixed in with Butler’s diaries I encountered one belonging to Butler’s mother which, for the most part, was a list borrowed money, money made, and prayers. Looking backward, Hartman notes, “There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage” (“Venus” 3). In this context, it makes sense that authors like Butler and others would speculate, attempt to bridge that gap with neo-slave narratives. It’s interesting to think that, in her case, the figure must be supernatural to survive all the foreclosures entailed in being black and female and slave in order to write her own Middle Passage memoir hundreds of years later, during Anyanwu’s career as a

writer in *Mind of My Mind (Seed to Harvest 393)*. Further still, in this historical void we see even more clearly how even a single story would bear the weight of the group, be treated as expressive of the collective, perhaps because we have so little to go on, perhaps because we want so much from so little. Hartman continues, “it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive” (“Venus” 3). Against these intense desires and gaps the urgency of reading slave suicide as a node in a larger tradition of collective resistance or symbolic escape makes sense. Cast as collective action, abjected and terminal action lends itself to use in political work, to identification and desire (who hasn’t heard their student claim, “if I were a slave, I would have rebelled?”), to esteem in the actor’s strength. Desirelessness, on the other hand, is far more difficult to defend and to identify with. Against colloquial and commonsense phrases like, “everybody loves sex” or cake or shelter, we find the limits of sympathy—and even, humanity. Disability studies scholar Eunjung Kim’s current work zeroes in on this universalization of hungers and desires articulated across a terrain as varied as South Korean films, municipal suicide prevention campaigns, and sexologist textbooks. It is this work from which I’ve adopted the term desirelessness in order to deepen my thinking about asexuality and idleness. Her interest is in “[w]hen desirelessness is identified as a fundamental threat to social reproduction, how does a capitalist nation-state commit to producing desire in citizen’s bodies, while maintaining the fiction of the naturalness of desire” and examines representations of self-effacement in the forms of anorexia and asexuality (“The Habituation” 4). She states that the “desireless figure can be understood as a mode of embodiment that reveals the ideological boundary of the human that is made legible through the nationalist and patriarchal language of desires rooted in gendered role, individual survival and consumption”—but I would add that it is not only nationalist and patriarchal language that casts desirelessness in relief, but also diasporan frameworks (4-5). As much as diaspora is about rupture, loss and losing, it is also always already a commitment to connection, translation, circulation, rebuilding and recovery in the face of those precious losses and burned records. Kim concludes her concerns with the question, “Is connecting through the absence of desire without having to register it as the presence of another normative desire possible [?]” (9). Our conceptions of diasporan autonomy are thoroughly enmeshed with the morality of motivation. In contrast to the veneration of collective resistance, individual desirelessness is siloed into the domain of pity, pathology, and compulsions to recover and rejoin the group that leave little space for lingering in the impasse.

The black and female body is subjected to a particular set of foreclosures that govern her public affects. Porn scholar Jennifer Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy* provides a thorough overview of the black feminist canon on representation. She argues that, taken together, the predominant logic that emerges from this tradition is a binary of “injury and recovery” which helps to make sense of the foreclosure of black female pleasure. To this I would add, a foreclosure or illegibility of refusals to recover. For example, in “The Case of Rihanna,” Nicole Fleetwood examines the landscape of public pressure on the performer Rihanna to conform to a series of narratives in the wake of her assault by fellow performer and ex-boyfriend Chris Brown. Rather than respectability and redemption, Rihanna’s strategy appears to be one of incorporation. There is nothing sentimental about her recovery trajectory, she embraces rather than disavows her association with violence in subsequent music videos and interviews, earning her rebuke from voices against abuse and domestic violence. Further, Fleetwood argues, “Equally significant is the repression of negative emotions and consensual practices that do not cohere in a progressive transcendent, or uplifting personal, gender, and/or racial narrative. Feelings or desires that do not support racial uplift or female survival result at worst in public shaming by ... advocates of gender

nonviolence and/or black female empowerment” (423). Interestingly, it is not only in the public eye but also the intimate hospital room where black women are hemmed in by the injury and recovery discourse. Audre Lorde recalls in her *The Cancer Journals*, “there was a tremendous amount of love and support flowing into me from the women around me, and it felt like being bathed in a continuous tide of positive energies, *even when sometimes I wanted a bit of negative silence to complement the pain inside of me*” (455-457, emphasis mine). We can see there is little “breathing room” for desires that disrupt the esteemed trajectory of injury and recovery and so I must ask, what happens when the result of injury is chronic pain or chronic fatigue? What of the bodies that never recover, not because they lack the necessary energy but, because they are no longer willing to spend it?

It’s understandable that within community there is no room for tiredness. Look how that discourse turned out for Rosa Parks. Tiredness and fatigue have been leveraged nationally in the project of erasure of radical black feminist study and action. We all know the story. If Rosa was just ‘too tired’ to get up from her seat on the bus, her resistance takes on a comfortably feminine tone: passive, unmeditated, and explained by the costs of gendered labor. Not active, not strategic, not angry, not stimulated by the costs of living under misogynoir white supremacy. Poetry by Rita Dove, Nikky Finney, and Vievee Francis meditate on and remediate the compromised image of Rosa Parks. In fact, Parks has corrected the record, “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. No—the only thing I was—was tired of giving in,” (qtd. in Finney, “Red Velvet”). If textbooks, politicians and the colloquial can twist and diminish that kind of radical tiredness into the mundane fatigue of a day’s work, what would they do with the confession of a nameless woman, giving account of her habitual tiredness.

Ex-slave and lay preacher Baby Suggs from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is another tired black woman we’ve come to know, though the texture of her tiredness is of another sort. She is most often remembered for her sermons on loving black flesh. But we are more apt to find her laying in bed than kneeling in the forest clearing. After her daughter-in-law Sethe kills a child to prevent her return to slavery, “Baby Suggs grew tired, went to bed and stayed there until her big old heart quit” (104). Questioned about whether Suggs’ death was easy, Sethe responded “Being alive was the hard part” (7). Like Anyanwu, Baby Suggs is the recipient of exhortations to continue working for others in spite of her own needs. All she wants “is [to] get in ... bed and lay down. I want to fix on something harmless in this world” (178-179) and yet another urges her to continue laboring for her community, “You got to do it... You got to. Can’t nobody Call like you.” (178-9). Stamp Paid’s understanding of Baby Suggs’s tiredness comes “too late,” his belief in her “mountain”-like strength is the foundation of his “refusal to see” (180). Suggs’s final judgment before passing is that white people do not know when to quit—but she does, as she retreats to her bed for the last time. Similarly, Anyanwu’s plan for suicide—a refusal to repair herself—is understood by Doro to be a refusal to repair *him*, to continue to provide the labor she always has for him. These two tired black women come into focus when Kimberly-Juanita Brown writes,

How does one survive slavery’s flesh-and-blood defeating processes? The answer: use black women’s bodies as the shield against which all atrocities can be siphoned, all exploitations contained. Black female bodies are often rendered as invisible armor, the “sturdy black bridges” that have the ability to emerge from the horrors of slavery physiologically intact. (2235-2238)

Brown's summary of the "strong black woman" trope in this context has clear relevance particularly because neither Suggs nor Anyanwu are entirely intact by the end, but their confessions of exhaustion are obscured by the construction of black female invincibility. What seems most unsettling about these two figures is that they refuse the legibility offered by resistance and offered by depression, instead Suggs is described as having "indifference lodged where sadness should have been" (3-4). Both figures eventually rebel against the conscription to give and give without taking something for themselves. Baby Suggs claims color. Anyanwu claims her name. Introducing herself to others upon arrival in the American colony, Anyanwu fields objections to keeping her Nigerian name, asking her to take an English one. She sticks by her own and states, "A woman should have something of her own" (*Seed to Harvest* 105-106). Since Doro has claimed possession (sometimes coercively, sometimes baited with promises) of Anyanwu's body, her children, her traditions, and her home, "Anyanwu" names what Doro cannot take away from her: memories of a life irreducible to habit.

### **Conclusion: Resistance and Defeat at a Distance**

It should come as no surprise that the process of recording the controversial deaths of slaves "revealed less about the fugitives"—who, until the advent of the neo-slave form, rarely spoke from beyond the grave—"than about the longings and aspirations of whites" whose political interests in abolishing or maintaining slavery could be served in the style of reporting (Reinhardt 104). But, what of the reading practices of the contemporary consumer of the suicides of black slaves in fact and fiction? It is common in African American history classrooms for students to ask, *why didn't more slaves rebel*, and a common response to point out that our understanding of what constitutes rebellion need be historically situated. For example, eye contact, work slow downs, but also, as JanMohamed notes, "black men were lynched for extremely minor, if not totally trivial 'offenses'—'sassiness,' disrespect, etc." (7), any of which could result in death (meeting Bell's expansive definition of slave suicide). The implication of such questions that, were the speaker in another time and place, "I would have rebelled." Butler is no stranger to confronting such anachronistic arrogance. She recalls the impetus to writing *Kindred* as a response to a young person's misrecognition of the older black generation's sacrifices (Rowell and Butler 51). What seems strange about this particular fantasy of "I would have rebelled" is that it enacts the kind of displacements that Saidiya Hartman describes in her work on the problems of empathy in *Scenes of Subjection*. But rather than invading the slave body under the guise of facilitating understanding (while further occluding it), the occupation of the slave body in the imagination is done explicitly *in order to destroy it*. And this suicidal fantasy is not new. A white woman advocate of Margaret Garner's testified, "If I were a slave, as she is a slave, with the law against me, with the church against me, and with no death dealing weapon at hand, I would with my own teeth tear open my veins" (qtd. in Gilroy 67). But, perhaps because the witness and the researcher hope, the suicide and her reader do not have to. Patrick Anderson concludes his study of anorexia, hunger performance, and hunger strikes with the sobering reflection:

Hope: a fragile but resilient project. Why is it that so many books end spiritedly, but almost in spite of themselves, with notes on hope? Perhaps because their authors feel, as I feel now, so deeply, overwhelmingly driven to concern themselves with that which seems most dire, most desperate, most restlessly and relentlessly hopeless. Could it be that hope's implied optimism is too arrogant to bear the weight or plumb the depths of its own

unconscious premonitions of a terrible, terror-filled future? Could it be that what hope names is in part a promise of failure? (3037-3041)

Brutal as the material is, black studies is no stranger to the tender ending. Saidiya Hartman's memorable departure from oral and archival history traditions to examine the sediment of the slave fort floor shows us that, in some cases, what remains is *not* resistance. The literal remains of the captured, the biological residue, the material afterlife that registers as blood and shit and skin is not resistance. And we would be hard pressed to read it as such—although, we do. Or we gather it close to our chest as fuel for our own propulsion beyond despair to something we call resistance, after the thanatourist bills are paid. We train our ears on the songs of girls and our eyes on the jump rope, rather than the composition of ground it grazes.

It is not so much that I am making a case against resistance as that I am looking for and looking after black feminine tiredness.<sup>24</sup> When slave suicide ceases to be thought of as a collective and preservational action, we have few tools left to make sense of individual suicide. Writing about failure and disappointment and depression as stepping stones toward new visions, writing about the necessity of sublimating negative affects into survival strategies, although inspiring, has the effect of highlighting in the suicide all of the work they did *not* do, their failure to *properly* experience pain and grief and tiredness. *Why didn't they see what we can all see from the other side of hurt? That the way out is through?* Perhaps because “through” and “out” are not the only paths and survival is a set of terms that are not always available, accessible, or desirable. Sometimes the choice is not between struggling and giving up but between certainties; between the certainty of carrying on and the certainty of rest. At a distance, resistance and defeat can look exactly the same. Does the slave jump for joy or jump because someone said “Jump!” or jump overboard because “a woman should have something of her own”?

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In the final chapter, I continue the working through the theme of resistance and defeat looking the same by examining the silence of the archetypal “mammy” who embodies simultaneous excesses and absences of desire as a figure who is constructed as both black and asexual. This next chapter will further flesh out the “declarative silence” raised in this chapter as elemental in a diasporan ethics. This chapter will also examine overlapping overdeterminations of blackness and of asexuality as failing to meet social expectations through constructions of alternately excessive and absent reproduction. I will take up the apparent paradox of the overlap of excess and absence at the site of the black asexual and interrogate the liberatory potential of failing to contribute to normative social and economic reproductivity as a desireless diasporan subject.

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<sup>24</sup> This language of “looking for” and “looking after” is an allusion to Kara Keeling's “Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future.” *GLQ*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2009, pp. 564-582, which will be engaged more directly in the conclusion of chapter four.

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## Chapter Four

### Desireless Diasporans: Asexuality and Idleness

In the previous chapter, I spent some time on a subject that I have long wanted to think through. Though there are many ways to consider black suicide, I approached it through the lens of failure because it allowed me to think through two overlapping conceptualizations of blackness that I find equally troubling: the trope of the strong black woman and also the narrow frame of resistance applied to black life and culture. In this chapter, I take a tentative step back toward resistance without necessarily making a home there. The forms of black failure I am interested to recite here are the under-theorized zones of black asexuality and black idleness. Reaching backward toward the first chapter of *Ordinary Failures*, I attempt an episodic recitation of the possibilities of black asexual subjectivity and black slacking. I begin by centering the ideological device of the mammy in order to get close to the earliest conceptual intersection of blackness and asexuality. I argue that the overdetermination of the mammy figure's silence does not foreclose her agency entirely but rather brings into focus what I call a declarative silence on her part. Finally, pivoting on a facetious inquiry about asexual laziness, the chapter turns to examine another sort of overdetermined intersection: blackness and laziness. While blackness and asexuality might seem colloquially antithetical today, the derogatory conflation of blackness and laziness persists in the global imagination. While scholars like Robin D.G. Kelley have opened up space to consider radical acts of resistance in the mundane, like slowdowns and wrong orders in the fast food industry, acts of black leisurely idleness apart from an explicitly political objective remain to be theorized.<sup>25</sup> I trace threads of racial idleness that brings blackness into focus in order to explore the overlap of resistance and defeat from another angle.

This tracing follows Paul Lafargue's radical manifesto *The Right to be Lazy* and its simultaneous new visioning and unimaginative reliance on the enslaved to realize such a right. Then I look at the post-emancipation ex-slave in the United States and her relationship to family, labor, and the historical record's deliberate misrepresentations of black folk's self-determination. The abolition of slavery and the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau paradoxically opens up the metaphorical usage of the term "slave" for bankrupt white men and "fledgling capitalists" while success and failure come to be endowed with new racial meanings. I employ Scott Sandage's concept of the tautological failure to make sense of the overdetermination of black failure and women's failure as they combine in the figure of the welfare mother. Harlem Renaissance religious leader Father Divine intervenes bringing asexuality and blackness back together again under the rubric of celibacy and economic self-determination in the face of federal programs that deliberately exclude black people. The chapter closes with a meditation on contemporary examples of black idleness in the realm of the visual with an examination of the Instagram feed @slackgaze and the drawing work of ruby onyinyechi amanze.

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<sup>25</sup> Here I am referencing Kelley, Robin. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. Free Press, 1994.

In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love states,

...an absence of or an aversion to sex might include figures deemed unnatural for their lack of a natural desire—a host of saints, dandies, frigid women, isolated children, and awkward teens. Although the absence of sex is certainly an important aspect of queer historical experience, it has not received much critical attention, perhaps for the somewhat banal reason that it is not very sexy. (Footnote 22 to page 40)

To her list I would add: Mammy. What is generated by the woman designed as non-generative? How might we ethically deploy Mammy to contribute to a conversation about black asexuality? Certainly Mammy is a political and ideological device, a fiction, an attachment, a fantasy, and a composite. As a result, Mammy is also the name for countless misrecognized black women across time in the national imaginary. In truth, to use Love's wording, there was and is something "very sexy," tempting and tasty about Mammy since she has not disappeared but persists in the American imagination, feeding the erotic nostalgia of domination and continuing to haunt the forums of Asexuality.org.<sup>26</sup> Mammy is engineered of Hortense Spillers's sobering observation, "My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" ("Mama's Baby" 203).

My interest in Mammy is as a paradigm, not a woman. I'm speaking to already existing critiques of Mammy—my intervention here is in exploring an underdeveloped facet of her constructed image: her so-called asexuality. As there is no human subjects protocol for treating fictional characters—however material their consequences—I seek to approximate an ethical engagement with Mammy by avoiding and even refusing, rather than offering, a central example of the mammy figure. By doing so, the chapter may deal in abstractions but refusing a quintessential example of the mammy further highlights or exposes the work of Mammy as projection rather than reifying the suggestion of her material reality in the bodies of black women. I aim to draw critical attention to what black studies means when calling the mammy "asexual," I am looking for more intentionality around the deployment of asexuality beyond a static appellation. And further, I am interested in what happens to asexuality studies, and the orientation, when made to confront blackness without the diversionary cover of new sexual minority status.

### **Asexuality**

In the relatively short history of the emergent field of asexuality studies, there are already a number of ways to historicize it. Although asexuality as both an orientation and as a descriptive category predate the well-known and industrious Asexual Visibility and Education Network,<sup>27</sup> the advent of AVEN and its consciousness raising work are pivotal in centralizing resources and conversations for the identified, the questioning and their researchers.

In 2001 David Jay founded AVEN in an effort to bring together people who do not "experience sexual attraction" (*The Asexual Visibility*; "AVEN: Timeline"). By 2015 the website has expanded the scope of the project to include AVEN, an organization dedicated to advocacy

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<sup>26</sup> Asexuality.org is the address for the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest organization of its kind, with origins in 2001.

<sup>27</sup> For example, see: Johnson, Myra T. "Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups." *The Sexually Oppressed*, edited by Harvey L. Gochros and Jean S. Gochros, Associated Press, 1977, pp. 96-109; Storms, Michael D. "Sexual Orientation and Self-Perception." *Advances in the Study of Communication and Affect*. Vol. 5, edited by Patricia Pliner, Kirk R. Blankstein, and Irwin M. Spigel, Plenum Press, 1979, pp. 165-180; Rothblum, Ester D., and Kathleen A. Brehony. *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.

and community building and over 68,000 members belong to its message boards. These tactics include print and televised interviews and testimonies, surveying, flyering at Pride, and hosting meetups. Among the group's goals are: increasing visibility and joining the continuum of recognized sexualities best summed up in the refrain, "we're just like everybody else."<sup>28</sup> However, individual and collective asexual orientations are nuanced in particular and complex ways that disrupt the familiar claim.<sup>29</sup>

Conversations about the representations and foreclosures of asexual identity have taken place on a variety of social media platforms. The "gold star" or "unassailable" asexual was a particularly important and generative community conversation addressing the tendency to put forward and circulate "unassailable" representatives or asexuals who are beyond the reach of easy critique. In order to combat arguments that have been typically used to debunk asexual claims, AVEN has become critical of using hetero-romantic couples, conventionally attractive and gender conforming individuals and people without disabilities or histories of sexual abuse. One response to this has been David Jay's (2011) decision to step back from publicity work to make space for others to represent the many faces of AVEN to the broader public and to produce a multitude of images of what an "empowered asexual person" looks like for asexual community consumption.

There are many other sites to locate and research asexual communion or congregation including companion, autonomous, and oppositional blogs and organizations that resist official incorporation, like Ithaca College's unregistered asexual student group which claims a large membership base. Worth noting, too, are the results of a 2012 campus-wide climate survey conducted by the University of California, which counted 398 self-identifying asexuals among its UC Berkeley-affiliated respondents (Rankin & Associates iii). Asexual research in both the humanities and the social sciences has accelerated in the wake of the 2004 publication of Anthony Bogaert's study of British asexuals. Much of the increased attention, both academic and popular, is owed to the organized efforts of AVEN, but the question of who owns (and who defines) asexuality remains excitingly unresolved. As new research on asexuality continues to pour forth, the definitional power and possibility of the keyword has become richer and richer. Worth mentioning here are Megan Milks and Karli Cerankowski, Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, Andrew Grossman, Cynthia Barounis, and Eunjung Kim who each inspiringly intervene in what we've already come to think of as the limits of asexual identification.

Milks and Cerankowski suggest in "New Orientations" that the resistance to the inclusion of "political" asexuals or celibates into the broader category of asexuality places artificial limits on an identity that is actually more fluid and capacious than the fixed narrative of the "innate" or "born this way" asexual. With "'Compulsory Sexuality and Asexual/Crip Resistance" Barounis refashions Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum to offer us an asexual continuum along which characters from the film *Shortbus* can find and offer each other support and temporary communion via analog rather than digital technologies. Przybylo and Cooper offer us a framework they call "asexual resonance," in their article of the same name, as a means of performing queerly asexual readings of cultural objects. They suggest that any sexual object or text carries with it an accompanying asexual resonance we might miss if our archive only accounts for "true asexuals"

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<sup>28</sup> This is a popular mode of discussing asexuality with audiences who are not asexual. For example, David Jay summarizes the aim of the documentary *(A)sexual* (2011) from what he identifies as Director Angela Tucker's perspective: "asexual people aren't that different from anyone else; a lot of what we're going through is the same as what everybody else is going through, just, without sexuality" (HotPiecesofAce 00:01:10).

<sup>29</sup> The umbrella of asexuality offers a nonce taxonomy of desires with prefixes not limited to a-, demi-, gray-, cupio-, and allo-, and suffixes such as -sexual and -romantic.

or those who explicitly identify as such. Perhaps most fascinatingly and daringly, Grossman's "Liberation of the Cinematic Clown" confronts the "immaturity" discourse that asexual activists and researchers have worked so hard to discredit (the idea that asexually identified folks simply have not finished maturing into sexually desirous subjects) and instead embraces the figure of the adult male clown whose enduring and ahistorical immaturity become the site of his defiance of assimilation into normative narratives of reproductive family unit. Finally, in "Why Do Dolls Die?" Kim offers us a critical and agentive take on passive sexualities in her analysis of sex dolls in films like *Lars and the Real Girl*. Kim bridges the gap between human and object by examining human-objects in the form of dolls to help us think through the radical possibilities of passivity. Through networks of recognition organized to care for these dolls, Kim writes that our prerequisites of the human (namely, function and progress) are troubled by the sex doll's uncanny permanence and inaction. Although Kim also directly and extensively writes on asexuality<sup>30</sup> I reference her doll article here because I think it also speaks to a dimension of asexual possibility by resisting the asexual compulsion to replace the having of sex with something else (like cake).<sup>31</sup>

Taken together these texts demonstrate that asexuality is far more expansive than the safe keyword that we began with. The field of asexual possibility for queer subjects who do not take desire for granted seems open for all kinds of deployment and employment. Yet, if we name the implication that this is a kind of "human" possibility, we quickly begin to see the fissures in "asexuality" as an agentive category of self-identification for bodies whose humanity is *not* a given. If asexuality is a theory of relationality, which I observe it to be, it must contend with issues of abjection and dominance in order to broach asexual intersections with blackness. So, let's think more broadly about the ways that our desires and our bodies, our pleasures and our relationships are framed by our interactions with the hegemonic power of race, which attaches life chances and death destinies, accords value and dismisses claims of value differentially along the shifting lines of blackness and whiteness.

## Sexuality

While this chapter is not about AVEN, and rather is about an idea, the organization's visibility work offers both the activist and the researcher a common place to begin. Recall that the asexual is defined by AVEN as one who does not "experience sexual attraction." What is this sexuality that asexuality is in the habit of defining itself against or in the absence of? If sexuality is a site of power in the eyes of the asexual—with access to visibility, social acceptance, and normalized dominance—I'd like to think about how and where asexuality exists in relation to various forms of power that cohere around legible sexuality.

Recall Michel Foucault's thesis in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality is a regulatory regime through which the state incites us to speak, exhaustively, about ourselves to make ourselves legible and therefore subjects of the disciplinary power of that state. Sexuality is, then, not our "bodies and pleasures" but our speech and our confessions about these things. Foucault notes that

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<sup>30</sup> For example, see: "Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy." *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, edited by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, Routledge, 2014, pp. 249-282; "Asexuality in Disability Narratives." *Sexualities*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2011, pp. 479-493; "How Much Sex is Healthy?: The Pleasures of Asexuality." *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, edited by Anna Kirkland and Jonathan Metzger, NYU Press, 2010, pp. 157-169.

<sup>31</sup> "Why have sex when you can have cake?" is a popular asexual slogan used to explain the banality of sex or the substitutability of sex with other kinds of pleasures that may lie outside the bounds of hegemonic notions of sex and sexual desire. This also situates mainstream asexuality as not repulsed by sex but rather, disinterested. New members to the AVEN forums are often welcomed with an emoji or .jpeg of a slice of cake.

subscribing to the repressive hypothesis (the idea that the West suppressed their desires until the 1960s, at which point this narrative suggests the West becomes sexually liberated) avoids the critical work of looking at the phenomenon of speaking about sex and rather relies on the easy out of not being allowed and now being allowed. In fact, rather than liberating, speech more deeply entrenches or subjects the speaker to the regulatory power of sex.

With Foucault's enduring influence in mind, I wonder the following. If sexuality is a discursive construction, is asexuality a mere reversal of that construction? Meaning that there is nothing to liberate from the repressive hypothesis, or that we are being liberated from *being liberated* from the repressive hypothesis? Since Foucault debunks speech as liberation, it might seem that asexuality offers a way out of sex discourse since (in the most abstract sense) there is nothing to confess. However, this simply reifies a binary opposition between speech and silence, where sexuality is the terrain of speech and asexuality equals silence, or asexuality is outside or before speech. We know speech and silence are not so discretely delineated and, moreover, Foucault cautions, "There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (27). The morning after the repressive hypothesis is a mess and, like the old t-shirt claims, "Asexuals party hardest."<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 8: "Asexuals Party Hardest" t-shirt worn at San Francisco Pride 2005. Source: David Jay, Flickr.

The slogan has been around since at least 2003, scrawled in chalk on the Wesleyan University campus by a budding asexual community of consciousness raisers ("Suggestions for Chalking"). The phrase operates on a few levels. One is comedic, in that the aim of many college-style parties is to get laid—making the shirt an endearing irony that proudly, snarkily declares difference. On the other hand, Lori Brotto, gynecology and psychology researcher, identifies the shirt as doing the work of "emphasizing that apart from their lack of sexual attractions, they are no different from the rest of us" and I would agree ("Understanding what it means"). Further still, the shirt suggests that contrary to the social stigma of asexuals as innocent and pure, asexuals also know how to have an edgy, sinful, quasi-legal good time. The appeal to the "hard" in partying hardest as a site of similarity suggests that there is no need to feel inhibited around asexual people or concerned about giving offense because, contrary to assumptions about their prudishness, asexuals can go pound for pound, shot for shot, or dance move for dance move with you and in the end, beat you in the game of nonsexual indulgences. Perhaps because, without the sexual distraction, the asexual can truly go hard rather than go home (with someone). Despite its popular

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<sup>32</sup> "Asexuals Party Hardest" is a popular design in the AVEN store appearing on t-shirts, totes and more.

connotations, asexuality is not pure<sup>33</sup> but the purported dirtiness of asexuality does little to extricate the emergent orientation from contact with and seduction by power.

Recovering from that brief aside, we might begin by asking whether asexuality produces exclusions of particular racial and sexual subjects. Or, by insisting on its own exclusion, does it produce inclusions? Since, any number of definitions of asexuality center sex and sexuality by opposing or disavowing it, asexuality cannot be “a relation of external opposition to power” so, I must ask how it operates inside of power (J. Butler 15). That is, asexuality as it has been and continues to be deployed doesn’t challenge but rather cooperates, upholds, and even colludes with power. If by power we mean racial and sexual hegemonies then we mean: the good body, the productive body, the reproductive body, the normative body, the integral body, the national body, the valuable body, the disciplined body, the obedient body, the body that fits, behaves, and responds to the disciplinary and fixing hail.

Literary critic Abdul JanMohamed’s work exposes the limits of Foucault’s confessional sexuality. In “Sexuality on/of the Racial Border” he criticizes the contradictions between Foucault’s outline of the incitement to speak (that sexuality was never repressed, rather it was drawn out of us through discourse), the legal silence of the slave (not recognized as human therefore unable to testify), and the “open secret” of white masters’ sexual desire for black slaves (rape). Opposite the “will to knowledge,” JanMohamed argues, is the “will to conceal.” To apply Foucault’s confessional technology to racialized sexuality would be to admit the humanity of the slave since the master’s desire “admits” humanness. Instead, the violation (rape) is silenced and so too is the slave. But, perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves here. Let’s take a few steps back to ponder, who is this slave?

## **Mammy**

Michele Wallace writes in 1994, “There is no question that textual representations of black women, particularly of “Mammy,” could benefit from deconstruction and analysis” (264). Without a doubt, more than twenty years later this continues to be a pressing need. Although Mammy has been a figure of concern in African American Studies since the establishment of the field, she has so many dimensions and faces, a veritable many-headed hydra, that facets of her identity yet remain to be interrogated, not the least of which is her asexuality.

Patricia Hill Collins’s study of controlling images describes the mammy as “obese, dark, and with characteristically African features... an unsuitable partner for White men. She is asexual and therefore is free to become a surrogate mother” (92).<sup>34</sup> Deborah Gray White historicizes the asexuality of Mammy as evidence of the domesticating potential of southern slavery to counter northern accusations regarding the contaminating proximity of slaves to whites. “Desexualized,”<sup>35</sup> Mammy is less threatening than Jezebel, the archetypal figure of black female hypersexuality, though both are subjects of ungendering. The mammy figure is said to offset the material vulgarities of sexuality for white women like nursing, so that she might maintain her membership

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<sup>33</sup> Here I am referencing interviewee Jill’s comments on the *Showbiz Tonight* talk show on CNN (husonghu “Asexuality on CNN” 00:07:36). See also my discussion of this in “On the Racialization of Asexuality.” *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, edited by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, Routledge, 2014, pp. 119-135.

<sup>34</sup> Collins’s use of the language “African features” and “obese” is not an endorsement of the generalizations, body negativity, racial science and racial insensitivity encapsulated by these terms but rather is a summary of the mammy as she lives in the American imagination.

<sup>35</sup> Collins’s interchangeable terminology for the assigned condition of the figure of the Mammy. Further scholarship is warranted to distinguish “asexual” from “desexual” from “nonsexual.”

in the cult of white womanhood, which signals purity, feminine capital, respectability, bodily integrity, and familial integrity.

The assigned asexuality of black females in the form of mammies has the interesting distinction of being required to take on the “dirty” aspects of sex and sexuality while supporting and maintaining the ideological illusion of being vacated of desire. Her utility as a device in the reproduction of white supremacy (raising property and its masters while representing the civilizing potential of this labor regionally articulated as fundamentally necessary for the socially dead) combined with her color makes it such that the dirt of sex cannot be seen on her body since she is already dark, blackened, unable to become any further debased because the mammy, even neutered of sexuality, occupies the bottom of social life. Through the combination of her darkness, masculinity, build, and her domesticated (to the point of erasure) desire, not only is she denied access to the category of “woman” through her foreclosure from protection and feminine weakness reserved for white women, but she is specifically engineered to also be denatured of the “sinful” desires assigned to enslaved black females however false or exaggerated.

Positioned as a metaphor by Collins and White, asexuality has been instrumental in making clear the intimate invasion of the black female body, her availability to all forms of insinuation and not limited to the physical. Not only are her children the property of private persons and state institutions, not only are her life chances determined or undone by the incomprehensibility of black pain, but even her sexual desire is not her own. Overdetermined from without to be too much, too deviant, and too productive in order to rationalize containment, assault, resource deprivation, and sterilization. As a matter of fitting the black female body into the machinery of early capitalism, the most profitable black female body is one that can be trained to labor without loving, to yield without yearning. The resulting figure is Mammy, whose hyperproductivity can be harnessed to produce slaves and masters, while slavery is said to *work for her* by relieving her of autochthonous (and therefore always already perverse and excessive) desires.

Mammy’s asexuality manifests on the plantation and in subsequent citations as social, meaning she is undesiring and undesirable, and not biological meaning amoeba-styled self-producing, although she seems capable of this, too. Mammy appears alone, one-of-a-kind while omnipresent, each plantation is imagined to have one Mammy serving several generations, performing every job. She is by invention not threatening, solitary, self-sufficient, and endlessly available. She is motherless and fatherless by virtue of being or having been a slave. Characterized as forever old, she is not born. Her asexuality is not just that she is undesirable to white men, but that she is mother to herself, seemingly self-generated in an unbroken chain of service. She is summoned, called for obedience, relied upon for her silence as a form of consent, when consent can be posited as a kind of contentment with social (can we call it that?) relations. She is an effective device for the racial project of white supremacy in that she is engineered to strike the black child, nurse her white charge, and mask her own violation.

In *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders offers a genealogy of the mammy figure from her first written mention in 1810, which by 1820 becomes associated only with black women, and by the 1850s referred to a consolidated set of behaviors (4). Contrary to popular belief, Wallace-Sanders finds inconsistencies in her color, size, and language, and rather emphasizes that behavior has been the most salient trait in producing and reproducing the mammy (7, 13-31). After the Civil War, monuments are proposed and erected throughout the South to memorialize the “faithful slave” (95-99). Southern white women writers develop “local color” writing that recount their memories or write fiction to allegedly “honor” their



mammies who, Mary Church Terrell reminds us, could not read such dedications even if she did exist (98, 101-104, qtd. in 104).

Following the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the mammy, in the trademark form of the Aunt Jemima, becomes the comforting symbol for the "national family" and "racial harmony" (135), unifying the white north and white south through the marketed "familiarity" of her comfort food (62). In this form she is celebrated as a transmitter of secrets, though these secrets are recipes, not rapes. Historically Mammy has been mobilized a number of ways, toward a number of ends. So far, we've seen a southern embrace to reconstitute regional identity through Mammy as caregiver in memoir and also we've seen her metabolized nationally to support a post-Reconstruction unification through Mammy as servant in cupboards. We must also consider the subsequent black radical embrace of Mammy to articulate a rhetoric of reappropriative, masculinist liberation in galleries.

Black male visual artists of the 1960s have embraced Mammy as a composite a laborer, reoriented toward revolution. Art historian Michael Harris writes, "Her resistance [in these images] tended to take on aggressive, masculine form, with weapons and physical confrontations in several instances" (114). Joe Overstreet's *New Jemima* (1964) depicts her as a revolutionary worker—still wearing the kerchief while her muscular arms and fingers grip an AK 47. The painting captures her gun mid-discharge, her face mid-laughter, lips parted and eyes smiling as is Mammy's custom. Her heavy breasts, illuminated by the flare of the firing gun, rest on the stock of her weapon, drawing attention to her voluptuous body and its historical and material articulation to various forms of violence. Leaning back in a confident, wide stance while broad hips and bare feet face the earth. Perhaps the largest element in the image is the architectural form in the top right corner. A syrup bottle aims at her breasts, rhyming with the metal color and barrel pattern of her gun. Her totem, her effigy, weaponized.

Work like Murry DePillars's *Aunt Jemima* (1968) even more overtly counters the asexuality of Mammy by bursting out of the pancake box and out of her aprons to reveal both her breasts and her buttocks at the same time. Her arm, bent high, grips a flipper poised to sing through the air in an archetypal disciplinary swat. Behind her, boxes recede in repetition as if Jemima breaks through not just her own box but all boxes as they stand in neat file before a flattened American flag. Like her posture, her face is contorted in anger—a reversal of her nationally syndicated joviality.

In contrast, Harris suggests that works by black women artists like Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) and Frieda High's *Aunt Jemima's Matrilineage* (1983) have taken a different approach to Mammy, "recontextualizing" her to reveal deep emotional/psychic rather than physical transformations (118). As a work in recontextualization, Saar arranges syrup labels and racial memorabilia alongside black power imagery. As an assemblage, we observe Mammy's smiling red lips in triplicate. Her broom is not removed, nor is the crying child, but rather complemented by a rifle and the knowledge of the racial mixture of the fussing babe. This rendering of Mammy works with what has been provided, rather than offering a revision, it seeks to expose the double or triple consciousness of the black female slave. Is it possible to recontextualize the mammy again without reifying her undesirability, nor subjugating her sexualities to the silences of white male desire? Can we refashion her asexual facet, her utility as a sign absent desire? How might we "claim the monstrosity," as Spillers puts it (229)?

Recall JanMohamed's intervention in the history of sexuality, which exposes the will to conceal embedded in the will to knowledge. The mammy assemblage, as a device of concealment, yields strategic ethical rationales, sexual gratification, and economic accrual. The creation of the

mammy as a black asexual trumpets the domesticating potential of slavery and assuages national moral concerns about black temptation penetrating the white southern household in the guise of servant. Additionally, the perpetuation of the mammy myth lends cover for rape on the “racial border” while the one drop rule, combined with the condition of the mother, “provides a means of denying miscegenation and augmenting the supply of slave labor,” while Mammy receives the offspring of the secret into her training (JanMohamed 104). This confirms that not only is there no sexuality outside of power, there is no asexuality outside of power. By this I mean that, through the example of Mammy, we can see that asexuality as a descriptive concept is recruited to mask her absolute value to the maintenance of white supremacy. Constructing her as non-desiring and un-desirable diverts attention away from a brood of mixed race enslaved children and the expanding purse of their master. Asexuality, it would seem, is a product of the “generative constraint on sexuality” (J. Butler 95). These constraints are the parameters of reiteration.

If sexuality, as a regulatory power, commands us to speak, and if racialized sexuality, as another vein of that same power, commands us to conceal trespasses of the racial border, AVEN seems driven, in the confessional mode, to speak--even though, at least abstractly it can be argued, there is nothing to confess. In order to instantiate asexuality as *not* pathological and *not* a failure, AVEN asserts through its confessions that its adherents are “normal.” The implication here is an investment not only in the dominance of particular sexual categories (over and against those constructed as deviant or perverse) and the dominance of particular bodily assemblages demarcated as healthy, as Kim notes in “How Much Sex,” but also an investment in constructing asexuality upon a white racial rubric (who else can claim access to being “just like everybody else”?). What is concealed in this paradigm is not the trespass of a racial border, but the fact of asexuality being a raced category, desiring racial borders. Annual AVEN message board threads with titles like “Are there any black asexuals on this site?” and “Asexual and Black” attest to such absents. These threads have pulled replies that minimize race of color experiences, insist on the asexual as a racially neutral identity, that minoritarian sexual status and racial status are argued to be an undifferentiated terrain, and that AVENites manifest no racial ideologies.<sup>36</sup> This difference inside of asexuality (blackness) is subordinated to the difference outside of asexuality (sexuality). Exposure of the asexual absence of desire seems contingent upon the absents of the racial.

### **Black A/sexuality**

What kind of trouble does blackness introduce to asexuality? Against what narratives might a black asexual on the forums feel compelled to disavow their blackness in the midst of claiming it with posts that begin “I’m black, but...” and end with invocations of popular essentialisms?<sup>37</sup> Drawing

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<sup>36</sup> This note is in reference to AVEN forum threads “Asexual and Black” and “Any “minorities” here?” According to the research guidelines posted on AVEN it is preferred that researchers get written permission from forum users in order to quote them directly (“Rules for researchers”). I have decided to instead summarize and provide sample links in the works cited to refer interested readers to forum pages in which sample statements may be found. In this way, I am not isolating individual community members. This footnote is also here to contextualize the next footnote. Productive conversations about race and AVEN yielded (for a short period of time) a “pinned” thread on Asexuality.org which is a forum thread accorded fixed front page status on the forums for easy navigation. This thread has since been renamed the “Intersectionality” thread. A Tumblr titled “Asexual People of Color” also seeks to centralize discussion of race among asexuals (<http://asexualpocsunite.tumblr.com/>), while sites like *I CANT AVEN* (<http://icannotaven.tumblr.com/>) define themselves in opposition to, and function as clearing houses for, the on-the-ground failings of AVEN to wrestle with issues of race at the general membership level.

<sup>37</sup> For example, see: “I hate boxes!” *Asexual Visibility and Education Network*. 10 December 2010. <http://www.asexuality.org/en/topic/57131-i-hate-boxes/>. Accessed 5 August 2016. Some of the responses to the forum thread describe their rejection of being stereotyped by invoking stereotypes. I observe that this practice

from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, we understand blackness as the result of a process of epidermalization, "to be blackened," as Darieck Scott observes in his *Extravagant Abjection*. A handling of the body, doused and dyed, and returned abject; the body "recolored" is endowed with a capacity for speech denied the consciousness of that same body. Or, if not the capacity for speech, the recitation of a script "overdetermined from without" and an audience for said script (Fanon 116). The skin is always speaking, louder than the bearer of the flesh. Here I am referencing Fanon's infamous encounter boarding a train in France; a child points and declares "Look, mama! A negro!" He enters the train a man but through this process of misrecognition is flattened, epidermalized, made one with his skin but also fragmented in three. This speech is heard over and against whatever the lips might utter, unless it furthers the assigned speech of the body. This is worth mentioning because, while the forums are textual rather than visual spaces of elaboration, users are "haunted by a galaxy of erosive stereotypes" (129) making processes of self-identification also séances, zones of contact for the body, the race, and the ancestors.

Spillers tells us that the black female subject, in particular, through the process of unmaking in "Middle Passage," is reduced to thingness (206). Outside of (or always) consenting to insinuation, sexuality itself, as we understand it in relation to reproduction, pleasure and desire, for black female bodies, is "thrown into crisis" (221). The unthinkability of Mammy's desire and desirability append the thesis of blackness as outside the field of human feeling, consciousness, and testimony, saddling her comfortably as an object of trade. Though blackness signifies the absence or foreclosure of subjecthood, legibility, and recognizability, when it comes to the corporeal blackness simultaneously signifies the excess of sexuality, criminality, noise, and violence (as referenced by forum users). Therefore, we come to know blackness as the cyclical signification of excess and negation.

If the blackened is simultaneously a signifier of sexual excess and also the negation of sexuality as an intersubjective relation, is black simultaneously sexual and asexual, in its earliest iterations? Or, if asexuality is a kind of failure of the normative mode of desiring, of reproductivity, and if blackness is hailed as excessively reproductive, Mammy's body acts as a site where blackness and asexuality articulate or touch.<sup>38</sup> The hyper- and the hypo- of sexuality meet in one dark body. The black female asexual is an ensemble of exclusions (from history, citizenship, gender, consent, desire) but, most explicitly: from "everybody else." The black asexual comes up against the AVEN mission to vocalize absence while insisting on the movement of asexuality into a group called "everybody else" requiring the absenting of the other other: blackness. This might explain the reinscription of silencing practices directed against the abnormal, aberrant, and abject. Black asexuals have been, in both friendly and hostile manners, urged to yield the desire for multi-dimensional senses of belonging on the forums in the name of neutral space. This dynamic hails Stuart Hall, "The aim of the struggle must be, instead, to replace the 'or' with the potentiality or the possibility of an 'and'" (472). Blackness of an asexual is no essential guarantee of a particular kind of politics but rather one wonders whether the simultaneity of black *and* asexual disturb one another's discursive stability. According to Fanon, the epidermalized body speaks—is accorded the right to testify that black consciousness (as black) never is, endowed with a testificatory power that cannot be covered up or quieted. Since her mark of difference *cannot* be concealed she will never be "just like everybody else." Recalling that Hall defines black as the "mark of difference"

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aims to create distance between the speaker and the marginalized racial group to which they are hailed by and, in doing so, inch closer to the marginalized sexual group that represents itself as a racially neutral category.

<sup>38</sup> Locating asexuality in failure, as I've done here, is not condemnatory. I think about failure as generative and, following the work of Heather Love, I do not suggest we need to redeem it.

(“What is This” 474) perhaps the blackness of the black asexual allows the following: if sexuality is confessional, and if racialized sexuality is concealing, and white (a)sexuality is confessional and concealing, and the confession of black sexuality is overdetermined, and the concealment of black sexuality is constituted by brutality, what is the relationship of black asexuality to confession and concealment?

What if we mine Mammy’s silence as refusal, a black asexual’s refusal to confess as the repetition of Mammy’s silence, with a difference? Mammy is called upon for her utility to conceal white supremacy, we do not hear her speak or know her desires because she is designed as already known. She does not have to speak. Since speaking renders one under the regulatory regime of sexual discourse, what if the mammy can do this not-responding but with a difference. Mammy offers us a model of not confessing and, by doing so, a possible refusal to be regulated by the regime of sexuality. Further still, since her body is always speaking, and her station is always silent, perhaps she is even never asked—after all, she has little if any right to testify. How do we make sense of Mammy’s absent response? Not-responding here is not synonymous with disempowerment or her engineered and presupposed silence, but makes space for an alternative mode. Spillers notes that the black female is frozen in “stillness” as an “undynamic fixing” of her ethnic/racial identity (224). What if the stillness of Mammy—undisturbed and unbothered, since she is beyond the reach of testimony—is not fixing, but meditative? The stillness of “bodies and pleasures,” not her social function.

In the spirit of this concern, I echo Alexander Weheliye’s question in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, “What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency?” (2). Or, what happens when resistance and defeat come so close together, that we can no longer tell them apart? What is made possible here, when we hold space for the very devices that have fixed us to actually, in another turn, approximate freedom? What is that difference that the black asexual is allowed, by repeating the Mammy’s silence? How can we “tell” the difference? To do this we might consider Gayl Jones’s neo-slave narrative *Corregidora*, whose protagonist Ursa is the fourth generation of Corregidora women who wrestle with remembering their hereditary enslaved past in Brazil to a Portuguese pimp. The narrative follows Ursa’s relationships and memories after undergoing a hysterectomy. The loss of her uterus resulting from intimate partner violence disturbs her capacity to assume the archival role laid out for her by the women in her family. From her earliest memories, Ursa is instructed that she must “make generations” in order to preserve and pass down an oral history of racial, sexual and gendered violence. Although the narrative is set in the United States, the reader is taken to Brazilian plantations and beds in the recitations of Ursa’s diasporic family history. Like the memoirists in chapter one of *Ordinary Failures*, Ursa is the author of her own story of misrecognition and failure, rendered artistically both on stage at the bar and on the page. And yet, contrary to the matrilineal commandment to produce and preserve, her first-person narrative is held together by the refrain “I said nothing.” Common to her dialogues and of interest to our study of the mammy, “I said nothing” is uttered in a multitude of moments, signifying something a little different each time. Below are examples of her refusal to be courted, refusal to admit knowledge, refusal to empathize, and refusal to reciprocate.

“What’s your address? I want to come see you.”  
I said nothing. (71)

“Get their devils off your back. Not yours, theirs.”

I said nothing. I pretended I didn't know what he meant. (61)

"You don't know what that means, do you?"

I said nothing. She was crying but they were dry tears...She was looking at me, expecting something. She wanted me to tell her that I knew what it was like, but I wouldn't tell her. Yes, I know what it feels like. (64)

"I love you," he said.

I said nothing. I was thinking I'd only wanted him to love me without saying anything about it. (55)

She refuses to participate in recitation. The absence of her speech is marked, remarked upon by the subject in the refrain: I said nothing, I said nothing. Perhaps employing an Ursa-styled articulation of the repetition of silence allows us to see Mammy's ongoing silence not just as a consequence of the imposition of concealment but as something more. Ursa and Mammy's declaration, "I said nothing," means that the speaker was present, participated in recognition, and made a decision rather than allowing the silence of design (Mammy invented as *unable* to testify) to go unacknowledged. With these models in mind, the black asexual silence becomes declarative, but not confessional. The historical fiction of the mammy is imagined as unable to testify, thus ensuring her stability in the social order, cowing to the commandment to conceal her repeated rapes. And, yet, slave-owning families in times of unrest feared their faithful mammies might poison their dinner, for example. In this respect, Mammy's capacity to testify is also not wholly foreclosed and I argue that she knows this. Therefore, we must hold space for the possibility that Mammy recognizes her capacity to testify (her first agentive act) and willfully withholds it (her second agentive act). Rather than obedient, perhaps her silence is proud and daring. Remembering once again that Mammy is an ideological device, a fictional comfort, how can we say definitively that Mammy has any capacity for agentive actions or withholdings? Ursa, another fiction, must "say" nothing, must use the modality that she refuses in order to register her refusal. Can Mammy—the liminal amalgam of desire and disgust, disavowal and necessity—clarify her stance? On this I defer to the poet Elizabeth Alexander who offers the internal narrative of Saartjie Baartman, by some accounts the original hypersexualized yet undesirable black female body, "Since my own genitals are public / I have made other parts private" (728). Alexander meditates on the absence of first-person accounts in the archive of a once-living woman and postulates that the silence of Baartman cannot merely read as an imposition but also as a decision to keep something for herself, off stage and beyond the poem. Without access to her internal dialogue, hidden in 1825, 1893, 1965, and counting, we cannot help but ask Mammy: what is that private part? We must reconcile ourselves with not knowing.

### **Not Doing**

In an article which explores the idealization of asexuality through the lens of race—affiliated with the attributes of purity, restraint, and industriousness when attached to whites, and affiliated with domestication, comfort, and obedience when attached to black women—I linger briefly on an exchange aired in 2006 on *The View* in which one host asks David Jay if, instead of being inexperienced or traumatized, asexuals are actually just lazy (Owen 129-131). Delivered in jest, the question is easily dealt with, yet I wondered whether the suggestion of laziness put asexuality in a precarious position by associating it with other "lazy" groups in the American imagination—

specifically, the black and brown poor. The exchange that leads to the playful accusation begins when David moves his hands in a gesture toward himself, his hands inviting us closer to him as he notes he is about to share a personal perspective, that may or may not reflect the larger group he is representing.

David: ...if you're going to have a sexual relationship with someone, that's a lot of energy you have to spend into thinking about that, like, thinking about that relationship—

Joy: —so, what are you, just lazy or what? [audience laughs]

David: Well, I, I mean I still form relationships. Asexual people have the same emotional needs as everyone else. So, I still have to think about forming relationships, I just don't have to think about forming relationships sexually. I have to think about how am I going to center a relationship around something else? How am I going to form intimacy in a way that isn't based around sexuality? (husongshu "Asexuality on The View" 00:05:46)

David's response quickly gets at one of the most thought-provoking interventions and expansions that asexuality offers to our conceptions of queerness that, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, is not yet here. But to return to the affective exchange at hand, with the words "a lot of energy" David drops his hands lower as well as his shoulders, and slumps a little to visually communicate the weight of energy expenditure. He counts his right fingers against his left palm in list-like fashion and swings his head haltingly from side to side in a motion suggesting exhaustive repetition as he begins to describe the thought of spending thought on a sexual relationship. Joy jumps in to reframe the direction of David's story as laziness and is met with an anticipated laugh from the audience. Joy turns her head to smile knowingly. David draws back from her and draws up his posture, physically on the defensive while his words convey a verbal deflectiveness as well, no longer open and relaxed, stumbling briefly and recovering in the familiar territory of asexual palatability as "just like everyone else." Moreover, the story that *might* have been told is rerouted to become a story about how much *more* labor asexuals perform than sexual people, since they are tasked with reimagining intimacy in a sex-saturated time and place.

At the time of my previous writing, I thought about Julian B. Carter's research which found that interwar marriage manuals aimed at white heterosexual couples had encouraged partners to document their desire so that they might harness their "racial resources," while in the 1990s Laura Kipnis uses the colloquial knowledge that relationships require work to think about the labor of intimacy from a Marxist standpoint about social production. At the time I observed "the assumption underlying *The View*'s suggestion of laziness stems from a suspicion that asexuals are avoiding the labor of restraint, the labor of sexual intimacy, and the reproduction of whiteness through either or both" (Owen 129). The brief and subtextual moment of articulation between asexuality and stigmatized blackness remains with me and I think that the contemporary racial jeopardy of affiliating with laziness remains to be interrogated.

The remainder of this chapter considers another sort of black subject who is animated by an expression of a lack of desire rather than a desire for something. If blackness and asexuality propose to disrupt one another's fixity, the conjunctive work of blackness and idleness does very much the opposite. Rather, the idle black figure fits into a long tradition of constructing black figures as driven by gratification, in need of discipline to reach the industrious ideal of the mammy who knows no pleasure, only continuous labor. In a way, the black idler is also an idealized representation of blackness in that, such a representation justifies the almost immediate denigration and erasure of black political progress during the era of Reconstruction, confederate nostalgia, stop

and frisk policies and the exponential expansion of the prison industrial complex. The lazy black figure, like that depicted in William Sidney Mount's genre painting *Farmers Noonning* (1836), reveals the racial limits of leisure. The painting shows five men taking a break under a tree in a hay field, four white men in various postures reading and reclining on the ground, while the light falls most directly on the sleeping black man atop a haystack. Art historian Martin Berger holds the critical reception of Mount's *Farmers* alongside his *Boys Caught Napping in a Field* (1848) to demonstrate that the production of racial meaning can be read as saliently in works depicting only white figures as those depicting "racial" figures (nonwhite). In the two Mount paintings, the same action taken by white young men in *Napping* stimulates "delicious" nostalgia in the viewer while a black figure engaged in the same activity rendered by the same artist is taken as evidence of "innate laziness" (Berger 11-14). I would add that the lazy figure is a necessary boundary of the figure of the mammy (along with the Jezebel and the rapist, whose indulgence in pleasure is imagined to be more active, more pursuant, more aggressive). The stillness that I propose is opened up for the black asexual figure is also available to the black idler, but rather than stilling the body and its pleasures, black idleness is stillness *in* pleasure, idling in the zone of pleasure. What happens when this stillness is claimed? Rather than denied, deflected, eschewed, abandoned, or hidden—what happens when the posture of interiority collides with the posture of decadence or selfishness for the subject whose self has long been claimed by somebody else?

Associations with laziness put asexuals in the irredeemable orbit of blackness (whereas other misreadings of asexuality either endow it with idealized white attributes or sympathy and pity, regardless of whether it is wanted). Let us spend a little time on blackness and laziness, this under-developed branch of black lack of desire. If blackness and asexuality each have the potential to unsettle how we've come to think of the human or destroy the human altogether (Fanon and Gressgard), we must also acknowledge here how the racialization of laziness, too, has contributed to shaping the limits of the human, the citizen, the sacred, the moral, and the forgivable. While a thorough racial genealogy of laziness is beyond the scope of this chapter, in what follows, I review a few moments and texts toward a tentative historical map of what would become the black idler of ruby onyinyechi amanze's large-scale drawing work.

### **Idle Thoughts**

Where better to begin than Paul Lafargue's essay, *The Right to be Lazy*. Lafargue, a French Creole journalist and at times an anarchist, marxist, and socialist, published his lazy manifesto in 1883 declaring the explanation for human misery to be that the proletariat has deluded himself into loving and demanding work. In Lafargue's vision, the European would be forbidden to work more than three hours a day, that he may spend the rest of his time in leisure and feasting but, centuries of venerating work had estranged man from his drives, leaving him miserable, tortured, sad (29, 9). For context, Lafargue refers us to the "primitive races" whom he suggests are happily ignorant of work until their colonizers arrive (10). The nonwhite body stands in for the time of leisure antithetical to progress and Western industrialization. This is supported by Charles Mills's *The Racial Contract* which states that European philosophers are able to articulate the Rights of Man apart from the State of Nature through an elaboration of nonwhite spatial zones as atemporally available and fixed in the time of nature. These spaces do not progress, progress approaches them. This is also demonstrated by Stephen Jay Gould's research into early psychology's regarding of the adult black body and the adult white female body as stalled at a lower register in the process of "ontogeny recapitulat[ing] phylogeny" (2297), developmentally immature compared to white middle class children. Children are thought to have poor self-control, incapable of self-governance,

and driven by desire—the state of being driven by desire is, of course, Lafargue’s ideal. Of his own moment, he refers to the mechanical advances of the United States in the area of farm labor as an ideal for Europeans:

the machine is invading all branches of farm production, from the making of butter to the weeding of wheat. Why, because the American, free and lazy, would prefer a thousand deaths to the bovine life of the French peasant. Plowing, so painful and so gripping to the laborer in our glorious France, is in the American West an agreeable open-air pastime, which he practices in a sitting posture, smoking his pipe nonchalantly. (48)

We see that, while the nonwhite body is esteemed as an example of laziness persisting in modernity, it is also, moreover, integral to conceptualizing a right to laziness via his harnessed labor, which provides the foundation for the progress Lafargue admires in America—from the capital to propel invention, to the (until recently) bondage-sourced tobacco in the carefree American mouth. Looking backward for a pinnacle moment in human leisure, he seizes upon the romanticized Greco-Roman world, “The Greeks in their era of greatness had only contempt for work: their slaves alone were permitted to labor: the free man knew only exercises for the body and mind” (12). His appeal to the glory of Greek civilization explicitly names the enslaved of its era as the back upon which free men engage in “exercises for the body and mind” (12). I begin with this utopian imagining of idleness to demonstrate first who leisure is meant for and what means (and whose bodies) have historically made it possible. It would seem that even the fantasy of freedom alternately requires and forgets the unfree.

With the emancipation of the American slave and the transformation of the southern economy from slave labor to free wage labor historian Jacqueline Jones notes in her *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* that black women left the fields in large numbers to care exclusively for their families if possible, while black men supported this practice which removed black women from the reach of sexually predatory white overseers. Ladyhood remained the domain of middle class white women—their protection from labor outside the house was recognized as a “fulfill[ment of her] marriage vows of motherhood and genteel domesticity” while black women sharing in the priorities of home and family were derided as “most lazy,” “doing nothing,” and “idle” (59). Rather, it was believed that black women required “wholesome compulsion” and “hard manual labor” to instill morality (53). Jones writes “the preference among wives and mothers to eschew wage work in favor of attending to their own households...threatened the free labor experiment” (45) because of Southern reliance on and northern expectations of black labor. In addition to this, new relationships to labor under the wage system without the compulsion of the whip meant black folk could work on their own schedules—in some cases working more slowly, showing up late or not showing up at all (58). On this note, “by the 1870s the amount of black labor in the fields had dropped to one-quarter or one-third preemancipation levels” (58). On the whole, the new economic system begot or fomented understandings of black folk as inherently lazy and slack so “Black Laws” were enacted to re-exert control over black bodies and to undermine new freedoms of movement in its many forms (55). Forecasting black failure without the firm and structuring hand of plantation slavery, former slave owners like Frances B. Leigh were shocked to observe the industriousness and organization of freed folk when working on their own land, on their own time, with their own kin (57). As new relationships to time and labor allowed for an expansion of black practices of mutual aid—such as childcare and eldercare—both northern whites and former Confederates rebuked the practice, taking the stance that each able-bodied black person regardless



of gender owed their energy to the restoration of the economy via the cotton fields which fueled the textile industry (65).

The work of W.E.B. Du Bois instructs us that, despite hundreds of years of enslaved black chattel labor and two brief decades of Reconstruction, the archival fate of black American exertion was rubbed out by historians engaged in a project of deliberate revision. In “The Propaganda of History” of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois analyzes American historiography produced about the Reconstruction period of U.S. history concluding that the record has been corrupted--watering down the cause of the Civil War, erasing the debates about Reconstruction and those records produced by blacks themselves—all of which was enhanced by the wide circulation of anti-black scholarship and the steady recruitment of Southern teachers in Northern universities. In place of fact and evidence-based research, Helen Boardman finds a series of key themes promoted by American history textbooks in 1935, among them being “All Negroes were lazy, dishonest and extravagant” (Du Bois 16683). Quoting S.E. Forman’s “Advanced American History,” one would learn that for blacks “freedom meant only idleness” (16695). And from ex-Confederate soldier John W. Burgess one would hold as true, “A black skin means membership in a race of men which has *never of itself succeeded* in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind” (Du Bois 16848-16849, emphasis mine). So thorough and pervasive was the discourse of black laziness that Du Bois explains, “The South found it necessary to pass Black Codes for the control of the shiftless” (16706-16707). The parameters of success are hemmed in by racialized foreclosures that, like the Mount painting, result not only in differential readings of freedom, rest and self-determination, but moreover, differential applications of constitutional rights then and now. Constructions of and confluences of blackness with shiftlessness justified ramped up surveillance and monitoring that not only served to limit the mobility of black people but, further, conceptions of black idleness played a necessary role in the emotional recouping of white Southern dignity and power—and not just in history textbooks but also on the silver screen, in the renowned white supremacist film of 1915 *Birth of a Nation*’s South Carolina legislature scene for example. The political gains of African Americans of the period are painted over with depicts of shoeless black men eating stereotypical foods in the chambers while clambering for the right to pursue white women. The discursive foreclosure of black success even in the face of the cold facts of black political progress under Reconstruction fits into what has been called “tautological failure.”

I adopt this term from Scott Sandage's *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, which constructs a genealogy of failure from the standpoint of economic enterprise and ambition, early credit bureau surveillance, and bankruptcy law, and traces the seeping of capitalist evaluations of (potential for) success and failure into the vernacular such that “Failure audited the person as well as the purse” (91). He names a three-part typology of failure: ““consummate humbugs,” “great fools,” and “honest men.” One failed by trickery, another by stupidity, and the third by some blend of adversity, delinquency, and mediocrity” (78) yet he names a fourth category apart and earlier in the text: the tautological failure (61). Those under this heading belong to a “race, class, or gender” whose performance is an “expected” failure—for example, “neither law nor culture presumed he [the African American] could succeed, so how could he fail?” (61). Sandage points to the construction of success, the capacity to pursue the “go ahead principle,” as the epitome and ideal of white manhood (85). When he writes “not indolence, but impotence, caused failure” he means that earlier conceptions of failure stemmed from laziness and waste, while newer conceptions of failure by the mid-1800s emphasize that merely maintaining or sustaining oneself subjected men to categorization as failures (87). Success came to mean “going ahead” in continuous movement

after new achievements in endless deal-making, and sloth comes to mean *not* participating in the endless race. As success evolves beyond ongoing laziness or one-time achievement to instead name an urge of continual ambition, the circulation of this transformation is in part reinforced in blackface minstrel performances that showcase the folly of the tautological failure's pursuit of the "go ahead" principle.

A dashing fellow was not only manly but speedy and still accelerating, and not all could enter this race. When a minstrel song sheet showcased "Zip Coon on the Go-Ahead Principle" or Harper's printed an antifeminist cartoon of bloomer girls declaring "We go ahead"--both wrung laughs from the absurdity of an ambitious woman or a negro. Among black face characters, "Zip" was the dandy, but he could no more be a "dashing fellow" than a woman in bloomers. Velocity and stamina defined white manhood--being "the most 'go-ahead' in energy, ambition, and success. (85)

Beginning in the 1820s white bankrupts draw parallels between their plight and the cause of Emancipation, by appropriating language to their cause and brandishing the terms "White slaves, wage slaves, debt slaves" (194). The newly emancipated black "Freed Man" in the 1860s is held in distinction to the "Wage Slave" such that "[t]his new political vocab changed the status of "the poor African" from nightmare to aspiration" as debtors vie for federal resources they judge to be disproportionately allocated to the Freedman's Bureau (208). Among the transformations heralded by Emancipation are, "In Frederick Douglass's words, "Liberation and slavery" gave way to a new measure of human worth: "success and failure"" (qtd 223). Candidates for these appellations do not begin on equal footing.

The affective dimensions of failure illuminated by Sandage include: "the conspicuous absence of magic" (74), "impotence" (87), "disrupt[ion]" and "stalling" (129) rather than "speed" and "accelerat[ion]" (85). The velocity of the modern man in a capitalist economy leads to diagnoses like "nerve bankruptcy" (234), a characteristic of modern whiteness further theorized by Carter in *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America*. Without a safety net to rely upon and give men a new start, Sandage points us to the emergence of "sentiment as a form of capital" in begging letters sent by men and, in secret, by their wives, engaging in narrative strategies that both insert their failure into American history and insist upon the nuance of their failure in the face of anonymous surveillance in early credit bureaus that reduce men's business as well as their personality to one-liners and predictions that foreclose second-chances (234, 111). The common denominator of the begging letter suggested that there existed an "authentic sel[f]" who was worthy of recompense, whose value could not be measured by the throes of the market (242). This strategy arises after the debunking of cranial and exposure indexes (pseudo-sciences said to determine through skull measurement and photography who is destined to fail, biologically, and who to succeed) (114). Sandage notes only the "credit index" persists as a mode of predicting failure and success (120) yet, I would add, a sort of "racial index" which might describe the enduring foreclosures that beget the tautological failure whose "authentic self" is constructed as already known and always carries more weight than the historical record.

Perhaps the best example in recent memory of the tautological failure is the welfare mother or welfare queen. Imagined to be a single black woman, bearing children for personal gain rather than to benefit the chattel slavery system, she is imagined drawing financial support from the state with each child she has (Collins 86)—the pinnacle of both sloth and scheme, refusing work and indulging in luxury at the expense of the public. The labor of mothering is not a part of the matrix

of national feeling about the welfare mother. Legislation instead has passed time and again to curb welfare benefits and to get black mothers out of the house and into the market, poignantly highlighting the historical amnesia of the attainment of welfare rights for widowed mothers in the late nineteenth century (Roberts 871). Successful advocacy of the value of the unpaid labor of mothering was grounded in hegemonic notions of motherhood as tethered only to the white female body (872). When enrollment opened to black women, the tenor of the national discourse shifted. Rather than emphasizing a child's need and the value of a maternal bond, the rhetoric seized on to the mother's ulterior desires (sexual, material) and lack of desire (dependence, sloth, irresponsibility). Dorothy E. Roberts writes, "Part of the reason that maternalist rhetoric can no longer justify public financial support is that the public views this support as benefitting primarily Black mothers" because the construction of domestic motherhood "never applied to black women" (873, 875). To the extent that black women have been seen as domestic it has always been in someone else's home, on behalf of someone else's family. By exercising the right to support in forming a maternal relationship with her own family, the welfare mother, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, "represents another failed mammy, one who is unwilling to become "de mule uh de world"" (87). If black folk are always already failures, undisciplined, and prone to idleness if not compelled to labor, then their access to welfare support, instead of strengthening the family—as white women had successfully argued—would weaken the state and the already compromised ethic of black people. When it comes to the care of black children, it is the state that monopolizes claims of vulnerability, unable to defend itself against the machinations of black women "getting over" instead of the socially sanctioned "getting ahead."

Writing in 1997 Cathy Cohen asks that we consider the welfare mother a queer figure, "— primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom have existed for their entire lives outside the white, middle-class heterosexual norm— we have to ask if these women do not fit into society's categories of marginal, deviant, and "queer"" (43). Although she has children, the welfare mother's reception shares a tangential resonance with Lee Edelman's theorization of the queer death drive. Since black children are never conceptualized as innocent they are not members of the shrine to childhood of which he writes, and since the children had by black women are thought to increase her enjoyment of sexual desire, state support and idleness, and since finally the family is a tautological failure despite receiving this support since all are thought to fail or fall outside the cycle of social and economic productivity, it is not hard to see the marginality, deviance and queerness of these figures. Moreover, such was the ideological power of the fantasy of welfare fraud that the purported originary "welfare queen" Linda Taylor of Reagan's embellishments was never charged with homicides she was suspected of committing because of a combination of political interest, the news cycle, and municipal budgetary limitations. Despite increases in welfare fraud investigations in the 1970s, the promise of federal savings were only realized by conflating all black welfare mothers with "the queen" via pre-existing stereotypes about black idleness, resulting in a rationalization for cutting benefits regardless of findings by investigators (Levin).

Similarly, the earlier exclusion of black families from state and federal welfare programs begot another sort of queer figure: the black celibate. In the 1930s Father Divine united blackness and celibacy together *against* the stereotype of black laziness and it is possible to count this lesser-remembered Harlem Renaissance figure as an early black asexual figure. Milks and Cerankowski make the argument that "[a] feminist mode of asexuality... might consider as asexual someone who is not intrinsically/biologically asexual... but who is sexually inactive, whether short-term or long-term, not through a religious or spiritual vow of celibacy but through feminist agency" (659). Although Divine's is definitely a religious movement, as we shall see momentarily, it is also an

economic and political movement, one of whose aims is to enhance black agency—it is in this respect that Divine’s followers might be in touch with a category of sexual refusal we would come to name as asexuality. Benjamin Kahan, author of *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*, points out that, despite Divine’s “enormous symbolic importance in the everyday lives of black Americans” (83) evidenced by period depictions by James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, he has been excluded from contemporary work like that of Brent Hayes Edwards and Michelle Stephens when writing about international black figures of the 1930s (84). Leaving aside the question of whether Divine was a fraud or not, his organization, the Peace Mission Movement, had a solid following of 3,000-4,000 and was both an economic platform and a relational platform. Divine organized members to open businesses collectively, like laundries, and to live communally. Followers embraced an “industrious, celibate, dark-complected” identity in place of the “old negro” much maligned by segments of the Harlem Renaissance (85). Indeed, in the face of the national overdetermination of black bodies as lascivious and sexually threatening in the Jim Crow era, Kahan writes that “Divine promotes and authorizes celibacy in order to write a new narrative about black bodies” which ultimately enables his PMM to maintain an interracial following with little backlash because of the neutralization of fears of miscegenation through membership commitment to celibacy (86). Kahan argues that Father Divine forces us to include celibacy among the Harlem Renaissance’s transgressive sexual practices (86).

In terms of industriousness, Kahan dubs Divine a business tycoon whose “celibate economics” offer a viable alternative to blacks who were intentionally omitted by Roosevelt’s 1935 Social Security Act (86, 88). In this case, we understand Divine’s intervention to be one in which an asexual identity of sorts is opened up to the black body globally but only on the condition that it be enmeshed with a fiscal platform. In fact, little pressure is needed to reveal that fundamental to a black celibate identity in this moment is a doubling down on the commitment to another kind of reproduction—economic. It would not be a stretch to suggest that, far from burying the “old negro,” Divine’s platform is an updated variation on the mammy figure—one whose energy can be singly devoted to laboring without the distraction of sexual desire—this time laboring for black advancement instead of whites (or both, rather). The “queer practice” does another thing differently, too. The mammy of old has always been and always will be alone. She has no peers, she is always older, always bossy, always busy. Divine’s black celibates, by living communally and running cooperatives, gain company in both senses of the word—not only a sort of economic self-determination but also, companions in the trenches of refusal.

Despite the geographic reach and social impact of Father Divine in his hey-day, his temporal reach and historical impact have been limited. Kahan is right to celebrate Divine’s authorization of celibacy as a viable option for the mass of black folks but it is difficult to singly celebrate his mission knowing that it conforms to a respectability politics that ultimately reinforces stereotypes by defining itself in opposition to them. Because Roosevelt’s New Deal excluded African Americans, the “Divine Deal” intervened; Kahan observes that Divine’s cooperative model—as a critique of the family model—“emphasize[d] positive thinking and self-empowerment... that ha[d] no use for welfare” which was thought, instead to promote dependence and “negative thinking” (92-93). In what remains of this chapter, I shift gears somewhat dramatically in order to consider some contemporary gestures toward carving space for the possibility of black idleness. A long way from *Farmer’s Nooning*, the visual art in the following discussion also depicts black idleness but from a more intimate vantage point.

### **Black/Slack and Idle Intimacies**

The misrecognition of black “shiftlessness,” “dependence” and “laziness” make it difficult to discern agential instances of black idleness and desirelessness. While open articulations of slack are a stark departure from the proud or concealing silence of Mammy, what remains constant across this chapter is a concern with tracing the emergence of the possibility of claiming stillness for black bodies, whether that be the stillness of desire itself, or desiring to sit still, or expressing desire via stillness. Locating space for black figures to participate and even revel in, rather than disavow, accusations of unproductivity is a challenge but... if you bill them, they will come. Winston Scarlett,<sup>39</sup> also known by the artistic persona Professor Wimpy J. Slack, a queer black diasporan and self-described “weirdo,” is the creator and curator of “slackgaze”—both a music genre and a digital and moment-based archive increasingly centered on black and POC artists that are a mix of 90s nostalgia, DIY, suspicion of success, and the celebration and practice of a slacker ethos.<sup>40</sup> Interested in making both literal and figurative space for the performance of black idleness, they founded a short-lived brick and mortar venue in the Chelsea neighborhood of NYC while also carving out conceptual space for agential—rather than overdetermined—black slackers, as emphasized by interviewers and reviewers of the work. Wimpy holds dear a rereading of a common saying constitutive of their diasporic Jamaican upbringing “nuh watch nuh face” to embrace slackerdom and failure—to truly not worry about what others think. It is worth noting that slackness signifies, in a Caribbean dancehall and political context, the site of much cultural discursive struggle. Although it is often judged superficially to be “mere sexual looseness” and “rubbish” it also has the tendency toward what Carolyn Cooper calls “a metaphorical revolt against law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency” (2892, 2941). Slackness has also been characterized as a racially black subculture with such denigrating language as “monkey” and “savage” (2945-2947). However, both critics and participants in slackness would agree that the subculture “eschew[s] respectability” (2906). Within slack subculture there exist “hierarchies of slackness” in which heterosexuality trumps homosexual slackness on a ladder of “culture and class”—measures to which slackness DJs have a rather fraught relationship (3049). “Slackgaze” shares in the rejection of social expectations and middle class ethics like joining the labor force and starting a family but clearly seems to also draw on the musical subgenre moniker “shoegaze,” a soft-sounding, introspective style gaining its name from the shyness of its performers staring at their own feet on stage. “Slackgaze” is at once a radical rejection and a sentimental site of connection whose creation is constitutively queer and whose ongoing aim is to hold space for black weirdos who fit the bill.

Often posting music videos of artists who Wimpy identifies as fitting a slackgaze aesthetic as well as other illustrations and artworks, reblogging is one of Wimpy’s curatorial modes (and perhaps the most accessible of curatorial modes for all). The slackgaze Instagram feed offers a bit

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<sup>39</sup> Winston Scarlett’s gender pronouns are he/his and they/them.

<sup>40</sup> Summary of Wimpy and slackgaze are informed by: “Black Weirdo of the Month #67 Wimpy.” *Black Weirdo*, 8 April 2015, <http://uniquenoir.tumblr.com/post/115851366446/black-weirdo-of-the-month-67-wimpy-name-winston>. Accessed 30 April 2016. [This link is no longer available]; Constat, Bailey. “Video: Bodega Bay Unplugged and Up Close.” *Sound in the Static*, 25 November 2014, <http://www.soundinthestatic.com/music/bodegabay-unplugged-and-up-close>; Disser, Nicole. “A DIY Space Where ‘People of Color Have Empowerment’ Gets Ready For Next Act.” *Bedford + Bowery*, 7 July 2015, <http://bedfordandbowery.com/2015/07/a-diy-space-where-people-of-color-have-empowerment-gets-ready-for-next-act/>. Accessed 8 May 2016; Mashurova, Nina. “Slackgaze Releasing *Pain* Zine, Featuring Vagon, Oshun, and More.” *Impose Magazine*, 14 January 2015, <http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/bookish/slackgaze-releasing-pain-zine-featuring-vagabon-oshun-and-more>; Pieters, Colin. “Slackgaze Presents: Slackfest in NYC.” *Museache: A display of art with sense*, 18 June 2015, <http://museache.com/slackgaze-presents-slackfest-to-celebrate-poc-artists/>.

more of an intimate portrait of the livedness of black slack and is another sort of curatorial project—one most of us participate in these days. Posts are typically snapshots from around New York City. In one captioned “pidgy, spearow, hoothoot squad,” three pigeons—the loiterers of the bird kingdom—are captured chilling on the crown and outstretched arms of a statue of the personification of Victory in Columbus Circle. Another is a detail of Solomon Northrup’s *12 Years A Slave*, held open to a page describing the labor of the slave from before daybreak and until after dark and bearing the phrase “there is no such thing as rest.” Wimpy gives this post the following caption: “shout out to all the carefree black girls and boys getting free; slackers, sithlords, travelers [time + space], post-teps, bhudda shorties, I see you. thank you for honoring our ancestors with your rebellious spirits. kick into low fear, and set the vibe right” (@slackgaze “shout out”).<sup>41</sup> A picture from the early winter of 2016 has a more subdued feel, a snowy Brooklyn rooftop landscape bearing the slack-infused caption “you made it out of bed” (@slackgaze “you made it”). You can see some snowflakes are drifting close to the window and lens, the urban environment simultaneously hails the grit of an industrial landscape, bricks laid by someone, sometime. Glass, fire escapes, hulking air conditioners hanging out of windows, transit delays to be sure. But at the same time, the image is conspicuously empty of people. The only person around seems to be the one behind the camera, who may be speaking to themselves, “you made it out of bed,” or speaking to us, the viewer of the image, at some later point in time. The day on view seems well underway, judging by how well lit the sky is for a January/February morning, despite the absence of the sun itself, obscured by opaque clouds the color of disinterest. The phrase is also, of course, a play on the congratulatory “you made it!” It is clear where the speaker would rather be.



Fig. 9: “you made it out of bed” (2016) Instagram image by @slackgaze. Source: Winston Scarlett.

<sup>41</sup> The use of the word “fear” in “kick it into low fear” rather than “gear” is intentional.



It was through @slackgaze that I was first introduced to the work of the Nigerian-born, New York-based artist ruby onyinyechi amanze to whom I now turn. Educated in photography and textiles, reclamation of drawing practices is now central to her work and has been supported by a Fulbright fellowship to study contemporary drawing in Nigeria. Her work is marked by recurring figures including ghosts, aliens, merpeople, headless twins, houseplants, clouds, and human/animal amalgams, engaged in recurring actions like kissing, lounging, doing hair, and playing. Her creative process is in part mirrored in these works as she literally sits, lays down, reclines on the work to complete it—"I am inside that space," she says—and taking on the position of the idler (yvettegresle). Despite these otherworldly figures in the foreground of every image and depictions of black slack, @slackgaze posts praise of her "use of space" in a piece on display at the Studio Museum in Harlem titled "that low hanging kind of sun, the one that lingers two feet above your head, (never dying) house plants in exchange for your freedom...orchids in exchange for your love, who are you kissing, when you kiss a mask?" (2015, 72 x 118.75 inches).<sup>42</sup> Although it includes pencil drawings, pigments and collage, the majority of the image, like the majority of her work, is composed of white space, giving this and other large scale works the intimate feel of a sketchbook, entre into the daydream world of the artist while also refusing to provide any temporal or geographic clues. There is no lighting pattern to give a sense of the hour nor electric lights to cast shadows or locate the scene as domestic or public, natural or built. She explains that she intentionally "leave[s] space for the viewers to insert themselves or participate in constructing the narrative," giving us a sense of what draws @slackgaze to the work: the invitation to connect and engage in a manner similar to their short-lived Chelsea-venue mission (firstindigoandlifestyle). The space allows the company of hosts in her work—specters, hybrids, and the not quite either—to experiment with a timeless, placeless representational language of black diasporic consciousness by "floating in-between worlds" as she has described her own experiences in Nigeria, England, and the United States (yvettegresle). She has adopted the stance of thinking about the white space as another "character" in her work, although unlike Kara Walker's white space which we've come to see as a hegemonic foreground exerting a perverse pressure to produce her famed black silhouettes, for amanze the character of white space is intended to be read as *not* filled but porous, as relaxed and as an open invitation to both fleshly viewer and penciled figures alike (yvettegresle). Indeed, not only are time and locale almost irrelevant to the reading of her works but so too is depth. Certainly, figures vary in size and magnitude in the works, but without scenery, setting or landscapes it is difficult to tether size to position in the field of white space—lending itself to the feeling of floating suspension, a signature of her oeuvre.

In "While a ghost balanced galaxies, She remained unmoved" (2015, 38 x 50 inches) we observe two ghosts: a photo transferred pigeon head on a green glitter bodied ghost amalgam and a graphite rendered black woman's head crowned with colored, transferred flowers. The green ghost carries a nodal representation of intergalactic clouds on its shoulder and outstretched arms, bent at the waist under the weight. The nodes closest to the pigeon ghost are other birds and on the far left a moped is part of the constellation, while the majority of galaxy or cloud structures seem to be composed of nodes similar to black eyed peas. As indicated by the title of the work, the black woman ghost in the lower right is unimpressed, not lifting a finger (she has none), not acknowledging the scene above or behind her. It is not a stretch to see in this work a nod to Zora

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<sup>42</sup> This work can be viewed here: amanze, ruby onyinyechi. "aliens, hybrids and ghosts [2013-ongoing]: large-scaled works." *ruby onyinyechi amanze*, <http://rubyananze.com/large-format-drawings#/id/i9466339>. Accessed 5 August 2016.

Neale Hurston's "mule of the world"—the overdetermined availability of black women for support work. This ghostly black woman instead looks away, out of the frame, head crowned with finely rendered leaves and red roses, both blooms and buds—a classical symbol of pleasure and love. That she wears, not receives, them we might imagine that she made or selected this crown, an affirmation of herself. Her ear and hair behind it are clearly executed (suggesting she can hear any petitions of the ghost behind her). The leaves have a fine border but the left side of her face is fading away, as if light is shining on it from the object she gazes upon off page. But since light sources are not common in amanze's work it seems more likely that she is merging with the porous white background of the drawing, fading from view. Her unmovedness to help carry the burden of the universe makes her available for a more transitory/transparent relationship with space and time. The unfinished left bluff of her face makes room for the viewer to merge with her, join her in putting down our hard working hands. Indeed, her neckline gives way to nothingness, she is liberated from having arms and hands at all in this floating, spectral world.<sup>43</sup>

In another work about bearing a load, "carrying a cloud is easy if you know how" (2015, 30 x 20 inches), features her recurring headless twins carrying a nodal cloud inked gray and blue in parts (more on the coloring). In this, both gender free bodies wear metallic body suits and their typical skins of photo transferred Dutch wax cloth, flagging a popular, hybridized diasporic fashion language. One twin holds the other about the waist and each has a left leg and foot forward, and a right leg kicked backward. They look as if they are running but no features indicate speed in the white space of the drawing. The cloud they carry has little context as well: has the cloud been brought to the ground or are the twins in the sky? The pressure of gravity is unapparent. In an era when "the cloud" signals venture capital, leaked secrets, and data plans, amanze's drawing instead harkens further back. She notes that hers is a practice necessarily emerging from a children's tradition (Corbett). amanze states, "We all draw to express ourselves as children, but along the way we learn a "correct" way of drawing that is centered solely on observation and representation" (Corbett). She recalls her journey back to drawing as her primary medium in graduate school, noting that "The medium is classic. It's universal. It's as old as time, older even than written language. But at the same time, it's constantly reinventing itself and doing away with former parameters of what it could or could not be" (Corbett). We can readily imagine the ubiquitous childhood illustration of a house with a tree and clouds in a blue sky. But, there is no sun here and amanze's cloud is anything but the puffy ornament of our youth—reinvented before us as an angle-driven, architectural formation. Although their faces are absent or obscured, it feels as if they are laughing, getting away with something. amanze again shares the backstory of the twins, "they are usually childlike and adventurous. They climb trees. They do handstands. They're a little bit naughty. This is part of why they don't have heads, it's more to do with their physicality" (yvettegresle). Note she describes them as "childlike" rather than as children—their ages remain unknown to us, meshing with the timelessness quality of her body of work and consistent with her invitation to *any* viewer to step inside the void.

The cloud is held in place by one hand of each twin, but it sways behind them like a full tree or an afro in a strong wind or, again, in low gravity. The title reminds us that theirs is an easy task but only for those with the know-how. One gets the feeling from the playfulness of the piece and the figures' reputations in her works that they did not study or set out to discover cloud-carrying techniques. More than likely, they made it up together as in a game, and skip past us at

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<sup>43</sup> This work can be viewed here: "ruby onyinyechi amanze: While a ghost balanced galaxies, She remained unmoved, 2015." *Artsy.net*, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ruby-onyinyechi-amanze-while-a-ghost-balanced-galaxies-she-remained-unmoved>. Accessed 5 August 2016.



undetermined speed, giving us the impression that the pleasure of cloud carrying is constituted most of all by your partner in crime. Are they bringing the cloud to us or are they running away with it? Getting away with it? Interestingly, when one looks closely we can see that not all limbs are needed to carry a cloud; the right leg of one twin and right arm of the other disappear from view, although we imagine them to be there—phantom limbs projected on to others. Perhaps the missing right foot is arched and pointed perpendicularly to the thigh, perhaps the yellow and black twin’s right arm is raised to support the cloud while the pink and blue twin supports them about the waist. Their space is groundless, who knows what is necessary to propel oneself through space. The apparently one-footed twin seems to do just fine. These absent appendages lend themselves to a disabled reading of the body in the timeless world. Perhaps theirs is a world in which limbs come into and disappear not just from view but from existence, as a sort of extreme form of gray-able being (a term coined by Eunjung Kim to describe someone existing somewhere on the continuum between abled and disabled). Indeed, as the title indicates, carrying a cloud requires knowledge, not ability.



Fig. 10: “carry a cloud is easy if you know how” (2015) multimedia drawing by ruby onyinyechi amanze. Source: Artsy.net.

“carrying ourselves on the bed we’ve made” (2015, 47 x 56.75 inches), is also worthy of our attention. The title, of course, is reminiscent of the punitive aphorism, “you made your bed, now lay in it” meaning the subject made a mess and must now suffer or accept the consequences. But the title also raises in mind the phrase of “carrying oneself” to indicate posture, affect, attitude. How do we “carry ourselves” if on a bed we’ve made? The self on the bed must surely be in recline or repose—and yet, to also carry oneself on it seems to indicate an acknowledgement of the mess, embracing it as constitutive of who we are. The image contains three figures: two ghost heads and

one reclining feminine form. The recliner has her back to us, wearing a tube dress or a wrap (one piece, simple to make and easy to slip in and out of) and sports highly styled hair—a pair of neon yellow afro antennae or branches of coral. She is propped up on an elbow, muscle and fat are exposed, draping the frame comfortably. Her outstretched legs are crossed, suggesting a mermaid’s tail, as in the artist’s other works. The dress fabric matches the hanging curtain above or behind her, perhaps part of a canopy to surround the bed just as the dress surrounds the wearer. The reclining body is resting on another of amanze’s nodal clouds. Geometric and sharp in points, triangles, diamonds and more, yet it feels light. Air passes through the connected points of the structure or air holds them apart and aloft. The recliner’s hips sink into the cloud as if on a mattress.

Both ghost faces have shaped eyebrows, full lashes and lips, narrow chins. The face on our left has her hair wrapped in sparse lines and the color of her face exceeds its boundaries but also ends before filling in her chin. The face on the right has her hair stacked high in a wrap, unfinished and with dreadlocks poking out of the top. Her shading with gray watery ink exits the back of her head in dramatic vertical strokes before fading away. Her eyes glance up and back to the right while the cloud lies over her face leading me to wonder if the nodes are perhaps a memory network—something like a bed composed of memory foam. In contrast to the aforementioned @slackgaze Instagram post “you made it out of bed,” the women, these ghosts, opt not to leave bed at all, but leave *with* the bed, carrying their slack with them wherever they may go.



Fig. 11: “carrying ourselves on the bed we’ve made” (2015) multimedia drawing by ruby onyinyechi amanze. Source: Artsy.net.

Most recently, amanze’s new work was featured at the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair held in New York in early May 2016. 1:54 was founded in London in 2013 to showcase contemporary African art “on an international stage” (“About” 1:54). The work titled, “The Playground (melting into stationary things)” (2016, 38 x 62 x 11 inches), is three dimensional, composed of two panels, the smaller of which swings forward revealing artificial grass is affixed

to its back.<sup>44</sup> This is a playground without traditional equipment—there are no slides, monkey-bars, swing sets or sandboxes. Consistent with her style, all six figures float in her signature white space, but in an interesting turn this floating, yawning space communicates a relationship to the green ground. The playground contains six figures: the pair of headless twins, one doing a head or shoulder-stand, the other laying on the ground with arms and legs tossed in the air, as if tumbling; ruby's recurring neon yellow alter ego, Ada, relaxes upside down with bent legs hooked on a watery blue mass; two grayscale ghost heads facing opposite directions; and one figure sitting on a chair wearing a full helmet with its shield down and nude legs splayed open revealing no genitalia, one arm casually resting on the chair back and the other draped in their lap. Save for the tumbling twin, the figures reproduce the stillness endemic to amanze's work but, in this case, the parenthetical title directs us to understand that their stillness is transformative or transubstantive. One ghost, drawn in the customary three dimensions, is partially submerged in a flattened nodal structure, perhaps a drawing of the drawings of clouds and galaxies appearing in other works. The ghost above leans her face into the blue mass, her lips and nose bleed into the gray puddles within. The helmeted figure, upon closer inspect, is not distinguished from the chair it sits on; its legs and its legs flow into one another in an opaque, milky brown. The feet of Ada, who hangs upside down, are in the process of losing their definition in the black rectangles floating in the watery territory. Her eye lids hang open, her body is relaxed at each joint although upturned. She seems unbothered as her hair drags across the apparent ground of the field.

The potted plants in this image take on another layer of meaning that perhaps eludes them in other images. Here they are the exemplar living object, their color indicates life but their pot indicates fixity. All the figures contained here practice or strive toward their stillness, approximating or achieving thingness, even the twin who fails momentarily, having toppled from its position. Common to black political and aesthetic organizing is the articulation of a striving to exit objecthood—yet, here relaxation leads to the casual merger: slow and characterized by leisure, likened to and idling in objecthood. This work in particular raises in mind Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet*. No one speaks in this image, all are soundless and still. The title's voice describes the scene but does not assign individuality. Rather than jeopardize all it touches as in the fraught dialogue between Joy and David, black idleness gives us new ways to interpret black objecthood. Quashie's text is a long-overdue meditation on the "stronghold of resistance on how we think of black humanity" (100). In it, he attempts to hold space for considering the role of quiet, waiting and prayer in black culture. Citing texts like Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* for example, Quashie examines texts that offer glimpses of the black ordinary and yet, he argues that Maud Martha's life and the aspirational inner lives of black folk more broadly, are not and must not be organized by race, gender and class discourses. For Quashie, depression emerges from the social world and the figure who allows these limiting discourses into their interior world. He revisits photographs from the long African American freedom struggle such as the 1968 Olympic black power salute by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and another of a SNCC organizer speaking with a family on their porch. The distinction between public versus inner expressiveness is vague, privileging traditionally contemplative postures like reading and bowed heads while implicitly discounting the possibility of interiority in the marcher and demonstrator. In attempting to attach black interiority to representation, the text runs up against but does not address the conflation of blackness with loudness and public expression with an absent or unattentive interior--as if public

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<sup>44</sup> A detail of this work can be viewed here: @ruby\_onyinyechi\_amanze. "Detail of "The Playground (melting into stationary things) 2016 On view @154artfair @marianeibrahimgallery @pioneerworks," 7 May 2016, 10:57pm UTC, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BFH6Xzmohli/?taken-by=ruby\\_onyinyechi\\_amanze](https://www.instagram.com/p/BFH6Xzmohli/?taken-by=ruby_onyinyechi_amanze). Accessed May 7, 2016.

expression cannot coexist with or be motivated by interior desires. He notes that the “centrality of expressiveness and demonstrativity in black culture is related to the seeming inconsequence of black life” (110) and he’s not wrong. Yet, time and again, this work takes for granted, that what will save blackness from “not mattering” is a heavy investment in, an inching closer toward, a universal conception of the human he imagines beyond race. One need not look any further than Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* to find a healthy critique of this optimism. Because the human gains its borders at the expense of blackness, he charges us not with relinquishing our race or gender but instead with destroying the world and with it all structures that create and foreclose the territory of “human.” But, on the other hand, we might also look to the work of Eunjung Kim again; her interventions demonstrate that nonhuman objects like sex dolls, for example, which trouble Quashie’s qualifications for humanness: “capable of engaging even needing, others who are human” but, further, are valuably passive participants in our lifeworld (130). Moreover, her recent article, “Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects,” convincingly argues that maintaining the human as an idealized category of being ignores the role of bodies without agency and without subjectivity which have fallen outside the boundaries of the human. She instead advocates for a broader conception of value that makes room for the nonpurposive and proximal “existence” (298). Rather, Kim writes, “Perceiving someone or feeling oneself to be an object in a given conceptual space does not itself constitute ethical harm; indeed, becoming an object provides a point of departure to unravel ableism, normative humanity,<sup>45</sup> and violence” (315). I argue that “The Playground (melting into stationary things)” is a visual recitation and embrace of black idleness and of black failure to transcend object status and, moreover, dares to engage in play with this liminal space—and even fail at failing, represented by the twin who falls from its pose.



Fig. 12: “The Playground (melting into stationary things)” (2016) multimedia drawing by ruby onyinyechi amanze. Source: Artsy.net.

It is difficult not to recall Beulah’s transformation in the previous chapter. In Rita Dove’s collection titled *Thomas and Beulah*, Beulah seeks out the feeling of nothingness in the brief

<sup>45</sup> In this respect, Kim is concerned about the impact of normative conceptions of humanity on disabled, queer, and nonwhite bodies (“Unbecoming” 301).

snatches of reprieve during her children's naps and husband's employment. She meditates on insects or on the color of her own eyelids closed to the sun and saves up this feeling to build a sensory palace of stillness to which she can return as needed, alone. "Daystar" is certainly part of a genealogical project, no poem can be fully disentangled from the others without risking the integrity of each individual piece and yet, this poem does stand out as a window into an elaboration of nothingness—the doing of and the desiring of nothing—for black women. When I take amanze up on her offer to step into her work and to float in the emptiness designed for me, to lie in the bed on which we carry ourselves, I look around at my suspended sisters, ghosts and hybrids, and recognize in fleeting ways the resonance of asexual intimacy. By amanze's hand I find play without the threat of aging into prohibitions against joy, the freedom to abandon limbs, sex characteristics, or the body or mind altogether. I perceive the radicality of asexual touch as the twins run and support each other, leaving their genitalia behind or unmanifested, and not haunted by labor undone or needing doing. In amanze's atemporal white space there is no clock's authority that I fail to satisfy, time and again. The longer I stay inside the piece, the more at home I feel. I can hear the gentle crunching of the artificial grass. I become object; in this sought after stillness my lips are closed, like my floating sistren, and I telegraph my thoughts in titular bursts and resume my melting, my tumbling. I grow my plants, I kiss my mask, I do your hair, and in my idle intimacies with amanze's pencil tips I neither command nor submit. I make more space, and invite you to co-create and carry the cloud with your knowing, without or out of our depth and without interruption. These idle intimacies upon a shared bed with my hand in the cloud and your hand on my waist, without expectation. It's all a game except no one ever gets hurt and it never ends.

At least, this is what I feel when I let myself get carried away. Kara Keeling tells us that the act of looking for missing black queer subjects must simultaneously be a "looking after," as a taking care of the subject, the memory, or the space to which they might one day return. I hold this notion close to my heart and wonder too if "looking after" can also act as a shorthand for "looking past," as in looking beyond or looking away—leaving space, as amanze does, for black women to "remain unmoved." Importantly, amanze notes how easily her themes of diaspora are interpellated into a larger, familiar narrative of trauma that ultimately forecloses other energies, stories, and formations of home that are fundamental to her work (yvettegresle). Home for amanze is instead "fluid." Although born in Nigeria, 17 years elapsed before she returned as an adult. She describes being read as a foreigner, as someone "who is not from there, when I am," leading her to meditate on "how to move through space as an alien" (BlackRook Media 00:02:55). She has taken to the term and featured aliens in one of her series: "it's no longer a term that I think of as a negative thing. I've embrace being an alien and take some pride in that, even, that I'm not from anywhere so I can be from everywhere" (BlackRook Media 00:03:38). amanze's experience of misrecognition amidst her diasporic homecoming is familiar. Unlike Hartman's disappointment and Marshall's mowing revisions, amanze offers us a simultaneous embrace of her "alien"-ation that neither challenges nor submits to constrained terms of belonging but rather floats alongside it. This redirection from what she calls "negative" readings of diaspora does not preclude the sublimation and exhibition of "apparent failures." She states "That human-ness, including mistakes and failures, is something that...is part of the conversation between me, the materials and the process" (yvettegresle). Just as the twin falls down, so does the artist—and both are captured tenderly and without judgment.

In "Blackness and Nothingness," Fred Moten writes, "We study our seaborne variance, sent by its prehistory into arrivance without arrival, as a poetics of lore, of abnormal articulation, where the relation between joint and flesh is the pleated distance of a musical moment that is



emphatically, palpably imperceptible and, therefore, exhausts description” (743). I am drawn to this passage for the ways that it combines the threads of silence and tiredness—the inability to describe as a kind of declarative silence and as the result of a magnitude that exceeds descriptive energy and possibility. Under such conditions, I argue, we discover the permission to sit idly by. Since blackness for Moten is irreducible to plain speech or habit, what choice do we have *but* declarative silence? To turn our heads, as “she” does? In search of an ending for this chapter, I was drawn to the beautiful portal of queer futurity and afrofuturist possibilities but could not make my landing there because I think that what black asexuality and black idleness offer us is the permission to stay right where we are. The freedom from production in both intimate and structural registers, however brief. The declarative silence of asexuals and of idle objects is a present-tense meditative stillness, neither destructive nor creative, but playful and careless of the threat of reification (childlike, lazy). Recalling my concern in the previous chapter with instances in which both resistance and defeat overlap or look the same, I end this chapter in response to the inspiring, but also restricting, call to resistance issued to all members of the black diaspora across time and space. Traditionally, being laid low means to suffer defeat and yet, lying in wait is the position of attack, and further still, laying down is a restorative posture. From the position of the witness, these modes of carrying oneself telegraph overlapping meanings of resting or dying or preparing to strike that all blur at a distance. Let’s take this lying down.

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## Coda

### Still Ordinary

*But black stood for nothing, nothing at all, and coloured stood for even less. "Black" implies some type of group identity and there weren't any groups where I grew up.*

—Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (47)

In contrast to many of the central scenes in *Ordinary Failures* depicting homecoming to the black continent or country, mass gatherings for organizing and protest, containment on the slave ship or plantation, and the forced communion of ideological generalization that overwrites autonomously authored connection, the scene that follows is another sort of isolation and also one of youth. Set in north Wales, the acclaimed memoir *Sugar and Slate*<sup>46</sup> recalls the life of Charlotte Williams, the recitation of which is interwoven with archival work on the history of blackness in Wales. As a young Welsh and Afro-Guyanese woman in “lily white” Llandudno, much of Williams’s preoccupations concern issues of belonging and alienation, communion, exposure and betrayal. Her mother, attempting to garner respectability for her daughters, “sent us out looking good. We sat as ambassadors for ‘our people’ on the four o’clock bus—just one misdemeanour would be generalised to all black children everywhere, just as their supposed disadvantage landed on us” (50). Llandudno is remembered as a “respectable town” where “polite” questions revealed the limits of belonging: “We had no name for that kind of stuff; the word ‘racism’ hadn’t been invented. Only in retrospect can I add up my experience in this way” (49). On her first date in her teenaged years in the 1960s, Williams found her self subjected to questions against which she “had no defenses,” such as “Are you brown all over? Nipples as well?” (69-70). Williams regretted answering the questions “so honestly,” feeling she had “betrayed” her sisters by having “given the enemy precious information” (70).

One of the most “closely guarded family secret[s]” was the use of a hot comb brought home from the continent for hair straightening on Sundays (the practice of which was largely improvised and homemade) (68). Despite being subject to a range of hostilities for her color from classmates and local adults alike, her surprise meeting with another teenage black girl named Simone only revealed that the “gulf between us was immense” (72). She lists the differences that cropped up between herself and the orphan before her “who just happened to have a brown face” (72). At the behest of the social worker who arranged their meeting, the sisters of Beit-eel<sup>47</sup> inducted Simone into the secret and unstable society of the comb. All of the girls involved recognized the ceremonial-nature of what was taking place; in her recitation Charlotte, recalls “the women on Falolou Road” whom she witnessed doing hair in Lagos “chatting in soft afternoon tones” (36) but the Beit-eel foray into communion was markedly different (72, 36). The task of doing Simone’s hair is likened to an “operation”; one sister “managed to make the procedure look very

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<sup>46</sup> *Sugar and Slate* was named Welsh Book of the Year 2003 (“Hay winner’s search for identity.” *BBC News*. BBC, 27 May 2003. Web. 26 July 2016. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/wales/mid\\_/2940110.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/mid_/2940110.stm)>.)

<sup>47</sup> “Beit-eel” is the name of Charlotte Williams’s childhood home. Houses in north Wales commonly have names rather than numbers.

professional” (72). Where mutual recognition may have been possible, the girls found themselves unprepared to nurture such a connection: “We talked hair with Simone but that was the limit of our shared experience” (72). The sisters spent the afternoon hot combing Simone’s hair and giving her detailed instructions on how to maintain the work. Williams recalls the event and the days following it with regret. When she sees Simone in town with her hair “restored to its fuzzy mop” she counts it as a “betrayal” despite the fact that she knows Simone has no resources of her own to keep up the work (73):

She represented something I feared. She was an unwelcome invasion, a reminder of just what might shame me in this dreadful clamouring for small town respectability. Every bit of her dragged me down and took away from my favoured position. I couldn't take her on; I was on the front line myself. She reminded me of what it was I was trying to escape from. (73)

Rather than focusing on the memoirist, it is Simone who requires our attention here in much the same way that the Mammy I explored in chapter four, often spoken of but rarely spoken for, needed some breathing room. Simone is never seen or heard from again by our protagonist; she fades from sight but not from mind. Surely she must have said something during the day-long encounter with the hot comb and its keepers, but she remains just as silent in the narrative of another black woman as Charlotte is concerned she herself is in white Welsh narratives. Simone gets her hair done and is disavowed. She doesn’t follow directions, is insubordinate, even if she had no other choice. Perhaps she could have taken care of the treatment longer, could have come back for more. But maybe, as someone even more outcast than Charlotte herself, she knows that straight hair won’t rescue her from being a Barnardos<sup>48</sup> girl—everything that black is expected to be in the quiet town of Llandudno. In fact, it is Simone’s noncompliance coupled with her blackness that haunt Charlotte. The assumption of readily available belonging and the optimism of unity, this time ushered in by a white agent of the state, is revealed again. Unlike Paule Marshall’s strategies discussed in chapter one of willing misrecognition to create relation, Williams doesn’t revise and embrace her would-be sister from the diaspora; instead, she recognizes and runs.

The attention paid to Williams here is not some coda to a dissertation about black self-hate; this is not my interest or intervention. Rather, *Ordinary Failures* has endeavored to demonstrate the violence of interpellation, the expectation of solidarity, the permission to be exhausted, the possibility of agential silence, and enjoyment of the reification of black idleness. Williams’s memoir follows the strand of hair across oceans—rather than roots and routes,<sup>49</sup> she gestures toward roots and plaits; the hot oil of betrayal and the faint fantasy of the intimacy of sitting still. The long and promising route the hot comb traveled to arrive at the roots of Simone’s hair ends in a failed connection which is burned into Charlotte’s memory. In this project I argue that black failure is neither necessary nor shameful but merely ordinary. Williams’s disavowal of Simone is not some special failing of two isolated young women but rather an ordinary shortcoming manifest on the fringes of a term meant to include them both: diaspora. The defeat that Simone stands for

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<sup>48</sup> The name of the local orphanage. Williams and her sisters were often mistaken for residents of the orphanage because of their color.

<sup>49</sup> This is a reference to Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993, a cornerstone of African Diaspora Studies. His roots/routes paradigm has been taken on by a number of scholars including Jacqueline Nassy Brown and Vanessa Agard-Jones, both discussed in chapter one of *Ordinary Failures*.

in Williams's past is also the resistance she demonstrates to her present. For Williams notes even at the time of publishing in 2002 that doing hair feels like a shameful secret—a feeling shared by her black British relatives as well (69).

Simone's silence, imposed by Williams's narrative, might also be of the declarative sort—(a)kin to Ursa('s). When we read that “[Simone] saw me and looked away,” we are apt to read the alienated girl's turn as one of shame since that is what Williams also shares with us. But, with so little information about a girl “going it alone,” we might also give her the chance of autonomously “glancing” at Williams and of looking away as one might when you have other things on your mind than whether or not a girl who disdains you disdains you even more at the present moment. This is why I find Bed Prasad Giri's assertion that diaspora is ordinary so useful, and why I must insist that we push this observation even further by arguing how ordinary the *failures* of diaspora are. In the ordinariness of diaspora's failings, we set ourselves up for new and more rigorous forms of relating and nurturing intimacy and prepare ourselves for the exhaustive failings of these as well. What is ethical, I believe, about *Ordinary Failures* is the contemplative posture that ordinary black failure insists on between the hail of diaspora and the turn of our heads toward—or away.

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