UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Traumatic Utopias:

Staging Power and Justice in Black and Latin@ Queer Performance

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Alison Rose Reed

Committee in charge:

Professor Stephanie Batiste, Co-Chair

Professor Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, Co-Chair

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September 2015

The dissertation of Alison Reed is approved.

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June 2015

Traumatic Utopias:

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by

Alison Rose Reed

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Getting a PhD feels a little like that scene in *Clueless* where Travis inaccurately reads Mr. Wendell Hall's announcement that he came to class late most often as an indication of his outstanding success rather than tardiness. Arriving (a few minutes past the hour) a bit frazzled but eager, I too would like to stand at the teacher's podium and say a few words (even though, like Travis, I didn't even have a speech prepared). But I would like to say this: writing a dissertation is not something you can do all on your own. Many, many people contributed to my dissertation. I'd like to thank my UC Santa Barbara committee for their faith in my meanderings, Jack—for taking a chance…on an unknown kid—and last but not least, the wonderful crew at Whole Foods for allowing me to embarrass myself by spending hours hunched over an absurdly expensive salad as I typed away at my laptop, without which I might never be Dr. Reed.

Clueless quotes aside, I would like to more earnestly express gratitude for a rock star dissertation committee that not only sounds like a dream, but proved in reality to be more than I ever could have dreamt of—Stephanie L. Batiste, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, George Lipsitz, and J. Jack Halberstam—thank you. Jack, not just for giving me a chance but for actively pushing me beyond theoretical stalemates toward the generativity of queer failures and counterintuitive genealogies. George, for convincing me that I must accept the risks, in a spirit of accompaniment, when going against the grain. For opening me to the world of SOUL (Students of Unlimited Learning), whose intellectual energies during those spirited Saturday sessions reinvigorated the work. For your humble modeling of how to be and do in academia. Some people change their minds; you change lives.

Carl, I have been blessed to have you as my advisor since I entered the MA/PhD program in Fall 2009. Our directed readings my first quarter became the groundwork for so much future inquiry. I was able to hit the ground running by carrying forward the energy from our generative conversations throughout my graduate career, strengthened and affirmed by your ongoing mentorship. I don't know if I ever told you that on the first day of your memorable seminar on Literature and the Human Rights Movement I woke up with quite a predicament. The course began at one in the afternoon, as did the hours of a tattoo studio I desperately needed to visit in order to attend to an apparently infected Monroe piercing. I chose to attend your class with a swollen face rather than handle what was in fact a medical emergency, and I would do it again.

Stephanie, I cannot imagine my life without having encountered your brilliance and guidance. When a student told me that my instruction style, inflection, and way with words echoed yours, I was floored by the compliment. And when I guest lectured on Shange's *for colored girls* in Introduction to African American Literature and looked out into the audience to see you beaming and teary, the impact you've had on my life condensed in a moment that won't ever leave me. In putting the finishing touches on my dissertation, it has become ever more obvious that the actual subtitle of my project should be "Stephanie and her BFFs," as you introduced me to a number of scholars from the Black Performance Theory working group as well as Sharon Bridgforth, whose impact on my spirit has also been transformative.

Sharon, thank you for touching my life and the lives of my students through your work as well as your willingness to engage with them via Skype in the classroom. I, and I'm sure they, will never forget it. Teaching your performance texts brings me limitless joy, and to quote our sustaining email exchanges: *We are on the Journey together fo sho!*

Serving as Graduate Fellow of the *Antiracism, Inc.* program, convened by Felice Blake and sponsored by the UCSB English Department's American Cultures & Global Contexts Center and the UC Humanities Research Institute, without a doubt transformed my ways of teaching and doing, knowing and being. I am "Head Over Feet" grateful for the fellowship of the *Antiracism, Inc.* working group and radical poets/pedagogues: George Lipsitz, Paula Ioanide, Nick Mitchell, Chandan Reddy, Daniel HoSang, Swati Rana, Aisha Finch, Barbara Tomlinson, Sarah Haley, Sunaina Maira, Shana L. Redmond, Kevin Fellezs, Glenn Adams, Daniel "Fritz" Silber-Baker, Ebony P. Donnley, Dubian Ade, Dahlak Brathwaite, David Scott, and of course, Director Felice Blake. Together we opened new worlds in the words that shape our walking.

Felice, I don't know where to start because there will be no end—to my unyielding love, gratitude, admiration, and commitment to our visions of liberation. We may joke, following *Drunk History*, that at least *he fucking listened; nobody does that!* But I have had the privilege to bear witness to just how many people hear you. If anyone could singlehandedly end institutional racism, I am convinced that person would be you. As that task proves enormous, luckily we can go it together. I may be moving to Virginia but I am not leaving you. Our work continues!

To my community organizing family: I would be lost without you. Members of the SB Coalition for Justice, particularly Sunny Lim, Sonya Baker, Danielle Stevens, Michelle Mercer, and Katie Maynard—you taught me how to be an organizer. To members of the Shawn Greenwood Working Group, in particular Paula Ioanide, and Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB), especially Diana Zuñiga, thank you for activating new communities of consciousness on campus. Members of the Coalition for Sustainable

Communities—particularly Ashley Kiria Baker and Corinne Bancroft—we showed Santa Barbara what Earth Day is all about: jails are toxic! And operating in solidarity with People Organized for the Defense & Equal Rights of SB Youth (PODER) reinvigorated the work in every way, with special thanks to Gaby Hernandez, Marissa Jeannene Garcia, Savanah Maya, and Kathy Swift: *Sí, se puede*, and we did!

I feel endless gratitude for the sustaining force of my DAWGs (Kristie, you said it, and so will I…Dope-Ass-Writing-Group): Shannon Brennan, Jessica Lopez Lyman, and Kristie Soares. Thank you for always encouraging me to say what I mean and do what I say. Your presence touches the following pages, which I can only hope do justice to our collective thinking and writing, theorizing and dreaming. I trust that together we'll keep calling new cosmologies, creative coalitional networks, and epistemologies into existence.

Some of this work benefited greatly from the feedback of editors and anonymous reviewers. Chapter 2 was published in *Text and Performance Quarterly* and Chapter 4 is in production at *Lateral: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*. Many thanks to the Editorial Assistant at *TPQ*, Sohinee Roy, as your thorough and thoughtful editing made me a better writer. E. Patrick Johnson, when I felt your approval as I gave my conference paper at Black Sexual Economies I thought I was hallucinating, because you are one of my heroes. Along with Stephanie Batiste, it is a pleasure to know groundbreaking scholars who are also incredible playwrights and performers. Stephanie's *Stacks of Obits* and your *Sweet Tea* stay with me. I am deeply honored that you solicited that paper for the forthcoming Black Queer Studies collection.

I want to thank my friend Marzia Milazzo for reading countless drafts of my work and more importantly, for allowing me to learn from yours. Your support as I embarked on

the job market this past fall kept me going despite the crushing weight of impending deadlines and inevitable rejections. Also thank you to my undergraduate mentors without whom I would not be the person I am today: Julie Prebel, Dan Fineman, Jean Wyatt, Dale Wright, and Leila Neti.

So many forces have sustained this stubborn city girl during my six years in Santa Barbara: the UCSB MultiCultural Center staff, particularly Director Zaveeni Khan-Marcus for creating such an enriching space, and helping me see my vision through during my time employed there; my piano teacher George Friedenthal, whose music wisdom now permeates my daily (life) practice; Julie Carlson for providing *Shelter* from the storm; Bishnupriya Ghosh, for making the English Department a place I want to be; and Jonathan Forbes, for if our scholar-ship felt like it was sinking we just made the ocean look good. Kelly Kawar, my poetry buddy—I would not have gotten through my qualifying exams without you—and Shanna Salinas, I am proud to be called your doppelgänger. Mary Rae Staton, you've made everything in graduate school seem possible, and for that I want to give you a big bear hug every time I see you. Now that I'm moving across the country, I wish I had. Living somewhere for a hot minute also bestows the comforting feeling of being a regular at some local spots. For the folks at the Bourbon Room, you knew my drink and were always right on time. *Meow*. Speaking of cool cats: Oscar, Calvin, Minnie, Romeo, and Rumi, I miss you.

I want to express appreciation and love for my friends who don't live in Santa Barbara but nonetheless have been an integral part of my life here: Kendall Rathunde and Kendra Dority. Kendall, we haven't lived in the same place for more than a passing phase in over ten years (can you believe it?) but I swear you still know me better than I know myself. Kendra, we set our sights on grad school together and you're still that little bird on my

shoulder, guiding me through. Thank you both for grounding me amidst the whirlwind of my 20s—and Kendall, extending back to junior high. You knew me when I was *really* punk (note sarcasm).

And Terrie, there's really no way to adequately thank you, but you'll always be on the soundtrack of my mind—reminding me what joyful noise comes from improvisation.

My students, you are why I do what I do. This list is surely partial, but I am privileged to know Dyne Suh, Rachel Scarlett, Nate Koreie, Ellie Cavazos, Sophie Hassett, Will Ellis, and Julia Olson. I learned so much from all of you. Keep changing the world! I have been blessed to encounter fierce activists and scholars such as y'all in my classes, but I also want to acknowledge those students who met me with more skepticism—to witness their subtle shifts and critical transformations is everything.

I am so fortunate to have a loving, supportive family. Mum, your poetry and empathy guide me. I am so proud to have been raised by such a strong, talented, and worldly woman. And you were right about Ian and Ruth waving at me from the crowd during graduation—their presence will always remain palpable in my life. Father Unit, you may be the most *far out*, *out there* person I know, and I wouldn't be nearly as weird without your creative inspiration. Thank you. I am grateful to have a wonderful stepfamily: Di, Ray, and Michael, much love. My sister and best friend/soul shrub Joanna—it's been a pleasure to witness you dance through life with so much grace, beauty, brains, and passion. Thank you for letting us laugh at my occasional dancing, too. And my future brother-in-law, Ben. I won't be tattooing *Traumatic Utopias* on myself anytime soon, but your enthusiastic suggestion still tickles me.

Lost or not, I would be *nowhere* without my chosen Santa Barbara family, you know who you are—for the ampersands, ellipses, and all the words in between. I'd like to propose

a toast: here's to Mary and the ladies who lunch. Mary McGuire, you're an event—your life a revelation—and as such one of the best things that's ever happened to me.

If my six years in this small coastal town have earned me the reputation of "Old Vampire" on the scene (thanks to my amazing queer crew Chloe, Mary, Diana, and Jetti), then that only adds a layer of playfulness to the seriousness with which I take advice given to James Baldwin, which he in turn passed on to reading publics, that "you have to go the way your blood beats." Anita Stahl, I met you when I finally felt (almost) invincible alone. But my heart now beats for you. And so I go, beside you all the way.

VITA OF ALISON ROSE REED

July 2015

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy, Department of English
University of California, Santa Barbara; expected September 2015
Dissertation: *Traumatic Utopias: Staging Power and Justice in Black and Latin@ Queer Performance*
Committee: Stephanie Batiste and Carl Gutiérrez-Jones (co-chairs), J. Jack Halberstam, George Lipsitz

Master of Arts, Department of English
University of California, Santa Barbara; June 2011

Bachelor of Arts, Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies
Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA; May 2008
Graduated *summa cum laude* with departmental honors, Phi Beta Kappa

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

"Queer Provisionality: Mapping the Generative Failures of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*." *Performance and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Stefanie A. Jones and Eero Laine. Special issue of *Lateral: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*. Forthcoming.

"Traumatic Utopias: Holding Hope in Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35.2–3 (April–July 2015): 119–141.

"Additive Race: Colorblind Discourses of Realism in Performance Capture Technologies." Coauthor: Amanda Phillips. *Performance Art and Digital Media*. Ed. Michael Nitsche. Special issue of *Digital Creativity* 24.1 (Fall 2013): 1–15.

"Scramble Suits and Other Postmortem Disguises: Erasing the Human in Performance Capture Technologies." *CAA Conference Edition, New York 2013*. Ed. Pat Badani. Special issue of *Media-N* 9.2 (Summer 2013): 67–74.

"Disembodied Hands: Structural Duplicity in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*." *Margaret Atwood Studies* 3.2 (September 2009): 18–25.

Chapters in Edited Books

"The Whiter the Bread, the Quicker You're Dead: Spectacular Absence and Post-Racialized Blackness in (White) Queer Theory." *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*. Ed. E. Patrick Johnson. Forthcoming from Duke UP. [Invited]

Peer-Reviewed Performance Reviews
"Mapping Memory in *Stacks of Obits: A Performance Piece.*" *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 21.2 (July 2011): 283–285.

Selected Poetry
"Rest" and "Spider." *CutBank Literary Journal* 83 (June 2015): 55–56.

"Ars Moriendi." *Incite Insight Magazine* (February 2015). Web.

"Punctuation," "Anatomy of an Eye," "Skin," "Texas Sunflowers," "Metal Folding," "Forgetting," "Los Angeles Midmorning," and "(W)hole." *Ocho: A Journal of Queer Arts* 33 (September 2014): 30–38.

"City of Crosses," "Corvus," and "Heidegger, 1966." *Matter* 8 (July 2014). Web.

"Reservoir." *Cactus Heart* 3.5 (May 2013): 15.

"The Forever Shell." *So to Speak*: a *feminist journal of language and art* 22.1 (Spring 2013): 44–45.

SELECTED HONORS & AWARDS

Dean's Advancement Fellowship, UC Santa Barbara, Summer 2014
Featured Poet, *Ocho: A Journal of Queer Arts*, ed. Rae Gouirand, Summer 2014
Academic Senate Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, UCSB, Spring 2014
Humanities & Social Sciences Research Grant, Spring 2014
American Cultures & Global Contexts Center Graduate Fellowship, 2012–2014
Pushcart Prize, Nominee (for poem published in *Cactus Heart*), Fall 2013
Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Collaborative Research Grant, Winter 2012
Contemporary Women's Writing Network Award for Best PhD Student Paper, 2010
Margaret Atwood Society Essay Contest, First Place, Winter 2010
Chicano Studies Institute Graduate Student Research Award, UCSB, Fall 2009

INVITED TALKS

"Antidotes to (Anti-)Social Death: Traumatic Utopia in Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*." Department of English at Old Dominion University, 27 February 2015. Norfolk, VA.

"Racial/Digital/Performance." Co-presenter: Amanda Phillips. American Cultures & Global Contexts Center Fall Reading Series, 1 November 2012. Santa Barbara, CA.

"Unseeing Eyes: The In/Visibility of Black Queer Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." Upper Division Seminar on African American Women Writers, 24 March 2011. Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA.

"Queer Virtualities: The Performative Matrix of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*." UCSB Performance Studies Conference, 5 March 2011. Santa Barbara, CA.

SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"The Artistry of Power, the Power of Artistry: Electronic Disturbance Theater's Utopian Poetics." 13th Annual Cultural Studies Association Conference, 21–24 May 2015. Riverside, CA.

"'How Does a Poem Stop a Prison From Being Built?': On Organizing in the Academy." Modern Language Association, 8–11 January 2015. Vancouver, Canada.

"Day(s) of Absence, Myths of Reckoning: Tyler Perry's Disciplining of Diversity in *For Colored Girls*." Antiracism, Inc./Works Presents: The Anticonference, 16–17 May 2014. Santa Barbara, CA.

"Performance as Pedagogy: Embodying Critical Intersectionalities in the Classroom." Co-presenters: Shannon Brennan, Jessica Lopez Lyman, and Kristie Soares. *Research as Ceremony: Decolonizing Ethnic Studies*. Annual Conference of the National Association for Ethnic Studies, 3–5 April 2014. Oakland, CA.

"Struggling Soundtracks, Soundtracks of Struggle: Against 'Post-Racial' Logics of African Diaspora." American Comparative Literature Association's 2014 Annual Meeting, 21–23 March 2014. New York University, NY.

"The Whiter the Bread, the Quicker You're Dead: Fetishizations of Black Sexuality and Claims to Postwhite Injury in Queer Studies." Black Sexual Economies Conference: Transforming Black Sexualities Research, 27–29 September 2013. Washington University in St. Louis, MO.

"Local Autonomy Networks and Other Provisional Cartographies in the Performance Art of Micha Cárdenas." ACLA's 2013 Annual Meeting, 4–7 April 2013. University of Toronto, Canada.

"How Colorblindness Hurts & Why History Matters." *Against the Gun: Deconstructing Narratives of Violence in Communities of Color*. Workshop at the 14th Annual Facing Race Conference, 23 Feb. 2013. Santa Barbara, CA. [Invited]

"Scramble Suits and Other Postmortem Disguises: Erasing the Human in Performance Capture Technologies." College Art Association's 101st Annual Conference, 13–16 February 2013. New York, NY.

"Close Listening: Toward a Politics of Provisional Coalition in Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*." UCLA Center for the Study of Women's 23rd Annual Thinking Gender Conference, 1 February 2013. LA, CA.

"The Race-Conscious Queer: Social Justice Performance Pedagogy." The Transcriptions Center's Annual Research Slam, 25 May 2012. Santa Barbara, CA.

"Muscles and Mascara: Spectacular Unreadability in Rechy's Outlaw Aesthetics." UCLA Queer Studies Conference, 8–9 October 2010. Los Angeles, CA.

"Rewriting Desire in Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and Morrison's *Love*." The Third Biennial International Conference of the Contemporary Women's Writing Network, 8 July 2010. San Diego, CA.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record, UC Santa Barbara, 6 academic quarters
Antiracism & the Problem of Colorblindness, co-taught with Dr. Felice Blake, Spring 2014
Black and Latin@ Queer Performance Literature, Summer 2013
Black Sexual Politics, co-taught with Dr. Felice Blake, Winter 2013
"Quare" Performance Studies, Summer 2012
Introduction to African American Literature: In/Visibility, Citizenship, and Community, Spring 2012
Replotting Desire in Contemporary African American & Chican@ Literature, Summer 2011

Teaching Assistant, UC Santa Barbara, 12 academic quarters
Introduction to U.S. Minority Literature, Spring 2015
American Literature from 1900 to present, Winter 2015
African American Literature from the 1930s to the present, Fall 2014
African American Literature from the 1930s to the present, Summer 2012
Studies in American Regional Literature: Transpacific Literature, Winter 2012
Global Humanities: Risk and Media, Fall 2011
Women and Representation, Spring 2011
American Literature from 1900 to present, Winter 2011
Introduction to African American Literature, Fall 2010
Introduction to U.S. Minority Literature, Spring 2010
Introduction to Asian American Literature, Winter 2010
Introduction to African American Literature, Fall 2009

SELECTED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Graduate Fellow, American Cultures & Global Contexts Center, UCSB, 2012–2014
Assisted Dr. Felice Blake in planning for and execution of a reading and film series, symposia, conferences, creative writing workshops, and activist roundtables for *Antiracism, Inc.*, a multi-year program that rethinks the meaning of antiracism in light of contemporary shifts in global political discourses on race and racism.

Research Assistant, Hemispheric South/s Research Initiative, UCSB, 2012–2014
Assisted Dr. Stephanie Batiste in planning for and execution of an educational and artistic program that included collaborations and co-sponsorships with research units across campus that share the initiative's commitment to enhancing and complicating discourses of race and ethnicity in the Department of English and beyond.

RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

Director's Assistant, MultiCultural Center, UCSB, 2013–2014
Organized and facilitated an original ongoing series titled "Negotiating White Privilege: A Conversation." Assisted Director Zaveeni Khan-Marcus in writing press releases and planning educational programs.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Outreach Program Coordinator, *Antiracism Writes*, Fall 2013–Spring 2015
Member, Coalition for Sustainable Communities, 2014
Co-Lead Teaching Assistant, UC Santa Barbara, Summer 2012–Spring 2014
Panelist, "Local Coalition Building," California Student Sustainability Coalition Conference, Spring 2014
Workshop Facilitator, "CSC Presents: How to Stop the North County Jail," Goleta, CA, Spring 2014
Workshop Facilitator, "Myths of a 'Post-Racial' Era," Gamma Xi Sorority, UCSB, Spring 2014
Member, SB Coalition for Justice, 2013
Workshop Facilitator, "Coalition for Justice Presents: Trayvon Martin Teach-In," UCSB, Summer 2013
Speaker, "Power & Privilege in the Classroom," TA Workshop Series, UCSB, 2012
Workshop Facilitator, "White Privilege and Advantage," Isla Vista, CA, Fall 2012

SELECTED CONFERENCES & EVENTS ORGANIZED

***Antiracism, Inc.* Anticonference**, Grad Organizer, UC Santa Barbara, May 2014
Co-organized with Dr. Felice Blake as part of the second year of the *Antiracism, Inc.* program, subtitled "Antiracism Works" and housed within the American Cultures & Global Contexts Center. Our anticonference—which brought together the voices of faculty, organizers, students, and poets from across the country—centered on the reading and redefinition of antiracism in the Age of Obama.

Activist Encounters, Grad Organizer, UC Santa Barbara, November 2013
This roundtable engaged activist responses to police murder, global security, drones, immigration, detention, occupation, incarceration, and other forms of state violence with UCSB student organizers, faculty researchers, and members of the Shawn Greenwood Working Group. This event was followed up in February 2014 with another "Activist Encounters" session led by Diana Zuñiga, the statewide organizer from Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB).

Poetic Interventions, Grad Organizer, UC Santa Barbara, May 2013
A special event of the program series *Antiracism, Inc.*, which brought together community members, undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty, as well as New York and Bay area-based Hip Hop and Spoken Word artists. This daylong workshop created new language and images that address the problems and possibilities our current racial landscape presents.

Bodies in Space Performance Conference, Co-organizer, UCSB, 2013 & 2012
Modeled after the Black Performance Theory conference, "Bodies in Space" assembled scholars in an academic performance environment to articulate, debate, and creatively stage a critical question that crossed fluid boundaries of theory, praxis, social justice movements, disciplinary knowledge, and affective response.

***Dreamscape* Performance and Workshops**, Grad Organizer, UCSB, Fall 2012
Coordinated logistics (travel, lodging, budget, scheduling, tech, and promotion) of bringing playwright Rickerby Hinds's *Dreamscape* to campus, as well as a Hip Hop Theater workshop and staged reading of Stephanie Batiste's *Stacks of Obits*.

SELECTED GUEST LECTURES

"Introduction to Globalization and Queer Migration Studies." *Feminist Studies 150*: Sex, Love, and Romance, 3 September 2013. Santa Barbara, CA.

"Speaking and Listening from the Site of Trauma in Morrison's *Beloved*." *English 140*: Contemporary American Literature, 14 August 2012. Santa Barbara, CA.

"Renegotiating Stereotypes in *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*." *English 50*: Introduction to Asian American Literature, 11 March 2010. Santa Barbara, CA.

RADIO INTERVIEWS & PODCASTS

"UCSB Coalition for Sustainable Communities." Interview by Kathy Swift. *Radio Occupy*. KCSB-FM, Santa Barbara. 27 May 2014. Radio.

"*Antiracism, Inc.*: Surveillance." Co-interviewed with Felice Blake, Paula Ioanide, and James Ricks. Interview by Elizabeth Robinson and Gerardo Colmenar. *No Alibis*. KCSB-FM, Santa Barbara. 16 October 2013. Radio and Podcast.

RESEARCH INTERESTS & TEACHING AREAS

Queer performance studies
Critical race and ethnic studies with an emphasis on Black studies & Latin@ studies
Queer of Color critique and queer theory
Identity, power, social movements, and coalition politics
Digital embodiment and technologies of performance
Social identities and popular music cultures

ABSTRACT

Traumatic Utopias:

Staging Power and Justice in Black and Latin@ Queer Performance

by

Alison Rose Reed

Rarely spoken in the same breath, the loaded terms of trauma and utopia serve as provocations to rethink how shared histories of struggle call new collectives into being. This dissertation examines the generative tension between trauma and utopia in Black and Latin@ queer performance texts from the 1960s to the present. In so doing, it offers a theoretical model I term *traumatic utopia*, or the use of historical traumas as the raw material for generating concrete utopias in creative and activist spaces. By focusing on what Josefina Báez calls "that very concrete utopia," I look to how participatory performance practices do not model a utopian future but actually create the space in which transformation becomes possible. My use of utopia, then, is not unbounded or existential but about discrete settings—in the theatre, in the cultural studies classroom, in the performance workshop structure—that collaboratively enable other visions of collective sociality and healing.

Traumatic utopias exist in creative spaces as a site for social transformation through the power of art to expose the root of suffering, not a spectacle of sufferers, to provoke rather than pacify audiences into enacting visions of liberation in their own lives—in ways often

illegible to the demands of mainstream representation or state recognition. In the so-called post-Civil Rights era social actors often locate trauma in a static past, and reduce utopia to a fantasy informed by naïve investments in change. This dissertation intervenes in cultural and critical discourses of trauma by arguing that remembering and mourning are not incompatible with healing, hope, and transformation. Through interdisciplinary analysis of a rich performance archive, my project shifts conversations about trauma in queer and critical race theory away from a politics of (spectacularized) hopelessness and toward the everyday transformation of social realities constituted in struggle. While never losing sight of the institutional, I pay close attention to the way power operates and circulates between bodies at the level of the quotidian. This project thus bridges the divide between analyses that emphasize the institutional at the expense of the individual and those that romanticize agency at the risk of neglecting the devastating effects of power. That is to say, the critique of institutional trauma and the imagination of liberatory possibilities both provide vital optics for art and activism.

Building on Black and Chicana feminist queer traditions of self-definition in the face of trauma, each chapter centralizes social life and spirituality against the grain of a ubiquitous politics of hopelessness—from plays that address Emmett Till's sonic legacy and #BlackLivesMatter, explored in Chapter 1; to Black feminist revolutionary theatre, explored in Chapters 2 and 3; to digital activism and tactical poetry along the Mexico/U.S. border, explored in Chapter 4. In addition, an epilogue reflects on the Afro Latin@ utopian imagination. The Black/Latin@ queer performance literature I close read attends equally to the very real violences and daily lived traumas of imperialism, colonialism, sexism, and racism, and the need for imagining other ways to be in the world. I define performance

literature broadly as texts that exist on the page and stage (plays, ensemble pieces, choreopoems and other works that combine dance, gesture, music, and spoken word)—materializing in and between situated bodies. A genre by definition meant to be read aloud and to transform (in) provisional communities, I take seriously the work of performance literature in shaping and transforming reading publics, particularly when classroom and other communal spaces negotiate texts collectively.

My reading of performance (as) literature centers the critical methodologies of literary and cultural studies more than theatre studies per se. Pedagogy also informs this approach: I have taught all of the texts assembled here so my readings reflect, sometimes explicitly, how classrooms can operate like theatre spaces. In examining performance texts that generate new social modalities, I remain attentive to each work's reception history and cultural context to assess the stakes of its political juncture. This constellation of works rethinks the discursive limits of trauma alongside abolitionist politics and utopian poetics of social upheaval.

Amidst dystopian realities, Black and Latin@ performance literature contends with the structural traumas of global racial capital to forge queer networks of creative solidarity that imagine and inhabit a livable social world. Against the colonialist imposition of borders, nations, binaries, walls, and cages, utopian visions activate the abolitionist demands of cultural producers who seek the dissolution of oppressive institutions. In the face of state violence exist possibilities for speaking truth to power, for mobilizing around social issues, and for creating spaces to grieve personal and shared traumas. Performance literature can be a rich site for all three of these aims: the creation of alternative forms of knowledge production, grassroots coalitional work, and community healing. In exploring performance's

unique possibilities for social transformation, this project demonstrates that understanding trauma as institutional, not exceptional, unearths cultural silences around its experience, as well as creates a more inclusive and urgent space for its articulation.

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Prologue

"How does a poem stop a prison from being built?"

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.

—James Baldwin

I came into this project driven by the question, posed by my community organizing family: How does a poem stop a prison from being built? While my research remains committed to the analysis of power, I find in my organizing work another obligation: to imagine, in collective opposition to ongoing forms of heteropatriarchal white supremacy—from mass incarceration, detention, and deportation to police brutality and murder—what would alternative ways of being look like? While pursuing my graduate studies at UC Santa Barbara, the urgency of these questions pushed my academic endeavors from thinking and writing to also *teaching* and *doing*. Growing up studious and shy, a classically-trained pianist, varsity athlete, and bookish poet who spent my childhood in the Bible Belt South and came of age queerly in Salt Lake City, I followed my eccentric immediate family in rebelling against the conservative forces of my geographic locales with various stages of revolt. This reactionary stance to hyper-religiosity instilled in me an abolitionist politics, but the pseudo-punk anarchist stylings permeating my youth voiced more substance in college as I began confronting the whiteness that clouded my feminism, the internalized heteropatriarchy that closeted my lesbianism, and the racial injustices that no amount of white progressivism could grapple with adequately.

It was not until graduate school that I left the safe web of words in which I had worked through questions of justice, often clumsily and not without misguided detours, to the

sphere of action. Retroactively marking a turning point seems always a false project, as subtle emotional transformations no doubt precede any given defining moment, but I can say with certainty that my graduate fellowship with the *Antiracism, Inc.* program directed by Felice Blake changed my life course forever. Beginning with the "Colorblindness Across the Disciplines" graduate seminar I took from Blake in Spring 2012, which prompted my invitation to serve as fellow from Fall 2012–Spring 2013, I started working through how the institutional incorporation of antiracism perpetuates global racial injustices and bolsters the academy's multicultural managerial regime. Moreover, the academic production of an antiracist subject divorced from praxis mistakes critique as the beginning and end of the work, claiming antiracism as a static identity rather than ongoing action. The *Antiracism, Inc.* working group and program series enlivened my deep commitment to orienting my teaching practice toward social justice. As I resolved to never shy away from linking course content directly to current political realities in classrooms, no matter the inevitable resistance, I simultaneously organized with the Santa Barbara Coalition for Justice, which responded to the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin and acquittal of George Zimmerman in July of 2013.

The following year (Fall 2013–Spring 2014), I continued to serve as the Graduate Fellow of the *Antiracism, Inc.* program and to work closely with Director Blake to coordinate reading and film series, poetry workshops, activist encounters, and direct actions with the Coalition for Sustainable Communities that formed in the wake of prison abolitionist events we facilitated on campus. The Coalition for Sustainable Communities (CSC) believes that meaningful change can happen through education, research, direct action, grassroots organizing, and strategically within the sphere of politics. CSC operated in solidarity with PODER (People Organized for the Defense & Equal Rights of SB Youth) to successfully

defeat the proposed Santa Barbara gang injunction in the spring of 2014. All of these experiences without a doubt have shaped my thinking and writing in this dissertation, returning to the *teaching* and *doing* that transformed my relationship to the university. Aware of the risks of this narrative being interpreted as a paranoid confessional steeped in passé identity politics, I nonetheless insist on locating how my situated identity and political investments fundamentally shape this project.

Riffing on E. Patrick Johnson's inauguration of "Quare" Studies to which this work is indebted,[1] (almost) everything I (as a white queer cisgender woman) know about queer studies I learned from Black and Latin@ literary and theoretical traditions. This was not to appropriate and position myself as an "expert" on shared experiences and social identities to which I make no claim—but because this literature addresses race, gender, and sexuality in ways that I find liberatory rather than partial, race-conscious rather than power-evasive. The works gathered here offer alternative epistemologies for understanding both the complex intersectional dynamics of hegemony and possibilities for justice. The authors about whom I write and teach offer expansive visions of liberation informed by their own artistic and activist practices, as they have been and continue to be creatively engaged in transnational organizing, from global decolonial movements to revolutionary Women of Color feminisms to the Zapatista fight for Indigenous rights to current uprisings to protest anti-Black police murder and white terrorism.

Rather than arriving at academic work already a community organizer, a positionality inhabited by many of the colleagues I admire, theory propelled me to action. This simple point animates my pedagogy. When I tell students that studying literary and theoretical texts

[1] See Johnson's foundational essay, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother."

can shape, empower, and transform their lives—through the development or refinement of a critical social consciousness that urges political action—I am always speaking from a deeply personal place. From direct action organizing to artistic practice, students can find creative ways to link their studies to their own lives and motivate or reinvigorate active investments in the ongoing struggle. As unorthodox as it may sound in an era of the increasingly privatized neoliberal university (with its attendant rhetorics, I will later argue, of "trigger warnings" and "safe space"), I believe that the best learning—and teaching—requires generative tension and even discomposure. Respecting and negotiating situated identities and experiences, I see the classroom space as a contingent community and treat it as such. I have thus adapted a conventional practice of my home discipline of English, close reading, to this community-based approach: what I describe in Chapter 2 as "close listening." Close listening incorporates traditional close reading practices with heightened attention to the way bodies interact in social space. In this vein, some of my favorite texts to teach have been *The Fire Next Time* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (explored in Chapter 1) for the way James Baldwin theorizes identity, power, sexual politics, and whiteness with pressing relevance to contemporary realities.[2]

While activist-oriented scholarship risks performatively enacting rather than dynamically investing in justice,[3] my dissertation has everywhere informed and made me

[2] From Baldwin and other writers I have studied and taught over the years, I learned how the unearned material and social entitlements of whiteness come at the cost of deep spiritual and psychic harm, predicated on very real violences against People of Color. To shape one's sense of self-identification without relying on someone else's subordination provides the foundational point of entry into coalitional spaces.

[3] See Wiegman's *Object Lessons*, which critiques the way a politics of desiring justice animates disciplines such that scholarship becomes an end in and of itself. See also Ahmed on the "non-performativity" of white claims to antiracism.

accountable to my coalitional work and vice versa. Organizing with local coalitions told me another story about oppressive regimes and cultural work, shifting my focus to how artistic interventions can offer what Robin Kelley calls a "space to imagine" (198). As I learned in CSC's fight against the proposed jail and ICE detention center projects in North Santa Barbara County, people will often be more receptive to hearing about the problem if you propose alternative visions of "security" and accountability without cages. Generating inventive solutions can function as political strategy, making artistic creation a crucial part of organizing. This project thus looks to performance as a site that offers collective possibilities for healing, hope, and transformation—as daily process, not future product. Still holding in tension the systemic production of trauma, alternative modes of non-hierarchical relationality open up possibilities for what Tricia Rose calls "(inter)personal justice," which understands communal spaces as a vital site for inspiring political mobilization and change.

Abstract analyses of power speak only shallowly to material realities. Rather than perceiving the persistence of domestic and border hyperpolicing and brutality, the prison industrial complex and immigration control apparatus (with their invented wars on drugs and terror), labor exploitation, and other forms of state violence as signs of defeat, cultural producers continue to posit concrete visions of justice. While the seeds and armed struggle of revolution have been waged at least since first colonization contact in the Americas, this dissertation returns to the liberation movements of the 1960s to find inspiration in their visions of freedom and trace the political backlash and hopelessness that emerged in their wake. Despite oppressive realities, the ubiquity of colorblind multiculturalism attempts to smooth over our era's injustices. While these injustices have become increasingly visible on mainstream social media outlets due to grassroots efforts such as the Black Lives Matter

movement, dominant publics have reacted with ever more delusion in their reframing (see the discussion of #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter in Chapter 1). Since its inception, the *Antiracism, Inc.* working group has sought to analyze the mechanisms through which such logics make sense.

Holding in tension both what confounds and what compels change—or how antiracism gets incorporated into oppressive regimes *and* how alternative social formations disrupt this co-optation—has been central to the *Antiracism, Inc.* program, which in its second year featured the subtitle *Antiracism Works*. As Felice Blake, Paula Ioanide, George Lipsitz, and other members of the working group would continually affirm, a generative analysis produces hope, not just keen awareness of power's machinations. As Lipsitz also insists in "Breaking the Chains and Steering the Ship," the ongoing struggle needs amplified dialogue between academics and activists to produce new sites of organizing in the academy that necessarily extend to larger collective networks. And as the co-founder of the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, urged in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," the mutual exchange among artists, activists, and academics can create new epistemologies and social formations capable of opening us to "not only know better how to live, but how to dream" (145). Knowledge production, political critique and strategic reform, grassroots organizing, and arts practice remain generatively entangled and bound up together even and especially in their tensions and contradictions. Against the "specialized lack of knowledge" actively produced as a white epistemology of denying the existence of Black feminist and lesbian knowledges and experiences (Smith 132), Black feminist queer perspectives, which exist in dialogue with other revolutionary forms of consciousness such as Chicana feminism, can be

structural tools for understanding how the world works and destabilizing entrenched ways of knowing.

Instead of what Sara Ahmed calls the non-performativity of antiracism, as a performative saying that does nothing to enact its promise, "the task is to build upon Black activism and scholarship that shows how racism operates to shape the surfaces of bodies and worlds" (49). Extending this claim to coalitional and relational social formations, this dissertation constellates Black and Latin@ queer networks of creative solidarity, which offer provisions for fighting power and generate utopian visions of abolishing oppressive institutions. While gendered racial regimes operate by continually trying to erase their material history and presenting themselves as natural and inevitable, performance literature proposes alternative forms of collective sociality and healing—concrete utopias attentive to state power's systematic production of trauma.

I chose the historical bookends of Emmett Till and #BlackLivesMatter to trace the competing landscape of revolution and counterrevolution in the so-called post-Civil Rights era where social actors compete against a tide of contradiction: on the one hand, the mistaken presumption that the very real legal gains of freedom struggles marked an end to institutional racism, and on the other, the ubiquitous politics of hopelessness that understandably characterize our moment.[4] Yet, the performance texts explored in this project create visions of collective social life despite deep pain, offering readers tools for understanding power and possibilities for justice. I ask my students to hold both in tension, as to either evade the presence of power or to conceptualize it as an inescapable force *both* leave us with little

[4] I often use "so-called" in front of terms such as post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-racial, etc. to reject the logics of their preemptive declaration of an endpoint to some former reign of terror, furthering the amnesiac U.S. progress narrative.

recourse to reconciliation, reparation, and transformation. In other words, we must combat both the power-evasive colorblindness that pervades classrooms and theoretical understanding of structural racism that see it as wholly crushing, for they ironically leave us in the same place—with little work to do. The communities of which I have been privileged to be a part add an institutional and interpersonal analysis of how power operates in the everyday, urging me toward work that seeks to not leave us in a place of hopelessness but to (re)invigorate our coalitional commitments.

"Finding Voice" through the Aesthetics of Jazz

I now turn to another activist and artistic site that has shaped this project alongside the *Antiracism, Inc.* program: my creative work and performance/poetry practice under the auspices of the Hemispheric South/s Research Initiative at UC Santa Barbara, directed by Stephanie Batiste. Specifically, in 2012 and 2013 I co-organized with my comrades Shannon Brennan, Jessica Lopez Lyman, and Kristie Soares the guerrilla-style conference, "Bodies in Space," after the model of the Black Performance Theory working group, first convened in 1998 at Duke University.[5] "Bodies in Space" assembled scholars from across the University of California system to articulate, debate, and creatively stage our research and political investments through embodied, social, and disciplinary knowledges. In 2013, performance artist Karen Anzoategui led a daylong workshop that incorporated Theatre of the Oppressed methods and culminated in an impromptu collaborative performance open to the public. In 2012, we hosted a two-day event that included roundtable discussions, intensive performance

[5] It came as no surprise when I discovered that I engage with the work of many BPT working group scholars throughout this project: Stephanie Batiste, E. Patrick Johnson, Jennifer DeVere Brody, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Hershini Bhana Young, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Salamishah Tillet, Matt Richardson, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, and Koritha Mitchell to name just a few.

planning, and a master class with theatre artist Sharon Bridgforth.[6] It is this transformative experience with Bridgforth on which I want to focus briefly here.

Sharon Bridgforth is the original Anchor Artist of a group of writers, artists, activists, community organizers, and academics who assembled in 2002 to form the Austin Project (tAP). She is also the innovator of a performance facilitation technique, Finding Voice, which she developed with tAP through the course of an eleven-week series of intensive writing and performance workshops. Witnessing and participating in Bridgforth's artistic process has inspired my creative work, scholarship, teaching practice, and everyday life. In *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project* (2010), the editors and tAP creators Bridgforth, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, and Lisa L. Moore center their artistic process of the jazz aesthetic on three concepts: the body as a site of knowledge, spiritual metamorphosis, and social change. Other principles they collaboratively describe include: improvisation, listening, witnessing "as a community system of support, nurturing, and growth" (Bridgforth 19), "expansion and exploration of time" (Bridgforth 16), polyrhythms, breath work, "*Simultaneous truths*" (Jones 6 original emphasis), and virtuosity. Each year the organizers invite Women of Color activists, academics, artists, and educators, as well as a few white women who have started the necessary work of actively disinvesting in racist structures that benefit them, into a space meant for transformation. All of the

[6] The descriptive language of "Bodies in Space" has surely borrowed from collaboratively written documents with Shannon Brennan, Jessica Lopez Lyman, and Kristie Soares—so I would like to credit them here. I would also like to mention that Shannon Brennan and Kristie Soares were the original creators of "Bodies in Space: A Guerilla-Style Performance Conference and Theory Bake-Off" and hosted the first of three conferences in 2011. Jessica Lopez Lyman and I co-organized with them during the second and third years.

women, leaders and allies alike,[7] "model the most progressive, Black feminist approach to community work" (Jones, Moore, and Bridgforth viii). Workshop participants center their process-oriented efforts on knowing with the body, reaching into the self, and building trust with others. While I think the co-organizers of "Bodies in Space" would agree that the latter proves most demanding in academic environments often unwilling to let go of hierarchical modes of organizing information and people, these principles shaped each iteration of our performance/theory conference.

With the dangers of empathic slippages in mind, Bridgforth's "Finding Voice" facilitation method leaves open the possibility of coming together in difference, rather than stifling its embodied frequencies. The jazz aesthetic thus turns on a spiritual belief in being radically open to possession by someone else, to receiving and learning from cultural knowledges, and to being a medium for one's ancestors. Ancestral memory inspires a critical consciousness of present pasts that advocate collective growth. Part of this consciousness turns on the self-introspection required to know which spirits inhabit you and which remain necessarily opaque. Bridgforth will often open the space with a series of questions that motivate participants to interrogate how their race, class, gender expression, sexuality, and social location profoundly shape their past experiences, present, and presence.

As I will demonstrate throughout this project, the liveness of performance literature provides a unique lens through which to think about coalition because the kinds of textual engagement it demands refuse simple conflations of body and text, instead dwelling in the

[7] I remain critical of the term "ally" given the cultural cachet it holds in the popular imaginary as an identity one can claim performatively without any commitment to ongoing action. See Mia McKenzie's "No More 'Allies.'"

interstitial spaces where one must simply listen.[8] For example, when I asked my students in a survey course on African American Literature I taught in Spring 2012 to creatively adapt a scene from Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* or Jean Toomer's *Cane*, they had to sit uncomfortably with how to engage the work with their bodies, which necessitated heightened recognition of the relationship between embodiment, social space, and reading practices. The results were often stunning,[9] with students in written responses also reflecting on how negotiating a text through artistic interpretation in collaboration with their peers deepened their theoretical analysis and historical understanding of course material. As a strategy for social change, performance allows students to understand and inhabit texts with their bodies.

My experiences participating in Bridgforth's master class helped me refine creative approaches to negotiating classroom dynamics, particularly using performance pedagogy. In an upper division seminar I taught in Summer 2012 on "Black Queer/Quare Performance Studies," for instance, I introduced students to the crossroads of performance studies, critical race theory, and Black queer studies—taking seriously E. Patrick Johnson's quaring of queer to insist upon the inextricability of racial subjectivity, gender expression, and sexual

[8] For example, the few white women who attend the Austin Project every year must approach the space understanding their presence is not immediately assumed or taken for granted (as so many other spaces remain to them) but earned: "they learn that being there in that circle with women of color is a privilege. They have to trade their unconscious privilege for a conscious privilege that they must work every day until they have acquired new muscles for it" (Jones, *Experiments* 9). With a sense of urgency and presentness in the struggle, practitioners must be motivated to do the work because their own humanity feels outraged by global injustices.

[9] I have found that students rise to the challenge despite initial confusion or anxiety. It's also worth noting that such introductory courses encompass a wide range of science, economics, business, etc. majors eager to fulfill a number of graduation requirements, and far outnumber the English and cultural studies majors. This is not to say that students of the humanities and social sciences necessarily have more interest in class materials, but the fact that an accountant and a creative writer can sit with a text and produce equally exciting work reaffirms the generative nature of performance-based assignments across the disciplines. Performance pedagogy, in other words, should not be delimited to theatre and dance departments.

orientation. Following Johnson, I teach Black queer studies as rooted in Black and Chicana feminist theory. Using theoretical tools, close attention to the material weight of history, and awareness of how their bodies signify, I assigned them to collaboratively envision and creatively stage a piece from Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Their artistic adaptation of this choreopoem through original spoken word, dance, music, song, performance poetry, and short film informed their literary analyses of the text and vice versa. Performance, even if, or especially when, participants do not self-identify as "performers," offers powerful opportunities for making meaning and challenging conventional modes of knowledge production in the university setting.

Throughout this project I explore the need to generate alternative ways of knowing, being, and remembering. I would argue that just as participants in the Austin Project must interrogate their own identities, so too must students and readers of Bridgforth's work (discussed in Chapter 2) and performance literature more generally. Bridgforth writes that the jazz aesthetic "is at its best used for the purpose of building nurturing, extending, and celebrating the humanity, liberation, and dignity of all people globally" (16). Confronting history remains a key step in this journey of embodied transformation. Linking course content to direct action organizing, community engagement, and artistic expression, my teaching philosophy affirms that teachers can offer language for students to articulate and creatively fashion critical thinking skills that may have an immediate impact on their lives and the spaces of which they want to be a part. In my classes, I foreground performance literature as never simply reflective of existing social realities but deeply generative of alternative ways of being. This project thus takes seriously the work of cultural production to

map new worlds while forging creative ways to exist within this one. Drawing from my thesis that artistic spaces use historical traumas as the raw material for generating concrete utopias in order to hold in tension both pain and possibility, I always strive to balance the utopian dimensions of teaching as a form of creative knowledge production with the ethical demands of helping prepare students to face what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the "fierce urgency of now" (218).

Coming out of my experiences with Bridgforth's workshop facilitation technique, and using performance pedagogy in the classroom, my project asks readers to visualize and experience texts in coalitional spaces. Central to my research methodology in studying performance literature is to close read *beyond the page* to the world-making practices it evokes. The jazz aesthetic as a practice extends from the theatre or workshop space to our everyday ways of being. It thus applies musical foundations to "writing, theatrical performance, and daily life" (Jones 6), foregrounding the jazz principle of being present: "To do this work, a woman has to show up, to bring her full self, to feel exactly what she is feeling right now. This single task is the most difficult" (Jones 6). And, as Bridgforth reminds readers: "Being present is the tool that improvisation comes out of" (23). Complicating the constraints of respectability politics (examined in Chapter 3) with what Matt Richardson calls a "politics of improvisation" (16), this project remains grounded in the aesthetics of jazz, which goes beyond a critique of the now to the utopian imagination of other ways to exist in that now.

Understanding the discourse of visibility and rights as a limited horizon for social justice movements, performance assembles people not only to imagine other ways to move through the world but to actually create the space in which those imaginative acts become

possible. The simple yet challenging principle of being present describes the Austin Project's notion of spiritual freedom. Freedom is a "habit" and a practice (Jones 9), not a law or a nationalist rhetoric. Jones defines freedom as the ability to abandon fear and self-doubt: "The Austin Project pushed me to unearth the moldy, dank places of fear, and to fully be" (4). Spiritual freedom, then, describes the facility to be fully present in one's life and accountable to one's social world. As Jones writes, "I had thought for some time that my jazz practice as a producer was connected to democracy, but democracy is not the issue at the heart of it all. The heart is personal freedom and group accountability" (353). With the jazz aesthetic and its improvisational ways of being, the pains of life forge new pathways for reimagining its pleasures—those moments transformed by the politicized love James Baldwin described half a century ago in *The Fire Next Time*. This transformative potential must be born out of grappling with legacies the past leaves on the present; these legacies can be traumatic but also provide the raw material for active hope, a hope informed not by sleek political campaigns but by community-based practices of survival and resilience in the face of dire social conditions.

Finally, tAP's community-oriented politics of improvisation, which embraces the messiness of lived experience and finds strength in embodied listening to the social dynamics of each moment, has transformed not only my teaching practice but my academic, activist, and artistic ways of *knowing* and *being*. Returning to the scene of my childhood that opened this prologue, my training in classical piano reflects my predilection for the order and structure of reading sheet music, even in the most expressive of Chopin nocturnes. However, studying jazz during graduate school has organically graced other aspects of my life as I learned to loosen my hold on rigid perfectionism. Improvisational piano, however inept I

may be at it, requires the same kind of openness, presence, and honesty that mark my teaching and organizing work. Jazz practice demands dedicated study, but also another kind of generative engagement off the safe script of notes ordered on a page. This process of reckoning with internal cues and external signs of how to hear a moment necessarily exists in the messy but transformative space of improvisational (re)invention. Amidst extended hands, classical and jazz knowledges, receptive ensembles, and the learned chords and structures upon which performers improvise—I channel sounds and cyphers with untranslatable meanings, felt in the playing.

Introduction

The Political Spectacle of Trauma: How "Senselessness" Makes Sense

i have never understood.
will
probably never understand.
the white mans lust
to eat the world.
to eat the universe. (mars is next)
why he was born with such a rabid
starvation.
why he feigns for power
like
crack rock. doing everything. and anything.
to have it.
no matter how deranged.
why he is in so much pain
he needs to rip the roots of happiness
from the earth
and
burn them into
his smile.

—Nayyirah Waheed

On Friday May 23, 2014, a tragedy interrupted heated debate over the recently publicized words of one University of California, Santa Barbara student, Bailey Loverin, and her student government-sponsored call for the institutionalization of trigger warnings. Requisite trigger warnings, argued Loverin and her contingent, would serve as a preventative measure against classroom content potentially negatively impacting students, particularly those experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Loverin's editorials rehashed nationwide conversations about the institutional management of pain, and eerily anticipated heightened discourses of trauma that would circulate on campus in the coming weeks. On May 21, 2014,

academic/blogger Valéria M. Souza prophesized: "It is as though Loverin is suggesting that one kind of 'trigger warning' will help prevent another, more gruesome 'trigger warning'—that of the school shooting." Certainly unbeknownst to Souza, two days later 22-year-old Elliot Rodger went on a killing spree, stabbing and opening fire on residents of Isla Vista, California. In what the press refers to as his "manifesto," Rodger self-identified as "half White, half Asian" (17), exalting the former and reviling the latter specifically Chinese descent on his mother's side.[10] Before taking his own life, he murdered six UC Santa Barbara students, and of those six, two of the three Chinese Americans killed were his roommates, Cheng Yuan "James" Hong and Weihan "David" Wang. Rodger stabbed their friend, George Chen, 94 times before shooting his next three victims, Katherine "Katie" Breann Cooper, Veronika Elizabeth Weiss, and Christopher Ross Michaels-Martinez, allegedly turning the gun on himself after injuring fourteen more while sustaining a bullet wound to the hip from the police's pursuit (see Abdollah). As the unruly academic blogosphere continued to irrupt over trigger warnings, and what came to be known as the Isla Vista rampage gained international visibility and media attention, the link between the two events emanating from UC Santa Barbara has remained only implied. However, explicitly connecting the discourse surrounding trigger warnings and the Isla Vista tragedy shapes the politics and perils of how trauma gains institutional legibility.

Immediately, a discourse of "senseless violence" emerged in the administrative response to the UCSB tragedy; and later, calls for action around better mental health services

[10] According to Rodger: "Full Asian men are disgustingly ugly and white girls would never go for you. You're just butthurt that you were born as an asian piece of shit, so you lash out by linking these fake pictures. You even admit that you wish you were half white. You'll never be half-white and you'll never fulfill your dream of marrying a white woman. I suggest you jump off a bridge" (qtd. in Glasstetter).

and gun control. What fell away from the traumatic impact of the event, however, were the thoroughly racialized, gendered, and sexualized motivations behind Rodger's ultimately suicidal rampage. Documented in his manifesto as well as male chauvinist "Men's Rights" Internet forums and YouTube videos (see Theriault; Garvey), Rodger's deep hatred of People of Color, interracial relationships, and his misogynistic idealization of white women as sexually available symbols of white supremacy and British aristocracy, fueled his rage against the world. However, as the son of an ethnically Chinese mother from Malaysia and white British father, few on campus wanted to acknowledge his deep investment in whiteness and class privilege,[11] much less link it to the culture of Isla Vista. Yet, across the political spectrum media pundits, journalists, and bloggers fiercely debated his racial identification, arguing that an overemphasis on his whiteness further marginalized and minimized the complexities of Hapa identity, while a refusal to acknowledge his alliance with whiteness risked erasing the deeply misogynistic and racist motivations underlying Rodger's self-destructive and premeditated acts of violence (see DeVega; Hsu; Walsh; Guillermo). Balancing both arguments, we must understand Rodger's deep investment in white supremacy as inseparable from his misogyny, class privilege, *and* internalized racism—exposing the deadly logics of white identity production through exclusion, subordination, and disavowal. With or without passing privilege, Rodger did not have full access to the entitlements of whiteness by the racial logic of hypodescent, a social inequity about which he was vengeful. His desire for accumulating the symbols of power in a white supremacist

[11] Throughout the dissertation I conceive of whiteness not as an essentialist or biological racial identification but in the vein of critical race scholars Cheryl I. Harris and George Lipsitz, as a kind of property invested with legal, material, and cultural privileges. Whiteness accumulates value in the exploitation and subordination of the lives and labor of People of Color, but can be accessed to varying degrees (and in complicated ways) by whites from all socioeconomic backgrounds and migration histories as well as People of Color.

world—money and cultural capital, (hetero)sexualized white women, the exploitation and denigration of People of Color—indicates the very real dangers of hegemonic demands for assimilation into existing social institutions. Rodger's case makes clear the plasticity of whiteness in a multiculturalist racial order where the active production of white supremacist epistemologies and policies takes on many faces, although those invested in its logics still experience racially differentiated access to its accumulated returns. While critics widely acknowledge race as a social construction with violent material manifestations, the porous and malleable boundaries of racial identity-making can confound even our best efforts to examine its psychic and social effects.

During a memorial event at which the English Department Chair asked me to say some words, I read the full text of the poem cited above by Nayyirah Waheed. Despite having received approval from the Chair, the selection was met with shock and dismay by other faculty and students gathered in the space—for my apparently distasteful appropriation of a tragedy to further my own political agenda.[12] When my choice was critiqued through the language of needing to protect the traumatized from further harm, I began thinking more about the link between the disproportionate impact of trigger warnings being mobilized not only to silence dissent, but also to dictate the boundaries of grieving trauma. Claims to injury so often authorize violence, from white feminist platforms for reform that ultimately reinforce the carceral state to institutional demands for "safe space" that exclude the very people for whom safety does not function as an entitlement of racial privilege.[13]

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[12] The fact that I was asked to speak in my capacity as an educator and organizer actively committed to justice work added to the perhaps all too predictable irony of the poem's reception.

[13] For a critique of the way "safe space" discourse can marginalize the very peoples for whom it would seem to account, see Christina B. Hanhardt's *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the*

Given accusations leveled against my reading of this poem for being unsuitable to the demands of "senseless" violence and the necessity of "safe" (read: power-evasive) spaces in its wake, the conversation about trigger warnings seemed ominously timely. Carefully but perhaps naïvely, I stood by the appropriateness of what seemed like an exceedingly relevant poem to an event that shook me and about which I was deeply engaged in mourning and processing with my colleagues, friends, and students. For us, Rodger could not simply provide a convenient scapegoat for social ills around gun control and mental health reform, no doubt connected concerns, but indicated a larger structural issue around the psychic *and* material harm of identity investments across racial lines. Rodger was deeply wedded to the logics of heteropatriarchal white supremacy, which in my classrooms and social spaces felt inseparable from discussions of how his violence traumatized communities already vulnerable to systemic suffering. Moreover, the administrative response to dramatically increase the police presence on campus in the tragedy's wake further compounded the limits of whose communities warrant protection.

Deeply disturbed by the privileging of only one kind of grieving that divorced power or "politics" from the tragic events, I began thinking about the stakes of mourning in relation to proximities of pain and accountability to the "communities" of which we imagine ourselves a part. It was clear from the endless repetition of a discourse of unspeakability—we have no words, no analysis of such senseless violence—that institutional authorities and social actors have a vested interest in actively refusing to engage with the structural forces that make such violence not aberrational but systemic, and bound to happen again. It hurts and confounds because for many, it is precisely the interconnected forces of misogyny and

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Politics of Violence (2013). For a discussion of how mainstream feminist demands have often reinforced the carceral state, see Dean Spade's "Intersectional Resistance and Law Reform."

racism that make pathological violence so painful to cope with, rather than a distraction from the process of confronting and working through tragedy. Trauma does not exist as an aberration for people who experience routinized violence in their daily lives. Yet, the dominant public's discourse of "senselessness" publically mourns tragedy while disavowing its underlying causes.

For aggrieved communities whose daily traumas of racism and misogyny remain unrecognized and unmemorialized by dominant publics, grieving cannot be disentangled from an understanding of power. While cultural critics surely brought a power-cognizant analysis to the table (see Ha; Valenti; DeVega), reading even a fragment of Rodger's manifesto makes unavoidable his linked investments in white supremacy and misogyny, and the internalized racism that led him to reify whiteness as "superior" and Asianness as "inferior." In the context of widespread circulation of his manifesto and analyses of the interconnected forces of sexism and racism that produce this pathology of violence, a sanitized "how could it be?" reaction reflects an investment in the ongoing production of white innocence, which can only be understood as willful delusion.

Claims to innocence and unspeakability further the hold of white supremacist misogyny on this nation, a nation that disproportionately disavows the logical limits of its own routine violences. Refusing to recognize Elliot Rodger's life and death as such, and projecting all the social ills of our time onto one individual, enables a mass disavowal of collective accountability for structures of power that perpetuate daily—not aberrational—traumas normalized by systems of power. As the student activist response on campus made clear, the most ethical response we can have in the wake of such tragic events—if we have the time, energy, and resources—is to fight. To fight for those lives and so many others

unjustly lost, to fight against the systems of oppression that normalize such violences, can be one form of collective healing. When we come together "as a community," are we mourning our own inability to truly mourn?

This question cannot be untangled from the simultaneous rehashing of trigger warning debates. Loverin's call for campus policies on trigger warnings garnered national media attention after publishing opinion pieces on mainstream platforms such as *USA Today*, where she writes:

> Rarely does one not know the subject of a business meeting or the themes of a movie playing in theaters. In a classroom, however, professors screen independent films or self-made documentaries with no public information available. Like movie ratings, trigger warnings can make a world of difference.

Immediately locating higher education classrooms in a managerial and entertainment context, Loverin argues that rape survivors and war veterans, to her mind exemplary PTSD sufferers, may be triggered by educational materials such as films. Since professors should certainly be sensitive to the fact that their course material reflects people's daily lived experiences, the problem lies not so much with Loverin's point as with its framing. Like much of the contemporary debate around trauma, tragedy, and trigger warnings, Loverin reverts to a popular discourse of trauma that occludes the idiosyncrasy of what triggers traumatic flashbacks, and professional recommendations from research indicating that trigger avoidance may in fact prolong the healing process, thus exacerbating suffering.[14] Loverin's argument cannot be untied from the commodification of higher education, and the embedded expectations that attend the student-as-consumer model. What's more, the increasingly

[14] In "Triggernometry," Souza quotes directly from the *Handbook of PTSD: Science and Practice* (2010), which explains that avoiding trauma can prevent healing: "Negative reinforcement of fear through behavioral avoidance is the primary process that is postulated to sustain, and even promote, the maladaptive fear response" (41).

privatized neoliberal university, with its multicultural managerial regime, fosters the conditions for students to make claims on university curricula censoring potentially triggering (i.e. "political") content.

This administrative move toward trigger warnings disproportionately impacts the humanities and social sciences in general, and the social justice-oriented classroom in particular. Any space that facilitates conversations about the global traumas connected to heteropatriarchal white supremacy can be triggering, but educators willing to address such concerns should be the most likely candidates to treat these issues with care—a hypothetical worth stating, as the messiness of human interaction in lecture halls or any public space for that matter disallows the promise of trigger-protected zones. As Avgi Saketopoulou, a practicing clinical psychoanalyst, writes on *Bully Bloggers*: "Imagining an un-traumatized other affectively subsidizes the notion that a trauma-free zone exists." Moreover, the investment in *institutionally-codified* trigger warnings often comes from students, like Loverin, who proclaim themselves trauma-free victims of trauma talk. When the multicultural managerial university's privatization guarantees that aggrieved communities newly represented in diversity curricula will be absented from classrooms, one has to wonder for whom trigger warnings offer protection.

These responses to trigger warnings, and the Isla Vista tragedy writ large, miss a key point about the discursive limits of *trauma* and *safety*: for many students, who experience the daily impact of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and endemic sexual violence on college campuses, the university never was a trauma-free space. Because of its leveraging power to privilege the presumed safety of certain lives over and against others, this introduction seeks to situate trauma as a cultural discourse and a technology of silencing.

This is not to minimize the very real need to treat ongoing experiences of trauma, and the wounds of heteropatriarchal white supremacy, with care in pedagogical and communal spaces. But understanding trauma as exceptional, rather than woven into the social fabric of oppressive regimes, perpetuates a discourse of suffering as detached from the daily experiences of aggrieved groups.

While remaining attentive to material experiences of trauma, the discursive construction of trauma and injury often protects hegemonic interests by silencing and sanitizing those very traumas it seeks to redress. As the administrative and popular response to the Isla Vista massacre on campus testifies, asking students to understand the violence apart from the social and political investments to which it spoke maintains an illusion of whiteness and maleness as unaccountable and innocent. In his provocative and widely disseminated polemic, "You Are Triggering me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma," J. Jack Halberstam addresses how the neoliberal co-optation of trauma privatizes public pain, which could otherwise motivate collective responsibility and accountability for the systemic production of suffering. As he writes, "neoliberalism precisely goes to work by psychologizing political difference, individualizing structural exclusions and mystifying political change" (*Bully Bloggers*). Trauma, now an infinitely malleable term, has been wielded more often to silence conversations than to open them up, to claim injury rather than an *identity formed through trauma* that acknowledges its constitutive force. To recognize the traumatic nature of identity production through systematic suffering can motivate political investment and participation in a broader social world. We must then ask how trauma can be used in service of the transformational work imperative to grassroots organizing for social justice—rather than mobilized as commodity

or as a voyeuristic display of pain legible to the state only in its exceptionality, decontextualized from larger social forces.

From heated academic debates about trigger warnings and institutional censorship to the popular circulation of discourses around redressing historical atrocities, the question of whose traumas gain legibility and how divergent communities negotiate them remains a deeply political issue. If the 2014 thematic foci of the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*—on trauma in May and tragedy in October—serve as any indication, literary and cultural critics have fixated on if not fetishized questions of past and present traumas and how to address them. My concern here is not to trace the history of trauma studies as a discipline,[15] but to examine how trauma discourse has been deployed in institutionally-sanctioned responses to tragedy. As I witnessed in the wake of the 2014 Isla Vista massacre, social actors often instrumentalize the rhetoric of unspeakability that has defined the field of trauma studies to silence long legacies of mourning *as protesting* the structural conditions that underlie racist, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic violence. During board meetings, classroom conversations, and campus-wide memorials, I was troubled by the privileging of only one kind of mourning invested in divorcing structures of power from the tragic events. Rhetorics of unknowability around trauma and tragedy can stand in the place of analysis and interrogation. My dissertation intervenes in this critical and

[15] The operation of trauma as a regulatory tool of institutional authorities and power has been at play since its medicalization in the late nineteenth century. Trauma's discursive function can thus be thought alongside the concurrent emergence of sexuality as a social identity. As Foucault famously writes, homosexual practices were punishable through legal and religious sanctions prior to the late nineteenth century, but it wasn't until that point that "homosexual" emerged as a categorical distinction. Trauma and (homo)sexuality exist at the center and periphery of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, pathologizing, delimiting, and shaping their articulation through biopolitical and necropolitical regimes. A century later, academics consolidated their interest in both trauma and sexuality as objects of study.

cultural discourse of trauma by arguing that remembering and mourning are not incompatible with healing, hope, and transformation—as daily praxis, not perfected futurity.

What the endless repetition of the term "senseless violence" cannot account for is that trauma must be understood as systematic, not exceptional. Despite being Hapa of Chinese descent, Rodger's hatred of People of Color in which he was of course implicated himself reveals his alliance with white supremacy. Rodger, in other words, exhibited a deadly form of internalized racism projected outward and manifesting the social pathologies of whiteness. After all, most school shooters are white (see Plank). Rodger's self-hatred consolidated dominant social logics and resulted in misogynistic and white supremacist violence, which indicates the deep pains and pathologies of white racism, not Hapa identities and experiences (see Lemi). While refusing dominant narratives that Hapa and other multiracial identities inevitably lead to internalized racism and irresolvable psychic tension (such as the "tragic mulatto" stereotype), Grace Hwang Lynch reflected on "what we can learn from the racial subtext of his despair," suggesting that intracommunal love and support networks can offer an antidote to the differential production of toxic identity attachments. This dissertation dwells in such an alternative response to trauma by taking seriously how deep pain can produce violence, but can also be a vital resource for community organizing and struggle.

While academic and popular demarcations of trauma often center on its spectacularity, my dissertation looks to legacies and contemporary manifestations of activist-oriented performance practices that stage both pain and possibility. And while I here elaborate a particular instantiation of trauma talk at UCSB through a reading of Rodger's complex identity investments, this project otherwise delimits its scope to Black and Latin@

queer performance literature from the 1960s into the 21st century.[16] I define performance literature broadly as texts that exist equally on the page and stage (plays, ensemble pieces, choreopoems and other works that combine dance, gesture, music, and spoken word)—materializing in and between situated bodies.[17] A genre by definition meant to be read aloud and to transform (in) provisional communities, I take seriously the work of performance literature in shaping and transforming reading publics, particularly when classroom and other communal spaces negotiate texts collectively. In the face of state violence exist possibilities for speaking truth to power, for mobilizing around social issues, and for creating spaces to grieve personal and shared traumas. Performance texts can be a rich site for all three of these aims: the creation of alternative forms of knowledge production, grassroots coalitional work, and community healing. This dissertation thus wrests trauma from its institutional incorporation, finding possibilities for justice in reclaiming the terms through which trauma as such can be articulated.

Traumatic Utopias, Utopian Traumas

Trauma and utopia are rarely spoken in the same breath, but juxtaposing these two loaded terms reimagines how shared histories of struggle call new collectives into being. While the freighted terms of trauma and utopia have many uses, I invoke them strategically, not

[16] However, this work could be extended generatively to other social groups constituted in struggle, such as the Asian American communities on which I have too briefly focused here.

[17] Matt Richardson defines performance novels specifically as "texts that are written both to have a life on the page and to be read aloud or performed onstage" (185). Performance literature includes novels but also poetic arrangements such as the choreopoem. It can thus be understood in a more expansive sense as literature that evokes performance elements, whether traditional theatre (as in a staged play) or spoken word: anything that embeds within it possibilities for existing both on the page and a stage.

universally. I argue that utopia exists as a process-oriented communal space that negotiates pain and possibility—*not* as an ideal world with its own set of principles, bound to reinscribe the very problems it seeks to resolve. Through a focus on how performance shapes and is shaped by historical legacies and social movements, this dissertation looks specifically to how participatory performance practices do not model a utopian future but actually create the space in which transformation becomes possible.[18] My use of utopia, then, is not unbounded or existential but about discrete settings—in the theatre, in the cultural studies classroom, in the performance workshop structure—that collaboratively enable other visions of collective sociality and healing.

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[18] Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* (2005) provides an important frame for thinking about the way theatre spaces motivate new ontological and intersubjective ways to be. Dolan describes what she terms "utopian performatives" as "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (5). Dolan's project complicates the real world/theatre divide by looking at affective response as a political category, yet she believes that utopian performatives are "most effective as a *feeling*" (19), and thus "can't translate into a program for social action" (19). Pushing Dolan's model of future-oriented "hopeful feeling" grounded in the "fantasy" of the theatre's magic (7), the performance process of traumatic utopias blurs the boundaries between art and activism. Performance literature, then, cannot be understood as a dreamlike space starkly contrasted to the outside world. Moreover, performance literature politicizes affective circuits flowing through an audience by seeing the communal space opened up in performance not just as a *catalyst* for meaningful action but as the actual *site* of social change.

Building on Dolan's notion of the utopian performative as a "placeholder for social change, a no-place that the apparatus of theatre […] can model productively" (63), traumatic utopias carve out a concrete presence in the now, materializing utopian visions in daily practice. Dolan's confidence in the "common human need to hope" (21) provides a crucial antidote to the theoretical backflips whereby some cultural studies theorists disavow its possibility (21). I agree with Dolan that performance "might resurrect a belief or faith in the possibility of social change" (21). I do, however, believe that we need to consider how hopefulness can give way to post-racial discourses that imagine theatre as a post-race space rather than a communal site that helps participants work out difficult histories. Claims to empathic understanding often aspire to dissolve difference through some version of "radical humanism" that transcends material differences and negates the force of structure on people's daily lives (2). Dolan's gesture toward "common humanity" and a "more complex universal" risks reproducing post-racial discourses that pre-empt conversations about the way power operates in performance spaces by understanding community as dissolving, instead of respecting, difference (22, 163). The desire to find common ground in affective shifts rather than "unity in difference" reifies the universal even as it attempts to complicate and reclaim it (Keeling 73). This project is thus indebted to Dolan's work while extending its terms.

Through a specifically queer lens, "Traumatic Utopias: Staging Power and Justice in Black and Latin@ Queer Performance" revisits the interaction between performance literature and social movements from the 1960s to the present—beginning with plays that address Emmett Till's sonic legacy and #BlackLivesMatter, explored in Chapter 1, to Black feminist revolutionary theatre, explored in Chapters 2 and 3, to Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's digital activism and tactical poetry, explored in Chapter 4. In so doing, my project shifts conversations about trauma in queer and critical race theory away from a politics of hopelessness and toward the everyday transformation of social realities constituted in struggle. I offer a theoretical model I term *traumatic utopia*, or the use of historical traumas as the raw material for generating concrete utopias in creative and activist spaces, from performance to pedagogy to the staging of public debate. The playwrights and theatre artists I explore understand an analysis of both institutional trauma and the imagination of liberatory possibilities as vital optics for art and activism. In sum, this dissertation understands systematic trauma as constitutive of identity but also generative of alternative forms of collective sociality. My reading of performance (as) literature rather than discrete stagings of each text centers the critical methodologies of literary and cultural studies more than theatre studies per se. Pedagogy also informs this approach: I have taught all of the texts assembled here so my readings reflect, sometimes explicitly, how classrooms can operate like theatre spaces. In examining how performance texts can generate new social modalities, I remain attentive to each work's reception history and cultural context. Given that artistic form does political work in the world, this project traces popular reactions to and appropriations of particular pieces in order to locate the stakes of a text's historical juncture.

Aware that ideas, particularly those invested in justice, risk hegemonic appropriation, I turn to the dangerous double of *traumatic utopia*, its ideological opposite: spectacularized suffering emptied of its historical referent, what I call *utopian trauma*, turns on the pleasure-seeking consumption of racialized pain as a way to displace collective accountability for violence. Sterilizing trauma through processes of displacement and metaphorization, utopian trauma operates as a kind of "colorblind" melodrama that characterizes the failed project of U.S. multiculturalism's politics of spectacularized suffering.[19] I use the term "utopian" because colorblind discourse imagines racism as no longer existent in institutionalized form; if we already live in a utopian world without racism, then social actors disavow their implication in its mechanisms and refuse to work toward its eradication. Utopian trauma works paradoxically by making something appear in order to declare it disappeared. This politics of recognition-through-disavowal maneuvers in both spheres of media representation and the law.[20] As I explore in Chapter 3, performance repertoires of trauma can and have

[19] Colorblindness ideology elides racism's ongoing, cumulative effects and affects. The Civil Rights paradigm of public acknowledgement and redress is limited in its demand for "proof of injury," particularly when the psychic realm is incalculable. According to colorblind liberals, the "race problem" was put to rest after Civil Rights legislation; they erect monuments for figures like John F. Kennedy as benevolent saviors, while ignoring the fact that grassroots movements for rights were led by People of Color, many of whom were murdered as a result of their activism. Yet Civil Rights rhetoric lives on, as white people cast themselves as the past's heroes and today's "victims" of affirmative action. Through discourses of cultural pathology, victim-blaming, and spectacular white dissociation from individualized acts of racism divorced from their institutional context, colorblindness ideology charges conversations about race with irrelevance if not full-blown racism. In a society that disavows the existence of systemic forms of racism, and celebrates "post-identity" politics in which all identity is constructed and thus supposedly equal, multiculturalism's safe containment of certain kinds of societally sanctioned difference allows it to coexist alongside colorblindness without being perceived as contradictory; when the nation pushes an agenda of diverse representation, equal opportunity, and cultural (rather than racial) "pathology," then race no longer *matters*.

[20] For a relevant example that extends beyond the U.S. context, Hershini Bhana Young's discussion of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission describes how it evaded collective social responsibility by individualizing trauma: "in neglecting those millions of people whose suffering under a brutal system was less spectacular, they privileged the *display* of pain. In other words, the

been incorporated by hegemonic social actors to present spectacles of racialized suffering that recant their structural force.

Yet, instead of instrumentalizing the pain of others, the recognition of one's own situated relation to personal and social traumas can motivate political consciousness, accountability, and action. As Saketopoulou writes against the logic of the trigger warning: "In its best iterations, political consciousness builds its density by borrowing from our most deeply personal experiences. That disturbance is more than a purely cognitive exercise, it is one of *veritable and deep pain*. To put it differently, anesthetizing oneself to one's pain is both an individual and social liability" (*Bully Bloggers*). Rather than possessively claiming another person's trauma as one's own, social actors must seek to recognize their own effect in and accountability for a culture of systematic trauma. The traumas of heteropatriarchal white supremacy, in other words, impact not just those communities aggrieved by its violences. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other oppressive frameworks exist as socially sanctioned and actively produced psychic sicknesses predicated on violence against targeted groups and in need of institutional acknowledgment and redress. As James Baldwin explains:

> Loving anybody and being loved by anybody is a tremendous danger, a tremendous responsibility. Loving of children, raising of children. The terrors homosexuals go through in this society would not be so great if the society itself did not go through so many terrors which it doesn't want to admit. The discovery of one's sexual preference doesn't have to be a trauma. It's a trauma because it's such a traumatized society. (Baldwin, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats" 63)

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daily workings of an unjust system became secondary to the spectacle of wounded bodies and cold-hearted killers" (18). Moreover, Young argues that "this linking of subjugation with the wounded body on display functions to naturalize the processes of race. Performances of blackness become reduced to the spectacle of pained domination, thereby creating categories of black 'victims' whose agency is elided in the interests of the commission's judgments of guilt" (18).

Rather than understanding a culture of trauma as only affecting aggrieved communities, Baldwin shows us that it must be exposed as belonging to those who possessively disavow responsibility for that systematized suffering. Shifting the terms of accountability opens up a way for coalitions of consciousness to form in the face of trauma's institutional exclusions and evasions. Community organizers work to expose the violence of structural oppression and protest the terms meant to dictate experience. Part of this making visible of material and discursive violence has been to demand that a critique of institutional power ask individuals who benefit within those institutions to take collective responsibility for their actions and interpersonal interactions. Instead of pathologizing aggrieved groups for structural injustices, it is time for a traumatized dominant culture to wake up from the fantasy of its injury to the reality of the devastating impact ideologies of inferiority and power-evasiveness have on their psyches. Trauma can make demands rather than concessions, convene communities instead of representing them wholesale to appeal to mainstream affective desires for circumscribing the legibility of harm.

Unseen Evidence: The Institutional Management of Trauma

An African American man suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was refused treatment because he could only point to James Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* as proof of injury. In "Trauma's Essential Bodies," Maurice Stevens recounts this story of his colleague's patient, finding unsettling its narrative "resolution" through therapeutic restitution: in an unforeseen twist of fate, the man was hit by a car, providing just the alibi he needed for treatment when the text of the body and the body of the text fail to index trauma in the eyes of the medical establishment. The man's physicalized wounds sufficed as visual

evidence of what remains unseen and unaddressed as trauma. Stevens thus offers a critical trauma theory grounded in a critique of the discursive formation of trauma as a spectacular or single defining event, instead turning toward its daily manifestation in embodied identities and social formations. This section focuses on what Stevens's anecdote implies about the cultural work of literature in addressing and redressing individual and institutional traumas.

Critical trauma studies emerges out of disciplinary crisis: psychoanalysts have critiqued the humanities for appropriating trauma for diverse multidisciplinary aims, critical race theorists have rightfully found issue with the universalization of trauma in that Western individualist models ignore situated and specific practices of healing, and cultural critics have taken the popular use of trauma to task for understanding its machinations only in exceptionalist terms. The institutional management of trauma makes demands of its hypervisibility in order to become legible within specific historical frameworks. Sites of official memory, in other words, conceal more than they reveal. What Stevens calls "a regime of remembrance" makes visible a key paradox of trauma studies (180): trauma, that "unclaimed experience" so extraordinary to daily experience that it cannot find language, can only be understood in its recollection and cultural narrativization as trauma.[21] This temporal

[21] In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth explains that traumatic memories defy placement on a linear temporal trajectory. Instead, they remain inaccessible to the victim, who experiences the effects of trauma anachronistically without consciously recognizing the cause. The memory abruptly surges up in the present moment but otherwise lacks narrative sequencing. Since traumatized individuals lack mental constructs with which to process the memory, their emotional response falls outside of language. Unlike narrative memory, traumatic memory lacks the mental constructs people use to make sense of experience. Traumatic memories thus exceed linguistic processing or full recuperation, at the same time as the difficult process of coming to terms with the traumatic event requires the presence of a listener-witness, a "you" to whom one reveals one's own "truth." While trauma, or more specifically, post-traumatic stress disorder, is characterized by a delayed response to an event or constellation of events, it should not to be confused with amnesia—for trauma surges up in the present moment against one's will in the form of dreams, flashbacks, fragments, recurrent images or involuntary enactments, "which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal" (*Trauma* 5).

double bind of trauma compounds the threat of erasure through the terms that dictate legibility of an already fragile testimony. Trauma, felt in the body but often unknowable or unrecognizable as such, too easily escapes public recognition or redress.

Critical trauma theory attends to the contours of these historical debates about trauma, but also extends them. As important as critiques of trauma's discursive limitations remain, Stevens calls for trauma as such, not just trauma studies in its disciplinary formations, to be rethought through the lens of embodiment—since trauma is felt in the body and constitutive of identity, not an attack on its otherwise presumed yet elusive immunity. Like Stevens, I am interested less in the academic debates around its divergent mobilization and more in the broader cultural circumscription of whose traumas get legitimated in public policy, legal rules, and social practices. It is those traumas that remain unacknowledged and unspeakable within dominant publics that find expression in the cultural productions taken up in this project.

Refracted through performance literature, this project articulates trauma as both intimately tied to subject formation and binding communities, holding in tension self-division and pain alongside resilience and survival. Building on interdisciplinary engagements with trauma studies that emerge out of critical race and queer theory, such as Hershini Bhana Young's *Haunting Capital* and Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*, I define trauma not in the individualized medical or juridical sense but as a collective negotiation of everyday confrontations with state power.[22] As Ann Cvetkovich argues, the strong link between

[22] Tracing out the "significant link between performance art and testimony in terms of a shared desire to build culture out of memory" (26), Cvetkovich explores "lesbian public cultures that create a collective audience for trauma rather than cosigning its representation to therapeutic contexts" (4). Acknowledging her theoretical grounding in African American Studies (see 284), she argues that "[t]rauma cultures are culturally doing the work of therapy" (10), broadening the space for finding a listener-witness beyond the therapist/patient relation, which is hierarchically grounded even insofar as

affective and political life creates performative public cultures of "everyday trauma" brought together to bear witness to each other's stories (19). My research archive assembles contemporary performance works that recognize trauma in its everyday context as contending with structural power, making necessary communal ties through the heroism and healing required to negotiate its oppressive weight.[23] By coming together in the never-ending struggle, new collectives called into being create alternative ways to exist in the here-and-now, not some imagined elsewhere.

Understanding trauma as convening communities does not equate to romanticizing pain. Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* mobilizes psychoanalysis to think about the psychic dimensions of racism, social interpellation, and subject formation. Cheng's work explores how People of Color experience processes of racialization as a kind of injury while never losing sight of agency and possibility. In so doing, she provides a vital theoretical antidote to what she calls the "cult of victimization" that understands minoritized communities as wholly the products of oppression (175). Seeing People of Color as symptoms rather than subjects rehearses the same insidious logics that critiques of racism as injury seek to repair. Cheng also explains that the necessary turn to the self-definition and self-determination of People of Color against the cult of victimization "risk[s] depriving them of the time and space to grieve" (175). At the same time, room to grieve can be an

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it fundamentally involves economic exchange. Instead of transactional, queer performance spaces are interactional: "Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community" (9).

[23] My evocation of a performance archive is indebted Diana Taylor's work on the archive and the repertoire, which together provide performance epistemologies for creating and remembering shared histories. Never static, the archive and the repertoire capture the political work of cultural texts and embodied enactments of memory by "being a part of the transmission" (20).

inaccessible luxury fraught with the politics of the spectacle, the voyeuristic fetish of racialized pain. Racial melancholia, a result of the nation's democratic promises and premises against the clear reality of its refusal to deliver abstract ideals, circumscribes the experience of the "self-as-loss" (127), but also contains within it a generative force. While Freud opposes melancholia to mourning—the melancholic representing a space of denial that must be overcome before mourning can begin—Cheng posits a melancholic subjectivity grounded in a politics of grief and grievance, of loss and accountability. Cheng concludes her theorization of racial melancholia with a gesture toward the utopian, defining self-identification in and through intersubjective relation as the "'no place' that is nonetheless an imperative" (195). Like Cheng, I focus on the way collective traumas structure race without collapsing race into racism. This insidious conflation reveals a political investment in producing colorblind ideologies that race, rather than racism, must be overcome. In other words, the formulation of race *as racism* neglects to consider that historical traumas do not delimit the social meanings of race.

Refusing simplistic accounts of structural oppression that render identities wholly victimized and/or heroic, we must turn to performance theory that articulates more complex engagements with trauma. Supposed "objects" of research have always rejected their objectification. Performance scholarship theorizes alternative ways of assembling our existence through language without purporting to transcend our own social location when we enter the wor(l)ds of cultural texts (see Johnson; Madison; Pollock). Moving away from representational models of literature, texts actively make meaning, and in so doing do not simply represent but transform social realities. As Cedric Robinson argues in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, we must look to the messes power leaves behind even as it

systematically attempts to clean up after itself. To conceive of inhabiting power structures that speak us into being as an "inevitable" byproduct of modern biopolitical control—i.e., to surrender to the inevitability of ideology—can be a way to disavow agency in its re/production. To be endlessly frustrated by ideology, which for some seems to explain all action, grafted as it were onto experience without any space for change, is actually an effect of racial regimes, which seek to reproduce the victim in need of state regulation. Since, as Robinson reminds us, hegemony is never totalizing, we must look to fissures in power that cannot fully account for embodied economies of collective affect and desire—and the possibilities for social transformation located therein.

While what Ernesto Martínez describes as "antirealist" scholarship tends to conflate identity with oppression and thus sees the former as something that must be overcome,[24] Queer of Color performance literature grounded in Black and Chicana feminist traditions remains attentive to history, memory, and embodied identity as significant categories of analysis and agency. Agency can here be understood as "embodied action" that manifests in daily practices of living—understanding performance as theory operating in tandem with lived experience (Pollock, "Making History Go" 22). Ultimately, I situate my concept of

[24] In *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*, Ernesto Martínez critiques what he calls "antirealist" stances that understand racialized personhood as only and necessarily a form of subjection (8). The equation of identity with oppression fallaciously collapses the distinction between race and racism, neglecting that shared histories generate vital embodied forms of meaning-making. However, if scholars take race on its own terms as completely distinct from racism, which is to say, mobilize race *as metaphor*, discussions of race can opt not to address institutional racism and thus risk reasserting liberal-individualist understandings of race at best or white supremacist fantasies at worst. In other words, if race and racism remain entirely separate from each other race can be mobilized in colorblind ways to divorce discussions of structural racism from racialized embodiment. Using race as an analytic without sustained considerations of the way racial regimes operate makes metaphor of daily lived reality, ultimately reproducing hegemonic racial discourse while claiming participation in antiracist practice merely by evoking race. Claims to antiracism without seriously engaging the operation of power satisfy an institutional need, mirroring larger patterns of the incorporation of antiracist language into systems that perpetuate racial inequities.

traumatic utopia in the gap between the cult of victimization on one hand, or on the other, liberal faith in reparative agency at the expense of acknowledging the complex politics of loss. Adding to the analysis of how power works, these performance texts offer utopian visions of liberatory social relations.

Quare Performance Methodology

Traumatic utopia is that "no place" I locate in performance spaces, the concretization of utopian aspirations in and through grappling with the legacies and realities of structural traumas. Building on the work of Stevens, Young, Cvetkovich, and Cheng on trauma, reviewed in the last section,[25] my archive of *traumatic utopia* expands and challenges the medical-juridical documentation of trauma. Traumatic utopias resist the authorizing presence of legal actors, the medical establishment, and managerial institutions of national memory and forgetting. As opposed to the transactional culture of trauma in a therapeutic context, queer performance spaces break down barriers between spectator and performer. As performance method and artistic form, traumatic utopias focalize the literary study of trauma through the political weight of its (un)representability. Narratives marked by traumatic utopia follow recognizable patterns of non-linearity, unreliable narration, flashbacks and dreams, temporal gaps and fissures, silences, and irresolution, but with a difference: a deeply

[25] I am also in dialogue with Salamishah Tillet's *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*, which locates possibilities for democracy in "radical mnemonic strategies that privilege the idea and ideal of democracy, yet all the while remaining skeptical of its materialization" (12). The useable past of slavery is oriented toward revising a blueprint for the future; in Tillet's words, "the past is a signifier for the yet-to-be-seen possibilities and potential of American democracy" (16). Tillet also acknowledges the national problem of locating racial injustice only in the past, fetishizing slavery as the origin and end of racism in the United States with devastating consequences: "the living suddenly risks becoming more invisible than the dead" (165).

historicized postmodernism that understands these literary tropes through shared experiences of struggle.

Creating alternative narratives of how people mobilize creatively within histories of pain, traumatic utopias also contain affective surplus. Traumatic utopias can thus be characterized by rupture, erasure, loss, and forgetting—both willful and unconscious—as well as joyful excess, discontinuity that shifts social perception, affect marked as culturally inappropriate (unlikely laughter, queer pleasures, and revolutionary rage), remainders that become seeds for something different. Where the historical archive fails, traumatic utopias recuperate cultural memory to perform the necessary work of remembering and to generate collective practices of healing and transformation. No mere pipe dreams, the practice of self-introspection and love, the development of a critical social consciousness, and the eradication of heteropatriarchal white supremacy remain vital forms of community mobilization and struggle. Hopeful desires animated by justice, in other words, punctuate traumatic utopias.

At the same time as I argue that performance literature generates alternative forms of collective sociality, I heed Saidiya Hartman's interruption of the presumed necessity of the archive—for its risk of making us feel better in recuperating subjects whose framing of their own experience is forever lost to history. Looking specifically to an archive of slavery, Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" describes the ethics of resisting closure to historical narratives, as well as "the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian" (12). Hartman suggests that narrativizing historical disappearances must dwell in the traces, in the silences, rather than

finding false resolution in voicing what words can only be fantasized into being.[26] Yet, Hartman writes that the "necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future" (13). Of Emmett Till's effaced face on which Fred Moten famously writes, Hartman asks "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence? […] Do the possibilities outweigh the dangers of looking (again)?" (4). Traumatic utopia exists in the possibility that emerges out of impossibility, remaining attendant to the failures of representation, its certain projections and displacements, and the urgency of letting archives speak through and with us.

Providing a lens through which to grapple with ethical witnessing in light of the danger of voyeuristic trauma tourism, Hershini Bhana Young theorizes a new way of reading texts as a kind of performance staged both by the reader and the characters within the fictional world as such, which seeks to "depart from only a flat paper-and-ink text that the solitary author invents through acts of thinking. Instead, I arrive also at the ghostly autonomy of flesh-and-blood characters who, to tell their own story, consume both the 'author' and the reader" (8). As Young explains, the West African concept of storytelling rejects the idea of a single-authored text, since narratives possess storytellers as they creatively transform them. Despite the dangers of empathy,[27] Young theorizes how "[t]he black body must be

[26] In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman writes: "The necessity of recounting Venus's death is overshadowed by the inevitable failure of any attempt to represent her. I think this is a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved" (12).

[27] Circumventing the problematic identity politics underlying empathy within contemporary human rights debates but not abandoning the work of witnessing, Young disallows the reader from standing in for characters in the process of reading, for "each woman has her unique political location and her own temperament, and any facile sentimental celebration of a 'we' or of a 'sisterhood' can only

counterinvested in as a site of possibility. By sharing in this trauma, by forcing myself and my readers to relive it in a nonsensationalized way, I hope to construct an alternative archive that undercuts the imperial archive" (10). Ultimately, Young's work asks us to critique the juridical-medical apparatus of trauma while remaining attentive to Afrodiasporic archives that counter official versions of national memory while refusing wholeness, legibility, and closure. While Young is careful to acknowledge that her emphasis on traumatic memory risks reproducing conflations of race and injury, and thus escapes such pitfalls,[28] this project seeks to flesh out a critical tension between destruction and generation by placing trauma and utopia side-by-side, visions of justice born out of violence.

Taking seriously Young's belief in the work of witnessing characters process their memories rather than of experiencing trauma by proxy, I hope to uncover the process of reading as necessarily tied to the performance of listening. While refusing the politics of reconciliation that preemptively declare an endpoint to haunting, the ghosts who hover at the edges of personal and national memory can become healing forces. Drawing from Saidiya Hartman's distinction between the witness and the voyeur,[29] readers must disavow their position as meaning-receiver or knower, instead adopting the position of listener-witness. Due to the dangers of projection and the impossibility of self-translation, this approach does

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weakly parody community. To pretend easy connection would be to deny the political work that is necessary for building real communities that acknowledge and respect deep multiplicity" (8).

[28] Young writes that "By foregrounding the embodied memories of violence and injury that constitute black diasporic communities, I do not mean to neglect those practices that have enabled black communities to be sustaining and generative" (26).

[29] As Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection*, the witness participates in reliving scenes of violence, thereby awakening and affirming the event's emotional and experiential depth. The voyeur, in contrast, is "fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance" (3). The witness is in part undone or transformed by an encounter with the other—opening up the possibility for an always partial empathy. The voyeur, however, takes pleasure in consuming the other as that which is wholly separate from the self—ultimately reestablishing boundaries between the me and the not-me.

not sentimentally believe that listening leads to total understanding. If we listen closely rather than presuming to know, our research investments can tell us a lot about alternative ways of being in the world. Yet, as semioticians and cultural studies scholars, queer theorists often read the body as text, and in so doing, turn subject into object—making the "object" of analysis a product of ideology rather than a complex subject not wholly determined by but also *determining* the social order. At the same time, as Roderick Ferguson reminds us, the specific histories of Queers of Color produce a privileged optic on power, but we must be careful not to fetishize that positionality.[30] In Chapter 2, I offer a model of reading called *close listening*, as an extension of traditional close reading practices in literary studies with heightened attention to coalitional possibilities—as well as the dangers of empathic erasures and fetishized appropriations of situated knowledges and embodied identities.

As I have argued, performance is never simply *reactionary* to existing power structures but deeply creative and generative; it remains a dynamic site for imagining other ways to be in the world. My project thus looks at the everyday life of structural traumas and possibilities for justice rooted in shared histories of struggle. Traumatic utopias exist at the nexus of performance, identity, power, social movements, coalition politics, and embodied agency. In bringing together this set of issues through Black and Latin@ queer performance literature, I take seriously Roderick Ferguson's call, in *Aberrations In Black: Toward A Queer Of Color Critique*, that "We need a study of racial formations that will not oblige heteropatriarchy, an analysis of sexuality not severed from race and material relations, an interrogation of African American culture that keeps company with other racial formations,

[30] As Roderick Ferguson warns, a "postnationalist American studies informed by women of color and queer of color social formations does not at all mean the idealization of the woman of color and queer of color subject" (143).

and an American studies not beguiled by the United States" (29). The necessarily interdisciplinary scope of my dissertation juxtaposes conversations about pain and possibility, trauma and utopia, in order to think through the implications of their interarticulation within critical race theory and comparative/relational Ethnic Studies, queer theory and Queer of Color critique, and performance studies.

More specifically, I bring together Black and Latin@ queer performance literature as an approach of Black queer studies, which emerges at the intersection of Black and Chicana feminist traditions—offering a quare performance methodology.[31] In quaring queer, E. Patrick Johnson implicitly suggests a theory of listening for and with the body: "quare," which he situates in relation to his grandmother's rich Southern accent, suggests a textured inflection of the word "queer" with various meanings of race, social location, sound, and geography. Johnson grounds Black queer/quare studies in Cherríe Moraga's "theory in the flesh," which takes up embodied knowledges in and around performance (Johnson 3; see also Moraga and Anzaldúa 23). Building on this work, Ramón H. Rivera-Servera offers "theories in practice" that envision performance as a site of creative knowledge production (18). I am

[31] I use the terms Black and Latina@ to emphasize a relational ethnic studies project, finding points of connection where theory and activism create shared sites of revolutionary consciousness. These meeting points can fall into a number of political terrains: embodied, as in Afro Latin@ and Afra Latin@ (specifically African American) experiences and identities, which the titular "and" hopes to include not exclude; coalitional, as in the Young Lords Party, Brown Berets, and Black Panther Party; and/or theoretical and epistemological. While the quare performance methodology outlined here draws specifically from Black and Chicana feminisms, I use Latin@ to be inclusive both of Chican@ literary canons as well as performance artists such as Micha Cárdenas and Josefina Báez who would not identify as Chican@, a political identity specifically born out of Mexican American decolonial struggles, but as part of larger Latin American, Caribbean, and Afro Latin@ diasporas. Moreover, while my work could be characterized as U.S.-based, I do not envision it as U.S.-bound. For example, African American communities claimed affinity with global freedom struggles through the transnational signifier Black, and Latin@ puts pressure on the discourse of "Americanness" delimited to the States. While comparative projects risk conflating radically different migration histories, relationships to the land and U.S. citizenship, and processes of racialization, I situate each chapter in specific social conditions and power relationships. Given its dangers, such work theorizes coalitional possibilities in ways I find urgent and compelling.

indebted to Rivera-Servera's definition of "utopia, in its connotations both as liberation from oppression and the constitution of community" (135). Like Rivera-Servera, my evocation of utopia delineates a set of performance practices that imagine and enact other ways of being in the world. I argue that the utopian register, when attentive to trauma, serves as a crucial element of social formations wagered on active hopefulness.

Hope has become a minefield of cultural meanings especially since its explicit political incorporation—exhibited in President Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaign slogans "Hope," "Change We Can Believe In," and "Forward," as well as Dan Savage's It Gets Better Project.[32] Yet, I insist that hope and utopia also exist as Rivera-Servera's notion of theories in practice, relevant only in their specific spatial unfolding. Utopia does not promise a solution to social grievances or an anticipated future based on an idealized past—like history and memory, it exists in its repetition and re-signification within concrete spaces. While the utopian literary imagination does real work in the world, that work exists alongside daily forms of survival, resilience, and protest.

This dissertation thus mobilizes a quare performance methodology rooted in Black and Chicana feminist epistemologies of embodiment and agency. In so doing, I look at performance literature as a vital site for the development of communities of consciousness. Like Rivera-Servera's theories in practice, a quare performance methodology centers *performance as theory*. The Black and Latin@ performance texts I constellate in this project grapple with both ongoing institutional traumas and utopian visions of justice—innovating

[32] See Rivera-Servera, 102–103 on President Barack Obama's Hope Campaign during the 2008 election year. For more on Dan Savage's It Get Better Project, see *ItGetsBetter.org*. Many have critiqued its exclusionary and narrow identitarian political investments, while also looking to the generative potential of how communities not otherwise interpellated by its neoliberal promise have taken it up to make space for narratives that tell a different story. See, for example, Tavia Nyong'o and Jasbir Puar.

artistic form in the process. Refusing the kind of Aristotelian resolution that enables complacency to settle over the audience, the performance novel testifies to and transmits cultural knowledges and wisdom orally through call-and-response, making the reader an "active witness" or co-creator of an embodied communal practice (Bridgforth qtd. in Jones, "Cast a Wide Net" 600). The performance novel pushes form in part by reconceptualizing the reader as a subject-in-relation to an aural text.

Listening closely requires an ethics, because it grapples with situated identities and social histories. When reading aloud a work of performance literature collectively in a classroom and grappling with its traumatic legacies, students must be made aware of the amplified or even traumatic resonance of particular social histories for students in that very space. Rather than censoring potentially "triggering" content, it must be addressed with care.[33] Making the classroom a space of respect and listening to what the texts tell us rather than presuming to understand experiences to which readers have vary degrees of access offers one pedagogical implication of traumatic utopias, which ask students to hold in tension the material realities of trauma and the necessity of imagining otherwise. Grappling with trauma, when animated by desires for justice, can produce generative discomposure. While not collapsing radically different relationships to power—from feeling agitated by to experiencing immense suffering at the hands of the here-and-now—recognition of one's embodied implication in structural traumas can activate utopian dreams of abolishing those very structures.

Artistic visions of justice have direct import in activism and academia. In *Keeping Good Time*, for instance, Avery Gordon calls for a renewed commitment to utopian thinking,

[33] For example, I will open a lecture on lynching as it relates to a work of literature we will be reading together as a class by setting the tone with Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit."

since "[t]he utopian as we primarily know it has missed the opportunity to chart a richer and more adequate history and theory of our real and imagined strivings for a livable social existence" (191). Understanding utopia in the here-and-now requires an unloosening of hegemonic power from its mythologized inscription into history as a totalizing force. I thus draw from the Black radical tradition of figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Cedric Robinson, and Robin Kelley, who put pressure on the limits of legal rhetoric and reform in fighting for something better. As Kelley writes, "Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about our liberation" (198). My project takes seriously the power of performance literature to create utopian spaces for imagining and artistically enacting social transformation of existing institutions—with actionable provisions in the present.

The Cult of Negation and Queer (?) Utopianism

Yet, it's a grim time to speak of utopia. What Saidiya Hartman calls the "nonevent of emancipation" nonetheless marks an aspirational turn in the amnesiac progress narrative of the U.S. racial romance (*Scenes of Subjection* 116). Institutional racism has devastating physical and psychological consequences, and to downplay these mechanisms would be to fall into the "post-racial" rabbit hole that denies systemic oppression and its daily material manifestations. Formal policies and cultural rhetorics reinforce ideologies of colorblindness, which will away race by minimizing the ongoing effects of global racial capital.[34] Fantasies

[34] As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich explain, "It has become accepted dogma among whites in the United States that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans" (190). Myths of post-raciality uncritically celebrate the nation's election of President Barack Obama while turning a blind eye to the global reach of white supremacy.

of post-raciality turn on a "blame the victim" narrative, pathologizing racialized communities for the structures of power that constrain their life choices and chances of survival. My use of utopia, then, does not evoke a romance of the American Dream, but instead the creation of alternative social logics not predicated on the law's enabling mechanisms of exclusion, violence, and subordination.

In a landmark study of blackness as a condition of ontological impossibility (explored further in Chapter 2), Orlando Patterson defined "social death" as slavery's denial of legal rights to personhood for enslaved Africans and their descendants—reducing the slave to a "social nonperson" in the eyes of the law (8, 5). Many scholars in Ethnic Studies have generatively mobilized and extended Patterson's influential "social death" thesis to the afterlives of slavery: Abdul JanMohamed, Dylan Rodríguez, and Lisa Marie Cacho, for example, examine how the operation of racial power—from the prison industrial complex to immigration policy—constrains people's material circumstances and psychic lives. The daily violences of racial regimes mean that some subjects are "formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (JanMohamed 2). This work remains invaluable to the study of power and its dismantling. At the same time, social death has traveled across disciplinary frameworks accumulating institutional value and disaggregated political investments.[35] In *Raising the Dead*, for example, Sharon Patricia Holland writes that the

[35] Many critics have argued, for example, about whether "social death" as an analytic could or should be removed from its original context of slavery. Here I suggest that queer theory's anti-relational thesis eerily mirrors the affective political turn of social death. Queer theory's anti-relational turn, which understands queerness in individualistic terms as rejecting the promise of futurity offered by the child, the family, and by extension community networks of support and belonging, is exemplified by Lee Edelman's *No Future*: *Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. See also Leo Bersani's *Homos*. For an important critique of anti-relationality's "fuck the future" motto, and a revival of the utopian strand in queer theory, see José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Muñoz theorizes hope, imagination, and art as anticipatory, illuminating events through the frame of queer futurity.

"nation's attitudes toward death seem not only to inform but to activate queer studies" (179). Queer theory's anti-relational turn, I argue, mirrors the affective pull of the social death thesis—while disavowing the historical conditions that gave rise to its salience.

Mainstream (white) queer theory's movement toward anti-relationality and a rejection of any gesture toward the social as sentimental fantasy has disavowed its utopian beginnings—itself born out of a critical stance toward the state. Since the disciplining logics of state power necessitate the imagination of alternative social realities, Queer of Color critique understands that utopianism has always been part of grassroots movements for social transformation. While a turn away from the social may be a viable refusal of state logics for some, for others it is precisely through collective formations that another politics becomes possible.[36] As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, "One must live a life of relative privilege these days to be so dour about domination, so suspicious of resistance, so enchained by commodification, so helpless before the ideological state apparatuses to conclude there's no conceivable end to late capitalism's daily sacrifice of human life to the singular freedom of the market" (69). But Lee Edelman's *No Future* serves as an exemplary text of what I shorthand as queer theory's cult of negation, or opting into social death without the burden. It takes as its motto "fuck the future" and embraces an anti-relational politics that scorns any vision of collectivity.[37] Edelman's rejection of what he calls reproductive futurism locates queerness "as the place of the social order's death drive" (3). Edelman's portmanteau, the *sinthomosexual*, replaces action and activism with the "act of repudiating the social" (101).

[36] As J. Jack Halberstam suggests, this work can be "compelling ... for certain subjects in certain social locations. For others, that place of pure critique might constitute epistemological self-destruction, and so I would argue for a kind of counterintuitive critique, one that works against the grain of the true, the good, and the right but one that nonetheless refuses to make a new orthodoxy out of negativity" ("Theorizing Queer Temporalities" 194).

[37] See Edelman in the 2006 *PMLA* forum that focuses on the anti-relational turn in queer theory.

While ongoing legacies of slavery situate the social death thesis, Edelman's text, for all its focus on anti-relationality and (social) death, remains curiously silent on the material realities against which it unfolds: the historical outbreak of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the medical industrial complex that sought to contain it, often through the literal and symbolic abjection of queer bodies.

Ultimately, Edelman's *No Future* enacts a politics of disavowal that erases the historical stage on which it was thought. Instead of motivating collective responsibility for the larger networks in which Edelman articulates his distrust of the future, this queer embrace of anti-relationality over and against alternative epistemologies of collective sociality mirrors larger theoretical moves across disciplinary boundaries. While Edelman wants us to "refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation" (4), his conception of queerness as the undoing of identity negates both hope and history, ending in a bleak place where only the most privileged of queers would thrive: a place of absolute repudiation of the social and the vital forms of collective knowledge found there. Edelman thus reads "access to a livable social form" as unquestioningly liberal (104), and all progress at its behest. As much as Edelman would like to see his project as not investing in the political stakes he finds futile, his disinvestment in the political is itself, of course, deeply political. These embraces of radical negativity foreclose taking seriously the fact that aggrieved communities strategically negotiate oppressive power structures without becoming trapped inside them; in the wake of daily traumas exist possibilities not for self-annihilation but for imagining other ways to be. In its silences and evasions, *No Future* can be read as symptomatic of unaddressed trauma precisely because of the unspeakability at its heart.

We need something more, not something that smells like teen angst but that smacks of utopia, something to rub against the grain of the cult of negation, which turns away from the social and embraces death as a supposedly liberatory form of rejection. Collective forms of annihilation morph into rhetorics of individual choice, as queers deny a politics of community through the decision to opt out of reproductive futurism. This move discards historical legacies and current manifestations of grassroots mobilizations for social change. However, the "utopian political aspirations and desires" of the Black radical tradition put pressure on a privileged politics of negativity that disavows the historical traumas that enabled its articulation (Moten 93). Traumatic utopias work against the institutionalized "post" that evokes fantasies of having moved beyond historical injustices, but also refuses to feel hopeless in the face of abstract accounts of power. Holding close both trauma and utopia allows for a critique of how ubiquitous theoretical frameworks of social death and anti-relationality can be displaced from the material realities of trauma that underlie their urgency, ultimately preempting possibilities for change.

Following Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," we must not only question queer activism's breakdowns and failures,[38] but also imagine a transformational politics premised on the limits of appeals to the state. Any mainstream LGBTQIA political agenda that co-opts Civil Rights strategies from 1960s social agitation not only participates in the erasure of the historical struggle that made its advent possible but also risks assimilating into, rather than seeking to transform, existing institutional structures that replicate heteropatriarchal white supremacy. Queer of Color frameworks offer another optic that rejects the promise of state protection,

[38] See, for example, Cohen's description of the racism present at the Gay Men's Health Clinic.

understanding the category of sexual and gender "deviancy" as highly racialized. When punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens come together with a vision of freedom that does not require the subordination of one group for the benefit of another, then a truly inclusive movement will form. Instead of drawing equivalences between racism and homophobia, or collapsing them into a universal humanism key to the incorporation of antiracist discourse by hegemonic social actors, we must look to another history of queer movements with a global impact: #BlackLivesMatter, for example, was initiated by two Black queer women, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors-Brignac, and one Nigerian American woman, Opal Tometi—signifying a Black political identity born out of transnational and queer sites of solidarity. While the appropriation of the movement's hashtag, from #AllLivesMatter to #BlueLivesMatter (explored in Chapter 1), comes as no surprise given the weight of the counterrevolution against social movements in an era marked by formal policies of colorblindness, we must not forget that queerness runs through those movements.

While recognizing that oppressed subjects must often strategically negotiate within the law as a matter of survival, an abolitionist queer politics understands demands for reform as just one tool of many in the fight for a livable social reality. This dissertation thus takes seriously the power of literature and art, which has always attended coalitional struggles—from the Brown Berets, Black Panthers, and Young Lords Party, to the Combahee River Collective and *This Bridge Called My Back*, to contemporary mobilizations around police brutality and murder.[39] Through the social and artistic networks of political solidarity between Blacks and Latin@s, "Traumatic Utopias" seeks to explore the collective

[39] While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully historicize these movements here, each chapter traces their echoes in artistic formations from the 1960s to the present. For more on cross-racial, pan-ethnic activism and grassroots organizing, particularly the networks of solidarity formed in their wake, see Laura Pulido and Gaye Johnson.

affirmation of new affective (and effective) attachments and communities that do not reproduce the logics of heteropatriarchal white supremacy. With a particular emphasis on queer networks of creative solidarity in Black and Latin@ performance literature, this project argues that art provides a vital provision for justice. By *queer networks of creative solidarity*, I mean that performance literature travels across disparate cultural spaces and readerships to form coalitional possibilities attentive to how lived experiences generate theoretical principles. The artistic knowledges that performance literature creates remain equally attentive to traumatic realities and utopian potentialities.

In opposition to its anti-relational turn, queer theory's stubborn utopianism lives on—to which this project speaks. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* intervenes in anti-relationality to critique the negation of difference in the work of Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani. Challenging both figures, who typify queer theory's presumption of a middle class white male subject, he writes: "Imagining a queer subject who is abstracted from the sensuous intersectionalities that mark our experience is an ineffectual way out. Such an escape via singularity is a ticket whose price most cannot afford" (96). Instead, for Muñoz, queer utopianism is about hope, even in the wake of loss. After defining queerness as an ideality, or "not yet here" time via Bloch's philosophical treatise *The Principle of Hope*, he explores the queer aesthetic of future-oriented art—distinguishing between a possibility (as a forecasted happening) versus potentiality as a virtual "mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (9). Muñoz's work on critical utopianism does not disavow the past but rather seeks to reimagine a viable social world based on lived history, as nationally-sanctioned modes of forgetting so often compound the problems of the present. Muñoz, as well as Francis Shor

and Heike Raphael-Hernandez, have all argued that Black radical thought echoes Blochian theories.[40] While exploring utopianism through a specifically Blochian lens has proven stimulating and generative, this project offers a different starting point, drawing from how Black and Latin@ queer networks of creative solidarity and struggle have theorized utopia on their own terms.

Against the ubiquitous politics of hopelessness and following the utopian line of flight reflected in Muñoz's critical utopianism, this project insists that we must wrest hope from its political incorporation into liberal progress narratives that promise a better future. As E. Patrick Johnson argues, we can critique queer theory's "homogenizing tendencies" while also celebrating its "playful spirit" (3). That playfulness exists in the utopian register. I hold close the dual meanings of utopia, which literally means "no place" or "nowhere" but often means "good place," in order to resist romanticizing agency and transformation in the face of dire structural and social forces that actively produce dystopian cultural realities. Nonetheless, I insist on the deeply generative, rather than representational, work of traumatic utopias to conjure new visions, understanding conjure as "a magical means of transforming reality" (Smith 4), with material consequences in daily forms of activism and community-making.[41] Utopian longing and daily struggle coexist and subsist despite and because of each other. Instead of resolving two seemingly contradictory terms, I unfold how they bind inexorably, at best generating what Rivera-Servera calls "hopeful anger" (127). While

[40] As Raphael-Hernandez writes, "Bloch can also be called *the* philosopher of grassroots movements, and concrete utopian texts can be viewed as grassroots literature" (4).

[41] I thus follow Smith and Tillet, who argue for the curative and reparative dynamics of performance, respectively. As Smith writes, "I propose that this unconventional representation of conjure be extended to include other cultural performances that involve curative transformations of reality by means of mimetic operations and processes" (5).

theories of state power's production of social death remain vital, they often render null and void the possibility of personal and collective agency, survival, resilience, and transformation. Shared histories of grassroots organizing efforts for justice testify to the force of life in communities most impacted by racialized regimes of death. Rather than romanticizing community in abstract terms, I turn to performance spaces for their theoretical and material interventions in the world right now.

Overview of Chapters

In the so-called post-Civil Rights era scholars often locate trauma in a static past, and reduce utopia to a fantasy informed by naïve investments in change. While never losing sight of the institutional, I pay close attention to the way power operates and circulates between bodies at the level of the quotidian. For example, I bring together considerations of "social death" and spiritual embodiment because of what the performance work tells me in my research. This project thus bridges the divide between analyses that emphasize the institutional at the expense of the individual and those that romanticize agency at the risk of neglecting the devastating effects of power, existing in a space where both analyses can be put productively in conversation. The Black/Latin@ queer performances I close read attend equally to the very real violences and daily lived traumas of imperialism, colonialism, sexism, and racism, and the vital need for imagining other ways to be in the world. Traumatic utopias exist in theatre spaces as a site for social transformation through the power of art to expose the root of suffering, not a spectacle of sufferers, to provoke rather than pacify audiences into enacting visions of liberation in their own lives, in ways often illegible to the demands of mainstream representation or state recognition. Quare performance literature demands a

relational politics of coalitional possibility through facing history—hope in the face of despair, utopia in the face of trauma, seeing how they accumulate meaning under the strain of mutual construction. Building on Black and Chicana feminist queer traditions of self-definition in the face of trauma, each chapter centralizes social life and spirituality against the grain of a ubiquitous politics of hopelessness. In so doing, the works constellated here rethink the discursive limits of trauma alongside abolitionist politics and utopian poetics of social upheaval.

In the first chapter, I look to what Fred Moten describes as the "phonic substance" of the published photograph of Emmett Till that galvanized a massive public response to and mourning of his murder (10). The widespread circulation of the image as well as the acquittal of his murderers resonates strongly today in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement that formed in response to the breaking point tragedies of Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, Miriam Carey, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and so many others. I examine how Till's photograph condensed a painful legacy of trauma and fomented a global movement against state-sanctioned lynching in the United States through two texts: James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) and Laurie Carlos's *White Chocolate for My Father* (1990). Baldwin's play, loosely based on the lynching of Till, grapples with the depths to which whites can plunge with impunity, and the gross inadequacies of white liberalism to redress racial injustices. I then look to how powerful modes of seeing and hearing in Carlos's ensemble piece create possibilities for communal cohesion across generations. In *White Chocolate for My Father*, it is the most painful of recognitions—identification with the sonic face of Till, who summons a long legacy of anti-Black racism and state-sanctioned violence—that lead to self-knowledge and

communal witnessing. By recuperating other effaced faces from their multigenerational history, characters in this performance form queer kinship structures based on shared histories and freedom dreams. Through the strength of collective remembrance, these two plays provide ongoing spaces for healing from what George Lipsitz calls the "hurts of history" (*Time Passages* 28).

My second chapter examines legacies of deep pain and possibility in Sharon Bridgforth's performance novel *love conjure/blues* (2004) as well as "The *love conjure/blues* Text Installation-Altar Film" (2006), produced by Bridgforth and Krissy Mahan. Understanding that gender and sexuality must be an integral part of liberation projects, Bridgforth foregrounds the central role of traumatic memory as a way to reenvision utopian spaces in the present based on queer theorizations of desire, gender expression, love, and family. If we follow Hortense Spillers in saying yes to the mother within,[42] new possibilities for understanding family come through an alternative modality. To embrace the mother within is to seek non-hierarchical relationality in the face of violence that severs collective pleasure. Bridgforth's work does just that—to wrest notions of racialized gender, sexuality, and family from dominant frameworks that trap them in binary logics that reproduce oppressive logics of social valuation.[43] While slavery, genocide, and colonialism undeniably leave legacies of trauma felt daily on the body, Bridgforth helps us understand what Afrodiasporic communities have long known: what is toxic can be tonic, if cultivated wisely. The way that audiences and readers of these texts transform relationships to themselves and

[42] In a frequently quoted concluding passage of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers writes: "It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within" (80 original emphasis).

[43] For more on the way rights-based discourses circumscribe the boundaries of "appropriate" gender expression and sexuality, see Richardson, especially 58 and 78.

each other through the utopian desire to exist in a world where identity is not refracted through hierarchical power relations, while remaining attentive to gendered racism, serves as the principle concern of this chapter. Building on the cultural work of the performance novel as a genre, and imaginative potentials for its reception, this chapter also offers *close listening* as an aural reading mode that surrenders the desire to know and so to speak.

My third chapter continues to examine the broadening of visions of racial justice along the lines of gender and sexuality, by looking to how Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) has become a site of struggle over the meanings of racism in a post-Civil Rights era. This chapter argues that historical critiques and contemporary iterations of Shange's groundbreaking choreopoem advance a *gender-specific form* of colorblind fantasy premised on the masculinist myth that racism disproportionately impacts men. In the current of popular backlash to Black feminist theories and critics, I read Shange's text against Tyler Perry's controversial cinematic adaptation. While Shange's pairing of two competing registers—the hopelessness of suicide and the hopefulness of the rainbow—underlines the text's complex theorization of collective witnessing, Perry's *For Colored Girls* (2010) reduces the rainbow to a multicultural symbol devoid of its previous political intervention. Moreover, Perry's rainbow is ultimately maintained by expelling queerness from its vision of solidarity and cohesiveness. I thus explore how the scapegoating of Black feminism and of Black queer sexualities exposes anxieties over whose traumas count as such. Perry's gendered form of colorblind melodrama glosses over the specific struggles of Black women from the African and Afro Latin@ Diaspora to mute the political impact of those experiences.

In the fourth chapter, I explore the generative failures of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, which exists in prototype form as a GPS-enabled cell phone application that simultaneously features mobile poetry and directs migrants to water caches and other safety sites along the Mexico/U.S. border. However, a series of highly publicized legal, institutional, and federal scandals indefinitely stalled the tool's development. Its provisional status produces a performance mode I term *queer provisionality*, which repositions dominant identity in relationship to performance through exposing the artistry of power, or the aestheticized rehearsal of contradictory political logics in the spheres of the law, the academy, and cyberspace. I take as a central point of focus Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's *Sustenance: A Play for All Trans [ ] Borders* (2010), as a work of performance literature that captures the project's utopian poetics alongside its activation of an archive of hate. By applying pressure to the pulse of a xenophobic U.S. rhetoric that continually attempts to hide its cultural logics behind legal frameworks, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* points to the inextricability of poetry from policy, art from activism.

Finally, a brief epilogue extends the conversation about utopian visions of global fellowship by turning to what writer, performer, and the founder and director of Latinarte/Ay Ombe Theatre Josefina Báez calls "that very concrete utopia." In her performance text *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* (2013), Báez carves out a utopian space for a world citizenship that does not ignore the material violences and realities of the border. I conclude by reflecting on how engagements with performance and its queer provisionalities manifest processes for social justice. Against the ubiquitous politics of hopelessness that marks not only trauma as a

site of rupture but also any vision of utopia as impractical romance, *traumatic utopia* extends the language for refusing to sever our greatest pains from our deepest pleasures.

Chapter 1

"Between Memory and Music":

Recognition, Effacement, and the Sonic Face of Emmett Till in the Works of James Baldwin, Laurie Carlos, and #BlackLivesMatter

> *In response to centuries of dehumanization, Africans have resisted white domination through forming Maroon communities, plantation insurrections, Populist, Labor, Black Power, National Liberation Movements and more. While the colonizer uses history to deny our humanity, for us, our art and history is a weapon we use to cut the throat of our oppressor.*
>
> *—Benjamin Woods*

> *My energy just couldn't stop dancing. I was caught up in the music of struggle, and i wanted to dance*.
>
> *—Assata Shakur*

> *#BlackLivesMatter, a project started by three black women, two of whom are queer women and one who is a Nigerian-American, has opened up the political space for that new leadership, and as a result, a new movement to emerge. Black trans people, Black queer people, Black immigrants, Black incarcerated people and formerly incarcerated people, Black millennials, Black women, low income Black people, and Black people with disabilities are at the front, exercising a new leadership that is bold, innovative, and radical.*
>
> *—Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors-Brignac*

On July 13, 2013, George Zimmerman's acquittal set into motion a mass mobilization of organizers, educators, and community leaders across the U.S. seeking justice for Trayvon Martin, his family, and the larger legacies of state-sanctioned violence against People of Color to which the mistrial testified. At the time, I was teaching a course on Black and Latin@ Queer Performance as an Associate in UCSB's English Department. Having developed the syllabus months in advance, I just so happened to have assigned James

Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, a play loosely based on the Mississippi lynching of Chicago teenager Emmett Till. While learning about the play's historical context two days after the verdict, students immediately saw the resonances between the murders of Till and Martin, and how they reinvigorated ongoing grassroots movements for racial justice. Just as Till's mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, strategically elected to have an open casket funeral to call attention to the gross injustice of her son's murder, Martin's iconic face, as well as the hooded sweatshirt he wore the night of the tragedy, sparked global controversy and became symbols of the struggle for social change. Both Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin gained prominent national attention, but the iconization of their lives and deaths cannot begin to fathom the ongoing realities of state-sanctioned murder—a point to which I return as I conclude this chapter with a discussion of #BlackLivesMatter, created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi as a transnational call to action against anti-Black racism in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict.

Till-Mobley's grief-stricken cry in the wake of this tragedy provides the prolegomenon to Baldwin's prologue, and haunts the play's edges. Through an emphasis on where sight and sound meet in embodied gesture, this chapter extends what Fred Moten describes as the "phonic substance" (10), or sonic materiality, of the published photograph of Emmett Till that galvanized a massive public response to and mourning of his murder. I examine how the widespread circulation of Till's image condensed a painful legacy of trauma and fomented a global movement against state-sanctioned lynching in the United States through two texts: James Baldwin's play *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) and Laurie Carlos's ensemble piece *White Chocolate for My Father* (1990). Baldwin and Carlos explore

legacies of mourning and protest through the traumatic utopian register of embodied music, which transmutes pain into possibility.

Against the realities of effacement, powerful modes of identification with the figure of Emmett Till in Carlos's ensemble piece create possibilities for communal cohesion across generations. In *White Chocolate for My Father*, it is the most painful of recognitions that leads to the possibility of self-knowledge and communal witnessing: identification with the face of Emmett Till, summoning a long legacy of state-sanctioned violence. Carlos's ensemble piece negotiates the need for recognition through a tension between the face and effacement, between the site of human expressivity and connection—the face-to-face encounter in a Levinasian frame,[44] the mediating plane of ethical response and responsibility—and obliteration, destruction, effacing the face. Carlos thereby comments on the need to confront history's ghosts, on both an individual and institutional level, and to acknowledge their continued haunting at the ethical plane of the face, where intersubjective encounter occurs through affective/expressive contact.

By recuperating other effaced faces from their multigenerational history, characters in this performance form queer kinship structures based on familial stories, traumatic legacies, and collective freedom dreams. These queer kinship structures extend beyond the logics of blood family to understand collective histories as an inheritance, even and especially when those recognitions involve reckoning with pain. Characters in Carlos's ensemble piece grapple with the risk of self-effacement, repeating an aggressive-melancholic cycle of shame and silence around colonialism's violences, rejecting the face that survived for the face that assimilates and forgets, overwhelmed by the face that could not. Ultimately, though, for

[44] See Levinas on the ethical call of the face-to-face encounter in *Totality and Infinity*.

Carlos's characters, the possibilities and politics of recognition—through the sonic materiality of Till's photograph— become the central mechanisms for individual and communal healing. Carlos focalizes this dialogue through a repeated plea, among the three sisters who carry forward their familial legacies, for photographs of Emmett Till. Their self-recognition in the face, what David Marriott calls "irresistible" identification (5), implores the sisters to make Till chosen family—a husband, a comrade, a brother-in-law, a friend.

I then look to how Baldwin's staging of Till's legacy grapples with the depths to which whites can plunge with impunity. Mister Charlie's blues testify to the gross inadequacies of white liberalism to redress racial injustices—a point that resonates today in the popular circulation of claims to #AllLivesMatter, as an anti-Levinasian insistence upon sameness that erases differential racialization, refusing to see how the affective encounter with Till's face summons embodied relationships to power. In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin traces the sounds of seeing and unseeing Till's face—both the galvanization of protest and mourning, and the willed blindness of white Americans to their own violence. Mamie Till-Mobley exposed the visual and instrumentalized the horrors of the defaced face as an index of lynching culture, the face of whiteness. Baldwin implicitly responds to Till-Mobley's call: "If other people could see it with their *own* eyes, then together we might find a way to express what we had seen" (qtd. in Smith 25; see also Till-Mobley and Benson 139). Yet, like the white press's refusal to publish photographs of Till's face, the "we" cannot encompass the lack of self-identification by those benefiting from institutions that made Till's murder not only possible but permissible, not exceptional but integral to its technologies of subordination.

Till-Mobley iconized the effaced face of Emmett Till not so much to warn others of looming violence—African Americans living under Jim Crow were already well aware of strategies of survival to avoid the constant threat of death—but to expose the face of white supremacy, to ask white Americans to take in the photograph of Emmett Till and see their own reflection staring back at them—not as some kind of false empathic relation under the rubric of liberal humanism, but to see the logical endpoint of the social structures that benefit them with or without their active consent. Of course, white supremacy may cloud their vision, making it such that they do not see themselves at all, but instead what they are not, a projection of the not-me, of what Deborah Walker King calls "blackpain" (8), which reaffirms their own sense of identity as whole, as safe, as immune and innocent.

The play's central motif of sound captures the psychic effects of spatial segregation in Plaguetown, U.S.A. between Blacktown and Whitetown, as well as the embodiment of Mister Charlie in the play's white liberal figure, Parnell James. As Fred Moten writes of Till's effaced face, photographed and heard across the globe, we must be attentive to the sounds that pierce the visual. In focusing on the visceral presence of the auditory, I am building on the analyses of Koritha Mitchell and Soyica Diggs Colbert,[45] who argue that Richard's sonic materialization throughout the play "models how to transform the affect associated with loss into insurgence" (Colbert "Historicizing the Ghostly Sound" 204). Sound thus articulates pain but also pleasure—in its sensuality and its ability to invoke Richard, the play's figure of Till, as an empowering force in his community. To discussions of Richard's sonic reverberations, I add the Black feminist voice of Juanita—characterized

[45] *Blues for Mister Charlie*'s emphasis on the sound of Richard's voice after death stages a twofold "aural intervention" (Colbert "Historicizing the Ghostly Sound" 206): by accentuating the auditory aspects of lynching, which has been understood primarily in terms of the visual, and by destabilizing "the primacy afforded the visual signifiers of race" (206).

by strength, clarity, and a breaking of gendered conventions that marks truly inclusive movements for justice.

Juanita, and her rekindled love for Richard, as well as Richard's father, Reverend Meridian Henry, together fight for what Tricia Rose calls "politically conditioned love" and armed resistance as strategies of grassroots mobilization.[46] Juanita and Richard's possible conception of a child metaphorizes hope, a next generation of organizers who refuse respectability politics and want something more than state recognition—a revolutionary ethos that Juanita herself embodies, echoing a long legacy of Black feminist visionaries. For example, she boldly unveils her anticipated pregnancy in the courtroom scene at the play's conclusion, aware of but caring none about Whitetown's overdetermined projection of a hypersexualized image of pathological womanhood onto her. From Juanita's Black feminist politics to Parnell's white liberal failures, Baldwin refuses to placate mainstream audiences. To demonstrate why its polarized reception history often fell along racial lines,[47] in this chapter I read the play as firmly entrenched in the Black Revolutionary Theatre of the 1960s—as well as a critique of whiteness that echoes Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, published the same year he completed *Blues*.

Baldwin and Carlos ultimately suggest that music, when grounded in rather than transcendent of embodiment, improvises through trauma to generate new visions of collectivity. Both the utopian echoes of Richard's and Juanita's voices in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, combined with the music of struggle in *White Chocolate for My Father*, enable

[46] For more on how politically conditioned love remains foundational to the viability and perseverance of social movements, see Rose, 37–38.

[47] At the risk of overstating or simplifying the point: Black audiences tended to love the play and white audiences tended to hate it. For more on its reception history, see Leeming, Chapter 23.

characters to recuperate Till's legacies through communal recognition. These utopian sounds emerge out of shared trauma. While scholars often describe how trauma "impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Erikson 187), Baldwin and Carlos understand trauma as creating collectives, binding people together through the heroism and healing required to move forward from trauma while never forgetting its residues and continual operation in public cultures. The traumatic and utopian coexist in the same breath—refusing the notion of trauma as something you can move on from, while emphasizing the importance of remembering and honoring the past. Against a politics of hopelessness, traumatic archives insist on often minimized aspects of survival—strength, heroism, healing, and resilience. In the preface to *White Chocolate*, Carlos writes:

> Heroism is that ability to keep moving in the face of disaster; to keep breathing after you've seen Emmet [sic] Till's face in the newspaper; to keep breathing when your mother looks at you and sees herself and believes it to be the most hideous thing; to keep breathing after your brother, the slave master, puts a bag over your head and rapes you constantly. Those we know are acts of heroism. (5)

Carlos figures survival as a heroic act—an extraordinary resilience to legacies of gendered racism, sexual violence, and trauma. Nationwide organizing efforts in response to the lynching of Emmett Till and the acquittal of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam speak to precisely the heroism that Carlos describes here. Till's memory remains as urgent now as fifty years ago. Carlos's and Baldwin's sonic offerings of hope became an elegy for what grassroots organizers dreamt of and the U.S. disavowed, while today People of Color-led movements everywhere take to the streets under the banner #BlackLivesMatter to mourn and protest ongoing forms of anti-Black racism.

Against the contemporary political current of hopelessness, this chapter returns to the electrifying freedom of global Black liberation struggles.[48] Pan-African movements for justice offer a model of blackness that frees it from static and limited (mis)understanding as only and necessarily attached to legacies of white racism, colonialism, and violence.[49] Affirmations of Black sociality make way for, as Soyica Diggs Colbert writes, "an ethical shift that recalibrates the value attributed to black life" (*The African American Theatrical Body* 10). This ethical shift, like #BlackLivesMatter in its conception rather than co-optation, revisits the queerness of Black liberation struggles. Rather than erasing histories of collective mobilization or re-centering whiteness through universal humanist rhetoric (as with #AllLivesMatter), #BlackLivesMatter grounds itself in the global Black freedom struggle and finds coalitional power in its assertion that "*When Black people get free, everybody gets free*" (Garza, original emphasis). This movement's focus on an expansive vision of Black experiences—from the denial of basic human rights and health care for trans people, to gender inequity in the workplace, to immigration law—sidelines a monolithic, nationalist concept of blackness for a dynamic broad-based coalitional politics that centers the lived realities and varied concerns of Black people.

Echoing Cathy Cohen's call for queerness to think about the multifarious gendering and marking of racialized bodies as sexually deviant, pathological, or otherwise outside the

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[48] Robin D. G. Kelley explains that at a "crucial moment when freedom electrified the African Diaspora … black artists sought one another out to create new modes of expression." Kelley then asks: "But what of the *political* distance traveled since 1960? The era of hope and possibility has given way to a period characterized by 'Afro-pessimism'—a demoralizing fear that Africa's economic and political problems are beyond repair" (163).

[49] As Soyica Diggs Colbert describes in *The African American Theatrical Body*, Black cultural production from the twentieth century into the present "reflects the strictures of the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a primal scene that, in opposition to the organizing principles of Sigmund Freud's tale of origins, enables plenitude" (8).

bounds of the "normal," and the possibilities for transformative coalition-building that emerge there, Garza explains that "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement." This chapter thus centers a queer politics rooted in the Black radical tradition, rather than contemporary LGBTQIA campaigns for so-called marriage equality or other forms of inclusion. While not minimizing the need to operate strategically within the law for legal protections that can be a matter of life or death, the two performance pieces I turn to mobilize a queer politics inseparable from systemic injustices of gendered racism. Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Carlos's *White Chocolate for My Father* evoke ancestral memory as a vital resource, not as a mythic past but as a multigenerational history, ultimately locating Afrodiasporic possibility in "soundtracks of struggle" (Kelley 121). Through the strength of collective remembrance, these two plays provide ongoing spaces for reigniting the utopian imagination of a more just world.

Seeing/Hearing into Erasure: The Sonic Materiality of Till's Photograph

Flashback fifty-eight years before the Zimmerman verdict to September 3, 1955: Mamie Till-Mobley decides to have an open casket funeral, which thousands of protesters attended in solidarity with Till's family and the long history of injustice that Till's murder represented—amplified by Chicago-based nationwide magazine *Jet*'s publishing of the funeral photographs on September 15. This painful and strategic choice to display his effacement at an open casket funeral, and the subsequent publishing of Till's face, mobilized widespread public

mourning and movements for justice to honor the life of Till and other lynching victims. Till, only recognizable by his father's signet ring after Bryant and Milam threw him into the Tallahatchie River with a cotton gin fan around his neck after having been beaten, disfigured, and shot, reflects not the spirit he possessed during his life but the depths of inhumanity to which whites can plunge with impunity. Born in 1941, Emmett Till grew up amidst active disenfranchisement of African American voters by force: for example, just months apart in 1955, the registration drive activists Reverend George Lee and Lamar Smith were both shot to death trying to cast their ballots. That same year, fourteen year-old Till visited his great uncle Moses Wright in Money, Mississippi, where he and a group of teenagers stopped by Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market after an exhausting day of cotton-picking. There, he allegedly transgressed the inviolable racial codes of Southern tradition and whistled at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, whose husband, Roy Bryant, and half-brother, J. W. Milam, justified lynching with an accepted social script. As Till's supposed sonic violation had activated in their imaginations the myth of the Black male rapist, Bryant and Milam did not just kill him—they brutally mutilated his body in a pathological white ritual to reaffirm their own identities through violence.

While the (mis)trial wielded the body's unrecognizability to question whether the decomposed corpse found in the Tallahatchie River was indeed Till's (see Smith 23), Moses Wright identified him by the signet ring he was wearing, with its inscribed initials (L.T.) of Till's father, Louis Till.[50] Moreover, Moses Wright's testimony on the witness stand to having seen Bryant and Milam kidnap Till had little bearing on the all-white jury's deliberations—in just over an hour, they acquitted both Bryant and Milam—which received

[50] Mamie Till-Mobley inherited the ring when Private Louis Till was executed by the U.S. army in Europe during World War II—an injustice the government concealed from her.

international attention as a reflection of the gross distortions of U.S. racism. When Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley courageously decided that "They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this" (qtd. in Smith 24; see also Till-Mobley and Benson 139), her words foretold the meaning of sight in a society shaped by blindness: while the *Chicago Defender* and *Jet* covered the open-casket funeral of Emmett Till, the white press did not print photographs of his defaced corpse, willing erasure of a legally-sanctioned culture of lynching with impunity from national memory. Of course, Emmett Till's life is anything but forgotten, as the injustice he suffered at the hands of white supremacist violence marked a tipping point tragedy, often cited as sparking and mobilizing the revolutionary fervor of U.S. Civil Rights and global Black Freedom struggles.

Fred Moten's *In the Break* famously describes the sound of Emmett Till's photograph, and its historical amplification in a moment of national racial crisis with the recent 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision that overturned state-mandated segregation of public schools. Immediate and widespread backlash to the decision (in the founding of the White Citizen's Council, for example) was not at all surprising but is often concealed in sanitized accounts of the Civil Rights era as a victory of U.S. democracy rather than the organizing efforts of global movements for justice led by People of Color. Moten theorizes the photograph's politics, the possibilities and pitfalls of a moment that speaks to so many other moments—threatening to unravel histories by way of fetishized tokenization or conflation of one with many:

> you have to think about the fact that an aesthetic appropriation could be said to desacralize the legacy of lynchings, precisely by way of an 'alchemizing' that seems to fetishize or figure on the literal, on the absolute fact and reality of so many deaths while, at the same time, continually opening the possibility of redemption … What did the hegemony of the visual have to do with the death of Emmett Till? What effect did the photograph of his body have on death? What affect did it send? How did the

> photograph and its reproduction and dissemination break the hegemony of visual? (197)

The reproduction of the photograph represents hegemonic ways of exceptionalizing and thereby downplaying countless deaths but also the break from hegemony by way of iconizing a figure who represents a tipping point and a collective outcry. Its reverberations produce a sound, and it is the "phonic substance" of Till's photograph on which Moten famously focuses (197).

Moten critiques the mourning/melancholia divide by arguing for the generative force of displaced affect that characterizes the melancholic subject, rather than understanding loss as binding the subject to an irretrievably destructive force in the body. The "leaving open" of the image works as performance through:

> the disappearance of the disappearance of Emmett Till that emerges by way of exhibiting kinship's wounds (themselves always refigured and refinished in and as and by exogamous collision). It is the ongoing destruction of the ongoing production of (a) (black) performance, which is what I am, which is what you are or could be if you can listen while you look. (200)

Listening to while looking at Till's photograph necessitates a new kind of engagement, which makes possible a photograph that "manifests itself as political action. Is the display of the picture melancholic? No, but it's certainly no simple release of mourning either" (210). For Moten, the image summons the possibility of a looking that "desires something for this photograph" (201), a desire for justice, but also the possibility of inappropriate affect that marks repressed trauma—to laugh at a funeral or "some unprecedented reflection, movement, murder, song" (201).

Since the performance of "Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death, which is to say Black Eros" (209), exists in that parenthetical stubbornness of life against death, of mourning in and through the melancholic freezing of a trauma in time via the

photograph, Moten complicates the psychoanalytic lens of mourning versus melancholia through the Black Mo'nin' that bridges the distance and "improvises through the difference" (210). Moten's theorization of the moan suggests that the phobic substance/sound of loss falls between the need to narrate trauma and the impossibility of its expression, requiring a "bone-deep listening" (83). The necessity of listening while looking finds expression in the traumatic archive of Laurie Carlos's *White Chocolate for My Father*, an entrapment in history from which characters find release through sonic confrontation with history's ghosted presences and emergent possibilities.

Where Sight Meets Sound: The Effaced Photograph and Sonic Memory

I now turn to Laurie Carlos's *White Chocolate for My Father* through four key threads, explored in subsequent sections: how Black feminist performance embodies gestures of mourning and healing, how Afrodiasporic sound negotiates collective trauma, how pronominal shifts punctuate the form of traumatic archives to bring together histories of effacement as well as recognition of the face, and how recognizing trauma as shared and familial not private and personal calls new collectives into being. As Carlos's ensemble piece makes clear, affirmations of Black social life persist alongside the ongoing trauma of its structural negation.

White Chocolate for My Father's multigenerational histories of sexual violence and racialized subjection remain deeply personal but equally collective in their expanse across centuries and continents. This Afrodiasporic story begins with Deola, the White Light Spirit, who embodies the children's ancestors. The intergenerational voices span from the White Light Spirit, Deola, Lore and her sisters Tony and Tiny, their mother Mickey, her

grandmother Mama, and her great-great-grandmother Emilyn. An effaced photograph, the phonic materiality of Emmett Till, pulses throughout the ensemble piece, weaving together its traumatic histories with the drive to find a livable social world. Through its constitutive violences, Carlos ultimately tells the story of the United States by starting with the Middle Passage, moving through slavery into Jim Crow and lynching culture, two world wars, the Cold War, and Civil Rights, bringing us into the contemporary moment. In the ensemble piece, past and present mirror each other, creating an endless cascade of reflections that simultaneously traumatize characters by proxy and create a community bound by loss.

Through its staging of reflective faces, Carlos draws a parallel between the unrecognizable face of Emmett Till after he was lynched, and the last African ancestor the play's family tree can trace—Deola, brutally murdered before the Middle Passage. Colonizers force her daughter to cross the Atlantic on a slave ship after throwing Deola in a hole on the shore. At their command, dogs chew off Deola's lips before rending the entire face from her violated body. The tension between effacement and the face locates the juncture between traumatic rupture and healing, as well as the impossibility of forgetting embodied trauma: Deola's effaced face, erased even from collective memory of the Middle Passage. Effacement of—rubbing out, erasing, expunging, doing away with, or obliterating—the face risks forgetting the past or denying its cumulative effects.

The White Light Spirit/Deola in the ensemble piece later "*appears in red hot pants, white-blond wig and pumps: the junkie*" (31). Since the U.S. pathologizes self-medication in the absence of any notion of collective accountability, this figure desires psychic and physical flight from the U.S. Rather than understand the long histories that may give rise to this figure, too often discourses of cultural pathology and individual responsibility maintain

the unrecognizability of the face. The White Light Spirit's reappearance as a "junkie" begs the audience to consider the institutional structures that give birth to such a figure, instead of criminalizing the psychology of addiction. Individualizing collective trauma attempts erasure of the systemic conditions shaping, but never wholly determining, subjectivities in the present. Carlos's ensemble piece reminds us that behind the mask of the junkie lies the effaced face of colonialism, of a fundamental violence that keeps on killing across generations even as communities work to strengthen and rebuild the face.

White Chocolate represents this struggle between the social forces of death and life onstage in the form of the Red Light and White Light, at once embodied persona and ethereal glow, character and set. Bringing together trauma and utopia, *White Chocolate* juxtaposes these two spirits in the ensemble piece—the White Light Spirit, the last African ancestor left on the shore, and her contemporary, the Red Light Spirit of the Radio.[51] The tension and movement between the face/effacement, recognition/refusal, and speech/silence provides a backdrop for the piece as materialized by the Red and White Light Spirit who together assume the struggles of the women to bring forth their personal and collective freedom dreams. Lore is caught between the two competing lights on the stage; she is "*caught between memory and music*" (9): the white light of memory and the red light of music, at once ethereal and sensual, static at times; Deola, the White Light Spirit who literally embodies effacement as the last African left on the shore, and Radio, the Red Light Spirit who represents the possibilities of recognition and of the face; Deola who represents an individual and collective trauma, and Radio who represents shared histories and community

[51] As the Author's Note describes, "The character Radio—Red Light—performs live onstage and is always present. The choreography creates and brings to life the connection with history and self-determination. The lighting design functions as both character and set, sustaining the images of the red light of the Radio and the white light of the child's ancestors" (Carlos 7).

building through the voices of the Bobbettes and the "passion of an inside dance" (9); statements of loss and strategies for survival and heroism; effacement and the face; trauma and the utopian possibilities of music as a place to imagine otherwise.

Carlos theorizes both the irresistible identification with the face and how communities attempt to distance themselves from that traumatic acknowledgment. The white chocolate of the title thus signifies on a key theme of recognition and unrecognizability. As Carlos describes, "I use white chocolate….well when you're holding it you don't know what it is unless you actually know what it is. So, probably part of the influence for me was, there was something about who we, who we are as Black people in America, we know who we are, but we don't know who we're in the room with, because we don't recognize ourselves" (qtd. in Whitmal 10). Ultimately, though, for Carlos's characters, the possibilities and politics of recognition become the central mechanisms for individual and communal healing. Lore and her sisters must create new gestures, rituals, and language not to forget the past but to understand their power to define themselves outside of the hegemonic imagination of oppression as wholly determining identity and crushing agency, what Patricia Williams refers to as the fallacy of "antiwill."[52] Effacement marks the difficulty of embracing one's past when that past is marked by trauma. Yet, Deola's and Till's effaced faces do not reflect their own subjectivities in life but white supremacy's negation of life—the violences that consolidate white group identity. Against hegemonic means of identity production, shared histories of racialized subjects create cosmologies and epistemologies that do not replicate

[52] As Williams writes, "one of the things passed on from slavery, which continues in the oppression of people of color, is a belief structure rooted in a concept of black (or brown or red) antiwill, the antithetical embodiment of pure will...To be perceived as unremittingly without will is to be imbued with an almost lethal trait" (219).

these logics; alternative ways of organizing social life pose a threat to the existing racial order, which fights to occlude their viability.

The repetition throughout the ensemble piece of "Who are you?" serves as a performance and a plea for listening while looking to light actively sought out for extinguishment. This self-reflective sound produces what I call traumatic utopia—that utopia made concrete by communal aspirations and shared affirmations born out of traumatic legacies—and finds physical manifestation in Carlos's infinitely receding and reappearing photographs. Ultimately, Laurie Carlos juxtaposes pain and possibility to extend the language for talking about trauma by understanding the way shared experience creates communities working toward justice—materializing traumatic utopias in theatre spaces.

The Sounds of Mourning: Black Feminist Remix

For Laurie Carlos, ways of remembering and speaking remain inseparable from gender expression. Rather than understand this move as gender essentialist, I would suggest that it deconstructs white masculinity's historical attachment to truth claims. Stories can transform the terms meant to dictate experience. As Carlos writes, "I have never been able to move within the boundaries of the Eurocentric play form. It doesn't tell my story because I'm always dealing with the present, the past and the future. Of course when you start to tell the story, it changes the face of history as we have known it" (5). Carlos's refusal of Western conventions of linear narrative points to how myths about history legitimate existing power relations, inseparable from the politics of aesthetics/aesthetics of politics. Rather than negating identity, experiences of exile and abjection generate alternative visions of and voices for liberation.

Carlos queers patriarchal definitions of femininity by reclaiming the space of the feminine as a site of empowerment, as fundamentally feminist. She makes the feminine and the feminist interchangeable when she writes: "So, ah, by the time I got born there was really nothing but be a feminist…all I had was a feminine…feminist vocabulary…. It was just...it was the only voice I could speak with" (qtd. in Whitmal 14). Her slippage stages a deliberate intervention. She continues: "So, I couldn't play the game. That was part of it. My feminine voice was very strong from the time I was five years old. So, I couldn't play the game. I looked great in high heels, but I couldn't play the game" (14). This raises the issue of how to be functional in a dysfunctional culture, and the particular challenges Black women face in a country where historically citizenship was the exclusive property of white men, a history that shapes the contours of existing social realities of gendered racism and sexual violence.

Carlos bases her 10-year-old character of Lore on autobiographical experiences of not being able to speak to an absent father and being molested by her mother's new partner. The first time Tony asks "Who are you?" falls after Tiny asks "Why dont you ask your question?" to which Lore responds "I havent any questions sir" (12), summoning the absent father figure referred to in the play's title. Lore connects her mother's rape to her own traumatic experience: "I met my Mister Chissolm" (31). Other interwoven plots enter the story—such as Tiny, Tony, and Lore, three sisters, being subjected to their mother's traumatic rehashing of her own experience, a material haunting echoed in stories from other generations, from their grandmother Emilyn's refusal to have white men's children as a slave, to Deola's graphic murder at the African shore. Their shared dialogue at the play's end opens up a space for transformative love, which has been absent from their lives until this climactic recognition. Lore's familial history does not trap her in a web of unspeakable shame but

empowers her to give voice to legacies of violence, which in turn necessitate the formation of Black feminist communities for addressing those legacies through individual and communal healing. Healing practices recognize the body as a vehicle for self-love and creative expression—as a building block for interpersonal and transformational work. Healing, both embodied and social, also serves as the recognition of oneself in larger systems of trauma, a recognition that manifests as heightened awareness of the need for collective action.

Black feminist artists coming out of the Black Arts Movement, such as Laurie Carlos and Ntozake Shange, carved out spaces for African American women to voice their own stories and mythologies against dominant cultural representations that typecast them as Mammies and Jezebels.[53] Carlos famously collaborated with Ntozake Shange in *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, winning critical acclaim for her performance of the Lady in Blue. At the forefront of collaborative artistic production that sought to create not only new images but to radically innovate theatrical form, Laurie Carlos used the music and dance punctuating her childhood as the foundation for new gestural repertories and multi-sensory linguistic expression. Carlos writes in the loaded emotional texture of the gesture, which "becomes the sentence" or "a line from which music is created" (Carlos 5). This visionary language, at once aural and visual, combines words and gestural tableaus. Embodied gestures and physical expression merge the gap between the ancestral and modern spirits, accentuating the body as a vehicle for spirit transformation. The sonic meets the visual in embodied gestures of musical expressivity.

[53] I extend this discussion in Chapter 2, particularly through an analysis of the Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic, which emerges in Black feminist performance spaces coming out of the Black Arts Movement.

Both on the stage and the page, *White Chocolate for My Father* incorporates choreographed movement with Afrodiasporic music cultures, embodied in the Red Light/Radio.[54] The Bobbettes, with their R&B sound from Spanish Harlem, first emerge out of that radio. While their music inspires dance and signals hope, both spirits constantly renegotiate each other. Opening with the utopian potential of "When You Wish upon a Star" (9), played by the Red Light/Radio to which Lore "*sings and circles in the red light*" (9), suggests an embedded skeptical hope (echoed in Ntozake Shange's rainbow, explored in the next chapter). This juke box signals shifts in tone, irony as well as possibility. Lore ultimately embraces both spirits, the Red Light of the Radio and the White Light of her ancestors, as part of her daily strategies of survival and her frame for building something new: a traumatic utopia, in this case using the *sounds of mourning* to generate alternative forms of collective sociality.

White Light/Red Light: Remembering and Dreaming Forward

The tension between the face and effacement, recognition and disavowal, manifests through competing sounds that warp and wane. What Toni Morrison calls the "Africanist" presence haunting hegemonic Americanness finds expression through an opening gestural sequence in which "*the rhythm of a drum sound away*" directly follows the stage directions for "*Five patriotic songs*" (12). The self-division here between Americanness and Africanness figures not so much a geographic displacement as an American identity that relies on projections of so-called "otherness" to gain meaning. Amidst an extended airport drama, "*Emilyn is caught by the rhythm of a drum sound away. The red light comes up*" (14), which offers the

[54] As Carlos describes: "The project uses old music and new music from both Africa and the Deep South to take you on this unique historical American journey" (7).

manufactured promise of heteronormative romantic arcs: playing the white man's blues of Jimmie Rodgers's "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" and Frank Sinatra's performance of "Love and Marriage," as well as the pain-lined pleasures of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, tempered with the comedic sound of "My Name is Jimmy Durante." Staging the affective modes and personal sacrifices of group identification, Carlos offers a complex negotiation with U.S. citizenship and Afrodiasporic belonging. Here, the saccharine, tragic, and classic sounds of Americanness, with its histories of musical appropriation and thwarted coalitional possibility, mute a distant drum.

Rather than romanticizing Africa as a static past, the spirit of Black musical forms connects shared histories, emphasizing continuity across rupture. But first the productive tension of the Red Light/White Light crosses through three memory trips: Trip Number 1, which takes place at an airport in Italy en route to Africa; Trip Number 2, which explores the repercussions of a scheduling mix-up between Trans World Airlines (TWA) and three young women (two sisters, Tony and Tiny, and their friend Ida); and Trip Number 3, when Tony tries to ease the nerves of Tiny and Ida when the Italian Police detain the women for not paying the $1,600 bill TWA promised to comp. During this memory trip, Tony has "visions of working in the hotel [where they had just been treated like royalty], or worse, going to jail" (29). TWA ultimately concedes the injustice of the unclarified $50 per diem stipulation, written in Italian, only when Tony threatens to call the American consulate. The women have been asked to comply in a language they don't speak, a linguistic politics that shifts when the African American women find recourse abroad in Americanness.

Understanding Africa as a symbolic place as well as a geographic space in the ensemble piece makes sense of the encounter between Italian officials and two of the sisters,

Tony and Tiny, and their friend Ida, which derails their trip to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) to visit their mother, Mickey. As Carlos describes: "They were scheduled to fly to Africa on Trans World Airlines at ten o'clock that evening, and arrived at the airport at nine o'clock with plenty of luggage and souvenirs" (10). The specificity of their destination country here gets lost in mundane markers of consumption—luggage and souvenirs. The patriotic songs and "AMERICAN THEME AND READING" in the stage directions follow the news that Trans World Airlines has made a mistake with flight arrangements and offers the three women a financial voucher to pay their expenses before they catch the next flight. Here the American theme references and reinforces the privileges to which customers are entitled—the freedom, mobility, and travel that ultimately reinforces nationalism through consumption practices of the globalist tourism industry. After indulging for days on elaborate meals and a $1,600 hotel stay, the women learn that the TWA voucher only partially covers the cost of their extended visit.

Wronged by the airline, unable to pay the bill, and harassed by the police, this stopover in Italy has successfully derailed their plan to recover "origins" and reconnect with their Africanness through travel. This financial mix-up turns on the fact that the voucher stated its limit in Italian; the authorities ultimately let the three women off as "three lucky American girls" who only speak English (50). A presumed, even compulsory, monolingualism marks them as American; however, another layer of symbolism unfolds in the injustice to which the three women are exposed as Black women, exposing the slippages and paradoxes of racial and national identity. While at home, the women may be understood as second-class citizens, African American but not American—since the unmarked privilege of whiteness remains tied to citizenship in a country that continually denies African

Americans even the most basic civil rights and social freedoms; yet while abroad, the women can be interpellated as American. Their Americanness functions as a form of privilege when they threaten to call the American consulate—after which TWA finally admits its fault. Ostensibly, their saving grace would not have materialized had they not been able to access the entitlements of U.S. citizenship.

Nonetheless, their experience of harassment and exploitation while traveling forces them to negotiate the paradox of African American identity abroad when the U.S. withholds full citizenship from them at home. In Italy, they get blamed for not speaking a language denied to them. This symbolically parallels the myth that the goals of the Civil Rights movement have been achieved despite overwhelming evidence revealing that legacies of injustice persist into the present, making aggrieved communities hyper-vulnerable to systems of social, civic, economic, bodily, and spiritual harm. The discourse of equality steals away possibilities for equity, as images of cultural pathology condemn communities for not being able to speak a language withheld from them. Tony, Tiny, and Ida offer up three affective responses to the dread of having to pay a bill the airline should have covered—panic, grief, and anger. It is Tony's anger that motivates her resourcefulness:

> Fifty dollars a day, shouted Tony—now she was getting mad. Her feeling went from fear to anger at the audacity of the men. She began to say exactly what she felt, what the heck, they were all going to jail anyway. How dare you! she shouted. You son-of-a-bitches have put us through sheer hell today with this nonsense. (29)

Tony then explains that the TWA agent assured them that all costs would be covered during the three-day delay without mention of a daily limit. She threatens to call the American consulate to speak with the American ambassador after explaining that "We don't speak Italian, we are Americans and speak only English" (30). While panic and grief are understandable responses to the airline's victim blaming, Tony here mobilizes her anger

toward indignation and determination, implicitly critiquing the grave limitations of patience as a political strategy.

This allegorical tale of citizenship and travel operates on two levels: first, it speaks to the ability to use Americanness as a *carte blanche* with all the racialized implications of that term, and second, it speaks to the injustices underlining patriotic representation of a country that only enables selective access to full citizenship. In other words, Tony's encounter with the airline agents can be extended to the Civil Rights context, and more specifically, the myth of reparations with tokenistic legal redress that perpetuates the false picture of a post-Civil Rights society that has miraculously eradicated racism. Now, in a so-called post-racial moment, "colorblind" forms of racism pathologize racialized communities with the rhetoric of supposedly bad cultural behavior. Replacing the language of race with culture does the work of disavowing the racist institutions that perpetuate radically uneven access to educational, social, and economic opportunities. This rhetoric of being blamed for legacies placed upon you speaks to Tony's recognition of linguistic discrimination (despite their American privilege), mirroring a larger injustice: being free but having to pay for your freedom.

Carlos thereby couches her critique of the assimilation/integration model of Civil Rights within global patterns of movement across Africa, Europe, and North America. The notion of dreaming forward while forgetting the past underlines a U.S. cultural imaginary that memorializes tokenized figures who represent watershed moments in order to freeze the past as a victory of white liberal rhetorics of individualism, freedom, and democracy. This exceptionalist move evades not only the traumatic residues but the persistence of injustices around genocide, imperialism, colonialism, slavery, and capitalism. The TSA incident

positions Mickey's children in vertiginous relation to these global legacies—literally at a geographic limen between Africa and the Americas. Entry points into the fraught category of ancestral memory do not arrive unmediated by tensions and contradictions of social location with personal and communal history. To dream forward but forget the past echoes the threat of effacement between women: Mickey's mother, Mama, tells her "your face is remembered and ruined" (14). Remembering painful histories here destroys the possibility for the face to communicate anything outside the frames of pain. When characters learn to dream forward *by remembering* the past, their faces reflect to each other more than trauma.

Pronominal Shifts: The Face/Effacement

Carlos formally mirrors affective identifications and claims to belonging through pronominal shifts in the text—from third to second to first person. The overlapping possibilities of projection and relation that the aesthetics and politics of pronouns open up find spatial representation in the African continent to which Carlos's characters desire travel. Carlos's choice to open Tony's monologue about this thwarted trip to Africa on Trans World Airlines in "Third person past tense" distances Tony from her own experience (13). Tony's voice is held in tension with that of Tiny, also in third person past tense. Emilyn then interrupts Tiny's recollection in "First person. Present tense" (13). In this first person voice, Emilyn provides clues to her traumatic encounter with rape and incest: "I have no white mans children" (13). The repetition of this phrase helps clarify her answer to Lore's question, "Who are you?" with "I am his sister" (14). Raped by the white master's son who is her half-brother and also the father of her sister's children, Emilyn grapples with a family tree warped and tangled by white supremacy's legacies of sexual violence. Emilyn refuses to bear this

legacy, literally—she kills the children born out of this violence. Mama, who sees only trauma reflected in the face of her children, repeats the line: "Your nose is too wide too big too flat" (14). Carlos's refusal to let one character alone shape a story points to the intersubjective encounter framing any attempt to piece together the past, and to contextualize its reverberations across intimate spheres and disparate spaces.

After Emilyn echoes the lines "No white mans children. Put every one of those in the ground bloody with no hands" Mama shifts to "Second person. Present tense" (16). This important shift concludes Trip Number 1, with Emilyn, Tony, and Tiny speaking in the first person: "Lets Speak Chinese. *They make language.* Lets Speak Spanish. They make language. I think we might be Spanish. I want to be Catholic. But I think we're Indian first" (17). Dreaming forward by forgetting the past, they initially desire new languages and cultural roots. Mama interrupts: "You aint nothin but some ignorant niggers?" (17), to which Tony responds "Forever ever ever ever forever" (17). Here speaking and listening from the site of trauma short-circuits possibilities for connection, as the second person shift signals not the presence of a listener-witness, a "you" to whom one reveals one's personal truth, but an accusation, the traumatic effects of repressing the past.[55] Interior monologues in the second person, after all, prevent the speaker from entering into an active relationship with an addressee.[56] Through the second person deflection of accountability and identification, Mickey struggles with the unspeakability of a lineage of abuse.

[55] In "The Voice that Keeps Silence," Jacques Derrida suggests that the temporality of the second person interior monologue is rooted in the past, and second person present tense often projects an internalized authority.

[56] Examples of second person phrases borrowed from Jacques Derrida's discussion of second person self-address, which he adopts from Husserl. See "The Voice that Keeps Silence," 72–73.

Paradoxically, the inherent isolation of second person self-reference potentiates a form of communication in which the "you" creates an exterior voice of authority, an outside voice that projects its desires onto the speaker's conscience. In other words, the "you," perhaps a parental or religious figure, condemns the "I," or the self, within an interior monologue. The second person shifts in Carlos's text therefore represent two possibilities: first, the internalized voice of hegemonic shame, and second, the potential for empathic relation, or the implied presence of a community to whom one tells one's story. At the same time, the second person can be a mode of purely fictitious communication, in that it essentially indicates nothing, or does not give the subject any self-knowledge, because it projects internalized fears and traumas. When Mama scolds with the words "You aint nothin but some ignorant niggers?" she is speaking past her daughters, to a projected "you" outside herself, to a force beyond them of which they are all traumatically implicated—the voice of white supremacy.

Mickey's children learn to define themselves outside of hegemonic understandings of power, as well as outside of Mama's repetition of the voice of oppression, spit out as "Your nose is too wide too big too flat. *(She repeats line four more times)* […] Looking at your face I see what the race will come to […] Your face lives like belching on ice cream" (14). Mickey has internalized Mama's derisive "you," instead of identifying with her own face in the mirror. Yet Mickey worries that her children will voyeuristically gloss over Till's photograph and consume rich musical traditions turned pop without appreciating their histories: "*This* face is always a photo & music" (14, emphasis mine). Using "this" instead of the possessive adjective forms your and my, which precede and follow derisive descriptions of the face, distances and deflects possibilities for identification embedded in the visual and

sonic registers. While the Red Light Spirit embodies the Radio, the source of music, Mickey feels that they garble the words:

> These children of mine all mistakes. All of them dance to the radio and to little songs they make up in the night. I work and they sing songs. Yes sir they sing old songs too. Just like you remember. New words sometime, cause they change the words on you. Go inside their heads and come out with mistakes. Their heads miss the lights. (12)

Speaking to the necessity of remembrance, Mickey fears they do not hear stories of survival opened up in the Red Light of music. Moreover, she worries that her children cannot see the White Light of ancestral spirits, and thus do not really reflect her traumatic experience. Mickey embodies both the past traumas of her matrilineal line and that of her own trauma of sexual violence at the behest of Mr. Chissolm. Trapped in her trauma, Mickey cannot yet see what it enables through community—for her, pain forecloses possibility, repeating cycles of self-blame, shame, and silence. Between wanting her children to remember and wanting to forget, she repeats the words of Mama back to her children.

Mickey's assertion of her children as mistakes has a history. The amassing of effacement threatens to erase the face—Deola's face eaten off, Emilyn's infanticide after being raped while her white half-brother covers her face with a bag. As she testifies: "No white mans children. The dogs chewed away my great-grandmothers lips she was still in Africa. We carry that picture in our heart when giving birth. Mama birth us with that in her & it helps us fetch a good price. *(She places bag over her head and sings and loosens her clothes)*" (17). Emilyn here reenacts her own traumatic experience with sexual violence. Her half-brother's attempted effacement of Emilyn—doubled when he covers her face—protects his white impunity and privilege of unseeing incestuous rape: according to white supremacist logics, as "property," she can neither be raped nor can he be committing incest. Emilyn also alludes to the white supremacist reality that a child deemed Black by the logic of

hypodescent could "fetch a good price" with certain features associated with whiteness. After Emilyn's monologue about the paradox of value placed on Black women's bodies,[57] Mama fears that Mickey's children, Tony, Tiny, and Lore, will erase the effaced face born inside of them. Mama sees her own trauma and that of Emilyn and Deola reflected in her daughter Mickey's face. Mickey's echoes Emilyn's words: "My great-grandmother was a white woman … and she brought a good price" (15). This threat of twofold erasure—both in fearing that her children will not pass on her story and in having her matrilineal line disrupted by white supremacy—finds possibilities for restitution in breaking the cycle of traumatic estrangement. As "you" transfers to the "I" explored next, Carlos's pronominal shifts in the ensemble piece also share the burden of negotiating traumatic history.

Answering the Call of Emmett Till's Moving Photograph

Who are you? Responding to this question not with wholeness or closure but with personal and collective affirmation breaks an insidious cycle of individualizing trauma though self-blame and silence. Carlos's affirmation, "Yes," locates an amassing of histories signified by the "I," as characters embody multiple spirits in a "*moving photograph*" (Carlos 14). Carlos repeats the line "Who are you?" multiple times throughout the piece to different effect. This refrain first introduces the ghosted presence and erased face of Emmett Till: "You dont know him do you? They wont let us see no pictures" (13). Here, Lore desires the privileged access to vision that her sister gains having seen her husband—the sonic apparition of Emmett Till's face.

[57] In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia Williams writes: "claiming for myself a heritage the weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance is a profoundly troubling paradox" (217).

Collective traumas, when encountered personally and felt in the body, can be as close as kin. Black women's solidarity with Black men who have also been the victims of white supremacist sexual violence—from rape to lynching—and the intimacy of those shared histories, manifests in the identification of Emmett Till as family:

> Mickey: I am sitting outside the house waiting my turn. Waiting. Mama, why didnt you help me? Mama, why didnt you help me? Mama, why didnt you help me? *(She sings "Look Away Dixie Land")*
> Tony: We are all together Lore see we are all in the same hole.
> Lore: Who are you?
> Tiny: Yes.
> Lore: My sister saw his picture then he is her husband. Emmet [sic] Till is her husband. And so my sisters husband is dead. But at least shes seen her husbands face. (27)

Here, Mickey grapples with her own mother's betrayal by repeating "Mama, why didnt you help me?" while Tony alludes to the site where Deola was violently murdered, weaving a web of intergenerational hurt into the fabric of colonialism and slavery. Mickey ties up her children with rope when she must leave the home, hoping to keep them safe from the traumas to which she was exposed herself.

Lore's search for an answer to the question "Who are you?" suggests both the necessity of self-definition through collective affirmation, and the possibility of a listener with whom she can make sense of the fragments of an intracommunal past, breaking the violent and uncontrollable cycle of memory's resurgence. Memory, as a living archive in physical space, can be understood as a web of past and present, a constellation of images not representable through traditional narrative form. Carlos's fragmented narrativization of trauma revisits the past in order to experience it without the filter of a backward glance. As Carlos explains, "I had to say it in the language that I knew at the time, as the child in the moment. I couldn't write it from the point of view of reflection back" (3–4). Gaps in the text

can signal both a temporal lapse, or a moving forward and backward in memory, and a traumatic repetition not pathologized within Western medical discourses. Trauma can then be understood as historical recurrence experienced bodily and negotiated in communal spaces for healing. Although the irreducible subjectivity of the first-person "I" forever fractures any simplistic one-to-one substitution of faces, Carlos's play asks audience members and readers to find glimpses of themselves in the characters.

Before the ensemble piece's open ending, the sisters begin to piece together their past by identifying their own familial histories through and with the photograph of Emmett Till. While Lore will later identify Emmett Till as her sister's husband, she exclaims: "Can I have those pictures I just want to see him. He might be my husband I have no pictures of my husband. Those pictures might be of his face. I have never seen them. You took the pictures of my husband, you have them. I want to see his face!" (19). Lore here demands photographs of her husband before Emilyn asks "Who are you?" to which Lore responds "Yes" (19). The close proximity of shared histories manifests in political solidarity: the identification of Emmett Till as chosen family. The hole where Deola's head severs from her body reappears in reference to the absent photo haunting the text:

> If you want to be in love with a boy you take his picture and put it under your pillow and you dont let your sisters see it ever. Your heart. If you really like his face take a picture of it, dont let your mother see it. Your heart. Make your own picture, and live with it. Keep your head out of holes. (20)

Tony responds: "Those pictures of the dead boy are on the top shelf. I saw them. He is dead and his face looks like the rats. I kissed his face, his picture. The picture makes me hungry Lore. I have to eat everything" (21). This comparison between kissing the effaced face of Till and rats alludes to an earlier scene. The sisters and their friend Ida bury rats in Pitt Street Park when developers decimate their space. As Tony describes: "Ida digs them up over there.

When they tear down the buildings. We put all the rats in our pockets and in Pitt Street Park we bury our friends. Tiny sings them away from the devil. Ida and me we kiss them" (17). These rats represent fugitive flight from the destruction of communities to make way for capitalist ventures, rats that Ida and Tony honor with ritual. In kissing the dead rats when the buildings fall, they treat with love a population seen as a menace—love for all life as a fundamental statement of humanity, self-respect, and dignity. Through this symbolic burial, they perform a ritual healing from traumatic encounters with the image of Till's face, which in death "looks like the rats."

Their testimonies directly before Emilyn's haunting echo this gesture of ritual healing, speaking to strategies of survival, resilience, and affirmation through laughter:

> Tiny: Amidst the clash of laughing and pennys-worth of swatches I was loved, patted and cherished. I was expected, planned for. Hands moved over my head and marked my growing with tears.
> Tiny: Memories for so many no longer here.
> Tony: My back gave refuge to hugs too full for strangers.
> Tiny: Strong arms helped me ascend to giggles. (16)

Tiny testifies to remembering "Memories for so many no longer here" (16), participating in a community built through trauma, memories of people you do not know personally but to whom you remain connected through shared history. The women constantly negotiate the past-as-process, even changing the lyrics to old songs, but that presence of a communal history helps raise spirits through healing practices.

White Chocolate's last scene refuses dramatic closure, as it ends with an unanswered question, posed by Tony: "Do you love me?" (31). This unresolved appeal opens the audience up to its vulnerability, suggesting that communal affirmation exists as an ongoing process. Yet, Lore has just reclaimed the question to affirm her identity (Who are you?), familial connection (Do you love me?), and shared history (What wars do you remember?):

Lore: Who are you?
Tony: Do you love me?
Deola: What wars do you remember?
Lore: Yes.
Red light climbs out from everywhere.
Yes.
Tony: Do you love me? (31)

The red light climbing out from everywhere, Lore asking and answering her own question with a double affirmation, suggests an undoing of traumatic repetition by reclaiming and not repeating the intracommunal conflict those traumas set into motion. Finally, Lore affirms the "you" of the question that haunts the ensemble piece, "Who are you?" with a resounding "yes" that comes into being through interpersonal support and love: "Do you love me? … Yes" (31). In so doing, Carlos suggests that healing—both individual and societal—happens in spaces of collective support and solidarity. Emilyn's and Emmett Till's faces are remembered and recognized, not forgotten. Carlos thus theorizes the dangers of entrapment in a past not fully known or owned—an effaced face, a displaced desire for recognition—and the possibilities for healing from but never forgetting traumatic pasts and presents. It is precisely these tactile legacies that sound out pain and possibility, not temporally opposed but in the same breath—at once remembering and dreaming forward. We might layer Carlos's refrain of *Who are you?* with *where are you?*—listening closely to Afrodiasporic soundtracks of struggle.

James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*

In the darkness, we hear a shot. These opening stage directions cue us to the rage of whiteness that punctuates James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. The play's instigating action happens before Act I even begins, with: "And may every nigger like this nigger end

like this nigger—face down in the weeds!" (2). Lyle Britten here summarizes his motivations for murdering Richard Henry, the play's absented protagonist. While the play opens with the blood-stained hands of Lyle, its focus lies not on the forgone conclusion of his acquittal in Act III but the sonic memory Richard leaves behind,[58] reinvigorating struggles for justice. In the climactic courtroom scene and its ensuing collective galvanization of Black community members to protest the murder of Richard, his childhood sweetheart Juanita's bold refusal of the epistemological grounds of anti-Black racism inspires new visions of collective sociality to combat systemic conditions of death.

Baldwin's play exists at the historical nexus of a culture of segregation and state-sanctioned lynching, as well as national debates between white liberals and Black activists about how best to fight for rights and manifest social change. Through the bigotry of Lyle and his wife, Jo Britten, Baldwin stages the devastating consequences of white terrorism, yet the play centralizes a more insidious brand of racism through the white liberal figure of Mister Charlie, Parnell James, who withholds evidence that would condemn Lyle and Jo in court. Thus, the Mister Charlie to which the title refers must be understood as Parnell James. Tracing out on whose blues this play rests, I agree with Koritha Mitchell that "the play is written to issue, and to heed, the counterintuitive instruction implied by its title" (55). Blues *for* Mister Charlie rather than *about* Mister Charlie does not suggest a dedication so much as a strained positionality.

Blues for Mister Charlie serves as a meditation on a lost opportunity for coalition, a failure of white liberalism to disinvest in whiteness. When the formal dissolution of some

[58] Koritha Mitchell argues that critiques of the play for its supposed absence of "dramatic suspense because Richard's body is dumped at the beginning of the play" presume "that his being killed by a racist is all that matters. Might Baldwin be interested in giving voice to what Richard meant to his community or to what the community meant to Richard?" (55).

legal inequities cannot eradicate racism as a way of life beyond the segregation of space to the illness of mind, to play the blues for Mister Charlie signals a loss of hope in possibilities for interracial alliances. Baldwin, after all, felt compelled to write the play following Emmett Till's murder, and finished it in 1963 just after the murder of Medgar Evers. In the published edition of his play, Baldwin dedicates *Blues for Mister Charlie* to "the memory of Medgar Evers, his widow and his children and to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham." The historical bookends of his play inform its urgent critique of the material violence of white supremacy's hold in the psyches and structures of U.S. cultural policies, legal rules, and social practices.

Arguing that Baldwin's critique of whiteness remains crucial to his intervention, this chapter takes seriously the cultural stakes of Mister Charlie's blues, not to mute the sonic struggle of Emmett Till's photograph, but to expose the face of white supremacy as central to the mechanisms of effacement. As in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin expresses the urgency of critiquing the way whiteness destroys both physical and psychic lives, as a kind of property to which access requires both violence and disavowal. The constitutive violences of white group identity, as Baldwin describes, must crumble before a new society can take shape—one based on freedom "close to love" and a sensuality that dissolves hierarchy (*Fire* 41). Shared histories of struggle testify to the pain and pleasure of living, an emotional complexity captured in the blues and jazz pulse of "ironic tenacity" to which white Americans recoil in its embedded sensuality (*Fire* 42). Baldwin's concepts of humble

sensuality and deeply politicized love provide nothing short of vehicles for social transformation.[59]

Through the political thrust of the deeply personal register of the blues, Richard's self-definition refuses the terms of Lyle's pre-coded bigotry, which cannot see beyond fictive projections of blackness. Baldwin's play critiques the voyeuristic spectacle of pain central to the consolidation of white group identity through sonic memory, what Soyica Diggs Colbert, citing Moten, describes as the "thick acoustic history associated with lynching" (193). In discussing how the American National Theatre and Academy's 1964 staging of the play without scenery emphasized sound as set design, Colbert argues that Baldwin structures *Blues for Mister Charlie*'s dramatic form around the sonic, and in particular, Richard's voice. I here build on that reading by focusing on a redemptive love between Richard and Juanita, who understand "the secret to Black survival is Black love" (Williams *Give Birth to Brightness* 228). Out of this love emerges the possibility of a new generation of organizers to carry forward sonic legacies.

The play, ultimately, at once serves as a revolutionary call to action expressed through the pain and possibility embedded in African American musical forms, an elegy for so many lives lost to anti-Black racism, and a condemnation of the logics of disavowal key to Mister Charlie's blues. To explore these interwoven threads, I divide the following analysis into five sections: "Theatricalizing *The Fire Next Time*: Everybody's Protest Play?," which argues that its theoretical resemblance to *The Fire Next Time* exposes critical anxieties in the play's reception history; "The Sensuality of Sound, Black Feminist Redux," which explores

[59] Aware that sensuality may evoke "quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs" in the U.S. popular imagination, Baldwin eschews stereotypes of thoroughly racialized embodiment, and the violence they authorize, for something "less fanciful" (43).

the expansive voices of Richard and Juanita through the embodied music of dance; "Black Sound, White Masks," which exposes the "darkness" of love's failures between Lyle and his accomplice, Jo, through the segregation of sound and its disruption through the visual register; "Mister Charlie's Blues," on Parnell and the failures of white liberalism; and "Love and Arms," which takes up the play's ending though the elusive figure of Richard's father, Reverend Meridian Henry. Meridian's transformation at the play's conclusion marks a utilizing of the tools of anger—perhaps for revenge against Lyle's unabashed admittance of guilt, perhaps to lead his community in armed resistance—a renewed strength in "his people's monumental dignity and their triumphant capacity for survival" (Nelson 29). This sonic offering of hope suggests that music improvises through trauma to generate alternative collectives united in struggle.

Theatricalizing *The Fire Next Time*: Everybody's Protest Play?

Baldwin turns to theatrical form to explore the complexities of power not encapsulated in existing structures in which he has little faith—materializing his meditation on U.S. racism and group identity in *The Fire Next Time*, published just a year before. While the play creatively explores and expands *The Fire Next Time*,[60] it is not simply, as some have

[60] While many critics have interpreted James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* as liberal-integrationist or ultimately transcendent of racial politics altogether, part of the force of his argument lies in its incisive critique of how whiteness must construct itself against a fiction of blackness—without which its world shatters into abysmal meaninglessness. As he writes to his nephew: "Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame … Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (9). Since whiteness defines itself by contrast, white Americans actively disinvesting in white supremacy would equal nothing short of re-envisioning their basis for identity. As an empty vessel of white fears, anxieties, and desires, overdetermined fantasies of blackness reflect the devastating effects of a society that cannot understand itself without symbolic figurations of so-called otherness.

suggested (without reference to *Fire*), "more theatre essay than play" (Hay 91–92). Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* deserves attention as firmly entrenched in the author's best works, rather than a spectacular failure.[61] Philip Roth, for example, reduced the play to a battle of villain and victor in which the "real hero of the last two acts is blackness," apparently an undesirable outcome; like many critics, he evaded an examination of the play's complexity in favor of reducing it to a game of stereotype. Roth was not alone in expressing profound discomfort with Baldwin's unflinching portrait of U.S. race relations and the psychological complexity embedded in their engineering; Robert Brustein, for example, titled his rant against *Blues* "Everybody's Protest Play," turning Baldwin's famous critique of Richard Wright in "Everybody's Protest Novel" against him—that protest fiction as a sentimental distortion of the social ultimately reifies the categories it seeks to condemn. Yet it is precisely the unresolved tensions around cultural ills and organizing strategies that Baldwin leaves open for debate that unsettles, rather than—as Roth and Brustein suggest—a histrionic war of social pathologies and didactic solutions.

While *The Fire Next Time* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* were written and published within a two-year span, it is precisely the play's embodiment of a critique of Parnell that provoked and unsettled white liberal audiences, who disowned their implication in the discourse by leveling accusations of stereotype. Despite striking similarities between *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Fire Next Time* (as I weave its arguments throughout these

[61] I follow Davis in arguing that rather than "a blemish on Baldwin's literary career," the play serves as "an underrated achievement doomed to provoke discomfort because it renders lethal American dilemmas and inbred social phobias in their complete, unbeautiful intractability" (32). The play's infamous trial on Broadway has bolstered this critical dismissal—with its history of fired directors and actors, changed venues, and Baldwin impugning creative decisions of the production and artistic team from the vantage point of a thirty-foot stage ladder. The box office did not fare much better, and the play's run continued after a month only with the support of private donors and public protestors; moreover, popular reception was notoriously tense.

pages)—the latter received critical acclaim and the former did not. This disparity stems from popular misreadings of Baldwin that mirror the critical obsession with focusing on intraracial conflict rather than polemics against power structures. Baldwin's revolutionary ethos in *Fire* has been muted by an overemphasis on his critique of Elijah Muhammad's following, a power-evasive strategy of turning away from interracial tensions to intraracial politics. This has produced arguments that Baldwin "chooses color-blind love over racial solidarity with [his statement that] 'I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?'" (Lyne 26). Yet, since Baldwin's conception of love seeks to redistribute power through structural change predicated on social transformation, I would question the shaky foundations on which this critic's claim to colorblind liberal humanism rests—echoed in the All Lives Matter hashtag.

While *The Fire Next Time* theorizes whiteness, it is the play's personalization of the institutional that proves hard to bear in the white imagination. Performance literature theorizes power and possibilities for justice—but its concretization of intellectualized affects makes its arguments unsettling to audiences with no recourse to the distancing effects of abstraction. Baldwin's play cannot be incorporated by political investments in sanitizing his work, in sum, because his critique of whiteness takes on physical form and flesh in the body of Parnell. Situating Baldwin's work in the Black Revolutionary Theatre of the 1960s contextualizes the tensions and contradictions in critical reviews at the historical juncture of *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, which debuted just one month after the abbreviated run of Baldwin's play; moreover, "Baraka was so influenced by Baldwin, in fact, that Baraka trumpeted Baldwin's theme in all of his own Protest plays" (Hay 95). Samuel A. Hay describes Baldwin's theme of liberation as first and foremost "burning all

bridges to white liberals" (95). Indeed, Baldwin's ability to unsettle, to expose not just the institutional but the interpersonal dynamics of racism, turns on his incisive portrait of a community divided helplessly along a racial line that whites such as Parnell feel entitled to trespass only when it reaffirms their own sense of self as morally superior.

Howard Taubman's review of Baldwin's play when it debuted suggests the need for an organized insurgence to burst through this historical monotony: "if the revolution is not to be bloody, the white man has an urgent moral obligation" (Taubman). As in Marita Bonner's Harlem Renaissance-era play *The Purple Flower*, bloodletting functions metaphorically to suggest a massive redistribution of wealth and power. Here, the symbolic weight of blood also suggests, as Mitchell writes, that "We must *recreate* each other by clinging to the reality that has become hardest to grasp: we are all each other's flesh and blood" (56). This is the kind of deeply politicized love that disrupts the colonial boundaries of race and nation that Baldwin offers in *The Fire Next Time*, and the warning offered by Meridian's implacable desire for justice in *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

Baldwin's play mourns the violent aporia of whites like Parnell whose relationship to Blacks is parasitic rather than communal, necessary for their own survival rather than being motivated by a genuine desire for change. Parnell's blues lead nowhere except to denial and violence, whereas Richard inspires his community toward the generativity of revolutionary action predicated on communal knowledge and love. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin suggests that historical trauma can be generative of alternative visions of social relations: "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" (81). This juxtaposition of suffering and social redemption underscores the

traumatic utopia of Baldwin's text. That imagined future exists in collective spaces that gather to share pain and pleasure amidst a devastating matrix of power.

The Sensuality of Sound, Black Feminist Redux

While I have focused on the traumas of Till's photograph—the visual register of white supremacy and its acoustic stickiness—I now turn to the text's affective edges of another possibility for organizing sound. Taking seriously the blues call and response of the play's title and reverberating through its pages, reading Baldwin through collectivity and sound makes clear how both hearing and feeling resound in the body, whether a distant echo or deep in the belly. Sound rematerializes what has been made invisible, paradoxically through its spectacularization. Richard's at once ethereal and material presence in the play aurally captures what the visual register has shoved from sight. In this section I also locate the vibrations of language, and its sounding out of struggle, as a potentially generative site, since Richard, Juanita, Meridian, and other members of Blacktown boldly refuse modernity's violence of categorization. Their identities, self-defined, move toward other visions of and actions toward racial justice.

As Colbert and Mitchell have suggested, the sound of Richard's voice and his material presence structures the play—bringing together the communal reverberations of Richard's life and death, the noise that overrides silence.[62] When Baldwin's characters remember Richard, they in the words of Mitchell "re-member" him (51), meaning that they

[62] In *Give Birth to Brightness*, Sherley Anne Williams also powerfully explores through Richard the figure of the Black musician as light bearer—drawing from Amiri Baraka's poem, "Premises Not Quite Condemned," which ends "Let him live, when he dies/ and give birth to/ brightness" (Baraka qtd. in Williams 230).

feel his physical presence in extant time.[63] Richard's crossing of racialized boundaries, materialized in the play as a line between life and death, violence and transcendence, opens up the possibility of another way of healing and being in/through performance. As Mitchell argues, Baldwin's play theorizes performance as "*flesh-centered imaginative work*—the intellectual labor that allows one to push past the categories that society encourages but that occurs in embodied ways; it is intellectual work that enables transcendent movement even as it takes place through the body" (39). This generative paradox of transcendent embodiment finds a home in the aural cues of the blues, in suffocating and subtle expression of violence and pain, from the cries of the lynch mob to the moaning/mourning that traps and releases despair.

The play's structure emphasizes Richard as the utopian pulse of a play otherwise centered on the absence of hope in U.S. legal and social systems, which perpetuate white supremacy while maintaining white liberal faith in the law to redress it. Richard's voice records another kind of memory, that of grassroots change and daily activism. This is the voice of hope that Baldwin projects against the otherwise tragic opening and closing of the play—Lyle's murder of Richard, and Parnell's ultimate complicity with Lyle and with the structures of white supremacy he would otherwise seek to critique rather than condone. This failure of whiteness frames the text's dramatic arc, represented by the title of the play itself—but Richard offers another vision of justice beyond the limitations of the law to effect social

[63] I agree with Koritha Mitchell that Richard's materialization throughout the play occurs not through dramatic flashback but rather "in response to living characters" (50). Citing Sharon Holland's work on the space of the dead, Mitchell writes: "In the space of death, Richard declares truths that his community resists, but he could not do so without having been brought forth by those who survived him" (52).

and political change. In Act I, the utopian exists in a sonic register, as Richard's voice arrives at us through the memory of music:

> Mother Henry: You remember that song he used to like so much?
> Meridian: I sing because I'm happy.
> Juanita: I sing because I'm free.
> Pete: For his eye is on the sparrow—
> Lorenzo: And I know he watches—me.
> (*Music, very faint*) (16)

Mother Henry then interrupts the sad tension in contradiction born out of Lorenzo's pause, recollecting that Richard "had a beautiful voice" (16). The play's structuring around the sound of Richard's voice, and its "phonic interruption" (Colbert 200), signals both pain and perseverance in the face of violence. While the final act puts U.S. racism on trial, grassroots organizing efforts also bookend the play—after Lyle's opening lines, the play shifts to Reverend Meridian Henry guiding students through training in nonviolent direct action. The students gathered in the church embody and perform Mister Charlie to practice what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "self-purification" (290), or developing resilient strategies to deflect anticipated hatred from whites through roleplaying; and the play ends not with Lyle's acquittal but with the mobilizing of students and community members in response to the mistrial.

Richard's protest cannot be quieted even in death, as his words haunt Lyle and the rest of Whitetown, while offering his community other possibilities for organizing and being in the world. The last lines Richard speaks during his life continue to resound: "Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me?" The grief, pain, and mourning of lynching elicits the insurgent reaction of Richard's father, Meridian, who adopts a more militant approach. As much as the play condemns the self-aggrandizing hypocrisies of white liberalism, their fear of and desire for the blues, it anticipates and illuminates survival mechanisms of the

Black liberation struggle. By returning to the South to confront his past and reignite deeply meaningful relationships with Meridian and Juanita, Richard's music gains force through collective memory's ability to strengthen identity and interpersonal relationships.

What's more, Richard's and Juanita's dance, as an embodied gesture of music, signals a political movement founded on deep-rooted acts of loving as a revolutionary practice. To Richard's sonic legacy I add Juanita's Black feminist corrective to trauma through the politics and possibilities of interpersonal relationships and intimacies, which as Tricia Rose argues remain fundamental to viable social movements—rather than derided as feminized spaces. Juanita's Black feminist epistemology emphasizes the resilience of intracommunal love and support networks. Even in the early stages of their playful banter, marked by the coquettish cunning of adolescence, the voice as motif characterizes Juanita and Richard's love that endures in death. Richard flirts, "And I bet you the same old tomboy. You sure got the same loud voice—used to be able to hear you clear across this town" (23). Rebuking Parnell's admission of romantic feelings for her, music here invokes the redemptive power of love:

> JUANITA: No. That train has gone. One day, I'll recover. I'm sure that I'll recover. And I'll see the world again—the marvelous world. And I'll have learned from Richard—how to love. I must. I can't let him die for nothing. *(Juke box music, loud. The lights change, spot on Parnell's face. Juanita steps across the aisle. Richard appears. They dance. Parnell watches.)* (79–80)

Richard's and Juanita's dance, the sound and sight of bodies guided by music, locates the utopian potential of love over and across the boundaries of life and death. In this moment, the embodiment of music through dance gestures toward a political movement founded on deep-rooted acts of loving as a revolutionary practice.

Yet the sphere of desire does not idealize its possibilities by smoothing over material realities. The psychic disavowals and spatial segregation of race, the separation of Blacktown and Whitetown, together form what Baldwin terms Plaguetown, U.S.A., destroyed by the wounds of racism and the false promises of a Christian faith abstracted from heteropatriarchal white supremacy, a "raging plague has the power to destroy every human relationship" (xv). Since the discourse of the nuclear family remains central to white supremacy's operation, and racialized fears and fantasies play out in the sphere of sexuality, Baldwin never abstracts his seething critique of U.S. racism from sexual and gender politics. Papa D.'s Juke Joint operates in a space of uneasy suspension—even of racial segregation—precipitating the inevitability of white terrorism in the space of music, of dance, and of organizing, gossip, and community.

In addition to racial tension, it is a space of sexual expression; when Richard shows off photos of his flings from New York, Juanita understands the pathology of whiteness over and against the gendered expectation that conversations about sex will disrupt her feminine sensibilities: "Don't worry about *me*. I've been a big girl for a *long* time. Besides, I'm studying abnormal psychology. So please feel free. Which one is this? What does *her* father do?" (26). Juanita's openness to the realities of Richard's life in New York leads to a deeper conversation about the pains and pleasures of living, since for Richard his burgeoning music career and the damage it does to his psychic life remain wrapped up inextricably. In telling Juanita about his downward spiral into self-medication with illicit drugs and sex, and the impetus for self-soothing to ease a larger social sickness, Richard explains:

> I got hooked about five years ago. See, I couldn't stand these chicks I was making it with, and I was working real hard at my music, and, man, I was lonely. You come off a gig, you be tired, and you'd already taken as much shit as you could stand from the managers and the people in the room you were working and you'd be off to make

> some down scene with some pasty white-faced bitch. And so you'd make the scene and somehow you'd wake up in the morning and the chick would be beside you, alive and well, and dying to make the scene again and somehow you'd managed not to strangle her, you hadn't beaten her to death. Like you wanted to. And you get out of there and you carry this pain around inside all day and all night long. No way to beat it—no *way*. No matter how you turned, no matter what you did—no *way*. But when I started getting high, I was cool, and it didn't bother me. And I wasn't lonely then, it was all right. And the chicks—I could handle them, they couldn't reach me. (29)

Richard's drug use allows him to manage to survive when the knowledge of social hierarchy and servility, his getting pushed around by managers and meaningless sexual relations predicated on the dual structure of racism, pleasure and danger, proves for Richard inescapably violent to his identity, projected onto the bodies of the women who desire him and whom he detests for the basis of their desire. This carves out a pain inside him—a pain that he must carry "inside all day and all night long."

Back home with Juanita, Richard's temporary respite from the violence Lyle represents finds strength in the embodied musical affect of dance. As Richard narrates this pain, Lyle interrupts by walking into the Juke Joint, demonstrating that under Jim Crow whites had dominion over *all* space even as they invented the spatial boundaries of race. Richard jokes: "I wonder what he'd do if I walked into a white place" (30). Lyle watches Richard and Juanita dance, revealing jealousies over the sensual emptiness he embodies as a white man: "you know I ain't never going to be able to dance like that" (31). Richard and Lyle first confront each other when Lyle jostles Juanita, after which Pete remarks that Richard's brazen attitude will get him killed. But Richard brushes it off: "Come on, baby, record's going to waste—let's TCB [take care of business]" (31). Juanita and Richard suspend time in the utopian space of the record player—a sonic place to which Lyle cannot gain access, except through a surrogate body he must erase in order to see his own face in the mirror.

Alongside Meridian's turning away from his earlier dismissal of armed resistance, Juanita's fierce will to love and Black feminist politics of self-determination in the face of theft together provide the basis for Baldwin's imagination of a leaderless movement centered on intracommunal love. During the courtroom scene, the revolutionary possibilities of love meet the violence of codified assumptions about pleasure. Once Juanita takes the stand, she rejects the hypersexualized assumptions violently projected onto her body, maintaining Baldwin's concept of humble sensuality as a liberatory category. The court accuses Juanita of licentiousness for dating Pete Spivey before Richard Henry, as if that undermines her credibility. The question, posed as statement, demonstrates how predetermined answers operate in a system that grants complexity only to those at the top of the racial order:

> THE STATE: Excellent preparation for your future! … And how many others!
> WHITETOWN: That's the way they are. It's not their fault. That's what they want us to integrate with.
> BLACKTOWN: These people are sick. Sick. Sick people's been known to be made well by a little shedding of blood.
> JUANITA: I am not responsible for your imagination. (96–97)

Here Whitetown echoes the racism written into law. Yet this parasitical relationship between legal and social spheres, the hegemonic reach of hate, does not dissolve the agency of Juanita, who refuses to take responsibility for the white imagination. Blacktown's response here is insurrectionary: the call for bloodletting, at once symbolic and material, represents how the pathology of whiteness needs to actively create an antidote to its own machinations—the racism to which it so furiously clings for unearned material advantage and psychic stability.

The state similarly interrogates Meridian, and like Juanita he remains steadfast in his conviction that his soul, his very self-conception and self-determination, has not been crushed by society's hegemonic grip. He states: "Your judgment of myself and my motives

cannot concern me at all. I have lived with that judgment far too long. The truth cannot be heard in this dreadful place" (105). The State's words ring particularly ironically in the courtroom, as it leverages an accusation against Meridian: "You are yourself so eaten up by race hatred that no word of yours can be believed" (105). This projection of the racial order's rage makes it no surprise that the State discredits Meridian's testimony and accuses him, not Lyle, of being at fault for Richard's death: "Perhaps the difficulties your son had in accepting the Christian faith is due to your use of the pulpit as a forum for irresponsible notions concerning social equality, Reverend Henry. Perhaps the failure of the son is due to the failure of the father" (102). Juanita and Meridian stand united in not letting the court's attempted humiliation of them affect their sense of self-knowledge and dignity in the face of injustice. Instead, both Juanita and Meridian understand state hatred as a violent projection of its own reality, its own spiritual emptiness.

Black Sound, White Masks

"Lord, where is our hope? … What hope is there for a people who deny their deeds and disown their kinsmen and who do so in the name of purity and love, in the name of Jesus Christ? What a light, Lord, is needed to conquer so mighty a darkness!" (77). As in Reverend Meridian Henry's pivotal sermon, metaphors of spiritual darkness and light permeate the play. Against the light of Richard, Juanita, and Meridian—Lyle, Jo, and Parnell embody the darkness that rages. Echoing his critique of how white identity formation relies upon subordination and denial in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin remarks in the prefatory notes to *Blues* that "What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this

knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a *spiritual darkness* which no one can describe" (xiv, emphasis mine).[64] This immunity from ongoing histories of violence ("deny their deeds"), and disavowal of relation ("disown their kinsmen," explored in the next section), protects the vested interests of white group identity, leading to a spiritual darkness that by design dims what Baldwin calls "the reality and the power of light" (xv).

Baldwin's color imagery in the courtroom scene remains consistent with his description, in the prefatory notes and in Meridian's preaching, of darkness and light. Reversing the colonial imaginary's attachment of blackness to darkness, fear, night, death, and danger, Baldwin attaches darkness to a metaphorical lack of political vision, a willed blindness or refusal to see characteristic of whiteness as a point of view (see Mills; Lipsitz). The courtroom's "blinding white emphasized by a dull, somehow ominous gold" associates the sterile violence of the law to a "blinding white" (81). In contrast, the "dull, somehow ominous gold" foretells the Black liberation struggle in Plaguetown, U.S.A. The courtroom's transparency also foreshadows this shift from blindness to the power of sight, as all its windows remain open, and the stage directions indicate that "one should be aware of masses of people outside and one should sometimes hear their voices—their roar—as well as singing from the church. The church is directly across the street from the courthouse, and the steeple and the cross are visible throughout the act" (81). The pulpit and the witness stand juxtapose modes of social and legal control as they mutually construct and inform the play's meditation on U.S. racism.

[64] Baldwin adds, "But if it is true, and I believe it is, that all men are brothers, then we have the duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we probably cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children" (xiv).

Baldwin understands both the courtroom and the church to erect false idols and prophets that perpetuate existing power relations. *Blues* thus parallels both structures to suggest a sonic as well as physical arrangement of courthouse and church: "Before the curtain rises, song: 'I Said I Wasn't Going To Tell Nobody, But I Couldn't Keep It To Myself.' The JUDGE's gavel breaks across the singing, and the curtain rises" (81). The judge's gavel interrupts a hopeful gospel lyric about not being able to contain the joy one feels about salvation, a sharing of self-knowledge with the collective. This song of spiritual healing has a frenetic, upbeat swinging sound punctuated by hand-clapping, making its energetic refrain ring particularly ironically in the wake of the courtroom's curtailing of freedom. The gavel's muting of the hopeful sound sets the tone of abrupt and jarring apposition of the utopian expanse of music and the traumatic reality of the courtroom. This contrast does not create a false dichotomy between pain and pleasure, but suggests that the courtroom seeks to violently negate the embedded possibility in daily lived experience. Listening to the Queen of Gospel Mahalia Jackson sing the lyrics of "I Said I Wasn't Going To Tell Nobody, But I Couldn't Keep It To Myself" sonically materializes the pain-lined pleasures of music, as a release from and expression of ongoing struggle.

Like Papa D.'s juke joint, the space of music implies another racial boundary that whites violently transgress as they flirt with the dangers and pleasures of blackness. Act II opens in the kitchen of Lyle's house. After a group of Lyle's closest friends conclude their singing of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" in a celebratory toast to Lyle's anticipated acquittal, Jo adds: "Listen. Here's to all of you! (*Drinks*) Listen. They're singing over there now" (48). The stage directions include the act of listening as integral to the play's parenthetical unraveling: "(*They listen*)" (48). One of Jo's friends comments, "Sometimes

they can sound so nice. Used to take my breath away when I was a girl" (48). The transcendent voice, and the fact of Black domestic workers in white-owned homes raising white children, points to the deadlock between the realities of racial proximity and the psychic gulfs of an immovable racial hierarchy. This music's ability to capture the breath, to transport people, poses a threat to Lyle, as he calculates Blacktown's sounds of hope and mourning as a challenge to sensual and spiritual vacuity. To Parnell, Lyle pleads: "Supper can wait. Have another drink with me—be my buddy. Don't leave me here alone. Listen to them! Singing and praying! Singing and praying and laughing behind a man's back!" (76). His exclamation mirrors Parnell's feelings of exclusion from the heavy lightness, the resilient desire moving through the blues—despite the gravity of white terrorism and violence.

This threatening laugh starkly contrasts the affective shift in the courtroom two months later, in Act III where the white "chorus attempts to castrate and/or impale Black witnesses on the spikes of their own sexual fears" (Williams *Give Birth to Brightness* 154). On the other side of the racially segregated town, Baldwin exposes Parnell James's withholding of evidence that would support Lyle's conviction through a lapse in memory—a flashback that precedes his testimony in court. This flashback reveals that Richard poses a threat to his very self-conception. Parnell and Lyle remain unable to banish the psychic danger of Richard because they actively reinforce its mythologized inscription into the U.S. imaginary. Suturing sonic appropriation to cultural and sexual fantasy, both their fear and their sublimated desire for Black social life—represented through Richard's voice and the sound of the blues—play out on the bodies of Black women, hypersexualized against the white woman's reproduction of racial purity.

Before Richard, Lyle murdered Old Bill, the husband of his lover in Blacktown, Willa Mae. Jo confronts Parnell about Lyle's affair with Willa Mae, and when Parnell admits that he too has loved a Black woman, Jo entertains a possibility that threatens her understanding of what their marriage consolidates against a refusal to recognize Black people's humanity. When Jo realizes why Lyle has murdered Old Bill, she accepts that he must have killed Richard, too. But in court she reverts to the same old social script to protect her husband, their son, and all the implications of his inheritance. To her horror she realizes Lyle's murder of Willa Mae's husband might have been a crime of passion as much as a crime of pure race hatred, the latter of which she can excuse before the unthinkable corollary to the psychic structure of racism: what Frantz Fanon identifies as the philia and phobia (188), pleasure and danger, of blackness in the white colonialist imagination.

Baldwin reveals that this psychic structure also shapes Parnell's desires, which extend from his first love to his romantic interest in Juanita. In the play, the reflective surfaces of phobia and philia short-circuit possibilities for interracial coalition. After Juanita and Meridian take the stand, Parnell makes transparent how performances of whiteness turn on psychosexual attachments to blackness: before he speaks, the reader-audience witnesses a flashback to Parnell at home in a bathrobe, reflecting: "Christ, how weary I am of this dull calisthenic [sic] called love—with no love in it!" (105). When a white woman accuses him of calling out another woman's name in bed, he hopes that other woman was white, not Black—revealing Parnell's fantasies and fears about blackness as a reflection of his investment in whiteness.

Parnell uses the figure of the white woman, who embodies the reproduction of the white nation, "as an anchor—to hold me here, in this house, this bed—so I won't find myself

on the other side of town, ruining my reputation. *What* reputation? They all know. I swear they all *know*" (106). In his drunkenness, Parnell reveals his despair, his self-hatred, his paranoid fear of exposing his identity investments. While Richard strengthens Blacktown's resolve amidst suffering, he haunts Parnell's imagination, threatening to unveil the masquerade:

> What name could I have called? Richard would say that you've got—black fever! Yeah, and he'd be wrong—that long, loud, black mother. I wonder if she's asleep yet—or just lying there, looking at the walls. Poor girl! All your life you've been made sick, stunned, dizzy, oh, Lord! driven half mad by blackness. Blackness in front of your eyes. Boys and girls, men and women—you've bowed down in front of them all! And then hated yourself. Hated yourself for debasing yourself? Out with it, Parnell! The nigger-lover! Black boys and girls! I've wanted my hands full of them, wanted to drown them, laughing and dancing and making love—making love—wow!—and be transformed, formed, liberated out of this grey-white envelope. Jesus! I've always been afraid. Afraid of what I saw in their eyes? They don't love me, certainly. You don't love them, either! Sick with a disease only white men catch. Blackness. What is it like to be black? To look out on the world from *that* place? I give nothing! How dare she say that! My girl, if you knew what I've given! Ah. Come off it, Parnell. To *whom* have you given? What name did I call? What name did I call? (106)

Here, Parnell projects the voice of Richard ("Out with it, Parnell!") to reflect honestly on his relationship to Blacktown, which remains at the level of the symbolic. He constructs blackness as an antidote to the white plague that haunts him, from which he desires liberation "out of this grey-white envelope." As Parnell continues to speak to himself in third person ("Come off it, Parnell") Richard's haunting the edges of his imagination starts to drive him to madness, which he must resolve through the appellation of a white woman's name. His inability to locate this name produces an active tension during the trial.

Blackness, fetishized as an imagined escape from whiteness, underlines Parnell's dramatic monologue—this actual confession that he glosses over in court. Instead, Parnell reaffirms his white group identity, consolidated in a subsequent image of Parnell and Lyle

hunting on Parnell's land. It should come as no surprise, then, that Parnell's refusal to deny Jo's testimony—the blatant lie that Richard violently attacked her with sexual threats—affirms it. With all the pieces of the social script set into motion, the state unsurprisingly acquits Lyle. When faith in the law remains as abstract as faith in the afterlife promising something different, communities must mobilize to flee the conditions of their planned destruction.

Mister Charlie's Blues

Parnell's state of unbelonging—both his estrangement from Whitetown for his newspaper's liberal political idealism, and his forged solidarity with Blacktown—remains at the level of performance. If he had on public record acknowledged his and Jo's lies to uphold Lyle's presumed innocence, he could have at least swayed the jury's decision. Parnell's failure to act with dignity on his self-fashioned principles solidifies his alliance with Whitetown and the absolute limits of his so-called allyship. The focus on Mister Charlie's blues thus falls to Parnell's embodied contradictions, since the white moderate position represents a greater threat to justice than the overt bigotry of Lyle. As Martin Luther King, Jr. writes in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (1963):

> I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate … who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice … who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." (295)

In the play, Parnell represents this obstruction to justice whose patronizing and "mythical concept of time," progress on his own clock, flies in the face of Meridian's sense of urgency.

His cold and calculating reaction to Richard's death—and his unwillingness to disinvest in white supremacy when the time comes to put his supposedly progressive words into action by implicating his friend Lyle in court—epitomizes the paternalistic stance King describes here.

In "Notes for *Blues*," Baldwin implicates Parnell's betrayal of Reverend Meridian Henry to the U.S. history of slavery and hypodescent that maintains a racial order predicated on the disavowal of kinship ties through the logic of blood purity.[65] Suggesting Parnell's cowardliness, Baldwin writes: "It is we [the American people] who have forbidden him, on pain of exclusion from the tribe, *to accept his beginnings*, when he and black people loved each other, and rejoice in them, and use them" (xv, emphasis mine). Through violent processes of reproduction under governing logics of slavery and hypodescent, white and Black Americans are repudiated "blood" relatives; while understanding the ideology of blood as a fallacy of scientific racism, the U.S. is nonetheless founded in a family tree cut at the trunk, its branches bleeding onto soil.

It is precisely Parnell's inability "to accept his beginnings" that prevents a connection with Meridian and empathic response to Richard's death. Meridian remarks that both Parnell and the police understand Richard's murder as a problem that needs to be dealt with, rather than a theft of human life. At the Police Chief's office, Parnell "saw" Richard only as a body, "just a black boy that was dead, and that was a problem. He saw the problem one way, you saw it another way. But it wasn't a *man* that was dead, not my *son*—you held yourselves away from *that*!" (39). Parnell can only respond: "I may have sounded—cold. It was not

[65] As Mitchell argues, "Baldwin is interested in a corporeal truth, not an abstract conception of humanism or brotherly love. As he argues in many contexts, black and white Americans are blood relatives" (36).

because I felt cold. There was no other way to sound, Meridian. I took the only tone which—it seemed to me—could accomplish what we wanted. And I *do* know the Chief of Police better than you—because I'm white. And I can make him listen to me—because I'm white" (39). Yet rather than using his whiteness strategically in the fight for justice, he exploits connections with People of Color in an attempt to shield and protect his own white group identity investments from critique. Across class differences, Parnell and Lyle share a bond through understanding themselves as joined through the allegiance of race. This bond proves stronger than Parnell's supposed political alliance with Blacktown, and his friendship with Meridian. In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Parnell's upholding of the values of heteropatriarchal white supremacy, his unwillingness to actively disinvest in structures of power that bestow unearned advantages to him even as he performatively disavows them, hums the same tune as Lyle's race hatred.

This supposed progressivism that blocks progress further disillusions Richard's Father, Revered Meridian Henry, motivating him to adopt a more militant approach to direct action organizing. When Meridian shifts his stance on armed resistance, the trust between Parnell and Meridian erodes most saliently: Parnell says "If the Negroes were armed, it's the Negroes who'd be slaughtered. You know that" to which Meridian responds: "They're slaughtered anyway. And I don't know that. I thought I knew it—but now I'm not so sure" (37–38). This turning point escalates into a full-blown display of the extent of their differences over strategies for social change. Meridian's stance, complex and measured, cannot accommodate the reactionary fervor of whiteness whenever it feels that its privileges may be impinged upon, echoing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s critique of the white moderate:

> PARNELL: What's come over you? What's going to happen to the people in this town, this church—if you go to pieces?

MERIDIAN: Maybe they'll find a leader who can lead them someplace.
PARNELL: Somebody with a gun?
(*Meridian is silent*.)
Is that what you mean? (38)

Meridian indirectly answers the question by directly linking the bible and the gun as tools of white colonial rule, reflecting on how Christianity has been wielded historically to further white interests. Knowing full well the racist foundations of its civilizing mission, Meridian nonetheless acknowledges that his religious practice has served as an affirmation of dignity in a world that yields him none.

Meridian then resignifies the terms of blindness and sight: "Since I wasn't a man in men's eyes, then I could be a man in the eyes of God. But that didn't protect my wife […] my son […] That hasn't changed this town—this town, where you couldn't find a white Christian at high noon on Sunday! The eyes of God—maybe those eyes are blind—I never let myself think of that before" (38). Colorblind discourse, like Parnell's, steeps supposed progressivism in white liberal humanistic rhetoric that minimizes racism while playing to a discourse of white injury ("I don't *see* race, for seeing it would disadvantage whites"). Parnell echoes God's blindness to racial injustice, the basis for Meridian's questioning of his faith:

PARNELL: You used to say that your people were all the people in the world—all the people God ever made, or would make. You said your race was the human race.
MERIDIAN: The human race!
PARNELL: I've never seen you like this before. There's something in your tone I've never heard before—rage—maybe hatred—
MERIDIAN: You've heard it before. You just never recognized it before. You've heard it in all those blues and spirituals and gospel songs you claim to love so much.
PARNELL: I was talking about *you*—not your history. I have a history, too. And don't be so sure I've never heard that sound. Maybe I've never heard anything else. Perhaps my life is also hard to bear. (39)

The sounds of struggle with which Parnell proclaims affective affinity reaffirm his own sense of moral superiority and goodness, his own benevolent disposition toward People of Color that attend his claims to a life "hard to bear." African American music cultures may speak (back) to Parnell (blues for Mister Charlie or Mister Charlie's blues), but it is the self-inflicted pain of parasitical dependence on subordinating and consuming blackness that makes his life not *hard to bear* but unbearable—caught in an ongoing history of anti-Black violence that benefits him particularly when he maintains a façade of denial.

Through music, Baldwin stages the key interracial tension in the play, centered on the failures of listening closely to the stories music tells, of really hearing what Meridian affirms about himself when it does not fit into Parnell's cognitive schema. He can make no music of his own until he confronts that history and acts on an informed vision of what justice looks like in practice. Meridian calls out the hypocrisies embedded in the white liberal sonic consumption of soundtracks of struggle—of tuning in and out pain. Parnell's inability to cross the boundaries of white liberal guilt and self-heroization leave him with "no other way to sound." What's more, Parnell defends Lyle's race hatred using a fallacious class alibi:

> MERIDIAN: And we know how Lyle feels about colored people.
> PARNELL: Well, yes. From your point of view. But—from another point of view—Lyle hasn't got anything *against* colored people. He just—
> MERIDIAN: He just doesn't think they're human.
> PARNELL: Well, even *that's* not true… He's a poor white man. The poor whites have been just as victimized in this part of the world as the blacks have ever been! (41)

The absurdity of this statement, which denies not only the historical reality of slavery but also the ongoing epistemological ground on which the nation rests, points to Parnell's willed erasure of differential life outcomes based on race. When Meridian's already tenuous trust in Parnell to do the right thing, to implicate Lyle when he knows him to be guilty, has been

stretched to the limit, he states: "I don't want you to do it for me. I want you to do it for you" (43).

Yet Parnell can only revert to a liberal individualist logic that scapegoats Lyle for crimes in which he himself is ultimately complicit: "We have come too far together, there is too much at stake, for you to become black now, for me to become white. Don't accuse me. Don't accuse me. *I* didn't do it" (40). Parnell, on the difficulty of relinquishing privilege, admits: "It's not a matter of trying to hold *on*; the things, the privilege—are part of you, are *who* you are. It's in the *gut*" (40). And here Baldwin reveals for whom Mister Charlie's blues play:

> MERIDIAN: Then where's the point of this struggle, where's the hope? If Mister Charlie can't change—
> PARNELL: Who's Mister Charlie?
> MERIDIAN: You're Mister Charlie. *All* white men are Mister Charlie!
> PARNELL: You sound more and more like your son, do you know that? (40)

What Parnell cannot realize is that Meridian's refusal of the crude universalist terms of white liberalism to effect social change through faith in a legal system that has systematically failed People of Color sounds out a decisively hopeful refrain—yet neither pain nor the visions of utopia that emerge out of struggle can reach Parnell's decidedly unhearing ears. Meridian *sounds more and more like* his son, and this sound poses a threat to Parnell's willed blindness.

Love and Arms

Despite the gross injustice of putting Meridian on trial for the murder of his son, Richard's ghostly presence in the play strengthens Meridian's commitment to social justice, as he turns toward a more urgent understanding of collective action. His courtroom appearance reflects

this shift in perspective, the radicalization of his attitude toward change—revealed first in his key dialogue with Parnell, where Parnell reveals the embedded racist assumptions of white liberalism. Meridian here echoes Baldwin's famous assertion in *The Fire Next Time*: "Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?" (94). Stating plainly the obvious answer to Baldwin's hypothetical question:

> MERIDIAN: I am afraid that the gentleman flatters himself. I do not wish to see Negroes become the equal of their murderers. I wish us to become equal to ourselves. To become a people so free in themselves that they will have no need to—fear—others—and have no need to murder others. (102)

Blues for Mister Charlie, as I have argued, can be understood as a theatrical staging of the tragic nature of life amidst existing power structures that Baldwin elaborates in *The Fire Next Time*. Meridian's statement here makes clear that "White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want" (*Fire* 94). This is not to say Meridian merely becomes a dramatic mouthpiece for Baldwin's ideas; his artistry renders all characters in the play not a mere reflection or representation of existing social realities, but a complex terrain for negotiating the aporias of white liberalism and other possibilities for justice. In the play, Baldwin signals these possibilities through soundtracks of struggle: Richard's lonely guitar that pierces through death, strengthening interpersonal relationships with caring dialogue, Juanita's voice that resounds in Blacktown, and the jukebox motioning toward politicized love through the humble sensuality of Richard and Juanita's dance, which both Lyle and Parnell voyeuristically witness.

When the State asks if Meridian identifies as a minister, Meridian replies: "I think I may be beginning to become one" (105). What Meridian means here accounts for why

critical reception of *Blues for Mister Charlie* has minimized or absented discussion of Meridian's relationship to Richard's gun at the play's conclusion:

> MERIDIAN: You know, for us, it all began with the Bible and the gun. Maybe it will end with the Bible and the gun.
> JUANITA: What did you do with the gun, Meridian?
> PARNELL: You have the gun—Richard's gun?
> MERIDIAN: Yes. In the pulpit. Under the Bible. Like the pilgrims of old. (*Exits.*) (120)

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin muses that "People always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love, a principle that releases them from personal responsibility" (81). For Baldwin, a separate Black nation cannot work if it reproduces capitalism and heteropatriarchy, but his gesture toward love is not, as some critics have suggested, naïve universalism. Instead, he offers a praxis of struggle, which understands that justice must dissolve not shared history but social hierarchy—and for this to happen, people will have to do the necessary self-introspective work to personally assess and address their own investments in a stratified rather than capacious sociality.

Yet, Baldwin acknowledges the complexity of mobilizing for a more livable world: "How can one, however, dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power?" (*Fire* 80). Meridian's gesture toward the white man's tools of colonial power evokes armed struggle as political strategy. Symbolically pairing the bible and the gun echoes El Hajj Malik El Shabazz/Malcolm X's famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," given the same month and year of the play's debut—April 1964. Malcolm X's speech and Baldwin's play use the bullet metaphorically and literally. Malcolm X, for example, tells his audience to treat the ballot as a bullet with careful aim of a target. For Meridian, the latent bullet of Richard's gun condenses a breaking point in his patience for existent political strategies, an urgency of justice for his son.

Baldwin foreshadows this link between the bible and the gun as tools of power, as well as strategies of resistance to white supremacy, in an earlier scene announcing the news that white terrorists had been planning to blow up the house of a community member, Freddy Roberts. Lyle, of course, does not pose the only physical threat to Blacktown. Juanita sets into motion a phone chain to warn everyone and "tell all the people that don't have rifles or dogs to stay off their porches" (34). Lorenzo then sardonically critiques Christianity's inability to save the Church's members from daily material violence:

> LORENZO: Tell them to fall on their knees and use their Bibles as breast-plates! Because I know that each and every one of them got *Bibles!* (*Meridian has walked to the church door, stands looking off*)
> LORENZO: Don't they, Meridian?
> MOTHER HENRY: Hush.
> (*We hear Juanita's voice, off. Then silence falls. Lights dim on the students until they are in silhouette. Lights up on Meridian. We hear Richard's guitar, very lonely, far away.*)
> RICHARD: Hello, Daddy. You still up?
> Meridian: Yeah. Couldn't sleep. How was your day?
> Richard: It was all right. I'd forgotten what nights down here were like. You never see the stars in the city—and all these funny country sounds— (34)

The sound of a telephone ringing, then a voice interrupting, insisting, and Juanita's strong and beautiful voice, all muted by Mother Henry's urge to listen ("Hush")—a silence making possible the materialized memory of Richard. Faint music from a guitar portends Richard's appearance, reopening the conversation about his mother's death. Meridian conceals its violence with the alibi of accidentally falling down steps, instead of being pushed, since "I didn't want you to be—poisoned—by useless and terrible suspicions" (35). During this conversation, Richard hands over his gun to Meridian for safekeeping, symbolically renewing the trust between them, a trust previously compromised by Meridian's protective stance toward the murder of Richard's mother.

Meridian then questions his position on armed self-defense. After the gathered students exit the church following this dialogue, the stage directions read: "*Meridian walks to the pulpit, puts his hand on the Bible. Parnell enters*" (37). Parnell notes that "I hear it was real bad tonight," to which Meridian responds: "Not as bad as it's going to get. Maybe I was wrong not to let the people arm" (37). The close proximity of Meridian to the bible and Richard's gun in this scene foretells the play's ending with a more militant approach to seeking justice. Yet, Baldwin refuses to offer up one strategy as *the* salve or solution to the intricate web of power. Dwelling in the historical juncture of increasing dissatisfaction with Civil Rights tactics but before Black Power had risen to national prominence, Baldwin's work posits multiple tactics to address social ills, understanding that change dwells in complexity and contradiction.

Like Meridian's faintly hinted intentions to seek revenge on Lyle, who has just openly admitted his murderous actions, with the bullet Richard potentially could have used to protect his life, the play ends in dis-ease and ambiguity:

> MOTHER HENRY: Come on, children.
> *(Singing)*
> *(Pete enters.)*
> PETE *(Stammers)*: Are you ready, Juanita? Shall we go now?
> JUANITA: Yes.
> LORENZO: Come here, Pete. Stay close to me.
> *(They go to the church door. The singing swells.)*
> PARNELL: Well.
> JUANITA: Well. Yes, Lord!
> PARNELL: Can I join you on the march, Juanita? Can I walk with you?
> JUANITA: Well, we can walk in the same direction, Parnell. Come. Don't look like that.
> Let's go on on.
> *(Exits.)*
> *(After a moment, Parnell follows.)* (121)

Pete's stammer, Lorenzo's reassurance, the swell of song all suggest an impending movement, a revolutionary explosion of feeling onto a corrupt legal system and social sickness. And while Baldwin writes to his nephew that "We cannot be free until they are free" (*Fire* 10), the ending does not suggest a change in Parnell's positionality. His may move along in the same direction, but he has followed Blacktown in deceit, self-deception, and betrayal before—nothing suggests a change in his consciousness. If Parnell's decision to follow the march suggests a glimmer of hope, it is quickly dampened by a deeper despair. Parnell's unwillingness to disinvest in the courtroom offers little hope for relinquishing what George Lipsitz calls the "possessive investment in whiteness." As Parnell's identity remains grounded in exploitation, his decision to follow will serve little more than his own need to perform a white liberal identity that masks over his life's contradictions. Juanita's self-aware acknowledgment, not absolution, of Parnell's existence in the face of his refusal to recognize her full humanity "removes Parnell to the outer fringe of her life as she joins with blacktown in the problem of getting on with Black life" (Williams *Give Birth to Brightness* 165). His hesitation may offer the only hope—a fleeting moment of self-reflection, sobered by Juanita's last words: "Let's go on on," indicating the repetitive exhaustion of history.

The sound of Blacktown's revolutionary rage pinpoints a moment, a growing dissatisfaction with Civil Rights strategies—for their faith in the law and coalition with whites, both strained, and for their constant encounter with violence devoid of means to self-defense. Instead, Blacktown moves toward a new kind of leadership, one that is incorporative, expansive, and allows for the simultaneity of an often polarized historical interaction between Civil Rights and Black Power strategies. As Danielle L. McGuire explains, armed self-defense was an integral strategy for Black women who were committed

to ending sexual violence as Civil Rights leaders. This use of armed self-defense has a long history, from abolitionist Harriet Tubman to Civil Rights leader Queen Mother Moore. While popular understandings of self-defense turn on the imagination of a masculinist Black nationalism, global Black liberation struggles have theorized and strategized at length around what it means to protect Black communities in the face of heteropatriarchal white supremacist violence and its unyielding threat.

The question of Meridian's intentions with the bible and the gun at the play's conclusion lingers urgently today in the context of increasing unrest at police brutality and murder. Black feminist activists have taken up this question of self-defense—as refracted through the popular rallying cry of #BlackLivesMatter, "Hands Up, Don't Shoot." Explaining why taking up arms has been historical necessity, Luam Kidane and Hakima Abbas write:

> The sight of Black people facing police guns and tear gas with their hands raised is as apt as it is painful. The intention is to highlight our "innocence" in the face of systematic state violence and to be in solidarity with Mike Brown who was shot six times by a police officer while his hands were raised in surrender. This gesture reinforces the powerlessness of our community to respond to the sustained onslaught of police violence on, primarily, our young people, but systematically, us all. This stance of surrender may indeed be reflective of the state of our self-defense. (Kidane and Abbas)

Kidane and Abbas emphasize the power of community response to the murder of Mike Brown and its global reverberations. Taking to the streets, with solidarity sites often facilitated through social media networks, puts pressure on broader publics to acknowledge long legacies of anti-Black racism. At the same time, media and political pundits often pathologize protest as violent, unprecedented, and a threat to the "safety" of a complacent middle-class white contingent who would rather understand violence in exceptional, deracinated terms.

Part of the discourse of exceptionality turns on who can be recognized as a "victim" of state-sanctioned violence—if Mike Brown, like Richard Henry in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, fought back with words or/as weapons, would his murder have been mourned less? Just as Trayvon Martin's iconization and galvanization of popular support turned on his ability to be recuperated against the notion of Black pathology—that despite accusations to the contrary, he was not a "thug," a "criminal," or a "gangster," Mike Brown's mainstream reception often contrasted his stance of non-violent surrender to the revolutionary rage of protesters in Ferguson, Missouri. Kidane and Abbas thus suggest that organizing must move beyond recognition by the state through the terms of morality, decency, respectability, and conformity to a more militant "stance that refuses to negotiate the worth of all Black lives and that builds Black community."

As with the epistemological limitations of asserting "Black Lives Matter," which assumes hegemony as optic and audience, visions of social change must act imaginatively beyond the limited parameters of power. Global histories of armed rebellion, insurrection, and self-defense strategies strengthen the resolve of protestors and animate claims to justice that understand the limits of selective inclusion within an unjust system. Meridian's and Juanita's actions at the end of Baldwin's play cannot be easily mapped onto a Civil Rights rhetoric of reform or Black nationalist separatism, congealing other possibilities for ways of being that move strategically within multiple and competing discourses toward a broader vision of love, collectivity, and justice. The play's ending demands that its publics sit uncomfortably with what love, collectivity, and justice could actually mean in their own lives and in the spaces of which they imagine themselves a part.

As Kidane and Abbas assert, Malcolm X's famous refrain in 1965, "by any means necessary," disturbs the safety of white citizenship, and it should. This provocation offers a vision of liberation founded on seizures of power in the absence of hegemony's acknowledgement of Black people as human beings whose lives matter. No amount of symbolic representation of Black lives mattering can compensate for the systematic destruction of Black life through economic exploitation and inequity, environmental racism, mass incarceration, vigilante violence, and police murder. "By any means necessary" suggests organizing strategies for those committed to institutional change rather than the public performance of redress. This Black feminist perspective challenges the historical understanding of armed resistance as a masculinist approach, suggesting a complexity offered in Baldwin's play. Richard's and Juanita's embodiment of revolutionary consciousness, as well as Meridian's emotional and tactical shift at the end of the play, offers hope for a future generation of organizers mobilizing around the powerful force of intracommunal strength, self-determination, and collective protection, reinforced by regenerative love.

The Pedagogies and Philosophies of Black Lives Matter

I conclude by way of returning to the classroom space that opened this chapter. It is Whitetown, and Parnell's appropriated blues, that remains unsettled and unmelodious. Until Parnell finds his own sound, he and his alienated community remain "in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (*Fire* 8). Self-imposed historical entrapment, of course, benefits whites socially and materially. This uncomfortable fact encapsulates the challenge and enormous

possibility of teaching Baldwin, as his writing demands more than the recognition of racism as institutional and interpersonal. Facing history, for Baldwin, necessities the transformation of entrenched ways of being and acting in the world, the very terms of identity.

Performance literature works to make theories of race and racism concrete and jarring, to make personal the politicized abstractions that often guide intellectual inquiry. As I taught students to understand Zimmerman's "neighborhood watch" defense and acquittal within overlapping contexts of institutional racism, white impunity, propertied wealth, and criminalization of People of Color, I was organizing locally with the Coalition for Justice. After inviting my students to a teach-in the coalition organized, some students who met the initial discussion of Martin's murder in the context of the play with resistance, even overt hostility, were deeply impacted by seeing so many students, faculty, and community members mourning and mobilizing. My teaching philosophy affirms that cultural con/texts can offer students language to articulate and creatively fashion critical thinking skills that may impact their actions.

As just one example of police and vigilante brutality, the factors shaping Zimmerman's presumed "innocence" for his murder of Trayvon Martin echo and inform recent uprisings across the country, from Ferguson, Missouri, to Baltimore, Maryland. These activist responses resonate strongly today in the wake of so many breaking point tragedies, such as the murders of Rekia Boyd, Shantel Davis, Miriam Carey, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Aniya Parker, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray. This elliptical act of naming performs a necessary remembrance and an erasure of so many other lives thefted by white terrorism. This is not to ignore countless other stolen lives—as many organizers have pointed out, the graves of cis and trans Black women, for example, often lie beyond the

scope of national recognition and mourning (see Stevens). At the local level, too, grassroots organizers have fiercely debated on whom the focus of public protests should be, drawing and redrawing the bounds of those impacted by state violence (Black and Brown lives, queer and trans lives, migrant lives, all existing at the intersections of this categorical imperative). But the recent mass galvanization of coalitions in response to police and vigilante brutality on a national and transnational scale has often gathered under the banner #BlackLivesMatter. The protests, die-ins, and other forms of direct action materializing around this hashtag address the devastating impact of anti-Black racism on all of humanity,[66] and the global reach of Black liberation struggles, which continue to shape civil and human rights organizing today.

I began this chapter in the classroom, and I end in grassroots spaces: taking the hashtag Black Lives Matter to the streets has challenged my own thinking about what a fellow organizer expressed as "lousy sloganeering," reflecting critically on the affective response #BLM evoked in her embodied Black feminist philosophy. Chanting "Black Lives Matter" with chosen family and comrades, whose lives clearly mattered *to us*, made me interrogate the frameworks for a movement's legibility. Any rudimentary political analysis of structural oppression tells us that the state does not value all life equally. But if we are to understand identity as constituted through shared histories of struggle and not just the state's production of pain, then the fact that Black lives have always in fact mattered becomes more visible through an optic of survival, collectivity, and witnessing.[67] What Orlando Patterson's

[66] For more on the movement, see *BlackLivesMatter.com*.

[67] However, if scholars take race on its own terms as completely distinct from racism, which is to say, mobilize race *as metaphor*, discussions of race can opt not to address institutional racism and thus risk reasserting liberal-individualist understandings of race at best or white supremacist fantasies at worst. In other words, if race and racism remain entirely separate from each other race can become

evocation of social death in his influential study of blackness as a condition of ontological impossibility and #BlackLivesMatter share in common, as one answers the call of the other, is how the exercise of white supremacy shapes Black sociality and attempts to delimit its field of inquiry.

The ontological status of blackness remains subordinated in the racial order, but not for People of Color-led movements to combat its systematic violences. Within Black communal spaces avowing that Black lives matter seems antithetical to the gathering of those lives in the first place. Deeply creative forms of Black sociality that flee the crushing weight of state power shake its foundations. While not minimizing the physical manifestations of anti-Black regimes of death, Fred Moten traces a simultaneous thread of blackness not as a violent denial of personhood but as a threat in the recognition of its creative vitality, a spirited force that must be repeatedly extinguished in order to make white supremacy's daily subjugations as a mode of life and living tenable.[68] Hegemony, in other words, sees the creative ways of being and organizing offered by collective forms of Black sociality as a danger to its perpetuity. This racializing of creativity reveals that Black lives matter, and matter too much. Thus, to say that Black lives matter remains redundant to the embodied threat that makes the ordered assemblage of whiteness possible, yet since whiteness

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mobilized in colorblind ways to divorce discussions of state violence and systemic inequalities from racialized embodiment. Using race as an analytic without sustained considerations of the way racial regimes operate makes metaphor of daily lived reality, ultimately reproducing hegemonic racial discourse while claiming participation in antiracist practice merely by evoking race. Claims to antiracism without seriously engaging the operation of power satisfy an institutional need, mirroring larger patterns of the incorporation of antiracist language into systems that perpetuate racial inequities.

[68] For example, as Moten describes, Kant thought that the lawlessness of a too-imaginative mind could produce only dangerous disorder, thus making it necessary to "severely clip the wings" of imagination ("Knowledge of Freedom" 269).

continually erases its origins the disavowal of Black social life constitutes the public recognition of blackness as such. It is Black social life, precisely, that exists as the precondition for its annihilation.

To be clear, putting pressure on the slogan's philosophical implications does not minimize its urgent and important work in the world. The creators of #BlackLivesMatter, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, worked collectively and collaboratively with creative producers and cultural workers to build centralized data nodes and digital infrastructure meant for local iterations to ripple globally. As dispersed as organizing efforts became, something remained critical: to protest anti-Black racism and deconstruct masculinist leadership movements. However, social actors too often egregiously sanitize #BlackLivesMatter under the universalist (read: white) refrain #AllLivesMatter. One of #BLM's co-creators, Alicia Garza, explains that:

> When we deploy "All Lives Matter" as to correct an intervention specifically created to address anti-blackness, we lose the ways in which the state apparatus has built a program of genocide and repression mostly on the backs of Black people—beginning with the theft of millions of people for free labor—and then adapted it to control, murder, and profit off of other communities of color and immigrant communities. We perpetuate a level of White supremacist domination by reproducing a tired trope that we are all the same, rather than acknowledging that non-Black oppressed people in this country are both impacted by racism and domination, and simultaneously, BENEFIT from anti-black racism. ("A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement")

Other activists, bloggers, and academics (such as George Yancy and Judith Butler) have since critiqued the obvious evasion of the slogan's particularity—*Black* lives matter—for ignoring the fundamental race-based differentiation between lives, from the three-fifths clause to mass incarceration. These erasures of race for an abstract concept of the human pervade popular thinking so it should come as no surprise that they get reproduced in

contemporary academic discourses.[69] Understanding an abstract concept of the human *as coded white* in a white supremacist racial order exposes incongruous arguments that we must let go of race-thinking instead of working toward the abolition of racism. Abandoning racial "difference" could only mean assimilation into whiteness in a thoroughly racialized global political landscape.

While these necessary critiques of liberal humanism remain vital, I am interested in another aspect of the discourse circulating around this mass movement, particularly as it has gained traction in the mainstream: #AllLivesMatter reveals the discursive limits of #BlackLivesMatter, however significant the latter has been as an organizing tool. To these indispensable condemnations of universal humanism, then, I add the historical precedent and precondition of white humanity taking shape against the ontological status of Black lives—and deaths. As James Baldwin suggested half a century ago, whiteness—the only racial identity arrogant enough to presume rather than reclaim universalism—can understand itself only against a subordinated fiction of so-called otherness. The colorblind trap of #AllLivesMatter, in sum, does not simply operate as another displacement through universalization—it's part of a long-standing philosophical tradition. In addition to the often ignored history that Black feminist queer women innovated the hashtag as a response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, a few key erasures make possible the dangerous slippage between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter:

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[69] In his controversial manifesto *Against Race*, one of the most famous theorists of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy, minimizes the significance of centering shared histories of racial struggle, eerily echoing the claims of #AllLivesMatter. Gilroy finds more pressing "[t]he recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves, [which] can all contribute to an *abstract sense of a human* similarly powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial" (17, emphasis mine). *Against Race* ultimately leaves us in a place that bolsters the imagination of a postrace future by buying into what Darieck Scott calls the "recurring drift toward the notion of the Black past as irredeemable" (54).

1: Garza, Cullors, and Tometi have expressed concern over the co-optation of #BLM for disparate aims without citation of the Black women who generated it (see "Celebrating MLK Day"), in turn proliferating the very racism the hashtag seeks to dismantle,

2: As the co-optation of #AllLivesMatter makes clear, white liberals claim victimization in the suffering anti-Black systems of power inflict on People of Color (and from which whiteness benefits) as a dangerously shaky foundation for coalition at best and a genocidal project at worst, and

3: The elemental assertion that Black Lives Matter speaks truth to power, but risks privileging white supremacy as an optic for understanding Black social life, which is to say, Black death in the eyes of power.

It seems no coincidence that coalitional spaces have co-opted the language of #BLM, with its specific history of protest, to negate and then reaffirm the ontological status of not only Black but also white Americans. In order to make a movement's protest of the structural conditions of anti-Black racism legible to a broader public, the universalizing hashtag's assertion of life in the face of death erases the particularity of U.S. histories of systemic anti-Black violence in favor of a liberal humanism. Once again, blackness becomes the mirror against which whiteness must see itself as the privileged subject and agent of history.

This organizing logic of claiming victimization through performatively assuming the struggle of People of Color has been present in academic and activist work for decades.[70]

[70] Wiegman discusses the white liberal tendency toward what she terms "discursive blackness" (123), or fabricating roots in a non-white identity. Wiegman's related notion of "prewhite injury," as a victimized whiteness born out of class-based solidarity or historical patterns of immigration, operates powerfully in queer studies with a slightly altered timeline. Rather than returning to a past in which immigrants discriminated against on the basis of class or religion literally performed blackness in order to enter into the privileges of whiteness, white queer subjects perform "discursive blackness" in

Those invested in its perpetuation deem whiteness an apolitical, historically untethered anti-identity, while figuring racialized identities as symbolic sites of injury, shame, debasement, and abjection. This is not to dismiss the original hashtag's far-reaching impact; I believe, with Khury Petersen-Smith, in "the slogan's ability to express so much in so few words … how painful it is that its message needs to be asserted." The absurd co-optation of #BLM to support New York City Police Department officers—Blue Lives Matter NYC—points to how the movement has succeeding in threatening power even as power recasts its terms. But my concern throughout this chapter has been to see what sonic and material possibilities for coalition emerge when the traumas of white supremacy do not become conflated with the utopian mutiny of Black social life, which offers another starting point for identity formation and collective galvanization. Queer of Color performance understands that traumatic experience—and the iconic faces that come to represent legacies of racialized violence and white impunity—calls communities into being. Baldwin and Carlos offer us sounds of mourning and sonic eruptions of hope through shared histories and politically-motivated love. Listen: the political imperative of Emmett Till's sonic materiality resounds with urgency today.

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and through their entrance into queer sexual or gender identity. The instrumentalizing of race to illuminate queerness expands Robyn Wiegman's concept of *prewhite* injury to what I call "postwhite injury" in a queer studies context.

Chapter 2

Holding Hope in Sharon Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*:

Close Listening, Blues, Theatrical Jazz[71]

i am from the blues.
hard times remembered recounted like mantras/lest we forget. chants about survival and daddies taken in the night. moans in the subtext of dreams.
with chicken frying music loud finger popping and laughter
i learned how to tell stories from my family.
see Jazz is a blood memory. something deep in the bones.
a charge. a responsibility. a gift/experienced

like those stories
long before the books the mentors the theatre the words formed
there was my mother's laughter and her mother's and hers. . .

—Sharon Bridgforth

Opening up Sharon Bridgforth's performance novel *love conjure/blues* is like turning on the radio to a mash-up of Mary J. Blige's "Real Love" with Lucille Bogan and Billie Holiday. The playful gender-bending sensuality of Blige's "Real Love" combined with Bogan's lesbian erotics in "Sweet Petunia," merged with Holiday's powerful anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit," offers a Black feminist politics of performance grounded in mourning, protest, and spiritual freedom (Blige; Bogan; Holiday). Bridgforth's mash-up of blues and jazz aesthetics does not empty out its historical referents: slavery, mass incarceration, and the military industrial complex, all of which, as Angela Davis writes, "generate huge profits from processes of social destruction" (88). Yet, amidst pain, performance offers possibilities for

[71] This chapter was published almost in full as an essay in *Text and Performance Quarterly* and incorporates materials and invaluable feedback provided by the blind reviewers and editorial staff of the journal.

spiritual and social transformation. Drawing from oral histories and folktales, Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* layers time through the centralized blues space of the juke joint, Figua's Flavas, where characters share multigenerational stories of collective wisdom, survival, queer desire, and spiritual agency from slavery into the present. Bridgforth's performance novel—a literary genre by definition meant to be performed—summons long legacies of Black feminist performance traditions, as well as African American music cultures, which embody and enact the everyday transformation of social realities. Generating possibilities for forming a critical consciousness rooted in history and spirituality, the performance novel's staging in and on space speaks both to the text's existence on multiple planes (on the page, rolling off the tongue) and to the enfolding, or more specifically, mashing-up, of spatial and temporal realms.

The mash-up, in its literal sense of bringing together disparate elements, provides an apt sonic metaphor for describing the work of the performance novel: to combine existing voices into something new while honoring the past, to deconstruct the arbitrary divide between written and spoken language, and to signal a cacophony of sensual experience. This speaks to the mash-up's more colloquial meaning of getting drunk or high, calling forth the ritual space of the bar, or the juke joint, as a potential "site for transformation. . . . Our senses combust so that we release" (Jones, "'Making Holy'" xiv). Understanding the bar ritual as freeing the senses and loosening gender conventions creates a space for the embodied language of *igede*, which in Yoruba signals the transformative power of words. The performance novel's temporality emphasizes collaborative improvisation on the structures and rhythms of history, which are learned through community and made personal and felt through muscle memory.

Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* can thus be understood as a literary mash-up of blues and jazz. The Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic, which surfaced during the Black Arts Movement, models communal forms of listening together that ritualize "the vitality, erotics, and transformative dynamics of subject–subject exchange" characteristic of performance (Pollock, "Making History Go" 22). Performance works in this aesthetic center gestural vocabularies and creative movement. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones explains that Theatrical Jazz "fused music/sound, dance/movement and the spoken word, was primarily initiated and perpetuated by women, relied on breath as the spiritual fire of the work, and set no limits on blackness" ("Cast a Wide Net" 599). Emphasizing elements from jazz—"improvisation, process over product, ensemble synthesis, [and] solo virtuosity" (599)—the Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic pushes the boundaries of language by using verbal and gestural expression equally, combining spoken word, modern and contemporary dance, West African aesthetics, quotidian movement, and sound. The emphasis on process over product stresses not a final theatrical production but the collaborative energy circulating among performers, their embodied fictional characters, and the ancestors called in to witness. With multiple improvisations and artistic interpretations generated on each page, a publication date marks the beginning of an ongoing creative process rather than a finished product. Bridgforth and other practitioners working in the Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic use their texts as open-ended scripts for workshops and collaborations with communities of artists, academics, and organizers. Riffing on jazz, the text serves as the sonic knowledge of chord structures and patterns upon which improvisers breathe music into the moment.

The performance novel's unique punctuation actively evokes possibilities for performance, mirroring affective shifts through textual variations. The distinctive aesthetic of

Bridgforth's transformative, embodied words, equally visual and aural, collapses the narrative distance between reader and text. Readers become both audience member and participant as they actively negotiate the book's multiple voices. At the same time, the performance of listening disallows any simple replacement of identification rooted in shared histories with claims to empathic understanding (see Hartman). As Della Pollock cautions: "To the extent that empathy in any way reflects desire for unmediated identification, it may be implicated in the rank nativism it, hermeneutically, hopes to combat" ("Marking New Directions" 327). Bridgforth's performance-ritual-as-theory calls for a new ethics based on embracing opacity, honoring untranslatability, and practicing what Doris Sommer calls "incompetent" reading (407), which refuses the violence of presumptions to transcendent understanding.

Following E. Patrick Johnson's call for renewed attention to the agency of performance, this chapter privileges performance as a site where embodied subjectivities are not simply the products of language but actively produce quare epistemologies for social transformation. In quaring queer, Johnson implicitly suggests a theory of listening for and with the body: "quare," which he situates in relation to his grandmother's rich Southern accent, suggests a textured inflection of the word "queer," with its various meanings of race, social location, sound, and geography. While contemporary scholars tend to conflate identity with oppression and thus see the former as something that must be overcome, performance (literature) remains attentive to history, memory, and embodied experience as significant categories of analysis and agency. Agency can here be understood as "embodied action" that manifests in daily practices of living—understanding performance as theory operating in tandem with lived experience (Pollock, "Making History Go" 22). Bridgforth makes clear

that performance exists "***long before the books the mentors the theatre the words formed/there was my mother's laughter and her mother's and hers***" ("Finding Voice" 13 original emphasis), highlighting a Black feminist politics of performance that transmits stories, laughter, and soul survival through a witnessing of shared histories. Johnson, after all, grounds quare performance studies in Black and Chicana feminist traditions, offering a "theory in the flesh" that takes up embodied knowledges in and around performance (Johnson 3; see also Moraga and Anzaldúa 23). Rather than representing or reconstructing an always incomplete history, Bridgforth's engagement with traumatic memory transforms a performative present. As Jones writes, storytelling acts "to assert a vision of reality" ("'Making Holy'" xviii). The imposition of trauma creates possibilities for ways of being that enable another realization of collectivity, helping us understand what Afrodiasporic communities have long known: what is toxic can be tonic, if cultivated wisely.

In Bridgforth's Black queer Southern vernacular, radical innovations in typography, punctuation, spelling, and syntax signal temporal shifts, summoning abrupt intrusions of traumatic memory into present negotiations of desire, sexuality, and deeply political love. On the back cover of *love conjure/blues*, Bridgforth invites possibilities for embodying and staging its interwoven stories, describing how the book "considers a range of possibilities of gender expression and sexuality within a southern/rural/Black working class context that examines the blues as a way of life/as ritual—in concert with Ancient practices and new creations." As with the use of a pentatonic scale in blues, Theatrical Jazz practitioners work with key components of West African song and dance, which Robert Farris Thompson describes:

> dominance of a percussive performance style . . . a propensity for multiple meter . . . overlapping call and response . . . inner pulse control . . . suspended accentuation

> patterning [and] . . . songs and dances of social allusion (music which, however danceable and "swinging," remorselessly contrasts social imperfections against implied criteria for perfect living). (xiii)

The trauma of "social imperfections" meets utopian "criteria for perfect living." Bridgforth's performance novel is equally attendant to the weight of history, memory, and trauma and the urgency of utopian visions: those political dreams that resound in the body.

Hopelessness rationalizes the present, but hope critiques it. In its grappling with ongoing institutional traumas, Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* offers concrete possibilities for justice. As Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, there are those for whom utopian notions of freedom and community are a daily necessity. Bridgforth layers "***chants about survival and daddies taken in the night***" with "***moans in the subtext of dreams***" ("Finding Voice" 13 original emphasis), joining historical traumas and the "utopian political aspirations and desires" of the Black radical tradition (Moten 93)—visions of justice born out of violence. These visions work against the political current of hopelessness endemic to contemporary understandings of race without abandoning the material realities of racism. Building on Black feminist legacies of self-definition in the face of state violence, Bridgforth's work demonstrates that despite proliferating forms of systemic vulnerability—from mass incarceration to police brutality and murder—cultural expression continues to provide another optic for understanding Black social life. Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* uses legacies of shared trauma as the raw material for creatively inhabiting concrete utopias in theatre spaces, a performance mode I term "traumatic utopias." Traumatic utopias generate alternative logics of collective sociality born out of shared histories of struggle. By understanding performance as embodied theory, traumatic utopias bring together pain and possibility to remind us that remembering and mourning are not incompatible with hope and

healing. This performance mode signals dynamic forms of social life even, and especially, given conditions of abjection and exclusion from the violence of hegemonic ways of being and knowing—a violence into which assimilation equals certain protections but also sacrifice.

Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* exists in the no-placeness of utopia: an altar space that realizes a world without institutional racism, an active hope and necessary fiction in justice work. Following Ramón H. Rivera-Servera's definition of "the knowledge produced by and within performance" as "theories in practice" (18), which articulate hope and utopia through a set of local, vernacular modalities in art and activism, and not as unbounded or universalizing concepts, utopia is here imagined as a world without heteropatriarchal racial domination. Embodying epistemologies that refute the abstractly existential, the realization of traumatic utopias in concrete performance spaces can do real work amidst dystopian realities of state-sanctioned trauma. As opposed to the transactional culture of trauma in a therapeutic or juridical context, I define trauma as a collective negotiation of everyday confrontations with state power (see Cvetkovich). Understanding trauma as institutional, not exceptional, unearths cultural silences around its experience, as well as creates a more inclusive and urgent space for its articulation.

Vincent Brown advocates for bridging discussions of power that offer "hopeful stories of heroic subalterns versus anatomies of doom" (1235), which is to say, accounts that romanticize agency at the risk of neglecting the devastating effects of power, and those that emphasize the institutional at the expense of recognizing the complexity of individuals living in the world. Bringing together conversations about hopelessness and hopefulness, the following analysis begins with a close reading of what Bridgforth calls "The *love*

conjure/blues Text Installation-Altar Film." Produced by Bridgforth and Krissy Mahan, this altar film directly incorporates and ritualizes the dense and layered language of Bridgforth's performance novel into an embodied ceremony. I take as a central point of focus the altar film's representation of a pivotal moment in *love conjure/blues*: a conjuration woman kills the white supremacist spirit on the plantation of Bridgforth's fictional community. Locating that no-place of utopia in performance spaces, my notion of traumatic utopia grapples with legacies and realities of structural trauma while making utopian aspirations concrete. Trauma and utopia are not often spoken in the same breath, yet Bridgforth's text juxtaposes possibilities for liberation against historical traumas.

Entering the Text Installation-Altar Film of *love conjure/blues*

A woman appears against a backdrop of wild brush stretching into a forest of densely packed undergrowth. Two starkly white chairs in the foreground contrast the grainy scene unfolding in shadowy pockets of darkness and light (see Figure 1). Here begins the conjure woman's ritual.[72] Wearing white linen with her gaze unwavering in a kind of dreamy calm, she prepares an altar space—an offering for the future rooted in ghosted histories. The time-lapse sequence creates a spectral effect of a single body doubled in fluctuating degrees of opacity (see Figure 2). Objects she carries include: sage, candles, a bowl of herbs, medicinal plants, and other pharmacopeia, clear liquid in a glass bottle, a jug of water, flowers arranged, rearranged, gently laid down on the stylized chairs (with seatbacks like miniature picket fences or dollhouse ladders). Over the collapsing and repeating of the woman's careful

[72] Suggesting the power and presence of African spirituality in African American religious experience, Theophus H. Smith defines conjure as "a magical means of transforming reality" (4), recuperating conjuration as spiritual and medical practice, with the power to heal both spiritually and physically.

movements wash layered words: two voices speaking against and with each other. The "gagaga gagaga ga" guttural baseline signals a drum beat that keeps time to a melancholy jazz tune: "they took his drum./ he make another./ they took his drum/ he make another/cut and carve and stretch and lace a/ little late late till it new/ then drum" (Bridgforth*, love conjure/blues* 50).[73] The wind generates another layer of ephemerality. Linens, dreadlocks, grass blowing—the only elements unmoving, the sturdy chairs and an ominous tree trunk in the far right corner of the frame. The stirred landscape "whisper[s] grief away. . . with sweetgrass sea salt and sage/copal cedar and moonlight" (48). The woman stops to fan herself after she summons the spirits, looking both resolute and fleeting, integral to the landscape's transmutation yet part of its shape-shifting. Aware of the forest's healing properties (see Thompson 42), her gaze lingers on the leaves, herbs, and roots placed on the chair as a still-life of rich contrasts, a canvas merging the dead and the living.

In creatively staging legacies of survival and resilience from the rich oral tradition of Black queer Southern culture, Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* tells the story of a drummer whose music refuses submission to John Harrison's cruel plantation terrorism. Despite the fact that the plantation master John sacrifices one of the drummer's fingers every time he drums, fingers that John keeps on display in a jar placed on the kitchen table, the drummer rediscovers music with his feet, spinning and reeling on a dirt trail behind the overseer's house. The dust cloud and centripetal force of the drummer's body paralyzes John when the conjuration woman Isadora appears, literally freezing him so:

> ole marsa can't move not even curse can't raise fist

[73] To capture the poetry's layout, I have included forward slashes to indicate line breaks with one space added after the virgule and before the next line. Where Bridgforth breaks a line with a virgule, I have maintained the original typographical choice to not include spaces between the slash separating words (making each instance—the original text and my transcription of it—distinguishable).

whip gun or overseers can't beat can't drop his draws
and act the animal he has been can't make no tie and
cut and burn and starve and sell and kill like usual (52)

The amassing of quotidian detail naturalized as part of daily experience here underscores the violent thrust of the language. Under Isadora's spell, John eats the jar containing the drummer's eight fingers and two thumbs for lunch, which diminishes him to the nothingness he has been, until the "wind lift marsa high up drop him down" (52), repeatedly until:

ole marsa's spirit float around the room slam down
into his body on the ground
then ole marsa open his eyes he ain't ole marsa no
more he just john harrison
overseers dead dead dead. isadora say they gone
come back slaves next time.
we leave.
every one of us we leave that night. john don't say a
thing.
we just walk off
ain't no plantation no more never since that time/not
on these grounds.
us
we come here.
this been our home
free
for a long time now. (53)

Summoning West African spiritual practices, the conjuration woman Isadora kills the white supremacist spirit on the plantation, empowered by the slave's refusal to submit; when his master takes the drum, he makes another. Isadora's spell divests the master of power to "act the animal he has been," reducing him to nothing but an empty shell incapable of action—"he ain't ole marsa no/ more he just john harrison." Bridgforth here resignifies the racialized meanings of animality. While racist logics born out of colonialism describe nonwhite bodies as "savage" and "animalistic," Bridgforth describes the white slave owner's acts of sexual and physical violence as "animal," making the obvious point that the hypersexualized and

violent stereotypes of People of Color enduring long after slavery reflect white alibis, not Black behaviors. Master John's spiritual death and loss of agency in the wake of the power relation's dissolution—"can't move . . . curse . . . raise fist . . . beat . . . drop his draws . . . cut . . . burn . . . starve and sell" (52)—stands in stark contrast to the spiritual survival and resilience of the former slaves, who walk off the plantation and form a new home together. The drummer's "resistance" to his master, then, explodes the term's usual signification of minimal spaces of intervention within oppressive regimes that provide a set of limited, constraining choices.[74] In the altar film, the drummer's foundational refusal provides the impetus for social transformation—shifting the discourse of agency from fleeting and ultimately futile moments of personal liberation to an ongoing struggle for collective change wagered on active hopefulness.

In a landmark study of blackness as a condition of ontological impossibility, Orlando Patterson defined "social death" as slavery's denial of legal rights to personhood for enslaved Africans and their descendants—reducing the slave to a "social nonperson" in the eyes of the law (5). This formulation, which tends to ignore the way artistic and expressive forms survived slavery and are sustained by contemporary cultural practices, is dramatically reversed in the altar film—the master is accorded social death, and the slave power. While, as Patterson argues, slavery categorized enslaved peoples as non-human and as such having no *legally* recognized will, agency, personal identity, or family, his conceptualization of Black nonpersonhood overemphasizes the law—the incivility of civil society—to define humanity. The law alone cannot account for the relationship between struggle and subjectivity. Black

[74] As Carl Gutiérrez-Jones argues, the production of consent, as "an essentially symbolic power denied in practice" (110), romanticizes agency at the expense of seeing how its fantasies are often merely an effect of power.

feminism has long asserted that communities define themselves outside of Eurocentric fantasy structures (see Collins; Williams). To understand power as totalizing is to disregard the global histories of People of Color-led organizing and activism, as well as daily strategies of survival, self-definition, and community-making that exist to deflect or challenge white supremacy's impositions of nation and heteropatriarchy. Reading race only as a form of subjection, or the formulation of race *as racism*, neglects to consider that the structural traumas of racism do not delimit the social meanings of race. Seeing People of Color as symptoms rather than as subjects rehearses the same invidious logics that critiques of racism seek to repair. Whiteness figures the fictive, overdetermined construct of blackness as the passive object against which it writes itself into master narratives as the active subject, yet flesh-and-blood people of the African diaspora are not the objects of their own histories—to be so would be to always occupy the third-person speaking position. In the context of slavery specifically, the actual existence of the written I in the large body of slave narratives exiles any simplistic violence of racial grammar.

In *love conjure/blues*, social death reflects the face of its creator—white supremacy and the people invested in its perpetuation—not its imagined objects, thus continuing to critique the operation of white supremacy while refusing to surrender all hope to a totalizing concept of power. Following Black feminist and radical traditions, Bridgforth's work attests—through quare performance—to laughter, pain, and pleasure, emphasizing psychic survival against slavery's reduction of the slave to a nonperson. Without slavery, former slaves move toward their freedom, but since Enlightenment thought needed slavery against which to define its notion of freedom, it has no basis for understanding selfhood without

subjection.[75] Taking Bridgforth's recalibration of the terms of social death seriously, I argue that the existence of social death as a legal concept imposed by white supremacy reflects the deadly logics of anti-Black racism, not the faces of those who suffer its injustices. Long legacies of grassroots organizing efforts for justice under the weight of oppression testify to the force of life in communities most affected by the state's production of social death. What social death minimizes is the historical fact that—despite extreme institutional violence to and rupture of kin—enslaved Africans and their descendants fought to forge meaningful alliances, families, support networks, and spaces of spiritual freedom.

Bridgforth's text conceptualizes spiritual freedom not in binary terms of domination–slavery but as an embodied practice of honoring one's ancestors and ethics even in the most constraining circumstances of bondage and brutality. The slave community drummer's decision to keep making music despite severe punishment—the loss of his fingers—opens up a space for spiritual freedom, as he channels the divine energy of art not as a sole act of rebellion against or reaction to the slave master but as a calling to music as soul survival, a process de-romanticized through his disfigurement. While traditional slave narratives emphasize the movement from bondage to freedom through an individual's (often a man's) lionized quest from South to North, from captivity to escape via physical and intellectual perspicacity, here freedom cannot be circumscribed by the boundaries of the self. Instead, we see a collective realization of spiritual freedom inspired by, but not limited to, an individual's bravery backed by communal conjurational wisdom. The traumatic utopia formed around John Harrison's spirit death remains embedded in ancestral and embodied knowledges of

[75] Morrison makes this point about the social context and historical legacy of Enlightenment thought in *Playing in the Dark*, which traces the "Africanist presence" in the U.S. literary imagination as a fictive otherness defining U.S. subjecthood by contrast (5).

historical traumas, not transcendent of them. From precolonial ancestors on the African continent to Black Americans living in the Jim Crow South, Bridgforth's characters evoke ancestral memory as a line of spirit communication and critical consciousness of history, never as a static representation of a vanished past.

The repetition of "ga" in the altar film, and mirrored on the page, sounds out an affective code in which a ghost serves as interlocutor for the erased and covered over histories on the plantation, at the same time as the abrupt intrusion of that ghost tells forgotten stories of survival and agency. The drummer's persistence amidst pain counters a theoretical fallacy reflected in social death's emphasis on the legal production of nonpersonhood but routinized by the Hegelian master–slave dialectic. The hegemonic order may need a so-called "other" against which to define itself, but aggrieved communities never needed the master (narrative) for self-definition because they always already contained the potentiality of existing outside of, or in more contentious relationship to, that violent dualism.[76] This is not to ignore the material effects of hegemonic identity production through subjection, which is to say, brutal forms of state-sanctioned and systemic violence. But whatever hold hegemonic power may sustain over the physical circumstances, cultural representations, and psychic struggles of racialized communities, there exists a long legacy of self-determination and transformation of the terms meant to dictate experience. In contrast, whiteness, as an unmarked yet nonetheless thoroughly racialized identity, needs blackness against which to define itself. This fiction of blackness, as an overdetermined fantasy projection of white desires and fears, gives meaning to whiteness alone and reflects on actual

[76] James Baldwin critiques this fallacy at length. Stephanie Batiste also powerfully contests the mechanisms by which so-called "otherness" circulates in academic disciplines without critical interrogation of the way that placeholder for racial difference recenters whiteness by assuming that People of Color see themselves, rather than white folks for example, as "other."

Black life only at the site of white supremacist interpellation and codification. While whiteness requires the material and symbolic exploitation of nonwhite populations, People of Color have mobilized, as Patricia Hill Collins describes, "the power of self-definition" (1). To shape one's sense of self-identification without relying on someone else's subordination sets the foundation for coalitional social justice struggles.

In *love conjure/blues*, it is the most painful of traumas that produces a space in which to negotiate utopian visions of racial justice—the drumbeat provides the impetus for Isadora's conjuration spell, which banishes white supremacy on the plantation. Just as the refrain "they took his drum he make another" testifies to cultural resilience in the wake of the slave owner's theft (50), traumatic utopia eschews abstractions of power that construct false binaries of oppression and victimization—a theoretical positionality that leaves little room for agency. As Cedric Robinson explains, the messiness of power disallows its desired seamless hold on subjects. Isadora's expelling of the white supremacist spirit from the plantation, symbolized by the master John, leaves a legacy of freedom in the town. This scene exposes that the supposed objects of the master–slave dialectic define themselves as subjects outside of that violent duality. Isadora summons what Theophus H. Smith calls "conjurational spirituality" (ix), which articulates diasporic Black Christianity and African religious traditions through their ability to wield greater powers in order to invoke cultural change. Isadora enacts visions of justice from traumatic remainders; literally, the drummer's amputated fingers become the components for a spell that eradicates the spirit of white supremacy in John, and metonymically, the institution of slavery. While a long scholarly tradition minimizes the preservation of cultural inheritance across the Atlantic (see Brown 1241), Bridgforth's evocation of African ancestors renders white supremacy small and

helpless. If Eurocentric ways of creating meaning depend on dictating the terms of life and death, personhood and nonpersonhood, then the refusal to define life through death generates revolutionary epistemologies and creative practices, even in the face of violence. Isadora's spiritual embodiment through her conjure spell puts pressure on the notion of social death as evacuating Afrodiasporic strategies of survival amidst pain. Moreover, the erotic energy circulating through the text refuses the totalizing terms of Patterson's thesis, which would suggest that subjectivity is nothing more than the projection of the racial order's rage. In offering more complex accounts of the work of power and performance, the staging of traumatic utopias generates social organizations predicated on an understanding of historical struggle as both constraining and necessitating utopias.

Complicating the Hegelian dialectic of diametric opposition, the logics of *love conjure/blues* favor "diunital" approaches, which, as Smith describes, "affirm both elements in a dyad. This dual affirmation of opposites is the crucial aspect of wisdom traditions that feature conjunctive forms of cognition" (143). I use this diunital approach to bring together the terms trauma and utopia, as well as the "double-edged vitality of the blues" (121), the musical pulse that runs through them.[77] Matt Richardson asserts that there is a specifically queer musical tradition of blues and jazz that disrupts cultural representations of African American life that attempt to undo the longstanding hegemonic discourse of Black pathology and in so doing suppress queerness. The irresolution of Black queerness, for Richardson, describes its erasure from collective memory as a political strategy of counter-representation against the "insidious, poisonous violence of the idea that Blackness represents sexuality and

[77] As Clyde Woods describes in *Development Arrested* (1998), a blues epistemology emerged in the South to archive the structural conditions and consequences of racial oppression and the plantation economy, as well as to assert the persistence of hope and human dignity in the face of state power.

gender gone wrong" (10). Richardson thus argues that one of trauma's effects is to disavow painful histories, histories to which the performance traditions of blues and jazz testify: same-sex desire and fluid gender expression as part of a larger project of dismantling heteropatriarchal white supremacy. Projects of queer archival recuperation, made manifest in the text of Bridgforth's performance novel to which I now turn from the altar film, begin the important work of remembering.

Close Listening as Embodied Reading Practice

Understanding the evolution of spirit as itself revolutionary, Bridgforth's work and workshop facilitation technique ("Finding Voice") assemble people not only to envision other ways to move through the world, but also to actually create the spaces where those imaginative acts become possible. After all, legal frameworks often require the production of disciplined subjects who mirror the hegemonic status quo; performance and other artistic forms can work alongside the struggle for rights to generate broader visions of freedom. Spiritual freedom is a practice, not a law or nationalist rhetoric. As Jones writes: "Activism has too narrowly been associated with overt political acts—sit-ins, marches, petitions, casting ballots. Such definitions render invisible the daily acts of activism that people perform" (Jones, Moore, and Bridgforth 9). Moreover, the blues and jazz have a long history rooted in African American material conditions that made freedom not a symbolic dream but collective necessity.[78] Spiritual freedom carves out a concrete presence in the now, materializing utopian visions in daily praxis—and also reading practice.

[78] As Cat Moses explains: "yearned-for freedom is not to be confused with Western notions of symbolic freedom; rather, given the material conditions of blues production, freedom must be understood first as literal—ownership of one's body—and, later (in history), as material-control over

Building on theories of performative/embodied writing, and possibilities for agency embedded in them, I offer "close listening" as an aural reading mode that surrenders the desire to know and so to speak (see Pollock "Marking New Directions"; Madison "Performing Theory"; Johnson "Queer Epistemologies"). As an extension of embodied writing that emphasizes reception as well as production, close listening incorporates traditional close reading practices with heightened attention to the way bodies interact in social spaces. The performance novel's aural dimensions uncover the process of reading as tied to the performance of listening, at the same time refusing to equate listening with total understanding, for the so-called "problem" of untranslatability is "actually a positive one, a necessary stumbling block that reminds us that 'we'. . . do not simply or unproblematically understand each other" (Taylor 15). Ultimately, the "close" of close listening is not only about a particular kind of attention to form, to the texture and weight of words, to layering meanings and symbolic systems, but also about proximity—to be close to or with someone, to be near a place literally or metaphorically.

The performance novel is meant for telling. The opening lines of *love conjure/blues* foreshadow its climactic moment cinematically represented in the text installation-altar film: "attitude/ attitude/ drumming/ it's a party it's a party it's a party / in my dreams/ a party. flowers mirrors cowrie shells and pearls/ ocean sunshine/ lightning moon/ wind clouds/ sky/ deep woods crossroads / the dead living/ it's a party" (1). This merging of the dead and the living spatializes both a party at a juke joint in the deep woods, and an enmeshing of multiple temporal registers. The deep woods also summon Isadora's conjuration scene in the forest, with its elements of "drumming," "flowers mirrors cowrie shells," "lightning moon,"

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the means of production, and freedom from poverty, discrimination, debt, and disenfranchisement" (629).

and “wind clouds.” Understanding Isadora’s conjuration as another kind of party layers the queer blues space of the juke joint with spirit transformation.

Within this first scene, words repeated and centered on the page signal entrance into a text that defies form and redefines literary encounter, propelling the reader into a celebration of the dead and the living, the visual and the aural, complete with the appearance of a refrain after the narrator welcomes us into the space: “**we is peoples borned to violence. not our making and not our choosing. just the world we came to**” (Bridgforth, *love conjure/blues* 2 original emphasis). The boldface provides us with a textual clue to watch for the way words are distributed and stylized on the page, while inviting imaginative possibilities for staging the work. We are then introduced to the queer love story between Bitty and Peachy, two “long nail girls” (3), or Black femmes, who defy heteronormative assumptions about queer couplings—that a feminine-presenting woman would partner with a masculine-presenting “trouser wo’mn” (3). A bar fight ensues over Bitty when “peachy’s knight in shining heels” attempts to protect her from her partner “who we all know’d would have whooped peachy/ from here to her Maker” upon discovering Bitty and Peachy’s love affair (6). Once Bitty is thrown in jail for protecting Peachy, Bitty’s community plans to “raise up on the law” when the moment is right (7), indicating how oppressed communities must strategically negotiate legal frameworks.

The scene then shifts to Bettye’s Joint where people congregate on the weekends. Since alcohol is not allowed, fewer are inclined toward the “swoll chest” violence born out of jealousy and heartbreak (11). As the narrator describes the atmosphere of Bettye’s, a ghost interrupts to remind the reader of history’s presence with the italicized groan “*aaawwwhhhh aaawwwhhhaaawwwhhh*” (12 original emphasis). These soft sounds, seamlessly connected

with other words throughout the text, might remain almost imperceptible in a performance mode but are concretized on the page—repeatedly signaling the intrusion of otherworldly elements into the dynamism of a particular physical space. With these pained vowels, the past intrudes into the present abruptly.

As is typical for Bridgforth's artistry—typography, spelling, and syntax signal shifts in a moment's emotional texture, which varies drastically, juxtaposing the pain and pleasure of living. Here, Bridgforth formally mirrors this temporal shift through a dramatic change in the way words appear on the page. The typeface is suddenly sharp and unformed with harsh edges and heavy lines, summoning the material weight of history (see Figure 3). The narrator tells the story of how she witnessed her father "hanging from de tree by/ he thumbs" (12). White vigilante terrorists killed him because he was "too/ smart to be able to hide it so dey took he/ cause he weren't able to mask him/ brightness" (12). Echoing the "myriad subtleties" that Paul Laurence Dunbar describes, performances of a particular kind of unthreatening depoliticized blackness that masked revolutionary spirit and rage against racial injustice were deployed strategically by Black communities during the Jim Crow era of legalized racism and mass lynching.

When even subtle displays of intelligence posed a threat to white supremacy, African Americans had to mask political aspirations and the seeds of the Black Freedom Struggle behind a veil, since the stakes of resistance and of existence were (and are) always, in fact, death. As theorized by W. E. B. Du Bois, the denial of personhood that is part of double consciousness, the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (11), does not amount to pure self-loathing but to an amplified vision of power, a gift of "second

sight" that allows for a repurposing of the veil as the violent site/sight where white supremacy refuses to see:

> Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. (10)

A reexamination of second sight's ability to prophesize power puts pressure on the critical stuckness on "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (11). Du Bois describes a utopian space of spiritual freedom amidst suffering, a blue-skied respite from the daily traumas embedded in a society determined to split its subjects psychically.

The primary narrative voice returns after the abrupt intrusion of the jagged typesetting, explaining "thats my gran-gran-daddy/big paw/my father's father's father. every day they say he tell that story at sunrise/he tell it like he praying/like he not really in the room/like somebody else speaking it for him" (12). Another kind of lettering, sturdy and familiar, signals the addition of a new voice, who we are told is the narrator's grandfather: "this is home. the place that earthed you. it's a sore/a wound/this ground/the place i grew up in" (13). Then "big paw's sister ma-dear" adds another story spoken like prayer:

> i am the cry that won't come out i am the pain stuck i
> am the me that never was sorry now i am for the
> moments i choked away for the lost touches diminished
> faded like yellow against the sun.
> i was born too early to be allowed to exist i was
> drowned the day i was born of heartache and loss i am (13)

These interwoven narratives of Big Paw, Uncle Daddy, and Ma-dear occupy the "home house" of the text. This haunting is both spiritual and material. Their physical presence at the narrator's home mirrors their textual occupation of *love conjure/blues*—their voices layered

and repeated, each one stylized with a specific typeface. The voices merge into one chorus as the declaration, "gurl you better listen good. we telling you/ something/you hear," combines multiple fonts (14). After the ghosts begin visiting the narrator in dreams, a cacophony of voices fills the space of prayers both thought and spoken, until "lately i'm/ thinking i'm visiting them in they dreams too" (14–15). The ghosts tell tales of trauma—forced silence, slavery, theft of land and property, sharecropping, and blood spilled on soil—as well as stories of utopia—resilience in the face of oppression, spirituals and blues rhythms, a shared history constituted in struggle, and transgressive and transformative love.

The three ghosts of the "home house" reappear throughout the narrative, reminding the narrator and by extension the reader–participant of the importance not only of shared memory, but also of experiencing history as embodied: "liv'n in da memory you don't know you have/ yet/ you must go right to it. . . second ting be da knowing./ you gots ta know what you know and know/ dat you know it" (46). The narrator recounts: "i left big paw uncle daddy and ma dear's house a long/ time ago/went where i was before/ but still find myself standing with them. . . like today we in the ocean" (47). This gap in the text of *love conjure/blues* performs a punctuated gesture, signaling a temporal lapse, a moving forward and backward in memory—a traumatic repetition not pathologized within Western medical discourse. Jennifer DeVere Brody explores punctuation's print play as performance by emphasizing how it collapses the arbitrary divide between the spoken and written word—since punctuation is written (but not spoken), performed, emoted, affective, communicative, excessive, visceral, and understated. Negotiating the space "between the stage of the page and the work of the mind" (5), Brody asks how we are to read the oral/aural traces between the theatrical text and the (inner) ear. Documenting an archive of feelings, "punctuation

marks historically have provided much of the affect of Western print culture since the Enlightenment" (2). For Brody, punctuation is both an oral/aural and visual phenomenon—a way of speaking to the ear and hearing with the eye. The ethics of close listening requires careful attention to the affective traces of punctuation on the page, extending to the aesthetics of apostrophes, line breaks, typeface, and other stylistic choices.

Acknowledging the impact of slavery as part of a traumatic past but also invoking its ongoing violences, Bridgforth draws a direct link between the racial domination undergirding slavery and the prison industrial complex. Directly after the scene of Isadora's conjuration, the narrative shifts to a more recent past in which Bitty is freed from the thoroughly racialized law by Sheriff Townswater, who "let bitty do what she want cause he understand they is powers greater than the gun and the badge and the jailhouse" (56). These powers—beyond the law and its various repressive state apparatuses—are spiritual and psychic, even conjurational. Although the "love conjure" of the title refers to Isadora's symbolic eradication of white supremacy, this spell not only reacts to oppressive forces, but also creates other ways of being in the world. Bridgforth introduces this "new style of conjure song" through a queer love poem in which the speaker has been "*dreaming awake/about/ sleeping in the soft of/ your breasts falling/ around my heart*" (68 original emphasis). This notion of "dreaming awake" opens up present possibilities for concretizing traumatic utopias: dreams that become realities through belief, even in the midst of pain.

Two lovers, Booka Chang and Joshua Davis, meet each other in "blistering sun / working days never ending / backs bent/ in toil / in/ the company of men they claimed each other/ declared themselves/ adorned each other with words. united/ in heart / booka chang

and joshua davis married one the/ other/ with a poem" (70–71). They disrupt the masculinist space of which they are a part, spatializing queerness and queering space:

> they met over a poem
> a poem they wrote in the fields between the digging
> of earth / the
> laying of tracks / the crossing of lines. between the
> pounding of steel / and sun
> with battered Spirits / in open spaces
> with no silence they made poetry
> one syllable at a time / they
> conjured theirselves / love (69–70)

Space grounds this passage, both in the open sunniness of the fields and in the materialization of words into concrete poetry, which is crafted syllable by syllable. Here the laying of tracks and the crossing of lines signify not only their physical labor but also their transgressive love, crossed over and through by words. This excess production of syllables cannot be claimed by capitalist profit; in the midst of exploitation emerge homosocial and homoerotic bonds that cannot be broken by an economic system designed to exhaust the bodies and spirits of laborers. Their crossing, symbolic as well as material, lays down their own tracks "one syllable at a time," forming their queer love story while inside inextricable hegemonic economies of love and value. In other words, they refuse the logic of capitalism while working within its bounds. Their conjuration of love manifests a utopian vision inscribed in a poem and onto their bodies, upending earth.

This central love story anticipates that of genderqueer Sweet T and Miss Sunday Morning, which represents the transfiguration of "battered Spirits" into a "Holy/Wholy" kind of everyday love (83). This love resummons the entire cast of characters near the end of the text and before the (re)appearance of:

> our gurl she
> carry the conjuration her mama she mama she mama she mama

> and that first African woman pass on this scare her from
> time to time/cause there are things she know but don't understand
> things she can do but don't know why/power she got can't control
> like her voice
> it contours time in release (84)

The first African conjuration woman, Isadora Africa, summons forth spirits that galvanize the slave insurrection on the plantation.[79] The voice speaks through "our gurl" but only when she can claim it as her own does she see a reflection of love in the mirror and words on the page, sonically signaling the reverberation of a collective outcry, to "carry the conjuration" of a freedom dream.

These visions of love are born out of the performance novel's traumatic hauntings. Before the chorus of voices unites to empower their own love conjures in the text's final pages, what I call *love conjure/blues*' "middle passages" summon the slave trade across the Atlantic. After being introduced to the queered love poems of Booka Chang and Joshua Davis, the reader learns that they "quit the rails. opened shop/ selling charms and things right there in they front yard/ they give poetry for free" (71). This alternative economy of free(dom) poetry following their marriage with a poem serves Miss Sunday Morning, who loves Sweet T. The charms they sell offer the "*chance to know what it feels like to hold hope*" (72 original emphasis). Holding hope is a kind of utopian aspiration and expression that moves beyond the space of fantasy and "take[s] Work" (73). The offering of Work lies in remembering, set into motion by the text's middle passages, which begin with triplets of one word on each line: "sun/ river/ you" (73). Booka Chang and Joshua Davis paint a portrait of movement back in time through legacies of violence vividly rendered in nonetheless minimalistic language: from lynching "trees/ know/ names" (76), to slavery and the

[79] This conjuration woman also alludes to Deola from Laurie Carlos's *White Chocolate for My Father* (1990), explored in Chapter 1.

underground railroad, to the stretching out and collapsing of triplets to capture captive slave ships:

> *you*
>
> *can't*
>
> *move.*
>
> *you*
> *can't*
> *cry*
> *you*
> *can't*
> *breathe*
> *you*
> *can't*
> *see* (76)

After this "*long/ journey*," Booka Chang and Joshua Davis return Miss Sunday Morning home (77). This memory trip signals Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's concept of "fluidity," which locates the Middle Passage as a site of pain, but also of queerness as "a praxis of resistance. . . forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths" (199). Tinsley theorizes queerness as a vital past that survived against the violences of imperialism rather than as a utopian future. In the face of loss, the reclamation of a (hopeful) homespace and the opening up of a place for transformative love must emerge from a memory trip back in time to grapple with the historical legacies. While traumatic, these legacies also provide the material for "holding hope" and for love/conjure/spells, for the traumatic in the utopian and for the impossibility of existing in a utopian space without holding close the stories of survival that accompany traumatic encounters.

Conjuring Love as Antidote to (Anti-)Social Death

Reading Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* through a constellation of performance scholarship that emphasizes the agency of embodied knowing and listening offers an antidote to understandings of discursive identity production as a closed system that forecloses textual interruptions. This performance novel presents a ritual healing from legacies of violence at the same time as it suggests a world in which heteropatriarchal white supremacist ideology has been eradicated. Bridgforth's fictional community forms a utopia that is at once a political imperative and lived reality in the space of the text, which centers experiences of a community not bound to or by hegemonic racial discourse, living deeply inventive, never simply reactive or resistant, lives. Part of the creative fabric of daily life, traumatic histories persist into the present alongside collective freedom dreams. Bridgforth's evocation of traumatic utopia spatializes transmitted historical memory and existing social movements. Ultimately, the repetition of "conjuration we" offers the possibility of a communal space that resists closure (86), and of the reader–participant's self-empowerment in the "love conjure" of the novel's title. The open ending's urgency and call to remembrance resist the kind of Aristotelian catharsis that, as Augusto Boal cautions against, prevents direct action. This suspension of (curtain) closure resonates with Toni Morrison's refusal of resolution with the repetition and dual interpretations of "This is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 324), meaning both a history not to dismiss and a discourse not to recollect with reductive summary. It also suggests a simultaneity of voices, as the text is mirrored on the page in two columns (see Figure 4):

> i
> am the conjure.
> sacrificial blood made
> flesh/i am
> sanctified by tears wailing
> deep in the belly/i am that

sound
released. i am
love remembered
the promise kept
the should have been
the utterance of hope/ i am
the Life dreamt

i am the answered Prayer
the manifested Light
i am my Ancestors
returned
i am the dead/and the
living
i will carry on
i will come back
i will grow more powerful
i will remember (88)

The first person singular, doubled on the page, carves out a space for the reader to become an active participant in the text's multiplicity of meanings. Bridgforth resignifies the bloodlines of ancestry to indicate history's bloodstains through the idea of "sacrificial blood made flesh" (88). Rather than summoning the biological racism of blood, racial identification here grounds itself in shared histories of labor exploitation and white supremacist institutions maintained through the ongoing shedding of blood. Recalling the "troubling paradox" Patricia J. Williams describes of "a heritage the weft of whose genesis is [one's] own disinheritance" (217), legacies of sexual violence and hypodescent make salient the political investment in maintaining an ideology of "blood" purity. Yet the nation's hands are stained with messy genealogies and the physical bloodshed underlying their perpetuation.

While the notion of "sacrificial blood made flesh" is also deeply rooted in Christianity, Bridgforth's performance novel opens up the possibility of reading multiple meanings into its stains, and of participating in the "love conjure" of its title. The refrain—"i/ am/ the conjure"—invites the reader into the web of simultaneous narrative threads, which

merge into a communal "conjuration/ we" after the doubling of voices through aligned text in two columns on a single page. The left side expresses gratitude for the conjure woman's gifts of healing life, while the right side repeats "conjuration we" as a doing not a saying (86)—to materialize utopian visions with historical traumas, symbolized by the drummer who keeps on making music even after the violent bloodshed he is forced to endure at the behest of his master. Theorizing the ethics of traumatic utopia as dreaming forward without forgetting the past, *love conjure/blues* ends with the refrain, "remember/ remember/ remember" (89).

Traumatic utopias in theatre spaces—such as the key moment of securing communal freedom through Isadora's conjuration spell—acknowledge the danger of utopian communities alienated from the material realities of power. At the same time, they critique the (anti-social) privileged individualism underlying the rejection of any vision of collectivity as sentimental fantasy. This minimization of shared legacies of survival and resilience cannot be untangled from its political currency in the present. Challenging the implications of a politics of hopelessness as not only complacent but also complicit with existing power structures (insofar as a turn away from possibilities for enacting change is itself political), *love conjure/blues* theorizes and stages a quare performance politics of Black feminism, of coalitional possibility through facing history—hope in the wake of despair, utopia in the wake of trauma. While hopefulness recognizes that the struggle to end institutional and interpersonal racism is a long road not realizable through some salvific romance of legal and cultural progress, a politics of hopelessness is not tenable for coalitions mobilizing to end police brutality, lynching, mass incarceration, and other material and psychic manifestations of global racial capital. Against static binaries of master–slave, person–nonperson, Bridgforth's work testifies to the way communities survive against and without reference to

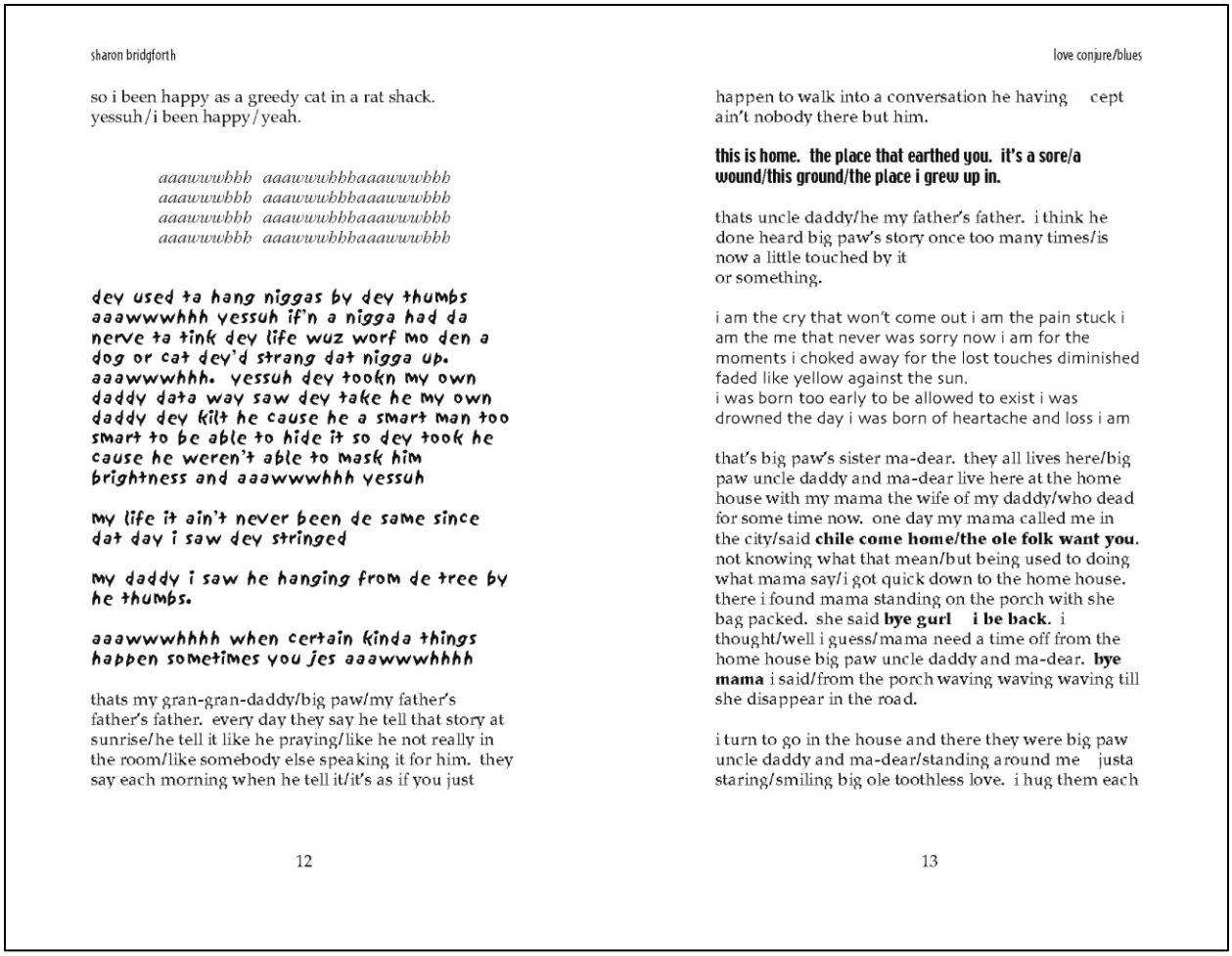
an abstract notion of totalizing power. The hopelessness running through contemporary theorizations of power forecloses taking seriously the emotional complexity Bridgforth's text offers: the daily exposure to and experience of trauma does not inevitably lead to self-annihilation but makes imperative communal support and organizing. Traumatic utopias juxtapose pain and possibility to honor how power relations constrain but also necessitate change. In centering the embodied performance/theory of Black queer social life, Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* testifies to the cultural knowledge transmitted in the break, where shared histories of struggle call new collectives into being.



Figure 1. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones on the set of "The *love conjure/blues* Text Installation-Altar Film." Photograph by Wura-Natasha Ogunji and digital editing by Jendog Lonewolf. Image courtesy of Sharon Bridgforth.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Omi Osun Joni L. Jones in "The *love conjure/blues* Text Installation-Altar Film." Image courtesy of Sharon Bridgforth.



sharon bridgforth

so i been happy as a greedy cat in a rat shack.
yessuh/i been happy/yeah.

aaawwwhhh aaawwwhhhaaawwwhhh
aaawwwhhh aaawwwhhhaaawwwhhh
aaawwwhhh aaawwwhhhaaawwwhhh
aaawwwhhh aaawwwhhhaaawwwhhh

dey used ta hang niggas by dey thumbs
aaawwwhhh yessuh if'n a nigga had da
nerve ta tink dey life wuz worf mo den a
dog or cat dey'd strang dat nigga up.
aaawwwhhh. yessuh dey tookn my own
daddy data way saw dey take he my own
daddy dey kilt he cause he a smart man too
smart to be able to hide it so dey took he
cause he weren't able to mask him
brightness and aaawwwhhh yessuh

my life it ain't never been de same since
dat day i saw dey stringed

my daddy i saw he hanging from de tree by
he thumbs.

aaawwwhhhh when certain kinda things
happen sometimes you jes aaawwwhhhh

thats my gran-gran-daddy/big paw/my father's father's father. every day they say he tell that story at sunrise/he tell it like he praying/like he not really in the room/like somebody else speaking it for him. they say each morning when he tell it/it's as if you just

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love conjure/blues

happen to walk into a conversation he having cept ain't nobody there but him.

this is home. the place that earthed you. it's a sore/a wound/this ground/the place i grew up in.

thats uncle daddy/he my father's father. i think he done heard big paw's story once too many times/is now a little touched by it
or something.

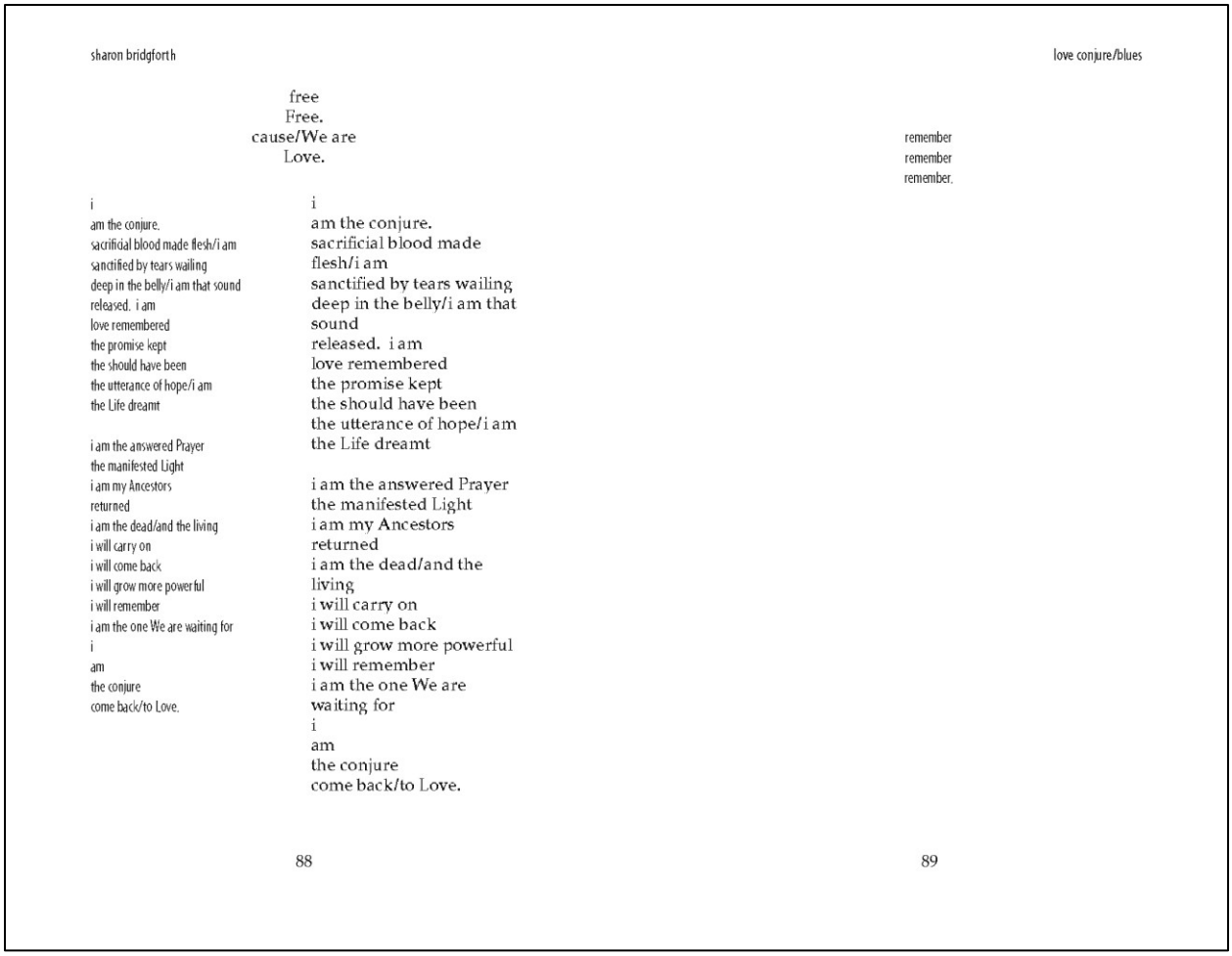
i am the cry that won't come out i am the pain stuck i am the me that never was sorry now i am for the moments i choked away for the lost touches diminished faded like yellow against the sun.
i was born too early to be allowed to exist i was drowned the day i was born of heartache and loss i am

that's big paw's sister ma-dear. they all lives here/big paw uncle daddy and ma-dear live here at the home house with my mama the wife of my daddy/who dead for some time now. one day my mama called me in the city/said **chile come home/the ole folk want you**. not knowing what that mean/but being used to doing what mama say/i got quick down to the home house. there i found mama standing on the porch with she bag packed. she said **bye gurl i be back**. i thought/well i guess/mama need a time off from the home house big paw uncle daddy and ma-dear. **bye mama** i said/from the porch waving waving waving till she disappear in the road.

i turn to go in the house and there they were big paw uncle daddy and ma-dear/standing around me justa staring/smiling big ole toothless love. i hug them each

13

Figure 3. Example of abrupt typographical shifts and performative punctuation in Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*. Image reprinted with permission from RedBone Press.



sharon bridgforth

free
Free.
cause/We are
Love.

i
am the conjure.
sacrificial blood made flesh/i am
sanctified by tears wailing
deep in the belly/i am that sound
released. i am
love remembered
the promise kept
the should have been
the utterance of hope/i am
the Life dreamt

i am the answered Prayer
the manifested Light
i am my Ancestors
returned
i am the dead/and the living
i will carry on
i will come back
i will grow more powerful
i will remember
i am the one We are waiting for
i
am
the conjure
come back/to Love.

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i
am the conjure.
sacrificial blood made
flesh/i am
sanctified by tears wailing
deep in the belly/i am that
sound
released. i am
love remembered
the promise kept
the should have been
the utterance of hope/i am
the Life dreamt

i am the answered Prayer
the manifested Light
i am my Ancestors
returned
i am the dead/and the
living
i will carry on
i will come back
i will grow more powerful
i will remember
i am the one We are
waiting for
i
am
the conjure
come back/to Love.

love conjure/blues

remember
remember
remember.

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Figure 4. Closing pages of Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*. Image reprinted with permission from RedBone Press.

Chapter 3

For Colored Girls?

From Ntozake Shange's Black Feminism to Tyler Perry's Colorblind Melodrama

> *As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.*
>
> *—Combahee River Collective*

> *I want most of all for Black women and Black lesbians somehow not to be so alone. This last will require the most expansive of revolutions as well as many new words to tell us how to make this revolution real. I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life … Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.*
>
> *—Barbara Smith*

> *sing her sighs*
> *sing the song of her possibilities*
> *sing a righteous gospel*
> *let her be born*
> *let her be born*
> *& handled warmly.*
>
> *—Ntozake Shange*

The revolutionary project of Black feminism exists at the nexus of activist, academic, and artistic works that generate new ways of being and dreaming. In 1974, as the Combahee River Collective formed in Boston to combat the racism, sexism, and homophobia infiltrating existing social movements, Ntozake Shange was performing her groundbreaking choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* at the Bacchanal, a women's bar just outside of Berkeley in Albany. And while Barbara Smith, a co-founder of

the Combahee River Collective, was engaged in the struggle she was also writing on the necessity of creative visions of insurrection in Black feminist literature as tools to build the movement. Insurrection is no simple metaphor: the Combahee River Collective found inspiration in Harriet Tubman's guerrilla leadership of a paramilitary campaign in 1863 to free over 750 enslaved peoples.[80] During the three-year period from 1974–77, Shange continued to stage her choreopoem and Barbara Smith continued to organize with the Combahee River Collective, co-authoring "A Black Feminist Statement" with her twin sister Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier in 1977. That same year marked the publication of "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," testifying to an ongoing legacy of Black feminist intellectual traditions inseparable from political and creative praxis.

While these intersections of art and activism remain vital today, Black feminists have witnessed not only backlash but also hegemonic incorporation into institutional agendas that sanitize the revolutionary ethos of their liberatory politics. This latter move has proven more dangerous in its insidious masquerade as progressive idealism, a "post-racial," "post-feminist" multiculturalism. This chapter explores how Ntozake Shange's negotiation of pain and pleasure has been co-opted to present spectacles of racialized suffering that disavow their structural force. In so doing, it examines the political stakes of hope and trauma detached from the weight of history. Yet, traumatic utopia as a performance mode *constituted in struggle* offers a theoretical framework for holding in tension the institutional production of pain and collective possibility born out of its recognition as ongoing and systemic.

To analyze the political distance traveled since the 1970s to writer and director Tyler Perry's feature film *For Colored Girls* (2010), I propose the term *utopian trauma* as a way to

[80] See *This Bridge Called My Back* 210.

track how U.S. multiculturalism replaces concrete enactments of justice with its representation, and in so doing, forecloses the demands of transformational work. Multiculturalist processes of locating traumas in the past rather than as systematic—while cashing in on spectacles of individualized pain detached from an analysis of power—shore up illusions of progress devoid of substance. This sterilization of trauma through processes of displacement and metaphorization, or utopian trauma, produces an aesthetics of colorblind melodrama that characterizes the politics of spectacularized suffering. I use the term "utopian" because colorblind discourse imagines racism as no longer existent in *institutionalized* form—absenting discussions of state power from the fetish of post-racialized blackness, sutured to trauma.

Arguing that Perry's movie adaptation of Shange's choreopoem indicates these broader political investments, the following analysis contrasts the potentials of *traumatic utopia* against the perils of *utopian trauma* in order to demonstrate the urgency of socially-engaged negotiations with collective trauma and healing—even and especially when the traumas of heteropatriarchal white supremacy have been relegated to a spectacularized past. For Shange, healing does not equate to overcoming trauma, as its structural force demands ongoing negotiation with its violences. Instead, healing practices reinvigorate collective struggles for justice. After foregrounding the terms of the debate, I look to the liberatory possibilities embedded in Shange's original text to show what light Perry's film adaptation dimmed—even as it burns brightly still.

Trauma, Inc.[81]

Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* has become a site of struggle over the meanings of racism in a so-called post-Civil Rights era. First published in 1975, just two years before Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" and the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement," Shange's choreopoem critiqued systemic violences against Black women and found, through performance, spaces for collective healing. In its time, masculinist critics blamed the Black Arts Movement's demise, in part, on the choreopoem's mainstream success—accusing Shange of selling out to Hollywood and attributing the choreopoem's appeal to its dealing with petty results of, not underlying reasons for, oppression. In his 1980 essay "Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle," for instance, Amiri Baraka relegates Black feminist concerns, which he narrowly defines as "women's oppression," to the "effects" of capitalism and imperialism rather than deeply embedded in its "root causes" (12). Black feminism here becomes a distraction to the struggle for racial justice. Accusations that Shange capitulated to a Hollywood aesthetic seem particularly ironic today, as her work stands in stark contrast to blockbuster-famed Tyler Perry's 2010 adaptation of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Turning up the original's drama and watering down its social impact, Perry's Hollywoodization of Shange's choreopoem capitalizes on the injury, not agency, of Black women,[82] while decontextualizing traumas from the structural conditions that perpetuate them.

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[81] As its interventions inform the following analysis, this section title aptly references the *Antiracism, Inc.* program directed by Felice Blake and sponsored by the UCSB English Department's American Cultures & Global Contexts Center and the University of California Humanities Research Institute.

[82] For more on the intersection of race and injury, see Carl Gutiérrez-Jones.

While Shange's choreopoem has always offered a critique of gendered forms of racism, Perry's film underlines the disciplining of diversity in a moment defined by a backlash against Black feminism. Critics of Shange such as Baraka figure the gender-specific ways in which racism is delivered to People of Color as a secondary or supplemental effect to the primacy of racism as a phenomenon that disproportionately, so the story goes, impacts men.[83] In more recent decades, well-known academics have made similar claims. Citing statistics about Women of Color in higher education, these scholars argue for Black feminist theory's irrelevance unless it recenters the experiences of Men of Color.[84] In "Black Feminism and the Challenge of Black Heterosexual Male Desire," as one example, literary critic Michael Awkward argues that despite a "brief respite in the 1970s and 1980s" when Black women's experiences were at the forefront of literary representations and cultural conversations (32), we have returned to a "statistically justifiable" emphasis on what Awkward calls "black-men-in-crisis" as "preeminent concern" (32). Not only does this ignore how state violence impacts Black women, but exposes a masculinist anxiety around

[83] At points in this analysis I deliberately use the broader term People of Color not as a conflation with the specificity of Black experiences but to suggest that—while beyond the scope of this chapter—other Women of Color feminisms have experienced similar forms of backlash.

[84] Michael Awkward opens "Black Feminism and the Challenge of Black Heterosexual Male Desire" with the suggestion that, "As we know all too well" (32), while percentages of Black women in academia rise, Black men remain hypervulnerable to structural violences, from educational inequity to mass incarceration. For his argument to move forward, he must imply from the outset that Women of Color have somehow transcended such violence, not to mention evade the fact that the academy (despite its class privilege and social capital) remains deeply rooted in heteropatriarchal white supremacy and thus often perpetuates rather than protects People of Color from systematic harm. Not surprisingly, Orlando Patterson cites similar statistics in order to centralize Men of Color's experiences. Patterson, like Awkward, claims a feminist stance in "Broken Bloodlines" (while certainly not in his infamously anti-feminist earlier iteration of this work, "Blacklash") precisely by arguing that Black feminism as a critical apparatus should no longer emphasize the voices and concerns of Women of Color. For an exploration of Patterson's strategic deployment of feminism to ward off earlier critique and to make a deeply conservative argument, see Martin Kilson's "Critique of Orlando Patterson's Blaming-the-Victim Rituals."

their presence in the university, as he patronizingly attempts to "broaden the social impact of black feminist insights" (34). Notably, he does so by returning to men, arguing that Black feminists remain unlikely to explore Black masculinity except as it oppresses Black women. He charges Black feminism with irrelevance to Black youth's lives unless it addresses Black masculinities as front and center. By refocusing on Black men in the wake of Black feminism, the gendered critique falls away. I bring up Awkward's argument not as an offensive exception but as endemic to our contemporary moment, where the establishment wills away the contributions of Black feminist intellectual traditions to theorizing racialized gender and sexuality, including masculinities. Even worse, these traditions become fodder for a post-feminist fantasy. In short, this fantasy suggests that the representation of Women of Color in the media and the academy diminishes their real-world experiences with racism, subordinating their testimonies to those of men.

This academic argument is mirrored in public demonstrations and political initiatives, from the Million Man March to President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper, as well as in cultural interventions, such as Keith Boykin's edited collection *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home* (2012). The choice to modify the original title with "still" indicates a widespread presumption that Women of Color's entrance into the university magically disappears the institutional and interpersonal racism they face daily. This is reflected in the book publisher's explicit reference to Perry's adaptation in advertising *For Colored Boys*: "While the film was selling out movie theaters, young black gay men were literally committing suicide in the silence of their own communities" (*MagnusBooks.com*). While not minimizing the significance of exploring Queer Men of Color's experiences, the *For Colored*

Boys promotional materials turn on a post-feminist fantasy—Women of Color have found mainstream *representation*, which gets conflated in a multicultural public with equitable *distribution* of rights and resources, but Men of Color still suffer.

Although Shange's original choreopoem remains invested in a Black feminist praxis, Perry's film turns on what I call *colorblind melodrama*, or the attempted evacuation of politics from popular representations of the racial traumas of exploitation, exclusion, and abjection.[85] This aesthetic disciplines Black feminism in two key ways, repackaging a long intellectual and activist tradition for mainstream consumption while emptying out its historical referent. First, colorblind melodrama sanitizes a specifically Black feminist history of struggle by attempting to universalize women's experiences. Second, it fetishizes and capitalizes on the spectacle of trauma, understood as individual and not institutional. This liberal individualist vision of trauma purports to be antiracist—through mainstream multicultural representation—even as it denies race as a significant factor shaping daily lived realities.

Tyler Perry's remake of *for colored girls* must be understood in the context of this backlash against Black feminist theorists, organizers, and poets.[86] Rather than indicating a real investment in exploring racialized genders and sexualities within the context of institutional white supremacy, Perry's film underlines the disciplining of diversity central to

[85] For an introduction to the operation of colorblindness ideology in the U.S., see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. See also his co-authored article with David Dietrich. The latter in particular addresses myths of post-raciality in the wake of President Barack Obama's election.

[86] A word on notation: I occasionally abbreviate Shange's choreopoem as *for colored girls*, which can be differentiated from Perry's film by capitalization.

what Chandan Reddy calls "post-racial multiculturalism."[87] I here build on that analysis by looking in particular to the disciplining of trauma through a post-racial and distinctly post-feminist multiculturalism. Understanding Shange's choreopoem and Perry's adaptation of it as competing visions of Black feminist performance, the disciplining and co-opting of Shange's work can be linked to three interrelated tendencies:

1: The proliferation of a multicultural myth that increased representation of People of Color in the media, in the academy, and other institutions that produce knowledge indicates that the ongoing violences of racism have been eradicated,

2: The notion that Women of Color represent a threat to the presumed centrality of men's experiences across racial lines, and

3: The perception of Queer Men of Color's voices as at odds with those of Women of Color, foreclosing possibilities for transformational broad-based coalition politics.

Passionate investments in justice can produce a myopic vision of what that justice looks like, which is why organizers and activists must work with not against each other. When an aggrieved community fights power in identitarian rather than intersectional terms—pitting Black women against Black men, for example—claims to injury authorize violence. This chapter explores the representational practices of Shange and Perry, as well as the popular media discourse surrounding the film's release. In so doing, I demonstrate how key terms like Black feminism and "colored girls" can be mobilized to radically different effect. Taking

[87] Post-racial multiculturalism accounts for how multiculturalism can exist alongside colorblindness ideology without being perceived as contradictory—an apparent paradox insofar as multiculturalism seemingly embraces ethnic if not racial difference while colorblind logics pretend not to notice difference at all. In a society that disavows the existence of systemic forms of racism, and celebrates "post-identity" politics in which all identity is constructed and thus supposedly "equal," multiculturalism's safe containment of certain kinds of societally sanctioned difference allows it to coexist alongside colorblindness.

seriously the cultural work of artistic adaptation across generations, the following discussion examines the rainbow's persistence as a symbol of the spiritual transformation and social vitality of Black feminist collectives. I then turn to the rainbow's co-optation as a way to reveal the political stakes of separating traumatic experiences and provisional utopias from their interarticulated constitution in struggle.

In View of Suicide and Rainbows

Shange's original choreopoem—a genre of her own creation that combines poetry, dance, improvisation, collaboration, and music—gave voice to a range of Black feminist experiences, constellating alternative visions of social life rooted in their pains and desires. The title itself, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, generates a world of meanings. The rainbow—a sign of hope and promise—deals in the same symbolic vocabulary as the Academy Award-winning ballad "Over the Rainbow." The fact that this classic song, with lyrics by Edgar Yipsel Harburg, was memorably performed by Judy Garland in the 1939 production of *The Wizard of Oz* adds a level of camp to the choreopoem's queerness. Moreover, in its most recent reprint in 2010, *for colored girls* features the addition of "positive," as an HIV/AIDS activist gesture. From its staging as a work-in-progress in 1974 to its first print publication in 1975 up until the present, the text has been adapted to the changing political landscape, not only in theatrical interpretations but in the published text itself: in 2010, for example, Shange replaces the reference to Vietnam with Iraq.[88] Each successive iteration strengthens the rainbow's persistence, amidst trauma, as a

[88] As Shange explains: "In revisiting *for colored girls*, I have made a few changes and additions. Beau Willie is now returning from Iraq. And with the devastation of HIV/AIDS, a clear and present danger particularly to women of color, I felt it would be irresponsible to not address the pandemic" (2010, 15).

symbol of the vitality and spiritual transformation of a community of Black women from the African and Afro Latina Diaspora.[89]

The title's loaded signifiers of "colored" and "rainbows" highlight how race is used as a way of assembling social meanings—both oppressive and liberatory. The virgule or forward slash that breaks up the title resists the minoritizing logic of the hyphen, which forever severs (through an irreconcilable merging) the competing and contradictory codes circumscribing the boundaries of citizenship (say, African and American). While both the hyphen and slash conjoin words and phrases, the former suggests two words must complete each other, implying incompleteness when apart. Yet the virgule at once signals the poetic rhythm of lines and a philosophy of both/and instead of either/or, in this case specifically suggesting a temporal and spatial movement back and forth between two claims: "for colored girls who have considered suicide" and "when the rainbow is enuf." The first phrase serves as both a dedication to and creation of a community of Black women brought together through shared experiences of trauma and loss, while the second is more ambiguous in its multiplying meanings. Taken alone, it could signal the self-affirmation found in conjuring utopian visions of hope—that "somewhere over the rainbow" exists a space of personal transcendence and social transformation.

When paired with the first part of the phrase, "when the rainbow is enuf" could register another affect of exasperation—enough is enough, a frustration with the very kind of hopefulness that prevents meaningful social critique and action. In other words, a space "somewhere over the rainbow" offers both a possibility for alternative visions of life out of death, and a very real grappling with the refusal of power to deliver its promises of equity.

[89] The Afro Latin@ Diaspora punctuates the choreopoem's poetry as well as musical pulse and dance forms, such as the Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican "mambo, bomba, merengue" (11).

This pairing of two competing registers—the hopelessness of suicide and the hopefulness of the rainbow—generates the text's traumatic utopia. Resisting narratives of recuperating "wholeness" through healing, the text nonetheless confronts legacies of trauma that fill the space with a presence that must be released, but not forgotten, through a communal sharing of testimonies. The resilient pulse of traumatic utopia, textual/theoretical/performed, opens the possibility of collective witnessing.

Shange's *for colored girls*: "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff"

In the following sections I read selected poems, identified by title, from Shange's choreopoem through its 1982 filmed theatrical version, both to provide a common medium of comparison to my subsequent analysis of Perry's film, and to emphasize the history of collaboration so central to Shange's artistic process. Director Oz Scott is one such collaborator whose commitment to Shange's vision took many forms over the years. When Shange first met Scott, she was skeptical, but quickly learned he was not only "disarmingly warm and self-effacing" but—as she recalls—incredibly "animated in his enthusiasm for my words and about his vision for them" (2010, 2).[90] They ended up collaborating on both the long Broadway run of *for colored girls* as well as the filmed theatrical version. The 1976 Broadway production, which was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play, starred Rise Collins, Paula Moss, Aku Kadogo, Laurie Carlos, Trazana Beverley, Janet League, and Shange. The 1982 telefilm was originally staged by the New York Shakespeare Festival and broadcast on PBS's American Playhouse. It featured Alfre Woodard and Lynn Whitfield, as

[90] Unless otherwise noted by the date (2010), as with this example, all citations of Shange's choreopoem (and its prefatory materials), come from the 1997 Scribner Reprint Edition. During my analysis of Perry's film, I include references from Shange's text when it was quoted directly—in order to make distinguishable its author as either Shange or Perry.

well as some of the actors from the original cast—namely, Shange, Carlos, and Beverley. Dianne McIntyre, one of the pioneers (like Shange) of the Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic, choreographed the filmic version, lending its movement repertoire dynamism and expressivity. In fact, Shange found inspiration for her poem "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" in the energy of women bonding at McIntyre's dance class in Harlem. While some have argued, opinions on Perry aside, that the choreopoem loses much when not performed live,[91] the televised theatrical production resonates with the feminist performance methodologies of the staged choreopoem, and also offers a striking point of comparison to Perry's 2010 film.

Both films—the 1982 production and Perry's in 2010—included men in the cast of actors. That said, in Perry's they figure much more centrally, as he for example develops new storylines for the Lady in Red's and the Lady in Blue's invented husbands. While many critics take issue with the extent to which men appear in filmed versions of the choreopoem, Shange has always explored complex male characters, including the pivotal Toussaint Jones in "haiti" and the PTSD aggrieved Beau Willie Brown. Shange's exploration of gender and sexuality is never divorced from a critique of systemic racism. Beau Willie's infanticide, affirms Shange in her complex rendering of his character, must be understood within the competing forces of his untreated post-traumatic stress disorder—a direct result of U.S. imperialism, as well as an utter lack of resources available to him, segregation, public policy enforcing concentrated poverty, and self-medication in the absence of medical care.[92]

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[91] For a discussion of the telefilm's mixed reviews, see Amber West, particular 197–205. However helpful West's analysis, she unfortunately remains mired in a defensive posture around proving that Shange was no male-basher, rather than deconstructing the patriarchal logics that presume men should always be included and never critiqued.

[92] Sandra Hollin Flowers also argues for Shange's "compassionate vision of black men" (51).

Embodying male characters in film seems less of an affront to the choreopoem's feminist mission, as some have argued (see West), and more of a fleshing out of the work from stage to film set. Obsessing over Shange's relationship to men reaffirms the androcentric logics that Shange so clearly works against. Those threatened by Shange's work accuse *for colored girls* of a myopic understanding of identity—particularly as in tension with Black men—but centralizing the voices of Women of Color never foreclosed exploring the richness of their lives, including love, desire, and companionship with Men of Color. Those relationships can and do co-exist alongside queer alliances, the decentering of male desire, critiques of racism and misogyny, and homosocial bonds. The presence and participation of allied groups in *for colored girls*, whether in the audience as witnesses or in the cast as performers, need not decenter Shange's primary motive of giving voice to Women of Color's experiences. The 1982 film makes this clear.

Black Feminist Intimacies: "graduation nite"

The narrative framing establishes a bond of intergenerational wisdom, as Shange asks her baby girl, Savannah: "Imagine, if we could get all of them to talk, what would they say?" This mother-daughter scene cuts to the central community of women performing the choreopoem's second piece, "graduation nite," in the context of a playful gathering of women with a sleepover motif of pillows, pajamas, and laughter. In "graduation nite," which occurs early on in the choreopoem, the Lady in Yellow describes the loss of her "virginity," itself a heteropatriarchal regulatory mythology, in ways that destigmatize and decenter the event as a defining one in women's lives, which like the onset of menstruation, culturally sets into motion a series of competing discourses about female sexual shame and empowerment.

As the "only virgin in the crowd," the Lady in Yellow carves out a space for celebrating her spiritual/sexual being on the dance floor: "so i hadda make like my hips waz inta some business/ that way everybody thot whoever was getting it/ was a older man cdnt run the streets wit youngsters" (9). Her flirtatious performance here functions not so much as deception but as deconstruction of truth claims to an originary desire that claims one's virginity, which reaffirms the centrality of heterosexual union and prioritizes penetration as a boundary defining and confining sexual expression.

As the Lady in Yellow describes her "coming-of-age" story, the other women dance as she does the pony and sings along to the Dells, creating an atmosphere of playful sensuality. While sexual violation is alluded to in the lines "& everybody knew i always started cryin if somebody actually/ tried to take advantage of me" (8), her refusal further indicates her self-possession on the dance floor and later in Bobby's Buick: "WOW/ by daybreak/ i just cdnt stop grinning" (10). Each lady chimes in with her own first sexual encounters, centering sensuality as a vital form of self-expression and deprivileging what it may signify to men: the Lady in Yellow does not offer "he started looking at me real strange/ like i waz a woman or something" as a closing line in the monologue (10), which would authorize the Lady in Yellow's experience through male eyes. Instead, her dialogue with other women centers her own agency: "[Lady in Blue] You gave it up in a buick?/ [Lady in Yellow] yeh, and honey, it was wonderful" (10). While this rite of passage around the loss of a woman's socially-constructed virginity marks the reproductive body as a minefield for cultural meanings, and covers over the realities of unwanted penetration that too often mark this passage,[93] "graduation nite" reclaims the experience as one centered on women's

[93] According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men in the U.S. has been raped (see Black et. el).

homosocial bonds. Their shared storytelling does not revolve around male desire, establishing the choreopoem's privileged lens of experience.

Segregated Libraries, Utopian Longings: "toussaint"

Shange's choreopoem offers a critique of the inextricability of racial and sexual politics as well as new possibilities for mutual understanding and intimacy between Black women and men. In her exploration of Black women's sexuality and love, she also provides a nuanced critique of the structural and social forces preventing connection across gendered lines. In the piece "toussaint," for example, it is segregation and educational racism that disallows the Lady in Brown from learning about the famous Haitian revolutionary, Toussaint L'Ouverture, who becomes the "beginnin uv [her] reality" (26), but not the end. Set in 1955, the Lady in Brown's monologue opens in the library where she finds books on Toussaint L'Ouverture "thru de big shinin floors & granite pillars/ ol st. louis is famous for" (25). Her experiences with racism after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education legal decision was technically supposed to desegregate schools punctuate her narrative. The daily traumas of white supremacy shape her discovery of him only "after months uv/ cajun Katie/ pippi longstockin/ christopher robin/ eddie heyward & a pooh bear" (25–26). She here posits an overwhelmingly white literary canon available to her in the children's room, echoing the institutional exclusions that mark her youth. The Lady in Brown describes the library as a segregated space, speaking to the reality of *de facto* segregation despite formal integration policies. When Toussaint comes alive on the pages of her library books, however, she looks to him as a source of empowerment. For one thing, "he dont take no stuff from no white

folks" (30). Yet, he remains hermetically sealed off in the adult reading room—spatially segregated from mainstream literature due to the threat he poses to the racial order.

When the speaker is disqualified from the summer reading contest because her book of choice has been deemed inappropriate children's literature, Toussaint becomes her fictional bedmate, "my first blk man" (26). She "carried dead Toussaint home in the book" because "he waz dead & livin to me" (27). The Lady in Brown here calls forth his spirit through what Theophus Smith calls "conjurational spirituality" (ix), which articulates the ability of Black diasporic religious practices to wield greater powers in order to conjure cultural change. Simultaneously summoning Haitian folklore, historical legacies, Vodou religion, and the famous Haitian Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman in August of 1791,[94] during which freedom fighters pledged to liberate themselves from French colonial rule, the Lady in Brown here recalls a merging of social, political, and spiritual forces that led to the slave revolt establishing the first Black republic:

> cuz TOUSSAINT & them
> they held the citadel gainst the french
> wid the spirits of ol dead africans from outta the ground
> TOUSSAINT led they army of zombies
> walking cannon ball shootin spirits to free Haiti
> & they waznt slaves no more (27)

At an early age, Toussaint inspires the Lady in Brown's coming into a revolutionary consciousness—drawing strength from the historical struggles and freedom dreams of the African Diaspora. Toussaint helps her strategize "how to remove white girls from my hopscotch games/ & etc." (27). She chooses to reject her "integrated home/ integrated street/ integrated school" (27), symbolized by the whiteness in her bed: "TOUSSAINT/ waz layin in bed wit me next to raggedy ann" (27). Upon refusing the assimilationist model of U.S.

[94] For more on the history of the Haitian Revolution, see C.L.R. James.

politics, he motivates her to leave St. Louis behind for the promise of Haiti. As the imagined land of freedom from white racism and colonial rule, Haiti is initially held out as a utopian space: "they gotta country all they own/ & there aint no slaves'" (30). Shange offers up Haiti as a symbolic utopia for African Americans before complicating its fetishization as a revolutionary space—instead looking to the possibility of the utopian manifested in present visions.

While the Lady in Brown first figures Toussaint L'Ouverture as a symbol of Black unity and resistance, Toussaint's double gets in her way—a flesh-and-blood figure named Toussaint Jones who meets the speaker and her imagined savior Toussaint head on. This narrative doubling relocates the possibility for intervention and the playing out of ideals within material space rather than the space of imagination—for the memorialization of Toussaint L'Ouverture as a larger than life hero glosses over his contradictions, not to mention Haiti's own complex histories of labor exploitation. Instead, the Lady in Brown asserts her voice into the present moment, holding close the utopian pull of Haiti while not abandoning existing possibilities of spiritual freedom:

> i felt TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE sorta leave me
> & i waz sad
> til i realized
> TOUSSAINT JONES waznt too different
> from TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE
> cept the ol one waz in haiti
> & this one wid me speakin english & eatin apples
> yeah.
> toussaint jones waz awright wit me
> no tellin what all spirits we cd move
> down by the river
> st. louis 1955 hey wait. (30)

The Lady in Brown signals her desire to join him—"no telling what all spirits we cd move" (30)—with the imperative "wait," a verb form whose temporality implies urgency. Here, her

reference to stirring the ancestors calls upon history as a guiding force for navigating present struggles. Moreover, her request "hey wait" calls out the need to build change from within rather than projecting political desires elsewhere, onto imagined utopias that short-circuit local action. After all, Toussaint Jones also assures the Lady in Brown "i dont take no stuff from no white folks" (30). She thus decides to stay in the present messiness of her U.S. reality, while finding her own utopian spaces within it, rather than escape into the utopian image of Haiti as the first Black republic.[95] Shange resists this appropriation, replacing Toussaint the larger-than-life figure with Toussaint Jones, the African American boy in whom the Lady in Brown places her trust, while not forfeiting her own political agency. Her real-life Toussaint, who represents Americanness by "speakin english & eatin apples" (30), resignifies the racial meaning of Americanness as Black instead of white. While the African Diaspora often turns on myths of "unity and continuity" (Tillet 103), Shange maintains transnational Black solidarity while emphasizing justice on a local scale.[96] The ambiguity of the closing line, "hey wait" (30), after an implied temporal gap represented by a spatial

[95] Haiti's symbolic function as the first Black republic often let down African American emigrants who sought this ideal but found upon leaving the U.S. that Haiti was looking for agricultural laborers not revolutionaries. Many recent migrants to Haiti wanted to claim either an Americanness denied to them in the U.S. or a transnational Black identity, but often found their dreams of equity and freedom disappointed by economic realities shaping the symbolic relation between the two countries. Stephanie Batiste writes of this exchange between the U.S. and Haiti, and how African American performance cultures simultaneously mobilize Haiti as an "Other" to the U.S. and as a sign of Black unity, shared experience, and universality. The "universal" here becomes a way to rewrite Americanness while critiquing its white supremacist foundations. As Batiste writes of Depression-era African American productions of *Macbeth* and *Haiti*: "These performances confirmed American identity as black national identity, but in a way that critiqued tyranny, oppression, and dehumanization" (162).

[96] Susan Buck-Morss also locates Haiti as a material space with symbolic consequences, arguing that Hegel's famous theorization of the master-slave dialectic arose out of material conditions in Haiti. Anything but an abstract space, Haiti gave rise to real-world debates about slavery and freedom, while at the same time often remaining a specter at the edges of thought.

opening of words on the page, suggests a transformative refiguration in which the speaker neither romanticizes a disembodied past nor idealizes a masculinist future.

The Political Work of an Apostrophe: "latent rapists'"

Shange's choreopoem has been unfairly criticized for demonizing Black men, but "toussaint" locates the possibility of racial solidary and justice across gendered lines. The telefilm even suggests a budding romance between the Lady in Brown and Toussaint Jones, as flirtatious gestures accentuate their dialogue. At the same time, Shange does not simply romanticize love and desire as liberatory categories devoid of their entrenchment in systems of power. Shange's "latent rapists'" serves as a collective form of protest and testifies to ongoing legacies of sexual violence. The poem powerfully critiques the patriarchal logics surrounding much rape prevention education, which too often places the burden of prevention on women (in the form of self-defense, for example), instead of on the rapists themselves as well as the rape culture that sanctions their behavior.[97] The title's pluralization of rapists makes a bold political statement, pointing to rape as a collective structural force rather than individualized aberrational transgression. What's more, the use of a possessive apostrophe (latent rapists' not latent rapists) deflects ownership away from the survivors of sexual violence to its perpetrators.

In that vein, Shange's piece begins by giving voice to an often silenced reality of rape: the frequency with which women are raped by people they know. 75 percent of rapes, after all, are committed by men with whom women were acquainted (see Zezima 23). The poem also expresses the legal impossibility of justice when woman are always already held

[97] For a foundational feminist critique of rape culture see *Transforming a Rape Culture* (2005), edited by Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth.

accountable for violations of their own bodies. As the Ladies in Blue, Red, and Purple describe: "a friend is hard to press charges against/ if you know him/ you must have wanted it/ a misunderstanding/ you know/ these things happen/ are you sure/ you didnt suggest/ had you been drinkin/ a rapist is always to be a stranger/ to be legitimate" (17). This language mocking the doubled injury of negating violence with the same misogynistic logics that produce rape as endemic in the first place eerily foreshadows contemporary conservative discourse on "legitimate rape," a category meant to further regulate and police the Black female reproductive body against fantasized notions of the "pure," violated body.[98] In the 2012 election year, for example, Republican U.S. Senate candidate Representative Todd Akin of Missouri stated that pregnancy rarely occurs as a result of what he called "legitimate rape," a choice of words that was condemned by Republican and Democratic candidates alike but shares much in common ideologically with the preferred "forcible rape" or "assault rape"—terms used to set the limits of rape's legibility by making it recognizable only through redundancy. That is to say, these modifiers (forcible, assault) make clear the misogynistic presumption that rape is not *always* forcible assault. This works in tandem with the victim-blaming discourse surrounding and supporting the pervasiveness of rape culture, which pathologizes rape survivors for their supposed partial responsibility. What can and cannot be considered rape, then, works to minimize its pervasiveness by individualizing each case—apparently open for debate—as an aberration to the existing social order rather than embedded in its systemic racialized misogyny.

In contrast to the rhetoric of exceptionalism around rape, Shange understands sexual violence and trauma more broadly as a daily lived reality, not as a catastrophic event for

[98] This is an already racialized designation used by anti-abortion groups for decades in attempts to ban abortion funding, particularly for low-income earners.

which no language exists.[99] Shange and other Women of Color feminists theorize trauma not just in medicalized or psychoanalytic terms, but as a social amassing of discursive and material violences often minimized by the effects of structural oppression. The popular desire to normalize violence is the work of those very institutions that maintain and enforce hegemonic power. In other words, the question of *who* is allowed to remember *what* is a deeply political issue.[100] As Cherríe Moraga writes of the willed blindness around rape culture:

> Although intellectually I knew different, early on I learned that women were the willing cooperators in rape. So over and over again in pictures, books, movies, I experienced rape and pseudo-rape as titillating, sexy, as what sex was all about. Women want it. Real rape was dark, greasy-looking bad men jumping out of alleys and attacking innocent blonde women. Everything short of that was just sex; the way it is: dirty and duty. We spread our legs and bear the brunt of penetration, but we do spread our legs. In my mind, inocencia meant dying rather than being fucked. (Moraga 118)

Just as "graduation nite" deconstructs the cultural overdetermination of particular events as episodes that totally rupture the fabric of everyday life, "latent rapists'" speaks truth to the ubiquity of rape not as a sensationalized outlier to daily existence—something that happens only to "innocent blonde women" on the so-called wrong side of town, an already classed and racialized depiction that Moraga further alludes to with "greasy-looking bad men jumping out of alleys" (118). Instead, Moraga and Shange describe how rape culture

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[99] For an introduction to canonical trauma theory grounded primarily in case studies of Holocaust survivors as well as the psychoanalytic traditions of Freud and Lacan, see *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), edited by Cathy Caruth.

[100] In "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," Laura Brown explores how psychiatric definitions of trauma can be exclusionary. As Brown writes of her experience defending PTSD clients in court: "I had heard it so many times before. How could such an event [e.g. rape] which happens so often to women, so often in the life of one woman, be outside the range of human experience?" (101). Yet, normativizing discourses of the medical establishment often assume a privileged white male subject: "Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other" (101).

perpetuates the myth that women are "willing cooperators in rape" (Moraga 118), particularly when differential racialization ensures uneven access and legibility to institutional frameworks for redressing trauma, entrenched in the regulatory function of harm, victimhood, and sexuality.

Shange's poem painfully details rape as something that can happen to women who have invited men into their homes, men "who make elaborate mediterranean dinners/ & let the art ensemble carry all ethical burdens/ while they invite a coupla friends over to have you" (19). These men "are sufferin from latent rapist bravado/ & we are left wit the scars/ being betrayed by men who know us" (19). This poem testifies to the delegitimization of women's lived experiences with sexual violence, particularly when men who rape women they know cannot even recognize their violence as such, their "latent rapist bravado" so thoroughly embedded in culturally-sanctioned misogyny. Trauma thus takes on embodied, political, and structural forms, but the processes of exclusion that socially construct the categories of history and memory as such often force it into hiding.

Instead of displacing systemic conditions onto individual behavior, Shange's outcry recalibrates cultural understandings of rape's ubiquity, putting pressure on the need for structural change. In relation to institutionalized practices of homophobia, racism, sexism, classism, and misogyny, feminist clinical psychologist Laura S. Brown asks: "What does it mean if we admit that our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded?" (103). The popular rhetoric of "man hating" punctuating public discourse around Shange's choreopoem attempts to individualize or abstract trauma by making it about one person's claims to injury against another individual or social group, as in the myth of

feminists uniformly hating all men. Yet, Shange's exploration of embodied traumas treats them as systematic, not exceptional.

"dark phrases" and the Utopian Register of Music

At the same time as the choreopoem grapples with the traumatic riffs on "dark phrases of womanhood/ of never having been a girl" it simultaneously explores the utopian possibility of hope through ritual healing (3). During the opening credits of the 1982 telefilm, Patti LaBelle's R&B ballad "dark phrases" sets the mood for this complex emotionality. After an opening shot of Shange typing at her desk, LaBelle's opulent voice fills out the words from the poem with an emotional tone characteristic of the blues: as Cat Moses describes, an initial loss followed by "movin' on" (623)—not as a moving past but a moving forward with statements of strength and self-affirmation. This strategy of survival, laughter, or what Moses describes as the "adaptive laughing-to-keep-from-crying perspective that is central to the blues" (631), finds expression in the theme song's lyrics: "it's funny/ it's hysterical" over textual excerpts detailing traumatic experiences (3). LaBelle's musical delivery layers these lyrics with promise: a virtuosic performance of resilience in the face of struggle. In Theophus Smith's words, laughter "in the midst of gross dehumanization and abuse, constitutes the ironic and double-edged element also found in the spirituals and the blues. That laughter-in-the-midst-of suffering appears here as the very emblem of a people's transcendence and will-to-survive" (153). The joke of LaBelle's lines is both an in-joke, testifying to the mythologies surrounding a Black woman's subjectivity as wholly oppressed under structures of racism and sexism, and sincere in its grappling with the classed spatialization of those forms of oppression: "dancing on beer cans & shingles" (3).

In the face of cultural and legal discourses that systematically devalue Black life, Black feminists create alternative epistemologies to define their own experiences. The Lady in Yellow's line, "my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of/ soul & gender" (45), refuses the terms of the metaphysical dilemma of whiteness—as a product of Enlightenment thought, which needed slavery against which to circumscribe freedom. In its shadow projections of so-called otherness, whiteness only tells stories about itself—its spiritual deprivation, its ethical sickness, its need to "make everythin dry & abstract wit no rhythm & no/ reelin for sheer sensual pleasure" (44). Shange here offers a definition of blackness that frees it from static and limited (mis)understanding as only and necessarily attached to legacies of white racism, U.S. imperialism, settler colonialism, and state violence. Race, as I argue throughout this dissertation, survives as something other than a remnant of traumatic histories. To understand race only as subordination is to ignore the way global histories of struggle call new collectivities into being.

Traumatic Landscapes of Healing: "a laying on of hands"

Shange's choreopoem is queer, I suggest, not in an identitarian sense, but in its centralization of women's pivotal relationships to each other—destabilizing heteropatriarchal logics, which often pit women against each other in competition. One of the most traumatic elements in the choreopoem brings the seven women into a circle of healing in which they return to the utopian undertaking of the rainbow; it is no coincidence that the Lady in Red/Crystal's tragic loss of her children in the penultimate poem, "a night with beau willie brown," transitions into the final scene, "a laying on of hands," in which the women come together to help Crystal reconnect with her own strength, resilience, and hope—hope not for some empty

promise of the American Dream but for tapping into Black feminist legacies of claiming spiritual freedom and creating new visions of revolution, even amidst deep pain. Out of violence, vulnerability, and trauma—the repeated refrain of "she's half-notes scattered/ without rhythm/ no tune" (5)—emerges the exhortation to "sing her sighs/ sing the song of her possibilities/ sing a righteous gospel/ let her be born/ let her be born/ & handled warmly" (5). The double resonance of the expression "sigh" in "sing her sighs" layers moans of disappointment and defeat with exhalations of relief and renewal, marking an affective transition that holds in tension both meanings, a sensuous release voiced through song:

> somebody/ anybody
> sing a black girl's song
> bring her out
> to know herself
> to know you
> but sing her rhythms
> carin/ struggle/ hard times
> sing her song of life
> she's been dead so long
> closed in silence so long
> she doesn't know the sound
> of her own voice
> her infinite beauty
> she's half-notes scattered
> without rhythm/ no tune
> sing her sighs
> sing the song of her possibilities
> sing a righteous gospel
> let her be born
> let her be born
> & handled warmly. (4–5)

The choreopoem actualizes this hope, "let her be born," within the space of the text, as it closes with "a laying on of hands" (60), as a gesture of community support "for colored girls who have considered/ suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own/ rainbows" (64). Shange's juxtaposition of "half-notes scattered" and the "song of her possibilities" testifies to

a cultural proximity and intimacy of trauma to powerful modes of collective survival and creation in the face of that trauma.[101] Trauma is here conceived not as a radical break from reality but linked to daily embodied experiences of communities under the weight of oppressive power structures. As the Lady in Orange testifies, "i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time/ it's so redundant in the modern world" (43), for "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical/ dilemma/ i havent conquered yet/ do you see the point" (45). Gesturing toward the utopian potential of the rainbow encapsulates an active hope in the wake of the "metaphysical dilemma" of survival in a society deeply invested in suturing racialized bodies to social death. The choreopoem's utopian aspirations gain traction in the struggle to become, in Shange's words, "all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten" (xv). While dismissing the possibility of wholeness as naïve, the women in Shange's choreopoem carve out a space for bearing witness to each other's grief and daily traumas. They contend with heteropatriarchal white supremacy to reclaim and affirm what Soyica Diggs Colbert might call their "(w)hole" selves.[102] It would, after all, be damaging to construct trauma as an obscene wholeness that could easily be overcome, given enough time and money to invest in psychotherapy.

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[101] Knowing the politics and risks of calling upon the biographical to support readings of texts, I still want to note that this project's theorization of how trauma—when understood as an institutional not individual issue—can motivate creative action and forge new communities, is not hypothetical. For example, Shange struggled with repeated suicide attempts before creating her deeply personal meditation on a collectively resonant experience in for *colored girls*, as well as collaborating with a number of performance collectives and forming her own dance company, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide.

[102] Here I am riffing on Soyica Diggs Colbert's play on the Derridean "différance" of whole/hole in *The African American Theatrical Body* (2011). Colbert's (w)holes are about plenitude, not lack and loss within a psychoanalytic framework. She locates "generative primal scenes" instead of sites of originary trauma that set into motion the Lacanian desire for lack (14), as well as the melancholic desire to fill that lack with words after the primal separation from the mother's breast that constitutes a child's sense of rupture from maternal intimacy, what Freud describes as the "oceanic feeling."

Shange's choreopoem flows over with words dancing on the tongue and fingertips of women as they connect to one another through the "laying on of hands" that follows Crystal's traumatic recollection of infanticide in "a nite with beau willie brown" (60). The Lady in Red begins her monologue in the third person with "there waz no air" (55), referring to Crystal with the intimacy of self-knowledge: "beau willie oozed kindness &/ crystal who had known so lil/ let beau hold kwame" (59). Not until the very end of her climactic monologue does the Lady in Red refer to herself in first person: "i stood by beau in the window/ with naomi reachin/ for me/ & kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fifth/ story/ but i cd only whisper/ & he dropped em" (60). Otherwise, the first person is only used in dialogue between Crystal and Beau Willie; Crystal maintains distance from her own narrative in the third person omniscient position.[103] Crystal's ultimate reclamation of the first-person "I" confronts her trauma through honest recollection to and support from a trusted community. When the Lady in Red/Crystal begins the communal closure of the choreopoem by saying "i waz missin somethin" (60), she opens up a space for bearing witness to and healing from daily embodied traumas of gendered racism and sexual violence. As such, the Ladies of the Rainbow experience the social dimensions of trauma as they listen empathically to each other's testimonies and affirmations of hope. Ultimately, they invite the reader or audience into the healing circle. The final stage directions indicated in the choreopoem trace this process: "All of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines 'i found god in myself & i loved her.' It soon becomes a song of joy, initiated by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies

[103] See my reading of Laurie Carlos's *White Chocolate for My Father* (1990) in Chapter 1 for an extended discussion of how pronouns can alternately indicate self-alienation, internalized voices of authority, empowerment, and relationality.

enter into a closed tight circle" (63–64). Their song of joy is shared with the audience, speaking to the layers of healing made possible by a literary work performed within and for a community. This is what Perry cannot account for.

Truth Sessions

While Shange's choreopoem was produced on Broadway in 1976, the form remains grounded in the Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic that I describe in the previous chapter, and thus emphasizes improvisation, process over product, collaboration, and a constantly evolving work that never remains static. So in the spirit of Theatrical Jazz, Shange has encouraged actors, directors, producers, and writers to engage with the work creatively. Perry's version of Shange's choreopoem exists as just one of many adaptations from a long line of interpretive practices ranging from off-Broadway productions to university classrooms. We must not forget that Shange's work was first performed in 1974 at a women's bar in the Bay Area, and then taken to alternative theatre spaces in New York before winning a number of honors including the Obie Award after its Broadway production in 1976. In other words, the choreopoem's form welcomes the accumulation of new meanings, spaces, and possibilities with each successive iteration.

In this section, I examine *For Colored Girls*' production, marketing, and reception history to trace its material as well as symbolic erasure of Black women's creative visions, starting with Lionsgate Entertainment Corporation's choice of director. With the form's openness in mind, Shange originally embraced the latest cinematic production of her choreopoem and granted film rights to writer, director, and producer Nzingha Stewart. In March of 2009, Lionsgate signed Stewart to create and direct the screenplay adaptation of *for*

colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, but seven months later, Lionsgate announced that Perry would be writing and directing the film. Stewart's script was discarded and she was demoted to executive producer.

This status, no doubt, swayed her diplomacy in the media frenzy surrounding Perry's usurpation of Stewart's original gig. When Stewart approached Perry about collaborating at Lionsgate's behest, Perry—whose own production company does business with Lionsgate—reportedly replied that he wanted to both write and direct the film (see Andrews). Refusing to comment on the original script that Shange supported versus Perry's, Stewart remained diplomatic, instead emphasizing the significance of the work: "It's probably better for me not to talk about my version of the script because I don't want it to take away from the version that is being produced now. Especially since the most important part of the story is that a movie based on a book of poetry about a group of nameless black women is getting made" (*Shadow and Act*). Stewart downplays her move from a more artistic to a more managerial association with the film by emphasizing the ongoing need for the creation of spaces for Black women's voices in Hollywood; what remains chilling, however, is the way Stewart's own vision gets sidelined in the name of representation. In the shadows of Perry's infamous enterprise, multiculturalist inclusion of "nameless black women" erases the actual names of Black women whose creative visions and labor make possible the conditions of artistic production.

Like Nzingha Stewart, Shange took a similar sideways approach during interviews, praising the ensemble cast's acting and expressing her appreciation of an audience for the work. When asked how it felt for her to experience the release of the film over thirty years after she crafted the script, Shange replied: "It's very surreal […] It's very different from

then, because then I was in the show, so I could feel everyone else's sweat, and I could see everybody's eyes darting or flicking or getting ready to cry or something. And I don't do that with this film; it's like twice removed from me, but I know it was there" (qtd. in Nelson). Shange couches her (not so) subtle critique of Perry in the language of physical and affective labor—the close proximity of sweat and tears during Shange's work on the show contrasts the distancing effect of the screen, with Perry's efforts marked in part by the privilege attending his fame. She adds (quoting Luke 12:48), "I think he [Perry] did as well as to be expected. To him who is given much, much is expected" (qtd. in Nelson).

Yet, Shange's expectations for Perry's concept of the film seem to have started out pretty low, as she reportedly told Perry "No Mama Dearest" (see Farley), referring to Perry's regular drag role as Madea, an over-the-top grandma figure with a predilection for guns and corporal punishment. Tyler Perry's infamous, and highly profitable,[104] drag performances enable him to simultaneously exploit and abject queerness. He may be in drag, but he's no queen. Perry embodies his female persona to espouse heteropatriarchal ideology while occasionally and intentionally breaking character to remind viewers of his manhood—namely by letting his voice drop and making misogynistic jokes about sex and women's bodies. As a racialized parody of womanhood, Madea ultimately reaffirms Perry's straight masculinity and turns thinly veiled misogyny into a comedic stunt. Racialized and gendered stereotypes thus inform Perry's particular brand of drag, which always threatens to undo itself through deliberate slippages of his own "authentic" masculinity. Shange's wariness about Madea surely stems from Perry's reproduction of stereotypes about Black womanhood

[104] According to *Forbes.com*, in 2011 Tyler Perry was the highest-paid man in Hollywood, ranking above the likes of Steven Spielberg and Elton John. From May 2010 to May 2011, he earned $130 million. See Pomerantz.

within a masculinist framework—surely the worst possible creative conditions for a famous Black feminist text.

Perry manages to steer clear of any kind of literal or symbolic drag in *For Colored Girls*. He is careful to mention in a behind the scenes interview featured in the 2010 DVD release how although he wanted to write a more rhythmic dialogue for the film that would easily slide into the poetic pieces of Shange's, he was not writing in her voice. Clearly not, as his retooling of Shange's non-linear poems into a unified narrative arc smacks of spectacularized tragedy and a sentimental finale. Fourteen of Shange's original poems punctuate a melodrama entirely his own. He speaks of the film's "messages of strength, of hope" but reiterates that the messages are not his but Shange's. The care with which Perry wants to make clear that he is not usurping Shange's embodied identity contradicts his directorial choices, which everywhere smudge the text. In the first piece of Shange's original choreopoem, "dark phrases," each woman calls out her geographical location:

> *lady in brown*
> i'm outside chicago
>
> *lady in yellow*
> i'm outside detroit
>
> *lady in purple*
> i'm outside houston
>
> *lady in red*
> i'm outside baltimore
>
> *lady in green*
> i'm outside san francisco
>
> *lady in blue*
> i'm outside manhattan
>
> *lady in orange*
> i'm outside st. louis (5)

In Perry's film, all women interact one way or another in a dreary tenement in Harlem—forcing connectivity rather than testifying to each other's unique realities and shared struggles across disparate spaces with their own felt histories. Moreover, his creation of roles for additional actors speaks volumes—from the loony abortionist Macy Gray, to the religiously fanatical mother Whoopi Goldberg, to the smooth-talking rapist Khalil Kain, to the Lady in Red's husband, Omari Hardwick, whose deadly secret guarantees additional tragedy.

About the presence of men in the film despite the casting of the original staged production, Shange replied: "I knew he had to add…well he didn't have to add, but many people can't imagine a movie without men" (qtd. in Farley). Despite her understanding of the film's concessions to a mainstream viewing public, Shange does not compromise her feminist vision. Her hope for the creation of new audiences remains entrenched in a politics of recognition not incorporation. That is to say, Shange does not assume that spectators passively consume art as entertainment. Instead, she sees possibilities for personal reflection and social transformation in grappling with the vital stories of seven Black women. When asked if there exists in the 2010 film a "message here for young black men," Shange responds:

> Oh absolutely, don't beat on women. The lesson is don't beat and hurt women. Don't lie to us. Don't get us pregnant and leave us in an alley. Don't pretend you're coming for dinner when you're coming to make love. There's a whole lot of lessons in there for young black men. There's a whole lot they could do. They need to take a notepad with them to the movie, and write down I can't do that no more, oh I can't do that more, oh I can't do that more. And see how many pieces of paper they have when they leave, if they were honest. You should have a truth session. (qtd. in Nelson)

While the lessons she articulates here have all too often been subjected to the racialized and gendered trope of the angry feminist,[105] reducing political arguments to an emotionally charged narrative of victimization, her sense of what it means to do coalitional work begins (but does not end) with the practice of locating one's own social positionality—here, young Black men, specifically, but certainly applicable to anyone. Boykin's *For Colored Boys* provides an important space for centralizing the queer voices of Men of Color, but Shange also insists on the necessity of self-introspection across gendered lines.

Rather than "hating men," as many critics have argued,[106] Shange extends an empathic invitation to conversation so central to transformative coalition-building work. Shange's call for a "truth session" offers the opportunity to move power out of the realm of abstraction and into an exploration of how one's own privilege, language, and actions function to replicate the logics of the existing social order, helping some while harming others. Shange advocates active viewership—notebook in hand—rather than complacent consumption of representations of trauma or justice. Identification with or participation in the representation of Women of Color does not alleviate subjects from unpacking their complicity in perpetuating violences against them. To transform society requires a commitment to confronting its power dynamics rather than willing them away through deliberate acts of unknowing history, or sidelining crucial conversations about gender and sexuality in the struggle to end global racial capitalism. Despite the disciplining of diversity

[105] For more on the trope of the angry feminist, and how it is deployed to silence political conversations by claiming affective investments undermine the force of arguments, see Barbara Tomlinson's *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument* (2010).

[106] For example, see Mark Ribowsky, Curtis Rodgers, and Robert Staples. As a particularly salient moment of sexist critique, in "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminism," Staples argues that the choreopoem's Black feminist vision satisfies a "collective appetite for black male blood" (26).

explored in this chapter, Shange's critique of gendered forms of racism need not exist in opposition to Perry's film—as audiences maintain agency over how they engage media. Yet, I take seriously the tension between Shange's and Perry's competing visions of Black feminist performance through the lens of gendered racism and its incorporation.

A major part of the film's marketing for wide release aimed to overtly minimize the racial implications of the title's dedication, *for colored girls*. Perry himself made clear that "You don't have to be a colored girl to be able to relate to and enjoy this movie" (qtd. in Hare), with actors from his film also emphasizing its universal appeal. While I would not disagree with refusing to understand the film's audience in narrow identitarian terms, what strikes me is how white femininity, like Black masculinity, gets coddled while coalitional possibilities across difference get erased. To the fan question posed by a Black man during one CNN interview, "What would y'all expect white females to take away from your movie?," Phylicia Rashad replied: "The truth of this is—Colored Girls? The color does not really refer to ethnicity so much as experience, and in truth what the playwright is saying: all women are colored girls. These experiences seem specific to this group of women in the film, but truthfully speaking they are experiences that are shared by women throughout the world" ("Tyler Perry Says His New Movie…" *CNN.com*). In her repetition of the word in each sentence of her response, it is clear that Rashad must ground her claims in *truth*—something akin to a deracinated "authenticity" speaking on behalf of "woman throughout the world." Rashad's discourse of truth-telling bespeaks an anxiety around discussing race (or ethnicity as it were) in an era that enforces "colorblind" policies and social practices.

In order to make white women feel included in the call of the title, the film's mainstream promotion downplays the blackness of the women who star in the film, in turn

allowing white women to identify as "colored" despite their lack of a shared history of struggle, indeed their participation in the perpetuation of the term "colored." While diverse audiences who share Shange's political commitments may witness the work without needing to see their own images and experiences reflected back at them, multicultural logics operate precisely by whitewashing and tokenizing difference while pandering to feelings of white injury and entitlement.[107] So it comes as no surprise that the easiest road to drawing in the broadest possible audience for Shange's work—explicitly for "colored" girls—is to insist that white women too can reclaim the term "colored."

Responding to the same question, Anika Noni Rose evaded the question of race with a metaphorical crayon box, saying "Everybody has a day when they are blue … [or] red with rage … these are all colors of life that we experience. And it's extraordinarily universal the things that these women are going through" ("Tyler Perry Says His New Movie…" *CNN.com*). In this approach, the "colored" of *For Colored Girls* comes to signify not race but popular affective associations with the colored fabric of each woman's role in the original casting: the lady in red, green, yellow, orange, brown, purple, and blue. Rose's response also leaves open the possibility of tracing the play's emotional texture and tactically reclaiming the universal from its presumed whiteness as political strategy. However, I here trace how a media firestorm took up these curtailed terms to bolster an existent narrative of downplaying the choreopoem's focalization through shared experiences of Black women in the U.S., instead favoring an ahistorical celebration of sisterhood (see Hare; King). To be clear, Rashad and Rose's measured stances were not anticipatory but defensive. Twitter

[107] For more on the discourse of white injury, see Robyn Wiegman.

conversations, news articles, and online blogs hotly debated the film's intended audience.[108] In Perry's film, the gesture of the rainbow and the unloosening of "colored" from its racialized associations serve the ultimate multicultural fantasy.

Shange's original choreopoem understands blackness, not whiteness, as universal insofar as she weaves together the particularity and texture of shared experiences across vastly different identities; Perry's film, however, understands womanhood as universal by erasing race. This is consistent with Perry's deliberate choice to keep a truncated version of Shange's title only as an attempt to clearly reference the original work, not as a supposed act of exclusion (see "Tyler Perry Says His New Movie…" *CNN.com*). But surely, women and men have read and witnessed the choreopoem in various forms across racial lines. If Shange's work can be understood as gesturing toward the universal in its articulation of the seven Ladies of the Rainbow by color not by name, and in her welcoming of various interpretations of each role, it is because she makes clear that wherever struggle exists, so too do emergent creative collectivities that transform spaces. This ongoing process of transformation requires situating social identities in power, history, cultural memory, accountability, and commitments to justice.

The media hype surrounding the film warrants a critical reconsideration of the question of multiculturalist feminist spectatorship. I contend that claims to injury can foreclose the coalition-building potential of performance when that injury seeks public

[108] These tensions could have been put to rest by Shange herself, who in "Beginnings, Middles and New Beginnings—A Mandala for Colored Girls" states quite plainly: "For men to walk out feeling that the work was about them spoke to their own patriarchal delusions more than to the actuality of the work itself. It was as if merely placing the story outside themselves was an attack. *for colored girls* was and is for colored girls" (2010, 11). This specific brand of patriarchal delusion speaks to how privilege works more generally: a social form of narcissism reinforced at every turn by fulfilled expectations of centrality and entitlement to space.

redress through representation. Again, whites ignore how their own racial scripts allow them the privilege of seeing themselves as unmarked, indeed universal. Not explicitly naming race in a so-called post-racial era protects a vested interest in the "invisibility" of whiteness.[109] So too does Perry's rewriting of the term "colored." Whether *we* are all white or all "colored," in a multiculturalist feminist framework such evocations of the universal erase the social meanings of race. Rather than consider coalitional possibilities, the *For Colored Girl*s ensemble appeals to a universal, deracinated notion of sisterhood that the original choreopoem and other Black feminist texts famously critiqued.

Day(s) of Absence, Myths of Reckoning

Ntozake Shange's choreopoem in its various iterations since the 1970s continues to reinvigorate commitments to and possibilities for social justice struggles. Yet in Tyler Perry's cinematic version of the text, the rainbow becomes a multicultural symbol devoid of its Black feminist queer political intervention. Moreover, the film participates in the ongoing erasure of Black feminist theorization of the joined forces of racism, sexism, and homophobia by sidelining those textual moments to create a unified narrative arc. Post-racial and post-feminist fantasy collude even though, and especially when, race and gender appear explicitly—since multiculturalist representation has become the chosen Band-Aid on the

[109] Obviously, whiteness is only invisible to white people. If the film were called *For Girls*, would it not recenter the voices of another set of women whose racial identities often go unmarked—for example, the wealthy white twenty-something college graduates living in New York City in the HBO Series *Girls*? And if that TV show went by the same name as Hilton Als's provocatively titled *White Girls*, what racial logics of the dominant order would be unsettled? In its imagined universality, the specificity of whiteness remains unacknowledged and thus safeguarded from critique. From this vantage point, whites can feel entitled to claim victimization and exclusion when their presumed centrality gets checked. Yet, in a white supremacist social order, the universality *Girls* producer Judd Apatow can take for granted Perry's PR machine must proactively claim.

wound of compounded histories of injustice.[110] Just as Obama becomes a token of progress to herald a "post-racial" era, Perry's investment in a Black feminist text attempts to move beyond its legacies by demonstrating how far we have come. Increased visibility of Women of Color here becomes the salve to ease the ache of entrenched hierarchies, but the *representation* of aggrieved groups has never secured their equal *rights*.[111] Multicultural policies and promises of representation often provide a spectacular distraction from ongoing injustices (see Melamed). Perry's film was popular, to be sure, because of the stunning cast of actors who breathed new life into Shange's celebrated words,[112] but it was also popular, I believe, because it transformed the revolutionary struggle of Shange's work into institutionalized diversity management that allows viewing publics to participate in a narrative arc not present in the original choreopoem: a *gender-specific form of colorblind fantasy* where purportedly antiracist inclusion obfuscates the perpetuation of heteropatriarchal white supremacy.

Perry's film participates in the gendered erasure of racism, which is to say, the myth that institutional racism impacts men over and against women. The male actors in Perry's film remain saints, villains, or victims of the system, while the women—despite an incredible amount of individualized pain—rise above racism through a single cheesy embrace. Notably,

[110] For an analysis of the overemphasis on representation in a post-Civil Rights era, see Herman Gray's *Cultural Moves* (2005). Gray pushes the tired boundaries of "good" versus "bad" representation, instead looking to what new creative possibilities emerge when the desire for mainstream visibility becomes less central to the valuation of artistic production.

[111] Perry's commitment to diversity shares much in common with that of the university: it is, to borrow Sara Ahmed's term, "non-performative," in that it represents a symbolic commitment to anti-racism without actually taking any steps to make that commitment more than an empty speech act that empowers institutions rather than the people it purports to serve. See Ahmed's "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism."

[112] *For Colored Girls* stars Kimberly Elise, Janet Jackson, Anika Noni Rose, Loretta Devine, Kerry Washington, Thandie Newton, Phylicia Rashad, Whoopi Goldberg, and Tessa Thompson.

this group hug brings together the previously estranged collective of women at the Lady in Purple's graduation party. Recalling a familiar narrative, Perry juxtaposes Beau Willie's (post-infanticide) incarceration with the Lady in Purple's scholastic success. Aside from the original choreopoem's climactic infanticide, these juxtaposed narrative details bear no resemblance to the original text, accomplishing another task entirely. Only men in the film seem to experience, marginally, the effects of anti-Black racism—as we see Beau Willie (played by Michael Ealy), for example, suffer from state neglect as a war veteran, and ultimately end up behind bars. Perry's women, however, find a different path—to college, to successful careers, and even to highly profitable ones, which land them in big trouble with their husbands.

Again, Perry is careful to say during interviews that the "messages of the film are not mine. They're Ntozake's" (*ColorMagazineUSA.com*), but his at times forced narrative threads that weave together fourteen of Shange's poems, as well as the tendency toward melodrama characteristic of Perry's style,[113] produce a moralistic argument. As Melissa Anderson writes, "Shange's text, whether seen live or read silently, soars with the power and precision of her language. Her women suffer and mourn, but they are never victims. In Perry's version, almost all of them end up in the hospital […] he re-creates the template found in many of his nine previous films: the martyred woman abused and/or deceived by her pathological mate" (*SFWeekly.com*). Anderson's word choice here is apt, as Perry's characterizations are simultaneously mired in larger than life archetypes ("martyred woman") and individual pathologies ("pathological mate"). Both options leave little room for

[113] For more on Perry's genre, see *Interpreting Tyler Perry: Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (2014), edited by Jamel Santa Cruze Bell and Ronald L. Jackson II.

conveying the emotional, ethical, and embodied complexity of the Black men and women in Shange's text.

In order to express the lived experiences of a group of Black women, Shange articulates the historical specificity of power's operation and how women negotiate that power to transform their own lives. In Perry's film, the revolutionary spirit of Shange's choreopoem seems like a distant dream. Rather than celebrating legacies of the global Black freedom struggle, current pain literally drowns them out. For example, when Phylicia Rashad's character, Gilda, begins to tell the story of Toussaint (explained as her future husband) to Crystal's children Kwame and Kenya, we hear Beau Willie beating Crystal in the next apartment over. Perry capitalizes on the injury, not agency, of Black women, while decontextualizing traumas from the structural conditions that perpetuate them. Perry's women suffer immeasurably in matters of romantic love, but his particular rendering of their empowerment, so central to Shange's original text, covers over her critiques of gendered racism with *colorblind melodrama*, or representations of (post-)racialized traumas disconnected from institutional racism. Such representations enable the easy resolution of deep histories of pain.

Not surprisingly, from Shange's filmed stage production to Perry, the text loses much of its emotional complexity. Perry's melodramatic aesthetic comes through in the film's dramatic start with "dark phrases," which sets the tone for a horror film more than a choreopoem. During the opening credits, the Lady in Yellow, played by Anika Noni Rose, dances gracefully across a dim dance studio, her flowing yellow skirt backlit by diffused white light from trellised windows. Stage left, a violinist perches on an upright piano as the pianist guarantees within a few bars that the music will swell. This duet's live performance

accompanies her balletic movement across the stage, shots of the violinist's hands competing with her silhouetted body and jazz shoes. Close-ups of her facial expressivity mirror the pained romanticism of the classical piece, as the low-key lighting creates a dramatic chiaroscuro effect. Only Perry could make something so beautiful overwrought enough to signal impending doom. Then begins the voiceover of "dark phrases," Shange's first piece in the choreopoem:

> dark phrases of womanhood
> of never havin been a girl
> half-notes scattered
> without rhythm/ no tune
> distraught laughter fallin
> over a black girl's shoulder
> it's funny/ it's hysterical
> the melody-less-ness of her dance
> don't tell nobody don't tell a soul
> she's dancing on beer cans & shingles
> this must be the spook house (3)

Literalizing Shange's politically and emotionally charged language, Perry's adaptation starkly contrasts the rich expressivity of Patti LaBelle's R&B ballad "dark phrases" from the 1982 televised theatrical production. While Perry's 2010 production of *For Colored Girls* takes its cue from the piece's soundtrack of "half-notes scattered/ without rhythm/ no tune," reading an intense irony in the lines "it's funny/ it's hysterical/ the melody-less-ness of her dance," the 1982 filmed theatrical performance chooses to enmesh competing affective responses of despair and elation, pain and joy. Perry layers voices, not emotions, as multiple actors fill out the poem's lines beginning at "without rhythm/ no tune." As Perry moves through shots of each woman's daily rituals, from getting dressed to journaling to watering flowers, the voices continue to recite lines over and with one another until they speak in unison the words: "let her be born/ & handled warmly" (5). First a lone voice, then the

collective, recites the last two lines of "dark phrases": "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but moved to the ends of their own rainbows" (6). The grand finale of the opening credits replicates this merging of voices as text from the original title of the choreopoem splashes onto a blank screen in swirling bright colors, like a poorly handled Prezi.[114]

Perry pieces together decontextualized fragments of Shange's choreopoem into a particular narrative, essentially turning each woman's "metaphysical dilemma" of "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored" into a melodramatic reckoning with some kind of literal conflict that has little or nothing to do with race or racism (45). Instead, these (formerly metaphysical) dilemmas generally revolve around romance or religion. In the film, the Lady in Orange/Tangie (played by Thandie Newton) utters these words in the context of realizing her false front of invulnerable promiscuity has failed to satisfy her underlying desire for love and affection. Perry even adds another Lady of the Rainbow, the Lady in White/Alice, played by Whoopi Goldberg—as the fanatical mother of the Lady in Orange and the Lady in Purple—just to ensure that Perry can remain consistent in his repertoire of religious zealotry. Perry interprets the refrain "i found god in myself & i loved her" all too literally, while ignoring its overt roots in Black feminist spirituality. Perry embellishes and adds details from each poem in order to forge a semi-coherent throughline that wanders into Perry's predictable thematic structure.

In Perry's tenth film, women continue to perform and conform to a Christian redemption narrative with the heteropatriarchal family unit at its center, outcasting those not

[114] Prezi is a cloud-based alternative to traditional PowerPoint presentation software. Its rise in popularity has also seen, to my mind, a frenzy of untrained users subjecting audiences to the literally dizzying effects of its unwieldy ability to zoom in and out of slides instead of displaying them in sequence. If this editorializing has not dissuaded you, see *Prezi.com*.

legible within its frameworks.[115] For example, the Lady in Blue/Kelly's pivotal monologue in the film turns the piece "pyramid"—about the complexities of desire, betrayal, and friends who "love like sisters" (42)—into the catalyst for actor Kerry Washington's own gratuitous Perry cross to bear: a previous partner was not only unfaithful but stole the Lady in Blue's dreams of conceiving with her husband Donald (played by Hill Harper), as an untreated STI scarred her fallopian tubes. Yet heterosexual love prevails, as Perry's moral compass rewards Kelly's "honorable" intentions—to be married, to have children. This Hollywoodization of Shange's choreopoem turns up the original's drama and waters down its social impact.

As ever, in Perry's distorted vision of Black feminism, career women perish. Janet Jackson plays one such character in *For Colored Girls*. The Lady in Red/Jo's ambition leads only to disaster, as her husband blames his cheating in part on her working long hours. In one scene, Jo's husband Carl (played by Omari Hardwick) returns home after being out all night. Jo has worried herself sick and tells him she even called the cops. NYPD inquiries brushed aside,[116] they proceed to rehash a recent fight about Carl investing $200,000 of Jo's money into the stock market without her permission:

> Carl: It's always about you and your damn money, huh Jo?
> Jo: Yes it is. It is. I earned it.

[115] It is true that, as *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis summarizes, "Tyler Perry has been led out to critical slaughter so many times, it might seem a wonder that he continues to make movies." Dargis also reminds Perry critics of the fact that he started his career not on the big screen but with community musical theatre in Atlanta; his staged productions met positive reception, financial success, and a large, largely African American, following. While *Madea Goes to Jail*, for example, grossed $41 million in the box office in February 2009, it was first a stage play performed for Black audiences in Atlanta. While many critics find it easy to dismiss Perry altogether for reproducing stereotypes of Black people, this assumption often centers a white audience and assumes a white point of view. However entertaining for audiences, particularly those drawn to seeing something that decenters whiteness in an institutionally racist Hollywood, Perry's films warrant critique.

[116] Given the widely documented realities of anti-Black police brutality, one might give pause before requesting that the New York City Police Department go looking for a Black man.

> Carl: Jo, I'm a broker. Everybody down at the firm knows who you are. It's embarrassing to me, that I can't come home and make a decision as a man in this house. So I took it.

While he claims "shooting some hoops with the fellas" as an alibi, Jo—like the film itself—has no time for details or nuance, overcome with histrionics. Her distress in part stems from the fact that she recently witnessed the infanticide of one of her employee's children. She laments "What kind of person am I?" for never having known Crystal was entangled in an abusive relationship. This marks a turning point in her attitude toward those not in her own class and social location. For much of the film, she remains spiritually and socially separated from them—cinematically mirrored by the establishing shot of the Lady in Red's scenes, which feature a stock image of illuminated New York high rise offices. In contrast, Perry signals scenes taking place at the Harlem brownstone in which most of the women live through an establishing shot of a key jangling in a fussy deadbolt on a door with peeling paint. While Jo originally orders her driver to keep the car doors locked in Crystal's neighborhood, her change of heart only becomes fully possible in the film through the revelation of a queer secret.

Low Down, Down Low?

Perry turns Shange's 2010 addition of "positive," an activist response to the HIV/AIDS endemic, into a major conflict between Jo and Carl. Narratively, the personal and social transformation of the Lady in Red—and her later integration into the community of Black women—relies on fetishizing the discourse of the "Down Low" (DL). This directorial choice to bring together Shange's poems "positive" and "sorry" through the Down Low infidelity of Jo's husband, which she only discovers through her HIV diagnosis, is foreshadowed

inexplicably through Jo's ominous cough—presumably an inaccurate conflation of HIV and AIDS. Thus, when the Lady in Red/Jo tells her husband: "you were always inconsistent/ doin something & then bein sorry/ beating my heart to death/ talking bout you sorry" (53), Perry literalizes Shange's philosophical reflection on human disappointment and betrayal. In other words, Perry turns an empowering poem, "sorry," into a key plot point where the Lady in Red's Down Low husband transmits HIV to her, interspersing new lines about how she always noticed him eyeing other men with the original text. This literalization of symbolic language for the film's narrative coherence happens at the expense of Perry's suturing of gay acts, but explicitly not public identities—in other words, the racialized Down Low fetish—to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The sensationalized discourse of the DL attributes the racist myth of Black men's hypersexuality to the spread of HIV among heterosexual, married, and monogamous (read: "respectable") Black women. Perry's abjection of queerness from blackness is nothing new, but speaks to long and fraught legacies of Black men's reclamation of straight masculinity from white supremacy (see McBride). Unsurprisingly, then, Black gay men have been the subject of ridicule in contemporary film, producing a stereotype of what filmmaker Marlon Riggs describes as "Negro Faggotry" (390).[117] Perry's humor often turns on stereotypes of blackness, which viewing publics may laugh at, believe in, or be offended by—but this laughter, whatever its agency, often happens at the expense of those not legible *as Black* along the lines of gender expression and sexuality. In *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009), for example, the "redeemable" women perform and conform to a Christian redemption narrative

[117] As Riggs writes, sardonically: "Negro Faggotry is the rage! Black Gay Men are not […] I am a Negro Faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be Black. A strong, proud, 'Afrocentric' Black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual. Hence I remain a Negro" (390).

with the heteronormative patriarchal family structure at its center, while the gender non-conforming prisoner serves as the butt of jokes, seen as beyond saving. Perry makes clear that Christianity can save normatively attractive heterosexual women from incarceration, but queer women should remain locked up. As in Perry's previous films, *For Colored Girls* forms a cohesive Black community that decidedly excludes Queer People of Color. Perry's adaptation of Shange's choreopoem consolidates this imagined Black community against the racialized DL trope. The Lady in Red's story ultimately allows Perry to maintain his multicultural vision of the rainbow by expelling queerness from its solidarity and cohesiveness.

Despite the dedication of its title, film critics have described *For Colored Girls* as Perry's first "crossover" film, a move that risks reifying blackness as market niche in its seeming disinterest in Perry's optic and audience. Yet, perhaps it is this mainstream representation of Black queerness that constitutes its dangerous crossing. As Black queer studies scholars have argued, a cultural obsession with the Down Low trope simplifies much more complex negotiations of Black masculinity and sexuality outside of the privileged closet narrative. It also links the HIV/AIDS epidemic to racist notions of Black pathology as a way to further link it to danger, contagion, and disease—in effect scapegoating a racialized community for a systemic problem.[118] While Shange's work was historically—and inaccurately—critiqued for demonizing Black men, Perry displaces anxiety over the role of

[118] Richard N. Pitt, Jr. explains that "While the 'Down Low' black bisexual is described pejoratively as a threat to black masculinity and the health of the black family, the 'Brokeback' white bisexual (when described as bisexual at all) is described in pitying language as one who is constrained by the society around him" (254). See also Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr.'s "'Out' in the Club: The Down Low, Hip-Hop, and the Architexture of Black Masculinity."

men in Shange's text onto the ultimate traitor, the Black queer who disrupts its heterosexual happy endings.

For Perry, the sacrifice of a particular brand of Black queerness makes possible the ritual transformation of a community of women in dialogue. It is her husband's scandalous secret that forces Jo to confront her shared experience with People of Color over and against her previous faith in the myth of the American Dream, with its corollary desire for distance from and disavowal of the way race and racism shape uneven access to life opportunities. Jo's character represents the "politics of respectability," as the historical trend toward assimilation into dominant social investments—in capitalism, in heteropatriarchy, in marriage—as one strategy of survival in a white supremacist society.[119] The revolutionary spirit of the Black freedom struggle, however, called for a bold rejection of white middle-class values. Black feminists have critiqued the politics of respectability for leaving little room to express alternative visions of social life and queer desire—calling for more inclusivity across class, social location, gender, and sexuality. Yet, Perry ironically mobilizes a critique of the politics of respectability by abjecting queerness, and in so doing, abandons Shange's Black feminist vision.

Jo bespeaks her desire for distance from women not of her social status in an early encounter in the film with Loretta Devine's character, the Lady in Green/Juanita Sims. Juanita visits Jo's New York office to ask for a donation to the non-profit organization she founded, a community Health and Wellness Clinic. She explains to Jo that she "read in your magazine about your upbringing … I just knew that this would be a program that you would respond to." Jo, however, responds only negatively. It is clear that Jo's liberal individualist

[119] For an extended discussion of the politics of respectability see Danielle L. McGuire.

bootstraps mentality, which assumes a level playing field, arises from a shared background of economic hardship; but her success, possessively defended, provides a mechanism by which she distances herself from Juanita even as Juanita attempts to establish a common bond. Jo retorts, after giving Juanita a look that classes both of them: "Let me stop you right now. I give to cancer. I give to Africa. I give to education. Those are my charities of choice." Jo's benevolence toward the African continent further achieves a distancing effect from an imagined bond of racial solidarity by reproducing a hierarchy of the Global North and South that turns on the civilizing mission and exceptionalist discourse around U.S. aid and its bedmate, the military industrial complex. Juanita responds, "But there is so much need in our own community."

The sincere inclusivity of Juanita's "our" attempts to bridge the gap that Jo sees between them, spatially represented by the New York high rise office and temporally represented by the hour that Jo makes Juanita wait before their brief meeting. Jo sneers: "Our? We are all afforded the same opportunities in *our* community." Then she hastily dismisses Juanita to which Juanita responds: "Ain't got no color up in here—all this white. No color up in this place. Including you." Juanita's rebuttal provides a powerful antidote to Jo's position, and the film's narrative arc in this way compliments Shange's original choreopoem. Perry's critique of Jo's bourgeois assimilation into whiteness finds roots in longstanding African American debates around strategic platforms for social reform—from the famous, often oversimplified, debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois to Bill Cosby's condemnation of conspicuous consumption and pathologization of the Black working class in a hotly contested speech given at the NAACP in May 2004 (see Dyson). Much like Cosby's, Jo's elitism refuses to acknowledge the white supremacist social

structure that guarantees radically uneven social access, economic opportunities, and legal protection along racial lines. Instead, Jo buys into the myth of individual pathology over and against institutional problems.

The film makes obvious its critique of this position. What remains striking, however, is the way the abjection of Black queerness becomes the catalyst for Jo's ultimate transformation near the film's resolution. Her symbolic joining of the *our* of "our community" through her appearance at a community function to celebrate the Lady in Purple's high school graduation happens directly after her "sorry" monologue, set into motion by Jo's confrontation with her husband about his extramarital affairs:

> Carl: Since you and I have been together I have not slept with another woman. I promise you that.
> Jo: What about a man?
> Carl: What the fuck did you just ask me?
> Jo: I see the way you look at them when you think I'm not paying attention. I see it. The pool boy in the Hamptons, my driver, the guy the other night at the opera. I see it all Carl.

Rather than defend his sexual preferences, his immediate response to Jo's accusation relies on blaming her for being a control freak, from managing his personal grooming to "calling shots over my head." In short, "You have no idea how much I hate coming up into this motherfucking house sometimes." Her direct response cuts to the chase:

> Jo: Are you gay?
> Carl: How you gonna ask me a question like that?
> Jo: How did you marry a woman, and then turn around and let a man bend you over?
> Carl: Ain't nobody bending me over.

Defending his masculinity and sexual identity at the same time, he clarifies: "I don't wake up holding another man, walking down the street holding some man's hands. That's gay, okay? That ain't me." After reaffirming to Jo that *he's a man* three times, assuming the category of gay man as an ontological possibility, he concludes: "I'm just a man who enjoys having sex

with another man, Jo." Spurning a gay identity could read as a desperate effort to save his marriage, but Carl's defensive posture around his masculinity, and his transmission of HIV to his wife, all too blatantly smacks of the DL stereotype, freighted with popular misconceptions that Black people are more homophobic than white people. Particularly in the context of the so-called Human Rights Campaign, mainstream liberal America perceives certain gay and lesbian identities as safe, socially acceptable, and an excellent consumer base on which to capitalize. Yet, those who reject a stable gay or lesbian identity as a matter of queer politics and/or those deemed illegible within its boundaries—namely, Queer and Trans People of Color—unsettle the social order. The popular imaginary pathologizes their acts, here manifesting as the racialized DL trope, by linking them to danger and disease. When mainstream liberals accept gay and lesbian inclusion, or at least publicly support their marriage rights—while perhaps privately repulsed by their affections and affectations—the projection of homophobia onto Black communities serves a twofold purpose. First, as Kenyon Farrow and others have argued,[120] the media fallaciously represents Black Americans as more homophobic than white liberal America in order to uphold the supposed moral superiority of whiteness. Second, assuming the public performance of goodness does not immediately erase homophobic sentiments—the racialized, uncontained, and abominable Black man on the DL becomes the perfect scapegoat for the projection of all sublimated queer fears and desires.

In Perry's film, the Black man on the DL also becomes a catalyst for Jo's personal transformation. Sitting back to back on an expansive bed in their expensive home, Carl and Jo hash out their romantic endings. "I'm sorry, Jo, for my truth" says Carl. Jo tells him to

[120] See, for example, Farrow's widely circulated essay, "Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?"

"save your sorry" before launching into an altered version of the Lady in Blue's original monologue "sorry" from Shange's choreopoem: "one thing i dont need/ is any more apologies/ i got sorry greetin me at my front door/ you can keep yrs" (52). In one of her finer acting moments in the film, Janet Jackson reaches the heart of the original poem in her mastered tone of detached pain:

> i loved you on purpose
> i was open on purpose
> i still crave vulnerability & close talk
> & i'm not even sorry bout you bein sorry
> you can carry all the guilt & grime ya wanna
> just dont give it to me
> i cant use another sorry
> next time
> you should admit
> you're mean/ low-down/ trifling/ & no count straight out
> steada bein sorry alla the time
> enjoy being yrself (54)

What Jackson withholds in emotion Perry makes up for in poetic flourishes; he adds "down-low" after "low-down" in the line "you're mean/ low-down/ trifling/ & no count straight out." Placing her wedding and engagement rings over the HIV test results, Jo picks up her designer handbag and announces: "When I get back I want you gone and take your HIV with you." She immediately sets off for the high school graduation party of the Lady in Purple/Nyla (played by Tessa Thompson). When Jo arrives, Juanita warmly announces her to everyone as: "the one who gave us all the money." Jo has recently written a large check to Juanita's non-profit, symbolically securing her metamorphosis from domineering wife to saintly benefactor.

In sum, Jo's diagnosis provides the catalyst for her recognition and healing in and through seeing herself as one of "our" community, rather than above it. At the community function, Jo asks about the women at Juanita's clinic, and learns that two in four women have

been exposed to the human immunodeficiency virus from someone she "trusted or loved." Jo punctuates her response with a dramatic cough between sentences: "Women just give up so much. Just so much of their power." Juanita reassures her that "It can happen to any of us. Anyone that's in love." Perry's spin on Shange's "positive" dampens its context of HIV/AIDS as a historical tragedy disproportionately impacting communities already vulnerable to systematic violences. Perry attempts to portray complex portraits of women creating meaning in their lives, but the film's mainstream appeal lies in its scapegoating of Black queerness. In other words, Jo's identification with other Black women across class lines becomes possible only through the betrayal of the Black queer man whose image in the mirror dissipates when the *our* of "our community" is summoned into view.

Disciplining Trauma

Despite the film's dealing in racialized stereotypes of Black queer masculinity, it otherwise downplays race, specifically Black feminist queer histories of struggle. Shange's choreopoem and Perry's adaptation of it both address numerous traumatic experiences: sexual violence, domestic abuse, infanticide, HIV/AIDS, and rape culture. Shange balances a nuanced individual and collective voicing of these experiences within the context of heteropatriarchal white supremacy. Rape, for example, is a systemic problem normalized by deeply rooted cultural misogyny—not a spectacularized aberration. Yet, Perry's film embodies the rapist in one character, projecting and displacing the collective nature of Shange's critique onto a melodramatic scene that intercuts close-ups of a date rape with shots of the Lady in Red at an opera with her DL husband, a tear perfectly timed to roll down her face. As Carl grips Jo's hand tighter after locking eyes with a man in the audience, as if to reassure himself of his

manliness or ward off (homo)sexual thoughts, the Lady in Yellow/Yasmine's tortured face peers into a digital clock, counting each agonizing minute. This representation of her traumatic experience, uncomfortably paralleled with Jo's marital strife, finds further cinematic insult at the police station, where the Lady in Blue's police officer husband Donald recites lines from Shange's poem "latent rapists'" deadpan, explaining the legal near impossibility of pressing rape charges against someone with whom the woman was acquainted. Despite these material realities, rather than offering support he seems to matter-of-factly spout the sexist language of victim-blaming central to the original piece's critique.

Never one to shy away from victim-blaming discourse, Perry carries it through to the final scene. Its fitting title of "My Love is Too…" emphasizes romantic self-empowerment rather than collective healing. Perry glosses over the women's confrontations with sexual violence and gendered racism by concluding with a party dialogue rendition of "a laying on of hands." In the choreopoem, the poem preceding "a laying on of hands" turns on Crystal's recollection of infanticide that makes necessary the space for healing that follows this traumatic moment. In the film, Perry throws in the infanticide scene about half-way through the movie; it is really no more dramatic than any of Perry's other plot twists. What's more, Perry's feel-good version of "a laying on of hands" literally reduces this symbolic space for communal healing to a group hug. As the rest of the women join the Lady in Green and Red on the rooftop patio, we hear them chatting excitedly. The Lady in Orange remarks: "I can't believe I'm having such a good time and there's no man around!" Juanita engages them all in a game of "My Love is Too…," asking them to fill in the blank. They share stories of men's empty apologies, tactless excuses, and hurtful behaviors. After a few minutes, Crystal interrupts this playfully dramatic mash-up of Shange's "no more love poems #4" and "sorry"

with a line originally recited by the Lady in Green: "shut up bitch, i told you i waz sorry" (52). Crystal's arresting words take us back into the space of her trauma with Beau Willie: "I asked myself how I could let that happen." This question disturbingly echoes Gilda's earlier victim-blaming, when she suggests that Crystal take at least partial responsibility for her role in Beau Willie's murder of their children, without acknowledging the deep pain and complexity of intimate partner violence.

And so opens Kimberly Elise's truly remarkable performance of "a laying on of hands." Yet, as the piano and violin from the opening credits wash over the sour taste of blaming women for being abused rather than shifting culpability to the individuals *and* institutions that perpetuate abuse, we cannot linger too long on Elise's powerful acting. After she recites the celebrated lines of "i found god in myself/ & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely" (63), the other women join her for the group hug that concludes the film. Represented but not rendered complexly, Perry's characters smooth over their era's injustices. Audiences confront or consume images of Black women's pain, which Perry attempts to resolve through his contrived happily ever after endings. These happy endings, ultimately, are no match for Shange's ritual healing in "a laying on of hands," which generates an active hope that audiences and participants alike will be moved to transform not only their lives but the social conditions that constrain them.

Traumatic Utopias, Utopian Traumas

Despite counterrevolution against radical Black feminist organizing, performance can inspire new political commitments and coalitions. While Perry's post-feminist multicultural fantasy is rooted in the idea of transcending identity categories, Shange's juxtaposition of pain and

possibility points to the fact that shared experience convenes communities. Her choreopoem, in its never-ending iterations and transformations, refuses to see representation as an end in and of itself. From considering suicide to embodying rainbows, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* testifies to how theatre spaces can use collective traumas for materializing utopian visions. These visions intervene in the popular discourse of conceptualizing trauma in terms of injury by looking to how trauma as systematic, not aberrational, forms part of the creative fabric of daily life. In so doing, Shange's innovation of form departs from canonical work in trauma studies, which sees narrativization of trauma as a resolution to crisis. Understanding that historical and structural traumas—as well as the deep pain they produce—do not find resolution through representation, Shange's choreopoem still collaboratively enables other visions of sociality, hope, and healing.

Traumatic utopias constellate the imposition of abjection and redefinition of being that comes in part from recognizing trauma's institutional force. As Shange makes clear, this recognition creates possibilities for reimagining and facilitating transformative social relations. Her choreopoem enacts traumatic utopias as culturally rooted in collective knowledges and actively negotiated through performance. Their linguistic mirror, *utopian traumas*, characterizes the politics of spectacularized suffering. This spectacle of injury is precisely what Perry's plot turns on, even as he attempts to broaden his directorial ambitions with much help from his talented cast of actors. Utopian traumas glorify trauma for the sake of entertainment, profit, and imagining it as healed through post-feminist multiculturalist representation. Shange exposes trauma as a product of, rather than exception to, the existing social order. Perry undoes this critique by portraying trauma as universal experience, not institutional force. Trauma and Black feminist performance thus collude in radically uneven

ways for Shange and for Perry. While Perry attempts to reconcile pain with sappy myths of happiness, Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* shows us something deeper: understanding trauma as institutional, not exceptional, unearths cultural silences around its experience, as well as creates a more inclusive and urgent space for its articulation.

Chapter 4

Queer Provisionality:

Mapping the Generative Failures of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's

Transborder Immigrant Tool

TRANSITION
(song of my cells)

Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing la migración de los pueblos mexicanos*, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán" (1999 [1987]: 33). The historical? The mythological? Aztlán? It's difficult to follow the soundings of that song. Today's borders and circuits speak at "lower frequencies," are "shot through with chips of Messianic time." Might (*O chondria!*): imagine the chips' transliteralization and you have "arrived" at the engines of a global positioning system—the transitivity of the Transborder Immigrant Tool. Too: when you outgrow that definition, look for the "trans-" of transcendental -isms, imperfect as overwound pocketwatches, "off"-beat as subliminalities (alternate forms of energy which exceed Reason's predetermined star maps). Pointedly past Walden-pondering,* el otro lado *de flâneur-floundering—draw a circle, now "irse por la tangente"—neither gray nor grey (nor black-and-white). Arco-iris: flight, a fight. Of fancy.* This Bridge Called my Back*, my heart, my head, my cock, my cunt, my tunnel. Vision: You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me.*

—Amy Sara Carroll

Prologue: Utopian Poetics, Dystopian Realities[121]

Imagine hearing this poem on your mobile phone as you pause somewhere between Baja California, Mexico and San Diego County on the U.S. side of the border. Leaning into the vertiginous landscape of the Anza-Borrego Desert, punctuated by tangled branches, barrel cacti, and sage brush roused only by ephemeral windstorms, and endlessly unfolding against a horizon of striated mountains and unbearable heat, you see through sunspots the GPS-

[121] An article version of this chapter is forthcoming in a special issue of *Lateral: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* on Performance and Cultural Studies. I would like to thank the guest editors Stefanie A. Jones and Eero Laine for their generative feedback.

enabled compass rose on your Nokia e71's dusty screen (see Figure 1). You listen for a sign from the looped poetry that alternately offers desert survival advice and sustaining words, "alternate forms of energy which exceed Reason's predetermined star maps." At the interstices of this messy interface your body reads a signal: 33. Steps. Forward. Your feet, leaden weights in too-tight shoes, manage the micro-migration. Northeast of you lies a transient promise of hope, stenciled in white words on a blue container, which you mouth silently with chapped lips: *AGUA/WATER*.

On September 1, 2010, neoconservative pundit Glenn Beck decried this poem as a threat to national security. Not surprisingly, Beck aired the video poem's most provocative lines: "*This Bridge Called my Back*, my heart, my head, my cock, my cunt, my tunnel. Vision: You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me."[122] Part of Beck's performative condemnation necessarily turned on censoring the words "cock" and "cunt" with loud bleeps that interrupted the video poem's audio track. Beck's outrage over this sexually explicit moment moved him to prophesize: "The poetry on this system will destroy the border and the nation" (Gharavi). Beck framed the performance collective's verse as evidence for the supposed need to fire its creators from their university teaching posts. Performing his anti-intellectual brand of Fox News Channel's ongoing xenophobic melodrama, Beck conspired in making visible the high political stakes of poetry.

The poetic object of Beck's scorn was Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0's *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, which currently exists in prototype form as a GPS-enabled cell phone application meant to direct migrants to water caches and other safety sites along the

[122] Beck played an excerpt of the video poem of "Transition (song of my cells)," co-designed by poet Amy Sara Carroll with Ricardo Dominguez, Elle Mehrmand, and Micha Cárdenas, the latter of whose voice is featured reciting Carroll's poetry. This video has been featured in various performance venues and is available for viewing on *Vimeo.com*.

Mexico/U.S. border. Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 developed this cell phone application at the bits.atoms.neurons.genes (b.a.n.g.) lab, a research collective at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology. Based out of the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT) collaborators include b.a.n.g. lab director and artivist Ricardo Dominguez, performance artists Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand, programmer Brett Stalbaum, and poet Amy Sara Carroll. EDT features Carroll's poems on the mobile devices as part of its museum- and gallery-based reception history, but also views computer programmer Brett Stalbaum's code as poetry/poetry as code. Stalbaum's GPS tools can be downloaded online as an open source alternative to navigation software.[123] Simultaneously a concept and an actual provision, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* circulates its code freely in order to amplify the accessibility of the prototype with potentially far-reaching effects. Centering audio recordings of Amy Sara Carroll's poetry as part of its intervention, the app pays homage to notions of poetic sustenance in the works of Chicana and Black feminists such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde by offering heteroglossic poetry-in-motion translated into Indigenous languages of Mexico such as Mexica, Maya, Yoeme, Diné, and Náhuatl, as well as Spanish, Portuguese, German, Russian, Greek, and Taiwanese. In so doing, the tool's poetry evokes a utopian image of global fellowship. Like Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, my evocation of utopia delineates a set of social practices and concrete performance spaces that imagine and enact other ways of being in the world, and *not* a naïve ideal world with its own set of principles, bound to reinscribe the very problems it seeks to move beyond.

[123] Developers can download and install Walkingtools software at *Walkingtools.net*.

In their project's deliberately provocative utopian vision, EDT recruits unwitting political actors and outraged publics as the primary performers in the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*'s drama. That is to say, since its conceptualization the tool's design has remained provisional and technically non-functional, but its poetry activates a political response *as performance*. The poem that Beck cites, Carroll's "Transition (song of my cells)," has been a flash point for the project since Beck's belligerent mockery of its final lines. He decried: "That is so beautiful […] I mean who needs water, you know, when their souls will be drenched in life-refreshing dew of poetry like that. Oh we are in good hands aren't we? America this is madness and you know it. Common sense says we must turn the money off on this project and others like it."[124] Underlining the popular conflation of the prototype's poetry and GPS technology, Beck's vitriolic address to his version of "America" encapsulates the key terms of the debate over the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (TBT). Social actors across the political spectrum have disputed its functionality, its poetry, its alleged federal violation of immigration law, and the contested use of tax dollars to fund projects that put pressure on both conservative and liberal discourses of migrant rights.

In spotlighting the online media frenzy surrounding the tool as well as Electronic Disturbance Theater's creation of video poems for the project, this chapter—structured like a play—holds in tension the competing visions of reality offered by poets and politicians. Act I addresses Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance history against the backdrop of material realities at the border. This act also engages the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*'s intervention in the victim narrative of much human rights discourse—putting pressure on the limits of legal reform. While a device that could potentially save lives will always remain an

[124] EDT archived the Beck footage at *Walkingtools.net*.

urgent project, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* does another kind of work: by including poetry as part of its technology, EDT interrogates the imaginative constraints on desire for change. The need for technical functionality sometimes dismisses the work of poetry, but in the struggle for justice, the absence of one perfect tool necessitates the strategic coalition of many. Act II close reads the tool's poetic interruption of discourses of "illegality" in order to understand creative form as central to the tool's political intervention—particularly the possibilities and pitfalls of utopian visions as they clash with dystopian realities, reflected in Electronic Disturbance Theater's activation and archive of digital hate. Through affectively charged reactions to the tool's technical non-functionality and functional poetry, Electronic Disturbance Theater stages its performance online. EDT conceives of Internet flames as a kind of art practice, because, as Carroll describes in *Vandal*, "nobody talks about Fox News's Aesthetics" (67). Act III offers a theoretical framework I term *queer provisionality*, as a performance mode that provokes dominant publics with its expansive social vision. Utopian provocations expose the artistry of power, or the aestheticized rehearsal of contradictory political logics in the spheres of the law, the academy, and cyberspace. Rather than romanticizing utopian potentials in artistic practice as a way out of a noxious present, queer provisionality takes seriously the work of exposing systemic practices as producing their own artistry.

Act I: Call of *El Otro Lado*

Since Anzaldúa's evocation of border culture as *una herida abierta*, Queer of Color feminists have understood borders as simultaneously discursive and material places for identity negotiation and meaning-making. The Mexico/U.S. border, of course, not only polices

racialized bodies but also locates a key space for the production and regulation of sexuality. Despite Carroll's homage to Anzaldúa's queering of the border in the poem that Beck denounces above, articles published on TBT systematically elide its queerness (Amoore and Hall; Goldstein; Warren). In contrast, Electronic Disturbance Theater/b.a.n.g. lab discusses the tool as serving a specifically queer function: "TBT's aesthetic, a poetics of dislocation, unfolds to queer the Nation's concretude" (7). TBT's utopian gesture—to queer the Nation's concretude—moves beyond the limitations of legal reform to an abolitionist ethics of challenging oppressive institutions themselves while also strategizing ways to move within them. As Dean Spade writes, fighting the law's injustices can be one "tactic of transformation focused on interventions that materially reduce violence or maldistribution without inadvertently expanding harmful systems in the name of reform" (1047).

On June 4, 2011, artist Marlène Ramírez-Cancio walked the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* prototype into Tijuana via a tunnel from the U.S. side of the border. This art event was staged as part of *Political Equator 3*, a two-day cross-border mobile conference. Of course, uneven and exploitative flows of capital secure the border's permeability for U.S. citizens seeking thrills in Tijuana, for instance, but not for migrants moving to *El Norte*. Rather than ignoring the radical power differential, we can understand Ramírez-Cancio's act of walking TBT across national boundaries as an anticipatory act of solidarity with the UndocuBus movement, which takes as one of its mottoes "Migration is a Human Right."[125]

[125] See, for example, the artwork designed by Alfredo Burgos, Pablo Alvarado, and other artists in solidarity with the "No Papers, No Fear" Ride for Justice through the South, beginning in Phoenix, Arizona, and culminating in an appearance at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina in September 2012. For more information on the UndocuBus movement, see *NoPapersNoFear.org*.

Beyond the desert, Electronic Disturbance Theater has demonstrated the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* mobile device prototype in art galleries and institutional spaces—circuitously staging the question of the tool's functionality as academic performance. EDT members have represented TBT at more than 40 international performance venues. In February 2012, for example, *LA Re.Play: An Exhibition of Mobile Media Art Los Angeles* at UCLA's Broad Art Center in conjunction with the College Art Association Conference, exhibited twenty-five of Carroll's poems uploaded onto four cell phones alongside other international "geolocated media" artworks.[126] As its extensive exhibition record attests, TBT has generated much positive attention: Electronic Disturbance Theater won two Transborder Awards from UC San Diego's Center for the Humanities, which funds year-long research proposals that innovatively address the issue of (trans)borders, as well as the Transnational Communities Award funded by Contacto Cultural, Fideicomiso para la Cultura México-Estados Unidos, which was handed out by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico. Rather than serving an end in and of themselves, these artistic and academic accolades set into motion the tool's performative afterlife: the opacity of the tool's poetic intervention reads as transparently dangerous to cultural actors and commentators.

Designed to provide aid in the tradition of Border Angels, No Más Muertes, Humane Borders, and other humanitarian organizations that provide life-saving water during long stretches of desert, the app, once fully operable and distributable, would ostensibly direct users to already existent water stations. However, during interviews about the tool (Bird; Warren), Electronic Disturbance Theater members cite multiple reasons—both unforeseen and anticipated—for the fact of its technical limitations. EDT's practical concerns range from

[126] For online exhibition information visit *LARePlay.net*.

operationalizing a cell phone model cheap enough for mass distribution and sustaining battery life to mapping a particular area when NGOs want to keep stations hidden as a protective measure, as well as preventing the devices from being co-opted as a means of tracking by *La Migra*. If a cheap mobile device could in fact sustain battery life over long distances to direct migrants to makeshift water stations, the labor of mapping and remapping safety routes would require constant communication with NGOs and circumvention of hostile Border Patrol agents. In addition to jingoistic realities short-circuiting hemispheric imaginaries, the material fact of GPS technology's history of bolstering the military industrial complex also threatens the tool's sustainability.[127] In effect, EDT's material and political challenges cannot be separated from the dangerous potential for repurposing the tool as a technology of state surveillance and violence.

While Electronic Disturbance Theater members maintain that they originally hoped to distribute a fully-functional version of the app by April 2011, approximately four years after its first iteration, I am more interested in the concrete effects of a utopian idea—as given these setbacks, I read EDT's insistence on the tool's practicality as part of their performance. Nonetheless, a series of highly publicized legal, institutional, and federal investigations indefinitely stalled the tool's development. These scandals, unsurprising in a political context marked by institutional repression and state violence, also halted migrants from operationalizing the tool along the border. TBT's performative life thus exists in the space of its provisionality, or the fact of its technical non-functionality; it is a powerful idea that because of its utopian ethical reach cannot fully materialize within the confines of U.S.

[127] As Kaplan argues, digital technology's data tracking capabilities claim to streamline the convenience and quality of one's consumer choices but instead produce a "militarized subject" of the Geographic Information Systems and Global Positioning Systems central to the military industrial complex.

immigration law. Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance process explicitly embraces Fredric Jameson's politics of "anti-anti-Utopianism" (vxi), which understands that only the most privileged members of society can afford not to hope, or to think that hope alone can sustain a political project. Through the tool's embedded poetry, EDT imagines a world not circumscribed by arbitrary national borders. This utopian poetics does real work in the world, even as its technology for crossing the material fact of the border remains provisional. By staging political backlash as performance, the tool's non-functional technology and functional poetry together reveal the danger and urgency of imagining other ways to be in the world. Legal reform alone, however necessary organizing efforts remain there, cannot transform cultural realities.

Electronic Disturbance Theater's understanding of migration as a human right rather than a federal crime gestures toward abolition of the immigration control apparatus altogether as the basis for collective action. Legal frameworks, after all, often require the performance of particular kinds of citizenship that reify hetero- and homonormative productions of the U.S. as a safe space of freedom, including sexual freedoms, at the cost of casting "Third World" countries in imperialist terms as arrested or regressive. In other words, part of the process of assimilation into citizenship demands the collective reiteration and reinforcement of a dangerous racialized and non-conforming "other"—the terrorist, for example—against whom the nation guards and defines itself, a point that Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai make in "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terror and the Production of Docile Patriots." Toby Beauchamp extends this argument about national security and patriotism in light of the gender-nonconforming subject to critique occasions when transgender advocacy organizations have depended on defining a properly assimilated citizen against a fantasized

"other" who threatens national coherence—covertly linking patriotism to race hatred through the anxious repetition of the racially ambiguous terrorist figure, a force to be expelled from the nation.

Given its performance trajectory from poetic prototype to legal liability, the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* can be described as a work of conceptual/performance art that troubles public disputes about immigration and human rights law in print and social media, the legal sphere, and the academy—shifting the terms of debate from the security of the border to the material realities of immigration reform. EDT members articulate a poetic vision of border dissolution and stage a debate about migration in which social actors collude in performing their political aesthetics, which rationalize global flows of capital across borders while criminalizing the very people whose exploited labor makes possible the conditions of neoliberal production. Neoliberalism's duplicitous positioning of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a democratic opening of borders deliberately elides the pattern of uneven globalization and systematic disenfranchisement that secures economic dominance over and through an expendable labor force.[128] As Ricardo Dominguez states during an interview with Louis Warren (2011): "A Coca-Cola can has more rights of protection in the flow across borders than the people who make the can, who fill the can, and pack the cans […] NAFTA seems to indicate that these commodities have [rights] and a right of flow. So, to me, transborders, trans-California, would be about an equation wherein the equality of the commodities would have a direct impact on the equality of the individuals who are the very flows of production there" (28). Dominquez calls for awareness of not only

[128] For a thorough account of the way NAFTA in particular and U.S. economic strategies of neoliberalism and globalism more generally continually exploit Latin@ populations on both sides of the border, see Rosa Linda Fregoso and Lázaro Lima.

the various violences underlying neoliberal policy, but of U.S. capitalism as being rooted in longer histories of imperialism, genocide, and slavery.[129] While a myopic timeline of the U.S. border might think of NAFTA's 1994 concretization as a defining moment in Mexico/U.S. relations, a more nuanced understanding attentive to global racial regimes would reach back to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (which forced Mexico to cede half its former territory) or even first colonization contact.[130] The contradictions of a selectively permeable border depend on global inequities, outsourcing, and the exploitation of labor, which maximize the flow of capital and racially restrict the movement of people through the discourse of "illegality."

Reinforced by national moral panics around spectacularized threats such as contagion and disease, criminality, and terrorism, the racialized discourse of "illegality" has been in wide circulation since the U.S. government criminalized undocumented entry in 1929 (see Nevins 54). The mass detention and deportation of undocumented and document permanent residents on mere suspicion of being in the country "illegally" bolsters the conflation of "national security threats" with bodies not easily marked as white and conforming. Echoing Richard Nixon's 1971 "war on drugs," for instance, the affectively charged "war on terror" in

[129] During interviews and presentations on the tool, Electronic Disturbance Theater addresses the global reach of racial capital by explicitly engaging the long history of Mexico/U.S. relations before neoliberalism's infamous 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, from first colonization contact to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, compromise legislation passed under Reagan, which by design did little to slow crossings into the U.S. but made it illegal to "knowingly" hire undocumented workers. In 1986 Congress also passed the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments, which regulated and defined what constituted a "genuine" marriage in order to make seamless the already inextricable link between cheap migrant labor and the nuclear family model (Luibhéid "Queer/Migration" 176). Both measures can be seen as part of the U.S. government's record of exploiting migratory labor, as with the 1942 Bracero Treaty, at the same time as it promotes anti-migration rhetoric.

[130] For a detailed history of the Mexico/U.S. border, see Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

the wake of September 11, 2001 heightened a longstanding anti-Latin@ immigration regime.[131] While the criminalization and hyperpolicing of People of Color is nothing historically new, the post-9/11 extension of immigration, detention, and border control authority from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and U.S. Customs Service to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 exacerbated ongoing injustices around, and a rise in, mass detention and incarceration of racialized Latin@ immigrants in ICE detention centers, county and state jails, and privately-owned prisons. DHS's coordination with local police to racially profile and detain targeted groups compounds the alignment of criminal law with immigration law, reinforcing the domestic and border hyperpolicing of Latin@ communities. The gross human rights violations of ICE facilities and privatized prisons have also been well-documented by the American Civil Liberties Union and grassroots organizations, and include an absence of basic legal protections, such as the right to an attorney and medical care, and subjection to sexual, physical, and psychological abuse by Border Patrol, local police, and detention center guards. Ultimately, the alliance of border enforcement and criminal law enforcement bolsters the power of the state to mass incarcerate, detain, and deport People of Color in moments of moral panic and economic crisis.[132] In building their performance around the bankruptcy of the idea of borders and cages, EDT refuses to advocate for humanizing state power's walls through reform.

[131] For a brief genealogy of the long history of Latin@ detention under the U.S. detention regime, see David Manuel Hernández.

[132] For more on enhancements in the coercive arm of the state post-9/11 and political spectacles of mass deportation in moments of economic crisis, see Tanya Golash-Boza.

Framed as both art and activism while collapsing the space between them, EDT's poetic gestures simultaneously serve as artistic invocation of and political intervention in a humanitarian crisis set into motion by shifting relations of capital and racialized moral panics—the escalating numbers of border deaths each year despite an overall decrease in attempted crossings. One report states that from 2007–2011, the Border Patrol reported 1,934 deaths, averaging 386 people per year (see Moreno). EDT's *Sustenance* describes that in 2009, the same year the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency released its data on Boeing's virtual fence construction—a hugely expensive failed attempt to further securitize existing barriers—it documented 416 deaths from attempted border crossings during the months of January through October alone. Of course, as Electronic Disturbance Theater/b.a.n.g. lab notes, state figures are often deflated: "In contrast, humanitarian aid organizations like the Border Angels of San Diego/Tijuana estimate that 10,000 people to date have perished attempting to cross the México-U.S. border" (3). Rising death rates can be attributed to the increased militarization of the U.S. immigration control apparatus, a multi-billion dollar industry. *Los Angeles Times* reports that "Obama administration officials claim the frontier is more secure than ever, benefiting from the billions of taxpayer dollars spent on border defenses. There are 18,500 U.S. Border Patrol agents on the U.S.-Mexico border now, compared with 3,222 in 1986. Barriers have been built along nearly 700 miles" (Marosi, Carcamo, and Hennessy-Fiske). As if border fences and surveillance technologies do not make crossing perilous enough, migrants must also fear the growing numbers of Border Patrol agents, and not only the possibility of getting caught but the violence to which they may be subjected if taken in by *La Migra*.[133] TBT counters the government's massive investment in border control with the act of imagining migration as a human right.

[133] The border remains a site not only of policing and surveillance technologies but, as Eithne

While the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* exists as a prototype that has not been replicated or distributed, the debate surrounding the tool ignores its virtuality, or the fact of its not-yet-ness. Beginning in January 2010 an investigation of EDT's supposed misuse of funding sources instigated by Members of Congress Brian P. Bilbray, Darrell Issa, and Duncan Hunter, and ensuing interrogation of each EDT team member by Audit and Management Advisory Services at UCSD, stalled TBT's development. Bilbray, Issa, and Hunter charged b.a.n.g. lab with using taxpayer dollars to violate the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which criminalizes border-crossing aiders at the federal level. Subsequently a series of investigations in 2010 by institutional and federal actors, namely, UC San Diego, the UC Office of the President, and the FBI Office of Cybercrimes, not only halted the tool's mass production and deployment, but also subjected EDT members to invasive legal protocols and online harassment from opponents to the tool, fueled by local and national media coverage. Bad press catalyzed these major setbacks for TBT's deployment. For instance, the letter Bilbray, Issa, and Hunter wrote to UC San Diego Chancellor Marye Anne Fox on March 17, 2010 shifts between present and future tenses, describing the tool paradoxically as a "program that helps individuals illegally cross the U.S./Mexico border" but one that EDT members "plan on disseminating … to illegal immigrants to aid in their crossing of our southern land border" (EDT *Sustenance* 4). Here,

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Luibhéid (2002) explains, "of serious human rights abuses, including beatings, rapings, and deaths" (xviii). One aid organization, No More Deaths, recently exposed the overt hostility of Border Patrol agents, three of whom were caught on tape destroying water caches set out for crossers as a humanitarian response to the escalating number of deaths catalyzed by stricter border control (Frey). The Border Patrol's own vigilante acts of destruction to potentially life-saving water stations along common migration routes takes border security to its logical conclusion, which extends beyond a legal issue to a human rights one: death. From the denial of medical service and the theft of money and medications, to overt displays of race hatred, sexual assault, torture, and murder, this belligerence reflects larger patterns of abuse, which overtly counter official protocols yet with little consequence for Border Patrol agents.

they collapse the temporal distance between "helps" *in the present* and "plan on disseminating" *in the future*. Ignoring its provisionality, they view the prototype as an active threat to the nation—typifying the warped temporality undergirding debate.

The University of California, San Diego, also threatened removal of Professor Dominguez's tenure. He was hired as an assistant professor in 2004 for his groundbreaking work developing Electronic Civil Disobedience with Critical Art Ensemble. Then, Dominguez's virtual sit-in performance on March 4, 2010—to protest widespread UC salary cuts, layoffs, and fee hikes—was deemed a distributed denial-of-service attack, warranting an investigation by the FBI Office of Cybercrimes. Drawing from his training in classical and agit-prop theatre, as well as the practice of Electronic Civil Disobedience that he collaboratively developed in the late 1980s with Critical Art Ensemble, Ricardo Dominguez developed virtual sit-in technologies with EDT cofounder Brett Stalbaum in political solidarity with the Zapatistas, an anti-free trade movement of Indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico who led an armed rebellion on the day NAFTA took effect.[134] In fighting for Indigenous rights against linked histories of global neoliberalism and colonialism, Zapatismo emphasizes the power of words, not war. Led by Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatista National Liberation Army famously staged the symbolic gesture of sending hundreds of paper airplanes containing fragments of poetry into a Mexican army base. This tactical move takes seriously the power of collective creativity in the ongoing struggle against systematic destruction and state violence. Linking Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance

[134] In "The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA," Coco Fusco discusses EDT's solidarity with the Zapatistas, and in particular their staging of virtual sit-ins to protest President Zedillo's refusal to recognize Indigenous rights, the 1997 Acteal massacre, and other injustices globally. She also describes the U.S. military's subsequent labeling of Electronic Civil Disobedience as cyberterrorism, as well as the transnational criminalization of distributed denial of service shutdowns. See 70–73.

genealogy to Electronic Civil Disobedience and Zapatismo underlines the significance of both digital activism and tactical poetry to TBT's performance mode.[135]

In the end all charges against EDT members were dropped, but the University of California Office of the President asked Dominguez to refrain from producing more artivist work and to remain silent about the investigations. In an era that often portrays the university as a radical oasis, this institutional reaction exposes the persistence of the 1980s culture wars in which conservatives sought to restrict content of federally funded intellectual and artistic projects. A public advocate of the anti-migrant Secure Communities program, Janet Napolitano's ascension from Secretary of Homeland Security to President of the University of California system provides further evidence of the university's xenophobic agenda in censuring Dominguez. UC San Diego's actions seem inconsistent: after hiring Dominguez for his hacktivism and virtual sit-in technologies, his tenure was threatened for those very reasons. The university's response to competing pressures reveals the internal contradictions, gaps, and ruptures in institutional power as generative sites for social change. EDT's work carves out a space for imagining how academics might risk and repurpose institutional resources to mobilize within larger networks of activists and organizers.

Despite the right's obsession with the tool's "immediate" danger, the media has simultaneously doubted its potential for efficacy—particularly how to reconcile TBT's poetry with its activist impetus. During a trial run of the tool with Dominguez and Stalbaum at UC San Diego in 2010, journalist Evan Goldstein observes: "Our movements are

[135] My evocation of "tactical poetry" is less a spatial distinction Michel de Certeau makes between tactics and strategies in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and more a temporal one, as Rita Raley theorizes in *Tactical Media* (2009). As she writes, "tactical media's imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism, is not spatial but temporal" (12). Raley defines tactical media as "performance for which a consumable product is not the primary endgame; it foregrounds the experiential over the physical" (13).

punctuated by occasional bleats of unintelligible, crackly poetry. There is no discernible logic to the dance of its compass arrow." Goldstein's skepticism crystallizes as he observes Dominguez's supposed digital incorrectness, a term which refers to crossing the line from hacktivism to cybercrime, but which Goldstein defines as deliberately inefficient: "His creations are 'digitally incorrect,' he told me in April, by which he meant deliberately inefficient… They are, in short, conversation pieces." In relegating TBT's performance to the space of a conversation piece, Goldstein betrays a healthy amount of doubt about whether conversations alone can do political work in the world. That is to say, Goldstein's concern over the functionality of the tool underlines an important point. For migrants, a final product could indeed translate to saving lives; but Electronic Disturbance Theater/b.a.n.g. lab points out that GPS devices available for purchase in Mexico thanks to transnational corporations such as Walmart "have been utilized for a long time in border crossings. In other words, capitalism long ago accomplished what the atavistic right and neoliberal administrations fear most!" (7). Activists may support TBT's evocation of political urgency, only to be disappointed by the tool's provisionality. For some, the tool is *too much* in existence—it poses a tangible threat. For others such as Goldstein, the tool has not done enough, or anything, as activist art. Yet, Electronic Disturbance Theater's digital activism locates the multi-directional affective flows of political outrage and solidarity born out of heated dialogue and debate as the space of performance.

In undermining the framework of il/legality,[136] TBT challenges both the conservative and liberal political imagination. In the former, TBT heightens the visibility of publics whose

[136] Foundational queer migration scholarship focuses attention on the active production of a divide between "illegal" unauthorized migrants and "legal" assimilated citizens or victims in need of saving. In "Sexuality, Migration, and the Shifting Line between Legal and Illegal Status," Luibhéid examines the invention of this gap particularly with respect to the movement for same-sex migrant couple

inability to accept migrants as people with basic human rights forecloses recognizing their right to not die in the desert. In the latter, the tool critiques the limits of human rights agendas, which turn on a fantasized victim figure in need of saving instead of a dynamic agent whose desires may not center on being folded into the nation-state. As Wendy Hesford argues, the human rights spectacle often attempts to elicit pity from its publics by erasing difference through universalization, mirroring an image of suffering that one can only identify as such insofar as it throws into relief the goodness and fallibility of the First World subject. The tool's use of poetry troubles this latter perspective in particular. While human rights discourses attempt to fix a stable, universalized image of a victim (often a wide-eyed woman or child) onto local contexts, TBT refuses to map this substitutable figure onto the border. Instead, TBT's inclusion of poetry as functional technology asks us to consider how the obsessive repetition of the victim figure covers over the paradoxes of human rights discourse, which purports to embrace equity and dignity but in fact leaves little room for self-determination, overemphasizing the so-called benevolence of U.S. institutions to determine the futures of its imagined victims.

EDT's functional poetry and non-functional technology set into motion a digital performance of liberal discourses of human rights. In online responses to the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, liberals often assert the discourse of human rights in order to delimit what aid should look like and in whose image. This assertion manifests as concern about the extent to which a potentially life-saving tool could or should simultaneously contain within its function the recitation of multilingual poetry. For example, one comment posted to Evan Goldstein's article reads: "It seems to me that the only parts of the 'landscape' that people

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rights, looking to the way the category of "illegal" circulates to regulate racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies.

traveling through a desert need to 'encounter' are those that help them not to die. To lecture them about sublimity and American landscape painting during their quest for water—not to mention force-feeding them poetry—borders on the obscene." To deem migrants unfit for cultural production or consumption is not only presumptuous but based on privileged claims to intellectual authority and authorizing presence. In making assumptions about what kinds of provisions sustain the perilous process of desert-crossing, such writers presuppose the centrality of their own subject positions. Locating the performance art squarely on the racialized bodies of migrants romanticizes and objectifies an entire population by coercing them into a staged event. This becomes particularly insidious, as commenters express concern about the extent to which a potentially life-saving tool should contain within its function the recitation of poetry. Electronic Disturbance Theater stages its utopian poetics as provocation, turning to the mediated spheres where power gets consolidated and (re)produced, mapping the category of political performance onto a constellation of cultural actors whose privilege often remains uninterrogated and invisible.

Act II: The Artistry of Power, the Power of Artistry

Aesthetically and theoretically aligned with Amy Sara Carroll's poetry collection *Secession* (2012), "Transition (song of my cells)" literalizes metaphors of transnational identity on the space of the Mexico/U.S. border via an affective mapping of global politics through sustaining poetry, and a Thoreauvian philosophy rooted to the land rather than transcendent of it—extending beyond the limitations of legal rhetoric and reform to what Henry David Thoreau in *On Civil Disobedience* calls a "higher law doctrine" (qtd. in EDT 4). Understanding the imbrication of Mexico/U.S. relations and slavery as the historical stage on

which transcendentalist politics were thought, Electronic Disturbance Theater reimagines Thoreau's higher law as "transborder justice."[137] In the tradition of civil disobedience, change becomes possible by deliberately breaking the law, not abiding it. Layering spatial and symbolic crossings, "Transition (song of my cells)" ultimately calls for an empathic act of imagination: "You. Are. Crossing. Into. Me." Poetically suturing border crossing and relational intimacy, Carroll's poem refuses the colonialist terms of nations dividing land, power, and resources—instead honoring an expansive vision of movement linked to the bodies and social contact.

In "Transition (song of my cells)," Carroll's politics of citation moves from transcendentalism to U.S. Third World Feminism—examining social relationships to the land on which TBT's intervention is metaphorically staked. Henry David Thoreau's privileged escape to Walden Pond, land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, meets Gloria Anzaldúa's "tradition of migration." The poem also asks us to interrogate the entitlement attending a U.S. transcendentalist desire for returning to a natural world untainted by the corrupting effects of modernity: "Pointedly past Walden-pondering, *el otro lado* de flâneur-floundering." By evoking the expansive I/eye of Whitman (song of my cells/of myself) to the strategic essentialisms of Anzaldúa's Aztlán ("The historical? The mythological? Aztlán? It's difficult to follow the soundings of that song"), Carroll's poem maps biological, technological, and utopian spaces onto exclusionary geographies policed by discursive and state regimes. Rooting language of transcendental -isms in the body grounds any notion of ethical engagement in a respect for rather than rejection, minimization, or tokenization of difference, countering empathy's dangerous desire to consume the other's experience in

[137] For more on transborder justice, see Bird.

order to better reflect back one's own.[138] EDT presses against the limits of empathy in performance art and poetry by exposing it to the militarized site of the border, where the failure of a provision to perform could mean being out of water, out of time, and out of life.

Alternating between desert survival advice and pointed rejoinders to discourses of "illegality" permeating U.S. policy, Carroll's poems are captured both aurally and visually (see Figure 2). One conceptual poem, for example, quotes Luis Alberto Urrea, who invokes and undermines political frameworks with the provocation: "In the desert, we are all illegal aliens" (*The Devil's Highway* 120). Rather than leveling out the material differences between an undocumented migrant and a U.S. citizen experiencing a vertiginous landscape, however, Carroll's scrambling of the words formally replicates physical barriers to empathic understanding. Perhaps suggesting a border fatality, the ominous singling out of one red letter "g" renders a linguistic absence that dissolves the word on which such death is predicated—"illegal." Replacing nationalist rhetorics of securitizing the border with global social logics that welcome rather than ward off migrants, this poem gestures toward the dislocating effects of entering a U.S. debate centered on the devaluation of an entire group of people as outside the law and thus undeserving of survival in the desert.

Another Fox News report in April 2011 on the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* comically pits Enrique Morones, Founder and Executive Director of the non-profit organization Border Angels, against Retired Army Colonel Al Rodriguez, who founded the hate group You Don't Speak for Me in 2006. You Don't Speak for Me is a coalition of "concerned Americans of Hispanic/Latino heritage, some first or second generation, others

[138] Empathy's limits are exposed at the site of the U.S. immigration control apparatus, which differentially polices bodies along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status.

recent legal immigrants, who believe illegal immigration harms America."[139] Morones explains that much like the humanitarian mission of Border Angels, TBT is meant to save lives, not aid and abet migration. Rodriguez, however, argues that the tool actively encourages illegality, insisting that anyone who has condoned illegal immigration should be "thrown in jail." Bolstering Rodriguez's position, the Fox News reporter's obsessive repetition of the discourse of illegality permeates the entire interview—twice in the first fifteen seconds, for example—operating as a covert placeholder for racialization. Rodriguez bespeaks a vested interest in the ongoing production of Americanness as white, and racial difference as "foreign." The injunction for President Barack Obama to present his birth certificate points to this disturbing social reality. Moneymaking conspiracy theories that routinely question Obama's citizenship, so popular among Republican politicians, celebrity advocates such as Donald Trump, Harvard-educated *New York Times* bestselling author Jerome Corsi, journalists, and voting publics, allow people who do not want to be identified as bigots to hide behind the legal parameters of U.S. citizenship.[140] The discursive divide between legal and illegal, then, tenuously links racialized bodies to overdetermined origins rather than actual social location and citizenship status. In short, the performance of illegality masks over material realities of migration. The artistry of power, or the aesthetic strategies of hegemonic political logics in legal, institutional, and social spaces, attempts to stabilize the constantly shifting terms of legality and citizenship through ongoing *performances of the law* as justifying white supremacist political and social practices.

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[139] *YouDontSpeakForMe.org* is no longer active but its archive exists at *ImmigrationProCon.org*.

[140] See, for example, the New York Times bestselling author and Harvard Ph.D. in political science, Jerome Corsi's *Where's the Birth Certificate?: The Case that Barack Obama is not Eligible to be President* (2011).

Anxiously evoking the specter of illegality in a country of millions of undocumented migrants also bespeaks a disavowal of how global shifts in capitalist production create the conditions in which mass movement must be contextualized. Rodriguez wishes to distance himself from Morones through the language of citizenship: "I think this guy that you're talking to—I don't know where he comes from nor where he was born." Rodriguez self-identifies as American, whereas for him Morones—as a Mexican American—is not truly American, because "you don't follow the laws of the United States of America" (*FoxNews.com*). As this Fox News report exemplifies, U.S. voting publics conflate a migration "threat" with racialized bodies, precisely by making whiteness the precondition for U.S. citizenship. Yet, since whiteness also functions symbolically as a form of social capital, the perpetuation of white supremacy can hide behind the brownness of figures such as Rodriguez.

In a so-called post-racial era that wields "colorblind" language to perpetuate institutional and interpersonal racism, the nationalistic language of Americanness polices the boundaries of race without explicitly invoking racialized difference.[141] In other words, xenophobic publics manage a racialized fear of brown skin by excluding it from the very concept of U.S. belonging. What Claire Kim calls the "colorblind talk" of white liberalism obscures the fact of systemic group dominance (18), and as Hiram Perez writes, "colludes with institutionalized racism in vanishing, hence retrenching, white privilege. It serves as the

[141] This myth of post-raciality, or the denial of race and racism as significant factors shaping lived realities, is propelled by formal policies and cultural rhetorics of "colorblindness." As Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich explain, "It has become accepted dogma among whites in the United States that race is no longer a central factor determining the life chances of Americans" (190). Racism is alive and well, but colorblindness propagates the myth that the Civil Rights movement marked an end to institutional racism, with President Barack Obama's re/election as the ultimate excuse for closing the book on addressing racial injustices.

magician's assistant to whiteness's disappearing act" (187). Academics, anonymous online commenters, and policymakers collude in this "colorblind" racism by conflating illegality with racialized bodies.

Electronic Disturbance Theater calls attention to these performing publics, exposing their carefully produced aesthetic of Americanness. A digital archive of right-wing extremist reactions to the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, documented in online forums and blogs,[142] makes visible the overt xenophobia that the liberal-individualist frame seeks to elide, since it so often advocates a mass colorblindness in order to foreclose conversations about racism's ongoing violences. Covert and overt white supremacy persists, as with the far-right "race realists," whose *American Renaissance* journal has not surprisingly expressed outrage at the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* project.[143] By applying pressure to the pulse of a xenophobic rhetoric that continually attempts to hide its racist cultural logics behind legal frameworks, EDT activates a performance not of the tool itself but of the discourse communities who receive it.

Overtly bigoted threats, which thinly veil white supremacist viewpoints in the official language of anti-immigration law, such as "I favor mining the border area" (qtd. in Goldstein), are hard to miss. However, liberal responses to hate speech typically code racist responses as exceptions to the multicultural world order, rather than symptoms of its structural force. Many commenters react directly to the xenophobic views of other

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[142] One such commenter, "jc100," (qtd. in Goldstein) writes: "Helping people to break immigration laws is INDEED a waste of student dollars on many levels, regardless of the ludicrous assertion of 'performance art.' 'Enabling people not to die'? (!) Get real. We are discussing people who are not citizens of the United States and who enter the country illegally, and entitlement to an array of benefits paid for by legal US citizens."

[143] See, for instance, "O Tempora, O Mores!" in the overtly white supremacist journal *American Renaissance*, founded and edited by Jared Taylor.

commenters as not only out of line but not with the times. By performatively shaming *individual* racists, the *institutional* perpetuation of white supremacy goes unchecked. One direct reaction to another commenter's fear of the tool using tax dollars to enable "illegal" immigration uses vitriol to fight xenophobia:

> Anything that irritates Glen [sic] Beck and his army of brain-dead followers is worth funding to the max! But aside from all that, "enabling" people to not die is hardly wasteful. If you're going to doom people to die in the desert, how is that any different from waiting for them with a sniper's rifle? But maybe that's more to your liking? (qtd. in Goldstein)

Particularly in an academic climate that touts post-identity politics, these comments signal the material force of racism in contemporary cultural production as anything but beyond, or "post-." And yet, a liberal discourse of shock alleviates commenters from unpacking their complicity in systemic logics that seek to exclude people from entering a country that was once their own, scapegoating Beck's cult-like following for a systemic problem in which liberals are also complicit. This exceptionalist desire for distance from U.S. colonialism finds an easy outlet when social actors conflate online expressions of *desire for justice* with active and ongoing steps toward its enactment.

Anything but a post-race space, the Internet bespeaks the violent meeting point of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in a kind of willed blindness or desired sameness that both tout fictions of the post- in order to foreclose conversations about race. Online networks generate viral processes of communal meaning-making, establishing the comment forum not as a unidirectional project of personal response to a given article but a collaborative space. While websites can be a particularly nasty breeding ground for discursive violence, due to the anonymity of actors, activist-oriented bloggers check the damage of Internet "trolls" for whom online harassment constitutes a destructive form of play. As Lisa Nakamura writes,

"[u]ser-generated blogs that confront racism, sexism, and homophobia work against the impulse to forget or ignore racist 'trash talk' by preserving and archiving it using old and new media" (3). When colorblind rhetoric bars conversations about the violent material manifestations of racism, disclosure itself is a generative kind of work.

Taking seriously what Nakamura describes as media archives of "trash talk," Electronic Disturbance Theater makes online inundations of recreational race hatred part of the performance, turning enemies into actors in the tool's drama. The tool's perceived threat provokes publics into staging their animosity, as EDT members have been targets of hate mail and death threats. In order to provide accountability for hate speech, EDT maintains the practice of publicly posting hate mail they receive online under a tab titled "Flames" on TBT's homepage.[144] The published "Flames" on TBT's website include names as well as email addresses, following the politics of making visible perpetrators of hate speech—although online personas can be difficult to link to real-world bodies. On March 10, 2010, for example, "gil baco" wrote: "Giving people who cross illegally into OUR country a free electronic PATHWAY to non-detection? YOU SON OF A BITCH. I strongly suggest that you and your piss-ant, gay colleagues in this outrage, pack up you [sic] belongings and families and do your work from the other side of the world." What is particularly striking about this threat is the sexual metaphors that underline its conception of the outlaw who can only be safely fringe when on the ideologically-demarcated "other side of the world," which "gil" presumably figures as Mexico. Xenophobia and homophobia work hand-in-hand, as both threaten to deform the safely white, patriotic "American people," as if Mexico were not

[144] While the original Transborder Immigrant Tool Homepage (*Bang.calit2.net*) is no longer operative and has since migrated to *Bang.Transreal.org*, all three selected "flames" included in this chapter are also reproduced in *Sustenance* (2010).

part of the Americas but a vast wasteland to which anyone's "gay colleagues" should be banished.

From EDT's archive of online bullying emerge patterns that echo the paradoxical coexistence and interdependence of colorblind rhetoric and a xenophobic imaginary that conflates national borders with the limits of racialized and sexualized identities. Xenophobic reactions to immigration debates immediately hold suspect the citizenship of all Latin@s, mirrored in the hate speech directed at EDT members, who were told to leave their teaching posts and go back to Mexico—imagined as the collective repository for badly behaving citizens. Moreover, the inassimilable production of difference read onto the group seems to exacerbate the nativist fear of the tool as threatening U.S. social cohesion. The fear of having TBT operate on the ground, dramatized by the "Flames" archive, reveals something that already exists in the world—thoroughly gendered, racialized, and sexualized panics over permeable national borders.

This jingoistic anxiety often plays out in colorblind language that replaces explicit mentions of race with discourses of cultural and sexual pathology. In other words, the colorblind substitution of overtly racist biological discourses of race with the covertly racist language of cultural pathology relies heavily upon the scapegoating of "non-normative" sexuality and gender expression. For example, Siobhan Somerville traces the persistence of colorblind language from the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) into present immigration debates, exposing that: "Although the explicit language of race was losing legitimacy in the eye of the law as a means of excluding potential citizens, the language of sexual pathology and pollution because increasingly available for circumscribing the characteristics of the ideal citizen" (87). As Somerville makes clear, immigration law deploys

a thoroughly racialized form of queerness even, *and especially*, when it sees itself as deracinated.

The public performance of xenophobic hate has aesthetic value insofar as its logics gain recognition through repetition of a stylized set of formal motifs, namely the concealment of race hatred through the abjection of racialized queerness. Gender hatred—especially that directed at queer gender expression—becomes the scapegoat for nonetheless thoroughly racialized and sexualized ideas of nationhood itself. As Jessica Chapin explains, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo establishes the violent oppositions of "capital/labor, mind/body, cleanliness/dirt, white/brown, reason/instinct, First World/Third World, progress/backwardness, order/chaos, closed/open, and male/female" (409). The online flames anxiously rehearse these false binaries at every turn, notably shifting overt racism to misogyny and transphobia. In another message, "Bryan Prince" digitally shouts: "You fucking anti-American CUNT!!!! I hope you die the worse [sic] death possible you horrible, disgraceful BITCH! GET THE FUCK OUT OF THIS COUNTRY YOU WHORE!!!!" Here, the death threats seem entirely unrelated to EDT's work on the tool as such; instead, Prince's hatred, conceived in strictly gendered and sexualized terms, turns on his imagination of a non-conforming, impure, hypersexualized female body.

Figuring Mexico/U.S. relations with violent metaphors of penetration at once marks Mexico with the feminine term and the threat of masculine aggression or border transgression metaphorized as sexual violation. These homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic anxieties expressed in sexual terms recast the U.S. as "victim" of unwanted incursions despite its histories of violently seizing Mexican land. U.S. neoliberal policy colludes in global racial capitalism's ongoing legacies of imperialism, annexation, slavery,

and genocide. In these responses, race hatred takes one form as sexual violence, which the digital space of "Flames" captures as part of what Cárdenas calls its "long history of radical transparency" (*Transreal Blog*). Extremist reactions to TBT, which view it as a concretized event in need of legal policing and control, expose the persistence of overt racism during a supposedly post-racial era in which the election of the nation's first Black president and the pervasiveness of social media both provide fodder for the myth of a deracinated, borderless world.

Act III: Staging Provisional Utopias

By exposing the artistry of power, Electronic Disturbance Theater's *Transborder Immigrant Tool* offers a performance mode I call queer provisionality, which repositions dominant identity in relationship to performance. Following Cathy Cohen, I understand queerness not in strictly identitarian terms along the lines of gender expression and sexual orientation but as a shared relationship to power that creates alternative possibilities for inhabiting space, recognizing deviance as a socially-regulated category with liberatory potential. By imagining otherwise, queer provisionality generates a performance politics that throws into relief the hegemonic aesthetics of material and discursive boundary-building. Poetic visions of utopia meet dystopian material realities of white supremacy, mass detention and incarceration, border surveillance, and domestic hyperpolicing. Queer provisionality characterizes Electronic Disturbance Theater's offering of a performance mode that balances, precisely by clashing, utopian visions of justice with the material weight of real and symbolic borders.

Electronic Disturbance Theater builds its performance around the instability of political and institutional actors, fostering public debate. As a communication device, after

all, the mobile phone amplifies the voices of transmitter and receiver. Based on the 1960s model of the "happening" pioneered by Allan Kaprow, who famously declared that "[e]ven when things have gone 'wrong,' something far more 'right,' more revelatory, has many times emerged" (86), the productivity of provisionality emerges from Kaprow's revolutionizing of the notion of art as a temporal experience open to failure.[145] Extending this trajectory, J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) suggests that failure's resistance to performing within existing models of success actually carves out a space for imagining, and creatively inhabiting, other ways to be in the world. As Halberstam contends, unmastery—as a manifestation of the queer art of failure—refuses legibility within hegemonic frameworks of desire. Understanding the tool as a specifically performance-based mode of queer failure helps unlock the implications of its provisional technology, shifting the conversation from capitalist functionality and productivity to the political work of utopian poetry.

The tool's illegibility *as a provision* must be read in tandem with its illegibility *as queer*. While it may not seem obvious to link queerness and TBT, doing so extends definitions of political activism to digital and fantasy spaces by reconceptualizing assumptions about the body while never simply romanticizing technology—a central intervention of EDT member Micha Cárdenas's critical writings and performance art. Cárdenas's theory of the "transreal" describes an expansive space between fiction and non-fiction, the virtual and the real. Rather than conceiving of digital and fantasy spaces as escapist, the transreal reflects how fantasies shape everyday life, locating possibilities for self-transformation in shifting sites of identity production—a multi-dimensional becoming linked to the figure of the prototype, which Cárdenas defines as being "between a model and

[145] Others have since theorized failure as event. See Marcela Fuentes on the "political efficacy of the non-event" (201).

an actual implementation" ("Becoming Dragon"). A prototype, as a tentative sample, actualizes some of its properties in the process of realizing itself, but remains provisional and subject to change. Building on Cárdenas's important theorization of the transreal, queer provisionality turns the notion of identity-as-process toward hegemonic social actors whose politics often masquerade as fixed, inflexible, and timeless. By provoking the aesthetic strategies of dominant ways of understanding racialization, gender, and sexuality, queer provisionality exposes power as contradictory, unstable, and reactionary to shifting economic conditions and social demands.

The utopian vision of the project's poetry puts pressure on teleological models of change. Yet, short- and long-term strategies remain vital in the struggle for justice: utopian visions of social transformation need not be seen as oppositional to present-based mobilization around reform and resource redistribution. The critical resurgence of utopianism in queer theory counters popular logics of anti-relational hopelessness not tenable for communities mobilizing on the ground to end heteropatriarchal white supremacy's machinations, such as mass deportation, detention, and incarceration.[146] I thus follow Kristie Soares in arguing for the necessity of utopian visions and daily acts of resilience in dialectical relation as a framework for any movement toward transformative politics. As she writes, "thinkers who look at only one half of the equation—either only at resistance or only at creation—are putting queer activism in a precarious place: a nonplace" (122). Soares reads José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) alongside his earlier work, *Disidentifications* (1999), which theorizes how social actors recycle oppressive representational frames as modes of

[146] Queer theory's antirelational turn, which understands queerness in individualistic terms as rejecting the promise of futurity offered by the child, the family, and by extension community networks of support and belonging, is exemplified by Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). For a recent revival of the utopian strand, see José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009).

empowerment in daily struggle and cultural production. Queer provisionality plays on the double meaning of provisional—as an unfinished draft or something in process pending confirmation, but also as something tangible to aid movement through (un)inhabitable geographies *just in case*. Its existence as a prototype holds in tension the notion of the provision, as a form of material or spiritual sustenance to bring with you on a journey, and provisionality, a way of acting in the world toward visions of justice without fixing boundaries on what that can or should look like in the future.

Queer provisionality is both a political tool and performance method situated between the provision and the provisional, the real and the virtual, hypervisibility and illegibility. The distinctively future-oriented reach of provisionality as a utopian gesture meets the materiality of the provision. In negotiating these spaces Electronic Disturbance Theater imagines what it would look like to live in a world where dignity and humanity get counted within the parameters of immigration and human rights discourse; alternative forms of social life have always existed in the face of power's attempt to selectively define humanity. Queer provisionality pushes the boundary of what an ethics of dissent can delineate, gesturing toward a utopian vision of political reality rooted in self-determination. At the same time, by strategically wielding the language of rights (recalling "Migration is a Human Right") queer provisionality understands that agency can circulate within oppressive regimes without being ideologically circumscribed by structural limits. While critiquing the capitalist and globalist logics underlying rights-based discourses, the provision- of provisionality holds in tension the need to navigate within power structures as a matter of survival, not false consciousness.

Aware of the "unique structure of state violence and social emancipation" (Reddy 37), queer provisionality tactically summons the law, as in provisions made to law.[147] However, in presently enacting visions of justice not legible within existing legal and cultural parameters, queer provisionality sees the utopian as a key tool for social change—while remaining attentive to the structurally produced traumas of border violence and policing. The force of Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance lies in its deliberate provocation of the artistry of power, or the aestheticized rehearsal of contradictory political logics as performance. This poetic provocation shifts the terms for understanding performance in relationship to social identities and institutional power; the tool's generative failures expose power's shifting and unstable technologies of coercion and control.

Bridging the significance of both abolitionist artistry and legal reform as part of grassroots movements for social justice, queer provisionality finds spaces to work within the law while challenging its limits. Even though artistic practice sometimes seems extraneous to the daily demands of organizing work, its space to imagine can create material change in the long and ongoing struggle. Both the poetry and the tool itself remain prototypes, models for a more just world around which organizers have been mobilizing for centuries—yet their provisionality manifests real effects. While replacing border violence with border abolition remains an active hope, Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* (2002) reminds us that: "Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about our liberation" (198). Poetry alone cannot change the violent fact of the border, but its *space to imagine* exists alongside on-the-ground

[147] For more on how legal provisions authorize violence, see Chandan Reddy's *Freedom with Violence* (2011). See also Dean Spade's *Normal Life* (2011).

activism. Volunteers at No More Deaths, for example, often draw pictures on their water bottles because people crossing the border understand that the Border Patrol might poison the water, but would not make art. Refusing to either romanticize or minimize the work poetry does in the world, EDT's generative failures remind us that the site of cultural change can never be limited to the legal sphere, for transformational work must dismantle existing legal frameworks rather than recapitulate them. Social action cannot happen only at the level of the law; it must take hold of the powerful ideas that shape perception. Queer networks of creative solidarity concretize alternative visions of reality that sustain social justice struggles.

Epilogue: Sustaining Queer Provisions

An abolitionist ethos, as I have argued, need not be pitted against strategic mobilization within the sphere of politics, despite the fact that legal frameworks often authorize the violent production of disciplined subjects who mirror the hegemonic status quo. Yet, queer theory's anti-disciplinary anarchist refusal of institutional frameworks of legibility and recognition can and does coexist within the very institutions from which most do not have the privilege to claim freedom. Electronic Disturbance Theater's performance mode, what I have termed queer provisionality, reveals the inextricability of practice and theory, and provocatively circles theory back on itself, testing its own limitations against the weight of embodied existence. The *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, in sum, lays bare the possibilities of consciousness-raising art, but also the stakes of theory that stops short of praxis—complicating the opposition between radical paradigm shifts and legal reform.

The *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (proto)typifies queer provisionality's deliberate contradiction as an in/operable tool. Gaining its force from a refusal of binaristic

formulations of instrumental/ornamental, rights/utopia, or effective/expressive, the tool's generative failures open up zones of ambiguity at the crossroads of form and technology. While conversations about technology are often mired in functionality and productivity, EDT's technological short-circuits foreground poetry *as the productive technology*. Instead of staging its intervention in hypothetical desert-crossing, the performance makes visible the artistry of power. As a result, the tool challenges immigration and human rights discourses without posing a solution that ventriloquizes the voices of migrant communities.

Capturing the production of bellicose nationalism in an archive of legal charges, FBI investigations, online comment forums, and viral media frenzy, Electronic Disturbance Theater activates as a political space of possibility something new: queer provisionality makes room for abolitionist demands and passionate dialogue in its generative, while dangerous, illegibility within teleological models of art and activism. Instead, it sees digital and imaginative spaces as vital material realities. The poetic texture of the provision cleaved to the staging of public debate locates the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* in multiple spaces of border- and reality-crossing. Utopian visions of global fellowship encounter archives of digitized hate, but EDT holds out hope as/for transformation: the dissolution of il/legality that frames discourses on migration. Ultimately, the media uproar surrounding the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* points to the inextricability of poetry from policy, art from activism.



Figure 1. The *Transborder Immigrant Tool*'s compass rose provides directions to a Water Station Inc. water cache in the Anza-Borrego Desert. The screenshot is captured from the same Nokia e71 mobile phone featured here. Photograph by Brett Stalbaum. Image courtesy of the artist.

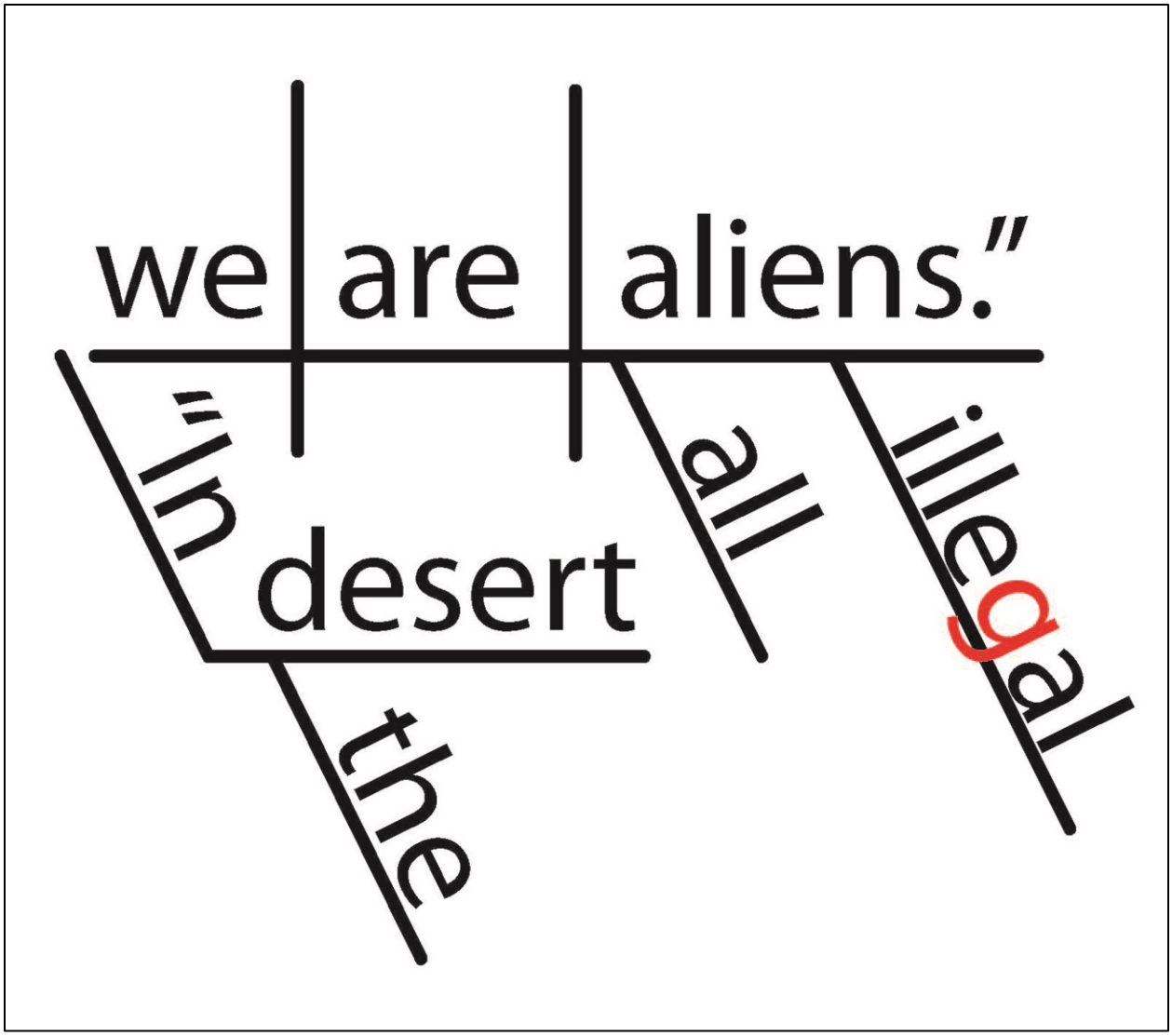


Figure 2. Conceptual poem, following Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, by Amy Sara Carroll. Image courtesy of the artist.

Epilogue

Concrete Utopias in Josefina Báez's *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing*

> *It is not enough to focus our energies on dismantling the systems of oppression, we must concurrently build ways of life rooted in freedom.*
>
> *—Luam Kidane and Hakima Abbas*

> *The struggle is inner: Chicano,* indio*, American Indian,* mojado*,* mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.*
>
> *—Gloria Anzaldúa*

Amidst dystopian realities, Black and Latin@ performance literature contends with the structural traumas of global racial capital to forge queer networks of creative solidarity that imagine and inhabit a livable social world. Against the colonialist imposition of borders, nations, binaries, walls, and cages, utopian visions activate the abolitionist demands of social actors who seek the dissolution of oppressive institutions. Throughout this dissertation, I have explored how performance texts provide a vital space for the actualization of alternative forms of collective sociality. While no doubt cultural producers from other communities across the globe materialize utopian visions rooted in shared histories of systemic trauma, I have chosen my parameters based on the theoretical trajectory of Black Queer Studies, which brings a necessary analysis to bear on the urgency of justice in the present U.S. context that shapes the social location of these pages. Grounded in Black and Chicana feminisms, my relational ethnic studies project follows this trajectory by reading those feminisms in motion,

from performance art along the Mexico/U.S. border to Afrodiasporic social formations to Afro Latin@ poetics and politics. The texts assembled here expose the shifting, interarticulated, and porous boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation—as poets, playwrights, theatre artists, organizers, and artivists wrest hope back from its post-Civil Rights political incorporation. In the face of bleak social realities, hopefulness animates this project—because an analysis that produces hopelessness leaves us in that other utopia, *no-place*.

I now turn to what writer, performer, and the founder and director of Latinarte/Ay Ombe Theatre Josefina Báez calls "that very concrete utopia," a performance space about process and provisionality, about complex emotional range and fluctuating meanings. Báez's creative innovation of concrete utopias reaffirms that performance practices do not model a utopian future but actually create the conditions in which liberatory social relations become possible. I thus ground my use of utopia in activist, academic, and artistic sites such as the theatre, the classroom, and the performance workshop structure, all of which bring together embodied identities, historical legacies, and justice movements, enabling imaginative visions of collective sociality and healing.

In *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* (2013), Báez carves out a concrete utopia: world citizenship that does not ignore the material violences and realities of the border. The title itself of her performance text multiplies interpretive possibilities through its selective capitalization, as "Comrade" and "Bliss" loom larger than "ain't playing," potentially a whisper, command, or reprimand. By juxtaposing politicized pleasure (*Comrade, Bliss*…) and its negation (…*ain't playing*), Báez captures the generative tension of bringing together utopia and trauma as a performance mode. Critiquing permutations of imperialist machinery in contemporary discourses of globalization that seek to erase specific sites of diasporic

memory and practice under the banner of universalism, Báez links her utopian imagination of global fellowship to shared histories of struggle. The transcendence of borders and bellicose nationalism need not slide into power-evasive strategies of liberal humanism. Báez thus creates what I have described as *traumatic utopia*, or a lived utopian imagination rooted in cultural memories of both possibility and pain. Globalist discourses contrive the advent of Internet culture and social media as bridging national divides. In stark contrast, Báez's work makes visible the reterritorialization and colonization of virtual and real world spaces, deconstructing the mythology of a borderless world by critiquing uneven globalization, or exploitative and profit-driven flows of capital, labor, resources, and people across borders. Her own experiences in La Romana, Dominican Republic lend weight to her incisive criticism of the tourism industry in particular—insisting on the personal as a building block for social change. Bridging the need for creation and critique, traumatic utopias dwell in the tension between hope and its political co-optation. Globalist discourses of a borderless world that perpetuate injustices meet abolitionist calls for a very different kind of border crossing, one predicated on non-hierarchical relationality.

Circulating between La Romana and New York City, *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* merges the individual and collective through a transnational politics of hopefulness. Urayoán Noel argues that Báez's work challenges the notion of *Latinidad* as being shaped only by conflict, chaos, and crisis,[148] instead tuning in to a time outside of time, an "antimatter" that matters, all the while refusing to negate the political clock and its effects on identity.[149] In

[148] For more on *Latinidad*, and the vast social histories it represents, see Rivera-Servera, particularly 23–24.

[149] Noel argues that "Báez points to a liminal community, beyond the opposition between liminality and communitas famously postulated by anthropologist Victor Turner. Far from the geographical

this no-placeness of antimatter—in the elasticity of an "outside" time—Báez's work critiques globalization's attempts to erase the colonialist conditions of its production, while holding close the utopian reach of a *Latinidad* not constricted by nationhood, echoing Rivera-Servera's positing of "the circulation of hope as a political praxis of queer *latinidad* " (99). Despite its political incorporation to perpetuate (neo)liberal progress narratives—the utopian register of hope, born out of struggle, provides a vital form of art and activism.

The preface to *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* opens with the phrase "Grammatically incorrect," which refers both to her play on form and the cultural grammars that silence frank conversations about identity and embodiment.[150] Báez then rehearses a deliberately understated intervention and assessment of the work: "Full of Clichés." Possibly referencing the repeated motif of silence as bliss, she also riffs on the tired phrase "silence is golden" to create textured encounters with language that refuse categorization: "All or none of the above." She then describes the work as: "Personal. Subjective. Limited. Mere propaganda," charges often assigned to texts existing at the critical intersection of personal experiences with and systematic analyses of oppression. She ironically nods to multiculturalist discourses that commoditize and minimize difference: "Commodity from the margin,/ or the phrase politically correct at the time." Against these logics, she reclaims the space of the personal as a necessary framework for theorizing, refusing the reduction of power to a totalizing force that wholly speaks us into being: "Subjectivity centered." She concludes the preface with a

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border, Báez recasts the communal as liminal, at the limit of print and digital archives, in the valences of antimatter" (879).

[150] I have omitted parenthetical citations in all instances since Báez's performance text does not have page numbers.

quotation from her mother, Luz Maria Pérez vda. Báez, emphasizing the feminist weight of generational storytelling and wisdom to Afro Latin@ diasporic performance traditions.[151]

While prioritizing how systemic forces produce subjectivity often minimizes if not erases individual agency, Báez's work testifies to, in the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, the power of the inner life to reshape the "outer terrains" (109), boldly refusing shadow projections of difference:

> Yes, yes like everybody else,
> I am from where I was born.
> I am from where I am right now.
> I am from all the places that I have been.
> I am from all the places that I will be.
> But above all, I am that place gathering
> Selected, subjective poetry
> on my own trail.
> I am that I am.

Here, the repetition of the first-person "I" amasses into a speech act that in its tautological affirmation shuns negation: "I am that I am." Empowered by the everyday conjuration of self through poetry, Báez's work lays down building blocks for a utopian vision inspired by two competing spiritual forces in the text, the red and blue angels. While the red angel is marked by the fury of traumatic pasts, like the White Light Spirit/Deola in *White Chocolate for My Father* (explored in Chapter 1), the blue angel serves as a spiritual guide for the present (much like the Red Light Spirit/Radio of Carlos's ensemble piece). Báez embodies the blue angel near the end of the text, but she has "talked more than what [she has] done,"

[151] While it has fallen beyond the scope of this dissertation to more adequately address the specificity of Afro Latin@ experiences and identities in the United States, much work remains to be done in this direction. For an excellent introduction, see *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (2010), edited by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores.

summoning the necessity of action. It is the red angels, with "halos … stained … Red colored now" who signal bloodshed and trauma but are "calling up the best in you."[152]

Báez also mobilizes color imagery to critique the racial order, or "Life's kindergarten," where Greed "will bond colors tight." As Báez writes: "In the self-proclaimed developed groups,/ Supremacy now is dictated by a pale-color./ Other kindergartens will follow/ and other colors will do the same." The speaker's critique of white supremacy and the color caste becomes central to her imagination of another world, a utopian vision: "I might also have that purple crayon,/ as Harold./ or I simply opened that door titled/ potentiality." Her "blue angel code-switches from language to/ language; from dimension to dimension./ No translation. No passport." Báez thus imagines what global citizenship could look like while critiquing uneven globalization in the present:

> Personal. Local.
> Now magnified globally.
> WWW.
> For some. By some.
> Just one big nation?

Condemning how the tourism industry reduces "tradition" to a static past—"Framed custom. Framed lore"—rather than an actively negotiated and dynamic present, *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* exists in multiple temporal frames: "Isn't tradition a live organism that includes all/ times, specially the present?" Social histories breathing in the current moment contend and compete with the toxic now of political realities in which "bliss ain't playing." Báez's work, in line with performance literature's emphasis on process, constantly engages in shaping and reshaping tradition, creating palimpsest narratives of both spectral and spectacular histories.

[152] I thank my student Olivia E. Anderson for her insightful analysis of how the red angels signal trauma, which can be mobilized with urgency toward political action.

The playful punctuation about which Jennifer DeVere Brody writes, and discussed in Chapter 2, formally mirrors this focus on process. Báez often delays the period on a sentence by setting it apart from the end of a line. In so doing, she leaves a thought open, even and especially one about the imagination of a utopia: "'The real dream' ./ Another title." She writes about life as a sentence we write, not just written on by culture, opening up space for her utopian conjuring of social justice at the heart of the text:

> Love will decide dialogues for the known
> urgency.
> Emergency rooms will flourish worldwide:
> with rooms to be hugged,
> rooms to listen and be listened to;
> and many other goodies that will not require
> money, stocks, credit cards, cellular phones or
> insurance, neither certification or diplomas.

This unfolds Báez's utopia at which she anticipates some will scoff—in particular, those who feel that we can only hope for a fleeting glimpse or sideways recognition of our own embeddedness in power structures. Báez makes possible the expression of another reality by exposing the performance of power's contradictory logics, its artistry:

> I am hardly laughing.
> This is a sound suggestion.
> Laugh. Laugh.
> You, better than anybody else,
> know their real motive, agenda as well as their
> good cop-bad cop rosters, casting and
> performance.

While the artistry of power shapes reality "Beyond borders. Catered to created market," Báez offers an antidote to this commodified product with the force of her own anti-capitalist, anti-elitist vision of a borderless world: a politics of utopia grounded in "Emergency rooms" designated for healing ("rooms to be hugged") and sharing stories ("rooms to listen and be listened to"). The work of Báez, like the other playwrights and performance artists explored

throughout this dissertation, reconciles trauma and utopia to move from individual evasion or disavowal to collective accountability: building an infrastructure of revolutionary listening, loving, and healing from the traumatic site of "known urgency." By refusing a politics of hopelessness, Báez finds possibilities for reclamation, reconstitution, and justice. This justice becomes possible in but cannot be limited to the sphere of performance, falling to culture more broadly: the "seed and blossom/ of my own revolution" where "Contradictions [are] played out/ not denied ." In that gap between word and punctuation—the space of action—we must move from utopian dreams to creation.

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