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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

In A Field of Static:
Black Feminism in Eclipse

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Culture and Theory

by

James Bliss

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Jared Sexton, Chair
Associate Professor Sora Han
Professor Rei Terada

2021

Judge us with empathy for we were (are) idealists
and sometimes we're young and foolish.

Afeni Shakur

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

In A Field of Static:
Black Feminism in Eclipse

By

James Bliss

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Theory

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Professor Jared Sexton, Chair

In a Field of Static examines the debates that shaped contemporary critical theory as an interconnected series of missed encounters with Black feminist theorizing. Turning on a phrase from Hortense Spillers, it remains necessary for practitioners interested in Black women's literary, political, and social texts to 'clear the field of static.' *In a Field of Static* offers an account of the ongoing ways critical theory eclipses Black feminist theorizing, a history of the critical debates that have shaped Black feminism's presence in the academy, and a feminist critique of the racial and gender politics of field formation. The first chapter tracks the early itineraries of 'theory' in the US academy, elaborating how 'theory' came to name a specific set of critical practices and how Black feminism was constructed outside of and opposed to the theoretical. The second chapter is framed around the prison writings of Assata Shakur, her incarceration in a men's prison, and her denied appeals to be incarcerated in a women's facility. Within those stories, the chapter explores Hortense Spillers' theorization of 'ungendering' as a form of originary positivity, rather than the loss of gender. The third chapter offers a reading of the spatial politics of Black feminist theorizing to examine recent critiques of intersectionality produced under the heading of "assemblage theory." Intervening in these critiques of intersectionality, the article traces alternative theorizations of spatiality and

subjectivity internal to Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, extending them through Hortense Spillers's theorization of the interstice as the nonsite of the Black female subject. The fourth chapter turns on the limits of narrativity, and how Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur constructed life narratives in the face of a state violence whose weapons included narrative. The chapter tracks how a feminist Black radicalism emerges within Black revolutionary formations in the 1970s. The final chapter explores the Black subject in Lee Edelman's queer negativity as both absent from and productive of its most radical critiques of futurity. The chapter elaborates a different queer negativity within the tradition of Black feminist theorizing.

INTRODUCTION:

A Field of Static

And so my idea was to try to generate a discourse, or a vocabulary that would not just make it desirable, but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation. And that is a theoretical conversation about any number of things but one of the things is certainly the feminist project. I had to write a piece called "Interstices ..." for a feminist conference at Barnard College in 1982. I was supposed to talk about black women, the sexuality of black women. And I thought, you know what, before I can get to the subject of the sexuality of black women I didn't see a vocabulary that would make it possible to entertain the sexuality of black women in any way that was other than traumatic. Before you could have a conversation about sexuality of black women you had to clear the static, clear the field of static.

Hortense Spillers, "Whatcha Gonna Do?"¹

Responding to the emerging status of "the community of Black women writing in the United States" as a "vivid new fact of national life," Hortense Spillers notes, in her Afterword to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985), that a tradition "arises not only because there are writers there to make it, but also because there is a strategic audience of heightened consciousness prepared to read and interpret the work as such." "They are not," Spillers adds, "like objects of nature, here to stay, but survive as *created social events* only to the extent that an audience cares to intersect them."² This insight arrives at a moment when much of the work of a recently-dubbed "Black feminist criticism" was recovering and recuperating the works of "lost" Black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset as well as discovering and producing first readings of emerging writers like Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Alice Walker. Spillers' insight holds new meaning today as much of this Black feminist criticism is itself long lost, out of print, and un(der)studied, and the task at hand is the recovery and the study of Black feminist theorizing itself.

Part of this work of recovery is to recover Black feminism from its own academic reception. That is, how an emerging Black feminist criticism was filtered through a critical theory both reliant

¹ Spillers et al., 300-301.

² Spillers (1985) 249, 250.

upon and resistant to Black feminism. To date, precious little has been said about the coterminous rise of Black feminism and of ‘theory’ in the US academy. Half a century in the wake of the “structuralist controversy,” theorists outside of Black studies have yet to engage with “theory” and Black feminism as deeply related. Indeed, when the relation does appear or is theorized, the traditions are treated either as antagonists, as non-relational, or as subordinate and superordinate, in which Black feminism is derivative of critical theory. This reception has shaped our present understanding of both Black feminism and critical theory. What is at stake in rendering the conflict as the absence of relation rather than the very condition of possibility for relation?

In a Field of Static is an argument that neither critical theory nor black feminism can be understood outside of their relation to one another, and that we are faced not with the challenge of subsuming Black feminism within the project of critical theory, but of understanding critical theory as embedded within Black feminism. The history and present of critical theory is structured by a missed encounter with Black feminism; that is, it is structured by its resistance to the longevity, depth, and complexity of the tradition of Black women writing. The work of the book, then, is a close reading of Black feminist theorizing that is also a recovery of Black feminist theorizing, and that is, in a further turn of the screw, a recovery of critical theory and the field formations within cultural studies that arise out of it. Recovering critical theory requires a fundamental revision and decentering of critical theory by way of Black feminism.

Methodologically, *In a Field of Static* is a meta-commentary on field formation, a study of the necessary “absence” around which these formations of critical and cultural theory cohere. By and large, rather than attempting surveys of each field, my critique proceeds by way of close readings of individual authors emblematic, if not unproblematically representative, of the formations. This close reading across the intellectual itineraries of the authors opens space for symptomatic readings, attuned to different forms of “discursive static” (Spillers) that are produced by missed encounters with Black

feminism. Part of the task of the work, then, is an exploration of the psychic life of field formation. Each chapter is structured around both a field and a concept: post-structuralism and “theory,” white feminism and relationality, transnational feminism and citizenship, diasporic queer theory and sovereignty, assemblage theory and intersectionality, contemporary Marxism and identity politics, and queer negativity and the utopian. My critical operation is an experiment in thinking *with* Black feminism; that is, a speculative practice *enabled* by Black feminism rather than an attempt to systematize or instrumentalize Black feminism as a practice of reading.

In order to elaborate Black feminism in this sense, I produce an archive and genealogy of Black feminist theorizing that reads both broadly and deeply within the tradition. To this end, I read a number of Black feminist writers, some forgotten, others misunderstood, and some awaiting critical engagement: Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ann duCille, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Joy James, Kara Keeling, Audre Lorde, Deborah McDowell, Toni Morrison, and Barbara Smith. Throughout, the dissertation is an engagement with the theoretical trajectory of Hortense Spillers as a figure and thinker whose work has inhabited this shared terrain for nearly half a century. Throughout, my emphasis is on those elements of Black feminist theorizing that have historically been occluded from scholarly study. Rather than read Black feminism as an expression of concreteness, an insistence on the agential capacity of the self-contained subject, its body and consciousness, my analysis elaborates elements of the negative and the non-relational, the insovereign, abstract, and impractical.

At the same time, I insist that Black feminism is irreducible to this negative archive, and irreducible to any archive and any genealogy. The book resists a narrow conceptual definition of Black feminism that would treat the field as separate or separable from those “universal” concerns of critical theory and continental philosophy. If Black feminism is repressed in critical theory, it isn’t solely some truth or fact of “the Black woman” that is repressed and must or can be recovered. Repressed are the

questions Black feminism makes possible and that *must* be repressed for critical theories to cohere into field formations. The critical task here is to approach the subject of Black feminism not as a known or knowable object but as generative capacity, as an absent core that produces questions toward the foundations of subjectivity in the (after-)life of slavery. The work is to read critical theory as an effect of what Toni Morrison has termed the “Africanist presence” in Western thought, to inhabit a field of static and explore its potential for the practice of thought. The work of recovery is never the end of the story. It is never simply about restoring some missing content, but about discovering what questions are made possible when we allow our critical and theoretical work to be elaborated by Black feminism.

Now, I want to avoid an understanding of Black feminism as simply an academic (inter)discipline or party program, but as a necessarily heterogeneous and heteroglot assemblage of interventions resistant to systemization. What concerns me in bringing together a diffuse group of authors and texts is not, then, a shared set of avowed theoretical positions or methodological or epistemological assumptions. The thread that connects Black feminist critical theorists within this study is their capacity to open up new fields of thought at “the nexus of violence and sexuality.”³ What I refer to as Black feminist theorizing is, perhaps, a shared insistence that “there is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women.”⁴

Practitioners in all fields of the contemporary humanities and social sciences engage with Black feminisms, articulate a host of Black feminist positions, and have produced a vast and robust body of scholarship. I began this project in what Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012) called a “post-Black feminist era.” An era during which the debates produced by, and in some sense productive of, Black feminist

³ Sexton (2008) 9.

⁴ Spillers et al., 308.

literary theorizing had been “folded into the cultural imperatives and interpretive strategies of a new millennium in which black women and *their* literature are no longer in vogue in the academy or anywhere else.”⁵ Indeed, the combined forces of citational absence, practices of hiring and promotion, and restricted access to modes of publication and distribution, and thereby to larger structures of intelligibility within the academy, had helped prevent Black feminist theorizing from being recognized *as theory*.⁶ Further, institutional antipathy and other formal and informal barriers toward wider spread training prevented a broader group of scholars from engaging with Black feminist theorizing.⁷ As I complete this iteration of this project, Black feminism has re-emerged across the institutional forms meant to signify importance in the academy. That is, in the outputs of journals and academic presses, conferences and symposia, job postings and calls from funding agencies. As grassroots political movements under the heading of Black Lives Matter emerged with calls for justice, universities responded with calls for papers.

Historically, Black feminism’s structural critiques of the apparatus within which academic work (or, “knowledge production”) takes place has been recodified as an instantiation of the resistance to theory—where “theory” is itself reduced to a handful of post-structuralist projects.⁸ Here we return, again, unhappily, to a debate over “theory” and “practice” that, on Deborah McDowell’s reading, “is often racialized and gendered, especially in discussion of black feminist thinking, which, with precious few exceptions, gets constructed as ‘practice’ or ‘politics,’ the negative obverse of ‘theory.’”⁹ Little changes when the theoretical terrain moves from the linguistic turn to the affective turn, except that affect theorists inherit a generation of slipshod attempts by Euro-American theorists to exorcise their

⁵ duCille (2010) 33.

⁶ Carole Boyce Davies notes on this score that “many scholars in the academy [still] participate in the devaluing of Black women who are writers and theorists by not recognizing them or engaging their ideas” (55).

⁷ See McKay (1998) and Painter (2006).

⁸ McDowell (1995) 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

racial demons by way of scattered engagements with Black women's literatures.¹⁰ Beyond this living legacy, I would note that many of the earliest champions of sustaining critical attention to the emotional, the erotic, the sensual, and the body were Black feminist critics.¹¹ But, again, Black feminist theorizing, for a variety of reasons, has not been seen as a set of potentially orienting theoretical interventions.

My interest here is not to deride affect theory so much as to offer a different orientation for thinking both sexuality and affect deriving from Black feminist theorizing. Central here is a problematization of the relation between Blackness and "gender" and "sexuality," and, indeed, a re-imagining of the relation between Blackness and "race" itself. That is, rather than imagine Blackness as a sociological or identity category distinct from gender and sexuality, it might be approached as "a production of bodily (not biological) difference at the nexus of violence and sexuality."¹² That is, Blackness names the relations of force of "New World" chattel slavery, not a form of social or cultural particularity. In this context, Blackness functions as a (non-)site within which "gender and sexuality lose their coherence as normative categories."¹³ To rest on this point, we might follow Joan Scott's insight that "gender" names "not the assignment of roles to physically different bodies, but the attribution of meaning to something that always eludes definition."¹⁴ And, we may follow Tim Dean's formulation of "sexuality," when understood in terms of orientation and/as identity, as "[conforming] to the processes of normalization that regulate desire into social categories for disciplinary purposes."¹⁵ On this reading both gender and sexuality refer not to pre-existing realities but to social and political tactics for ordering bodies and desires that always already exceed categorization. It is in this sense that categories "lose their coherence." Blackness disrupts the capacity for these categories to form a body.

¹⁰ For a rich account of this, one can see Deborah McDowell's work cited above or Abel (1993).

¹¹ Christian (2007) offers a prescient reading of this phenomenon.

¹² Sexton (2008) 9.

¹³ Jackson (2011) 359.

¹⁴ Scott (2011) 6.

¹⁵ Dean (2003) 247.

What is a fraught and incomplete process for all others is a structural prohibition for Blacks. It is in this sense that we can read Roderick Ferguson's observation that Blacks might be "heterosexual [or homosexual] but never *heteronormative* [or *homonormative*]."¹⁶ This is all to say that Blackness is ontologically *prior to* and *productive of* the back-slashed pairing "gender/sexuality." This is not to reproduce an argument about the political *priority* of "race" over and against gender and sexuality, but argue that to attempt an analytic of Blackness must always also be to attempt to account for the categories made possible as the shadow of Blackness. This has long been precisely the project of a radical Black feminism.

This distinction raises two important issues. First, how do we give an account of Black suffering without recourse to some common humanity into which Black subjects ought (to want) to be incorporated? Theorizing social relations in their totality, beginning from the position of the Black woman, requires theorizing *enslavement* in all of its political-economic and libidinal-economic registers. It requires taking a step back, as theorists, to re-think what we think we mean when we say "slavery" and reckoning with antiblackness as a structuring force in the contemporary world. The work of theorizing sexuality, gender, race, capital, and the unconscious in the modern world, what Eugene Genovese has called "the world the slaves made," might best be engaged from this theoretical vantage in Black feminism. As noted above, Blackness arises in the historical context of chattel slavery, and it is this moment which also produces the concept of the Human as a universal and universalizable category. Indeed, Blackness names, negatively, the capacity for categorization. Both the universal and the particular, as qualities or capacities of the Human subject, are founded upon the exclusion of Blackness from the Human project. The historical appearance of the Black *qua* slave is the ontological condition of possibility for the appearance of the (unequally) free Human subject. In a very precise sense, then, "antiblackness" is a synonym for Humanity. "Antiblackness" names the *energy*, or the

¹⁶ Ferguson (2003) 87; emphasis in original.

activity, of Humanity as a social structure. It does not simply name various forms of violence experienced by Blacks, but the violence that *positions* sentient beings outside the realm of the Human.¹⁷

In this context, in which “slavery’s critical agency in Western self-conceptualization[...] is nothing short of foundational” and “the quintessential ‘slave’ is *not* a male, but a female,” we must necessarily rethink how Black feminism interacts with other claims toward understanding social relations in their totality.¹⁸ Put differently, it is not simply that Edelman’s analysis privileges a white gay male rather than some other subject, that it is therefore too “particular” or that it “excludes” other possible subject positions or identity categories. I want to propose here not a difference of degree but of kind. The structural position of the Black woman is not (yet another) particular position, but what Slavoj Žižek calls a *universal singularity*, “a kind of direct short circuit between the singular and the universal, bypassing the particular.”¹⁹ The figure of “Black woman,” as an abstraction that Black women in the world intersect in myriad ways, is a “structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions.”²⁰ This is to say that, following the Combahee River Collective, “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”²¹

Second, how does theorizing from the vantage of Black female subjectivity allow us to think the utopian without being hopelessly beholden to the dictates of hope; without being mired in the eutopian?²² The insistence on the utopian as no-place is an argument against a particular type of incorporation or affiliation. It is also an argument about the persistence of slavery as a structuring

¹⁷ These large claims regarding what Lewis Gordon has called “the antiblack world” gesture toward a different, though related, research agenda in Black studies and the historiography of the Atlantic world with which my present study engages. For works that trace the racial emergence of the Human subject, see, among others, Mills (1997) and da Silva (2007).

¹⁸ Spillers (2003) 17, 215.

¹⁹ Žižek (2008) 17.

²⁰ Wilderson (2010) 58.

²¹ Combahee (1986) 15.

²² An inelegant pun, if there ever was one, but this distinction between the homonyms utopian (no-place) and eutopian (good-place) was an important originary moment for this project (though this program of study was already long in the works). It led me to the question of how Black feminist theorizing might ground a study of groundlessness.

force in the contemporary world. I want to resist an approach, seen all too often, that engages with slavery as a bounded historical event, albeit one that survives as an inheritance or legacy or source of accumulated disadvantages. I am interested in thinking slavery following Jared Sexton's provocation: "But what if slavery does not die, as it were, because it is immortal, but rather because it is non-mortal, because it has *never* lived, at least not in the psychic life of power? What if the source of slavery's longevity is not its resilience in the face of opposition, but the obscurity of its existence? Not the accumulation of its political capital, but the illegibility of its grammar?"²³ Reading slavery in this way demands a critical procedure that can think through "the (il)logic of the 'symptom,'" a symptomatic reading practice attuned to how "an 'inside' materializes in an 'outside' as a specified break in a kinetic relay of movement."²⁴ For Spillers, "slavery... offers an analogous spectacle of successive displacements" to the Freudian symptom, where the task of the critic is "to hear its stutter more clearly."²⁵ (20). Spillers' practice here recalls Derrida's argument that the analysis of "encircling exclusion, of exclusion enclosing what it wants to neutralize or cast out... has *political* pertinence or efficacy only if one articulates" *both* "a historical analysis or description of the elements traditionally filed under the category of the 'political' ...which in general has been done, up till now and so far as I know, following *pre-psychoanalytic* paths and conceptuality," *and* "an analysis that reckons... with the psychoanalytical problematic," by which he means not "any particular doctrinal state of psychoanalysis, to this or that orthodox content, but to a problematic topos that psychoanalysis presents us with." Derrida describes this finally as the need to "*politicize* the topical structure of mourning... through a *psychoanalytical-and-political practice*."²⁶

²³ Sexton (2010) 16; emphasis in original.

²⁴ Spillers (2003) 20.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Derrida (1995) 67; emphasis in original.

My resistance to futurity here, and what guides me in articulating a vision of the utopian as a hope against hope through Black feminist theorizing, follows from rejecting the tacit assumption that the world, as it is, is a fundamentally acceptable place. The desire to “rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment,”²⁷ or the desire named by Audre Lorde “to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it,” is a desire for rupture.²⁸ Regardless of something else beginning, *this* must end. Following Saidiya Hartman, this means “more than the desire for inclusion within the limited set of possibilities that the national project provides” because the social structure’s “inexorable investment in certain notions of the subject and subjection” poisons such emancipatory politics.²⁹ By holding on to a faith in this world, emancipatory politics is saddled with a “language of freedom [that] no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but *the site of the re-elaboration of that condition*, rather than its transformation.”³⁰ Likewise, Sharon Holland offers that “the place of slavery in queer studies work has yet to be reckoned with[...] because the boundary-breaking futurity in which the queer studies finds its subject would balk if such a subject were held to a *transhistorical* vision of time”—a Black temporality, a reproduction without futurity that offers “a radically different text for female empowerment.”³¹

In arguing that any text avails itself to Black feminist critique, I’m following the lead of Black feminist theorizing, of course, but also Black queer theorizing. In her groundbreaking work of scholarly synthesis, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Holland describes this project as occupying the “interstitial and charged space between critical race theory and queer theory,” and attempts an analytic that can function as “the bridge between theories of race and theories of sexuality in all of their diverse complexity.”³² This thinking race, gender, and sexuality as a type of knot composed of indistinct

²⁷ Spillers (2003) 229.

²⁸ Lorde (1980) 13.

²⁹ Hartman and Wilderson (2003) 185.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³¹ Holland (2011) 62; emphasis in original.

³² Holland (2011) 8, 32.

strands has implications for theory as well as for politics. For Kara Keeling, this requires a critical disposition that “understands that the politics thought proper to each are inseparable from those of the other,” that thinks “black politics as queer politics and vice versa.”³³ This is no small order, but it is a persistent theme in Black feminist and queer theorizing, articulated as early as the Combahee River Collective’s “Statement.” Recent work by Cathy Cohen on this score has been instructive as well, in her challenge to practitioners of both queer and critical ethnic studies to think “queer” beyond the real or presumed sexual/gender identity, performance, or practices of particular subjects in an effort to see more clearly how the social logics that structure queer positionality are already at work in the construction of racial Blackness.³⁴

Finally, I follow the insight of Ann duCille, who has argued against the presumption that the object of Black feminist theorizing must always be work by or about Black women. To wit, “it’s time to light out for other territories, because nothing—least of all the fictions of white male authors—should be beyond our reach or ‘shellacked’ against our critical gaze.”³⁵ This paper is also an attempt to shift what it might mean to *do* intersectional analysis, to inhabit the danger zone described by duCille when she observed that “one of the dangers of standing at an intersection[...] is the likelihood of being run over by oncoming traffic.”³⁶ In this way, we court the danger of looking and speaking in several directions at once, without the confidence that one can tell one intersection from another, requiring the will to gamble with (at least) the coherence of subjectivity.

³³ Keeling (2009) 567.

³⁴ Cohen (2012) 128.

³⁵ duCille (2010) 44.

³⁶ duCille (1994) 593.

CHAPTER ONE

In Dubious Battle

One could argue that what most marked, if not marred, black feminist theory during its own short happy life—from its arrival in the academy in the late 1970s to its fall from a tenuous grace in the latter 1990s—was a self-consciousness about itself. I intend the apparent redundancy here: the critical introspection was that intense and all consuming as black feminist theory struggled to define, establish, and assert itself. “Dubious battles” (to riff the title of one of the most heated and infamous debates) raged over what black feminist criticism was and should be; over methodology and philosophy; over theory and practice and the practice of theory; over whether “theory” could legitimately be associated with such sacred identities as “black” and “feminist” or “womanist,” as some insisted; and over who could be entrusted with the sacred task of interpreting what the lesbian theorist Barbara Smith refers to in one of the earliest delineations of a black feminist critical methodology as “the precious materials of Black women’s art.”

Ann DuCille, “The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory”³⁷

[Unlike] philosophy, criticism is in essence a discourse that is supposed to elude systems and bypass logic in order to make brilliantly inspired and singular insights that, in retrospect, cannot be made any other way and hence not be proven to anyone’s satisfaction. Criticism has always been a blend of authoritarianism (unwarranted self-assertion) and the haphazard (the unaccountable, the surprising). It has always snatched insight (made brilliant connections no one else would ordinarily see) at the expense of misrepresentations and oversights (misreading). . . . Paul de Man himself summed this up when he said that in order to see something has to be overlooked, as if insight were always beclouded by blindness.

Herman Rapaport, *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse*³⁸

In the late 1980s a series of critical exchanges put under scrutiny the role of “theory” in Black literary criticism. Within the larger context of the Theory Wars, these exchanges did more than stake out positions on the practice of Black literary criticism, canon-formation, and the institutional lives of literary study, they threw into crisis the relationship between Black feminism and the practice of theory as such. Alternatively termed “a revolution that should have been televised,” a “painful exchange,” and “one of the most heated and infamous debates” of Black feminist theory’s “short happy life,” the critical exchange in *New Literary History* between Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston A. Baker, Jr. shaped the institutional lives and theoretical ambitions of Black literary study for generations.³⁹ The sides staked out in the *New Literary History* debate were hardened two years later when Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” appeared in the collection *Gender and Theory: Dialogues*

³⁷ duCille (2010) 33.

³⁸ Rapaport (2001) 17.

³⁹ Holland, 327; Griffin (2011), 1516; duCille, 33.

on *Feminist Criticism* with a rebuttal by Michael Awkward. These exchanges revealed and were shaped by fissures internal and external to the project of Black literary and cultural studies, fissures that cut across the humanities during rise of neoliberalism and the perpetual crisis of the humanities. I am interested in how, in the wake of these debates, one's orientation towards or engagement with the constellation of interventions—intellectual, methodological, theoretical, aesthetic, institutional, ethical, political—called Black feminist theorizing became reduced to being either for or against something called “Theory.”

In Sharon Holland's words, the debate between Joyce and Gates & Baker constituted “evidence of the continuing unspeakable gender divide in the critical camps of mainstream African-American criticism and its black feminist counterpart.”⁴⁰ Holland adds that, more broadly, this “debate between scholars is not necessarily over what kind of theory or even social practice is at stake in the production of criticism, but which voice—male or female—is allowed to articulate which practices or theories are viable for” the enterprise of African-American criticism.⁴¹ This is not to say that the debates I track are reducible to a critical “battle of the sexes.” In her own analysis of the Joyce/Gates & Baker debates, Deborah McDowell places the emphasis on the question of race's status as either pure signifier or concrete reality in Black literary criticism. McDowell offers further that this “schism has been oversimplified and exaggerated and construed, all too often, as a gender war over the uses and abuses of ‘theory’... with black men on the side of ‘theory’ and black women against it.”⁴² Indeed, as Holland observes, Joyce's critical position doesn't so much offer a “Black feminist” alternative to Gates and Baker as much as a “model for theorizing about ‘Black American literature’ [that] is based on the experience of black men in contact with white America.”⁴³ But this is all to say that the gender

⁴⁰ Holland (2000) 328.

⁴¹ Holland (2000) 329.

⁴² McDowell (1995) 165.

⁴³ Holland (2000) 328.

problematic simply appears in different ways in these debates, not that it disappears. It requires attention be paid to Black feminists' different engagements with Black nationalism, and it also requires attention be paid conflicts between feminist critics across the color line (Black/non-Black rather than Black/white).

I want to claim this expansiveness as a valid terrain for Black feminist theorizing. Black feminist theorizing is enabled by a willful abrogation of generic boundaries, a cultivated transgressivity (and sometimes aggressivity) towards borders. Here I follow Hortense Spillers' observation that "this community of cultural workers has no simple centrality inasmuch as it is comprised of fiction writers as well as writers of criticism, who are also teachers of literature, with all the descriptive categories occasionally overlapping."⁴⁴ And I want to insist on the political and ethical dimension of these critical choices, and the critical choice to work from the vantage of the Black feminine/feminist subject. For all of their differences, the Black feminist critics discussed below share an insistence in working from or through that position. And, again, for all of their differences, the critics on the other side of these debates share an antipathy to this position and articulate it through the language of "theory."⁴⁵

Theory Wars

"It was in the late 1960s when the symptoms, heretofore fugitive and for the most part manageable, could no longer be ignored."⁴⁶

Theory emerged retroactively, with the afterwardsness of a traumatic event. The stories we tell about the career of theory, our versions of a little bit of history, will always reach just a little further

⁴⁴ Spillers (1985c) 249.

⁴⁵ To be clear, "Theory" names too many traditions for any one study of the intellectual history of the past century. The present work will engage with several, related traditions, but makes no effort to be comprehensive.

⁴⁶ Bruss 3.

back. The event of the October 1966 Johns Hopkins conference, “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” names one impression point linking several histories. Reflecting on that event in the Spring of 1987, at a colloquium marking the establishment of the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California, Irvine, Jacques Derrida would offer, “What is now called ‘theory’ in this country may even have an essential link with what is said to have happened there in 1966.” But, if something happened there, “this something only came to light afterwards and is still becoming more and more clear today. But what is also clear is that nobody, either among the participants or close to them, had any thematic awareness of the event; nobody could take its measure and above all nobody could have or would have dared to program it, to announce or present it as such an event.”⁴⁷ Later that year, Derrida became a permanent guest at Irvine, raising the institution’s profile, and following his longtime friend, J. Hillis Miller.

Miller was on the faculty at Hopkins during the 1966 conference, but he missed Derrida’s paper, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences.” “I met my colleague and friend Georges Poulet in the Hopkins quadrangle just after Derrida’s lecture. Poulet told me that Derrida’s lecture was opposed to everything to which his own work (that is, Poulet’s) was committed. [...] Nevertheless, said Poulet, it was the most important lecture of the conference by far.... I have always remembered Poulet’s insight and generosity in saying that. He was right. Derrida’s lecture marked the moment of so-called Deconstruction into U.S. intellectual life.”⁴⁸ Hopkins had been so pleasurably shaken by Derrida that he was invited to teach a course for two months in the Fall of 1968. Miller attended the seminar, on Plato and Mallarmé (later published as “The Double Session”), and struck up a friendship that lasted across Hopkins, Yale, and Irvine—“over forty years of

⁴⁷ Derrida (1994), 80. Later in 1987, Derrida would begin a visiting professorship at Irvine, moving on from his long stay at Yale. His invitation to Irvine came courtesy of the outgoing president of the Modern Language Association and his longtime friend, J. Hillis Miller, who was recruited away from Yale by Murray Kreiger (who founded the Critical Theory Institute at Irvine) and Executive Vice Chancellor Bill Lillyman.

⁴⁸ Miller (2009), 1-2.

unclouded friendship.”⁴⁹ But also during that Fall, Derrida toured American campuses from Chicago to Buffalo, Providence to Washington, D.C. In his words, the “exhibitions of a traveling salesman.”⁵⁰ The 1966 conference hadn’t been Derrida’s first visit to the United States, but 1966 marked a new relationship to America and the American academy. And the lines of exchange moved in both directions. The year after the Hopkins conference, Derrida gave in Paris the first of what became yearly seminars for graduate students from Hopkins and Cornell. The students who traveled to Paris included prominent future deconstructionists and early translators of Derrida. This is all to say that the *event* of the Hopkins conference, and the trajectory of what became Deconstruction in America, was embedded in the transnational infrastructures of a web of elite American universities. Friendships were buttressed by the largesse of benevolent administrators.⁵¹ The Humanities Center at Hopkins was only one site of many, as universities worked through the relationships between, in Jonathan Culler’s words, “criticism and a pedagogy attempting to cope with America’s unparalleled experiment in mass higher education.”⁵²

The crisis of the humanities was already in full swing by the 1960s. The mid-century iterations of Black freedom struggle had initiated crises of institutionality that cannot be summarized here.

⁴⁹ Miller (2009), 2.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Peeters, 202.

⁵¹ The Hopkins conference was the inaugural event of the Humanities Center. The Center was supported in its creation by the president of the University, Milton Eisenhower (brother of the 34th President of the United States), who felt the Humanities had been underserved after years of administrative focus on bolstering the sciences. Eisenhower’s career as a university administrator began as President of Kansas State University in 1943, after stints at the Office of War Information and three months as the director of the War Relocation Authority, where he oversaw the beginning stages of the internment of Japanese Americans in 1942.

In January of 2018, the Humanities Center at Hopkins became The Department of Comparative Thought & Literature. The name means almost-something. In a fashion familiar to many academic units on many campuses, campus leadership had difficulty understanding why the Center continued to exist as itself. The name of the Center also conflicted with the recently established Humanities *Institute*, funded by a multimillion-dollar grant and named for the founder of the Rite Aid chain of drugstores. The Dean who had threatened to shutter the Center, and who oversaw the transition into a Department of Words and Thoughts, was later appointed provost of a major midwestern research university. The press release for her appointment extolled her years of leadership at Hopkins, including fundraising to the tune of three-quarters of a billion dollars. Around the same time, the Critical Theory Institute, founded at Irvine in 1987, was restructured into UCI Critical Theory. The campaign to ‘save’ the Institute, to the extent that there was one, didn’t garner the same media attention as that around the Center at Hopkins. The Institute’s application for renewal was simply denied and it disappeared.

⁵² Culler (1987a), 93.

Suffice to say, the violences underpinning American institutions faced mass opposition and the violences called “legitimacy” were called into question. And this all took place as the social, political, economic, and cultural functions of the university were changing. In a 1971 review essay for *The Georgia Review*, Robert Griffith, then an assistant professor of history at the University of Georgia, characterized the changes in higher education as “a transformation characterized by increased size, complexity and bureaucratic organization.”⁵³ For Griffith, “the great growth in higher education since the second World War has resulted not from the superior wisdom of educational statesmen (it is the peculiar conceit of some educators to confuse virtue and necessity) but rather from two interrelated consequences of the new technology. On the one hand, the gains in productivity resulting from technical innovation have made available increased funds for education; while at the same time the manpower requirements of the new technology have created demands for a highly trained labor force. As a result the new university is most often a large university.”⁵⁴ These new, large universities were flush with the money of Keynesian capitalism during the post-War “boom” of unimpeded American empire. And they were charged with simultaneously producing the skilled workforce needed for an “advanced industrial economy,” and conducting research and development on the modes of industrial automation that would contribute to demolishing the democratic gains of the post-War era beginning in the 1970s.⁵⁵ By the sixties, the mission of “the university” had expanded dramatically.

At the turn of the century a major university centered about the college of arts and sciences, a small graduate program and a few professional schools. Today it resembles a corporate conglomerate with laboratories and institutes, hospitals and clinics, hotels and farms. Universities do research for government and industry, patronize the arts, and manage the big business of college sports. The institutional complexity introduced by these new pursuits balkanizes power, introduces diversity of purpose and necessitates bureaucratic organization. As a consequence the university becomes at once more difficult to govern and less responsive to individual influence.⁵⁶

⁵³ Griffith 57.

⁵⁴ Griffith 57.

⁵⁵ See Noble (1986) and Chomsky (2000).

⁵⁶ Griffith 57.

Within the new university, with its diversity of purpose and complex networks of power, it became more important than ever to define and to claim one's intellectual terrain. The power of individual faculty members became tied to institutions outside the university itself, especially the professional organizations, whose standards became shorthand "best practices" for university administrators tasked with overseeing producers of increasingly specialized knowledge across a range of fields. "The putatively value-free norms of the professions have in turn facilitated the growing commitment of academicians to government and industry. The proliferation of research contracts and consulting fees since the second World War have converted increasing numbers of scholars into auxiliaries of big government and big business."⁵⁷ The dynamics remain familiar today, as so much of the professional lives of the academic workers who produce published research are tied to working with external funding entities.

Writing later in the seventies, Richard Ohmann's *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*, a book-length attempt to digest the previous twenty years of social upheaval, sought the origins of the 'crisis of the humanities' in the structure of the discipline of English. English as an academic field is structured around "the amalgamation of partly contradictory tasks and interests" that shape its academic lifeworld.⁵⁸ American departments of English, "the scholarly heirs of philology, eagerly acquired the remnants of rhetoric, too, and have since counted on these to *secure position* in the university."⁵⁹ As Ohmann puts it, "Students 'need' to be taught composition, and, rather arbitrarily, scholars in literature are the ones thought professionally competent to teach writing."⁶⁰ That is, departments of English formed from the practical need to offer courses in composition. Their connection to particular forms of literary study is a belated one. As the university professionalized,

⁵⁷ Griffith 58.

⁵⁸ Ohmann 242.

⁵⁹ Ohmann 243, emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Ohmann 243.

“language and literature faculty [laid] claim to professional status[...] by joining the bread-and-butter work of teaching freshman English to the scholarly work of literary study.” (In a parallel development, that bread-and-butter work was sourced to academic workers lower in the institution’s rigid hierarchy of status.) Across the early part of the twentieth century, the study of literature became its own profession. The literary critic, who has enjoyed greater or lesser status at different historical moments, now had access to new forms of professional esteem and employment security.⁶¹ Consequently, this new professional had to produce *something*, in or outside the classroom, and the debate over what they produced shaped the Theory Wars.

A decade after Griffith, Jonathan Culler characterized the post-War university as “structured by the conflict between the model of the production of knowledge and the model of the reproduction of culture.”⁶² That is, the humanities could produce specialized knowledges (along the model of the sciences) or produce citizen-subjects inculcated with the values of their national culture. Indeed, they *could* do both. But the conflicts collected under the heading of the Theory Wars, and indeed the bitter exchanges of the late 1980s, were framed neatly (if misleadingly) along these lines.

By the time of the Hopkins conference, the profession of literary study was beginning to change. It was in 1967 that the annual bibliography of the Modern Language Association began to list works in “Literary Criticism and Theory” in their own section. “The number of entries immediately began to swell from a scant two hundred in 1967 to over six hundred in 1975.”⁶³ And the Humanities Center at Hopkins was unique but not alone. By the time the Center had launched a flagship journal, *Glyph*, in 1977, new journals had appeared from departments, programs, and centers across the United States. In *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism*, Elizabeth Bruss (then at

⁶¹ On the status of literary criticism around mid-century, see Bergonzi.

⁶² Culler (1987a), 93.

⁶³ Bruss 3.

Amherst College, she died the year before *Beautiful Theories* was published) laid out what was “suddenly, an Age of Theory.” I quote her here at length.

Even more dramatic perhaps was the massive outpouring of new journals—*Critical Inquiry*, *Diacritics*, *New Literary History*, *Glyph*, *Semiotexte*, *Sub-stance*, *Ideology and Literature*, the *Oxford Literary Review*, *Praxis*, *Poetics*, *Boundary = 2*, *Salamangundi*, *Clio*, *New German Critique*, *Telos*, *Semiotica*—that reserved substantial portions or even the whole of each issue for broad speculative debates and minute studies of individual critical texts. But as significant as the sheer quantity was the quality of these new journals—self-consciously interdisciplinary, often deliberately blurring the boundaries of the political and the aesthetic, and (most notable, against the background of a “perennial English disinclination to use a specialist vocabulary”) almost aggressively extraordinary in their language. The breadth of reference might suggest the rebirth of the encyclopedist or the man of letters, but these new letters were obdurately, forbiddingly opaque. The old dream of a common language had shrunk, in the cooler light of the morning after, to (at best) an antique curiosity or (at worst) a piece of malevolent sophistry—“The terrorism of plain language, that mythical weapon of those who prefer the comforting repetition of the ideological caress,” as Stephen Heath put it. With no language capable of claiming the loyalty of all classes and professions, and with the academy itself divided into contending and mutually unintelligible research traditions, the only hope seemed to lie in strenuous invention and artifice. Hence the distinctively synthetic cast to this new theoretical writing, its penchant for the chemical and the mechanical, for terms derived from cybernetics, economics, or topology rather than the homelier idioms of horticulture and handicraft. Look where one would, it was becoming increasingly difficult to find anything that seemed scaled to fit the individual, any mirror that gave back the image of a coherent, separate self. Instead, only plurals and collective nouns (*agencies*, *intensities*, *the symbolic*, and *the text*) abstract nominal processes (*figuration*, *emplotment*, and of course *writing/écriture*) and a kind of jaded familiarity that took what had once seemed complex, unpredictable exercises of judgment and causally compressed them into predictable single verbs (*valorize* or *thematize*). Little food remained for narcissism in this discourse where positions were more stable than their occupants, which saw, behind the veil of superficial variation, the same essential operations repeated endlessly.⁶⁴

Bruss draws our attention to the promise of Theory, of an ensemble of scholarly activities falling under the heading of theory, and the institutional infrastructures that made these activities legible as scholarly practice. The promise of Theory—or Deconstruction—or structuralism, poststructuralism, or postmodernism—was elaborated across two moments in the 1966 special issue of *Yale French Studies* on “Structuralism,” which went to press the month before the Hopkins conference.⁶⁵ First, in Jacques

⁶⁴ Bruss 3-4.

⁶⁵ The 1966 special issue was published as an edited collection in 1970, the same year as the first publication of *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*. The editor of the special issue, and the edited collection, Jacques

Ehrmann's Introduction, "Structuralism" was offered not as a self-contained philosophy, but as a method or a set of methods. In short, structuralism for Ehrmann referred to "a certain way of studying language problems and the problems of languages."⁶⁶ The promise of structuralism, which would continue to be the promise of "theory," was that it "attempts to uncover the internal relationships which give different languages [its meaning closer to what later would be called discourses] their form and function."⁶⁷ This method of seeking the "deep structures" of an object or set of objects (the structure of a single utterance, the structure of a literary work, the structure of the literary itself) held open the promise of short-circuiting the relatively recent invention of the disciplines-as-professions. That is, it offered the promise of an authentic interdisciplinarity. Elsewhere in the issue, Geoffrey Hartman (then at Cornell, not yet at Yale or one of the "Yale Critics") described structuralism as "a 'unified field' theory," rhetorically linking the Sciences of Man and natural sciences. Structuralism's "subject is not this or that culture (a corpus of texts, a geographically or historically delimited area) but the very process of mediation, and how rites, values, meanings, and all such recurrent currencies relate to it."⁶⁸ For Ehrmann and Hartman, this promise of Structuralism sits in something internal to its method. That is, Structuralism has new ways of posing questions and new ways of arriving at answers, all in relation to larger intellectual projects.

But Hartman also points to the extra-textual promise of Structuralism. "New movements," he writes, "win out over old by their purity, or simplicity—by removing a burden of unnecessary assumptions and freeing the energy released for a more integral purpose."⁶⁹ The promise of each new

Ehrmann died in 1972 'after a long illness,' according to his obituary in the *Times*. He was 41 years old. Derrida would dedicate 'Living On,' his contribution to *Deconstruction & Criticism* to the memory of Ehrmann, who had arranged Derrida's first visit to Yale, in the years before his later allies, de Man and Miller, were on the faculty. The impact of the loss of Ehrmann appears as a fragment in the special issue of *Yale French Studies* dedicated to his memory, which appeared after many delays in 1979. By way of closing his introduction, Michel Beaujour begged forgiveness for 'my slowness and ineptitude. My mourning, our distress, literary paralyzed me' (14).

⁶⁶ Ehrmann (1966), 7.

⁶⁷ Ehrmann (1966), 7.

⁶⁸ Hartman (1966), 149.

⁶⁹ Hartman (1966), 148.

project, or intervention, or school, is that it clears ground and opens space for an intellectual project freed from the orthodoxies and bad feelings of whatever we were mired in before. It clears the field of static. At least, until we face the challenge of doing something with this new movement. Inevitably, the new movement finds its own orthodoxies, or realizes it's borrowing them from an older movement. The break from the past was never as complete as it felt. The new concepts trap us. We repeat them, or beatify them, or dissect them. Structuralism promised something new, even as it was replaced by other place-names for similar projects. Projects that coalesced under the heading of Theory. It was a shock, and "theory, like horror, is a genre meant to shock."⁷⁰

More recently, longtime scholarly press editor William Germano reflected on the history of the "theory book moment," and the role of editors and presses in the new age of theory. While the mass of new journals trafficked in essays, reviews, and interviews, the *market* for theory was dominated by the book. And the first wave of theory books were works in translation. "The French and German governments were particularly helpful in underwriting the costs of translation. This was, however, a book-to-book system of support. [...] On an important level, the work of translation was fundamentally a means of supporting the originating publisher first, and the author second. The system reinforced the primacy of the book, and the primacy of the theory book *as a book*."⁷¹ And not only the book in translation, but a further level of books that sought to explain works in or out of translation. And not only those, but books that collected explanatory essays and fragments of the originals.

The proceedings of the Hopkins conference became just such a collection—twice. The paperback edition in 1972 reversed title and subtitle, a move at least one reviewer claimed, "reflects the publishers' responsiveness to intellectual fashion, and their anxiety that the word 'structuralism'

⁷⁰ Germano 452.

⁷¹ Germano 452, emphasis in original.

should appear prominently on the cover.”⁷² The original publication, *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, had, on its own, little immediate impact. Sarah Lawall, who had received her PhD from Yale under the direction of René Wellek and was then an assistant professor at UMass Amherst, remarked on the interdisciplinary richness of the proceedings: “Such controversy is a sign of strength and indicates that the ideal structural analysis touches on all the ‘sciences of man.’ Insofar as the structuralist literary critic returns to the work from his psychological, linguistic, or sociological forays, he will enrich our understanding of literature’s complex knot of meanings.” She also cautioned that “structuralist literary criticism, however, is still limited by its cosmic ambitions.”⁷³ Lawall’s would be among the kinder critiques the project of structuralism would receive over the following decades.⁷⁴ Writing in *Telos*, Richard Moss’s review was colored by a Marxist humanism that also sounded a conspiratorial note. Co-editor and co-convenor of the conference, Richard Macksey’s opening remarks sought to situate the conference against the “aggressive architectural rhetoric” of so many similar interdisciplinary gatherings (where walls are smashed and doors kicked open), in favor of the topography of board games. A space where rituals and rules shaped space, determined the available moves, and organized the field of *play*—punning on the title of Derrida’s paper. Macksey reminded the assembly that “games can be deadly serious business.”⁷⁵ Moss’s review of the Baltimore proceedings would travel further down this path, speculating about, “the other games played at Johns Hopkins University: the Center for International Studies trains people for far deadlier games, and the Department of Defense sponsors numerous research projects

⁷² Lodge (1975) 128.

⁷³ Lawall (1971) 131.

⁷⁴ In an otherwise mocking review for *The Hudson Review*, the literary critic and don of interdisciplinarity at Santa Barbara, Marvin Mudrick, cautioned against a French theory marked by “the new Nietzschean world of free play and infinite possibility, where we can discard such delusions of ‘bourgeois ideology’ as ‘reality’ and ‘life’” (593). In *The Modern Language Review*, David Lodge was more generous. He saw the appeal of this *new* criticism as, “looking around for some method or rationale that will save us from the two-hundred-and-forty-ninth reinterpretation of *Wuthering Heights*, we become enviously aware of the brilliance, the enthusiasm, the daring, and utter self-confidence of the *nouvelle critique*” (130).

⁷⁵ Macksey and Donato (2007) 7.

for its global game of dead man's bluff. Macksey gives us the clues, deadly and business[,] and further, we might ask[,] what is the interest of the Ford Foundation in sponsoring this symposium?"⁷⁶ Reflecting on Moss's review for the fortieth anniversary republication of the conference proceedings, Macksey describes how "the narrative that emerged was quite simple: the symposium and the subsequent seminars had been funded by the Ford Foundation (\$30,000, to supply some historical perspective); this agency was, in turn, an armature of multinational capitalism using its wealth in the interests of thought control and the promotion of American imperialism in Vietnam and elsewhere. End of tale."⁷⁷ To be sure, Moss only articulates a rough skeleton of a conspiracy between the functionaries of American statecraft and the organizers of Hopkins symposium. But this isn't the end of his tale. Moss went on to outline a critique of the guiding assumptions of the structuralist project that would be echoed later by both radicals and conservatives. For Moss, the methodology of structuralism was "analytic rather than dialectic," it described and *naturalized* relations of dominations rather than revealing the operations undergirding them. The implied epistemology of structuralism "views man as an object rather than a subject," evacuating subjectivity of historical and political agency. "The overall effect," Moss claims, "is to completely divorce structure from function."⁷⁸ From a Marxist perspective, or the perspective of a post-68 American Marxism, structuralism could only be political debilitating—"the sciences of man ask all the wrong questions, inevitably come up with the

⁷⁶ Moss (1970) 355.

⁷⁷ Mackey and Donato (2007) xi. For context, thirty-thousand dollars in 1966 is the equivalent of a quarter-million dollars in 2021. In a 2014 interview, Hillis Miller offered a delightful anecdote about his friend Dick Macksey's relationship to money. "I had at Hopkins, and still have as a friend, a professor named Richard Macksey. Dick Macksey is one of the great book buyers and collectors in the world. When he needed some money for something, he just sold his row of Yeats first editions to make a hundred thousand dollars or so" (Fest [2014] 128). None of this is to impugn Richard Macksey, only to offer some context for why he might 1) have held on to the *Telos* review for forty years, and 2) why his account is both glib and reductive. Richard Moss was, at the time, the circulation manager at *Telos*, though by the next issue he disappeared from their masthead.

⁷⁸ Moss (1970) 355.

wrong conclusions, and form the basis of an anti-human ideology.”⁷⁹ This latter point formed the foundations of the conservative rejection of theory.

Already in 1972 the second edition of *The Structuralist Controversy* entered a world of new controversies. In the same year, Fredric Jameson published *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. Never a structuralist, Jameson’s work struck a raw nerve with readers already familiar with the webs of disagreement within the French scene. For the great mass of American academics, though, Jameson’s text offered a guide to a pair of challenging intellectual fashions. In point of fact, it is Jameson’s *title* which traveled furthest, along with his epigraph from Nietzsche, “We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit.” Jameson’s epigraph, and his larger study, were taken to mean that there is no thought that escapes the prison-house of language, and all of literature and indeed all of human experience is similarly held in bondage.

Meanwhile, Hillis Miller was walking into a fight he never anticipated. His review of M.H. Abrams’ *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) in the Winter issue of *Diacritics* wounded the otherwise sunny Abrams.⁸⁰ Abrams responded in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, during an exchange with Wayne Booth, and Sheldon Sacks (then editor at *Critical Inquiry*) invited all three into a dialogue at a panel during the

⁷⁹ Moss (1970) 355.

⁸⁰ In the same interview from 2014, Miller offered the following story to illustrate the geniality of Abrams and the sadness caused by their rift (which was eventually repaired):

This is Mike Abrams in essence for me: when Harold Bloom was visiting Cornell. Harold was an undergraduate at Cornell, and, so I gather, actually was in undergraduate courses taught by Mike Abrams. Imagine, even if you’re Mike Abrams, having Harold Bloom in your freshman/sophomore course! (Bloom apparently corrected Abrams now and then: “Professor that was 1801, not 1802.”) At any rate, it’s a typical day in Ithaca in the winter. Bloom is there as a visitor for a year. This is after Bloom is well established as a professor at Yale. It’s snowing. This is in the sixties, the late sixties. The African American students have occupied the administration building. For Bloom, this was the end of the world. He’s very conservative politically, in spite of always voting for Democratic candidates. He was full of anxiety about the future, not only of Cornell but also of everything else. So they meet. Bloom meets Abrams. Snow, catastrophe on the campus, riots, and so on. Abrams turns to Bloom and says, “Harold, isn’t it a beautiful day?” That’s Abrams. That’s Abrams in a nutshell, and I immensely admire that. (Fest 132)

1976 Meeting of the Modern Language Association. Their revised papers appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in the spring of 1977. In “The Deconstructive Angel,” Abrams defends the project of the literary historian against the challenges of the deconstructionists, for whom, “since the only givens are already-existing marks, [...] we are denied recourse to a speaking or writing subject, or ego, or cogito, or consciousness, and so to any possible agency for the intention of meaning something,” and “all such agencies are relegated to the status of fictions generated by language, readily dissolved by deconstructive analysis.”⁸¹ At its heart, Abrams’ argument is that the communicative functions of literary text (or the text of literary criticism) obtain even in the face of a language’s inherent equivocality and multiplicity of meaning. For Abrams, Miller’s “central contention is not simply that I am sometimes, or always, wrong in my interpretation, but instead that I—like other traditional historians—can never be right in my interpretation.”⁸² Abrams’ leaves uninterrogated the value of being “right” in one’s interpretations.

It is in the closing passages of “The Deconstructive Angel” that Abrams really picks a fight with Miller.

As a deconstructive Angel, Hillis Miller, I am happy to say, is not serious about deconstruction, in Hegel’s sense of “serious”; that is, he does not entirely and consistently commit himself to the consequences of his premises. He is in fact, fortunately for us, a double agent who plays the game of language by two very different sets of rules. One of the games he plays is that of a deconstructive critic of literary texts. The other is the game he will play in a minute or two when he steps out of his graphocentric premises onto this platform and begins to talk to us.⁸³

That is, if Miller *believed* his own arguments, it would bar him from the everyday practice of communication. The premises of deconstruction fail because they are articulated through a language they claim has no outside from which to speak. “After all, without that confidence that we can use language to say what we mean and can interpret language so as to determine what was meant, there is

⁸¹ Abrams (1977) 429.

⁸² Abrams (1977) 427.

⁸³ Abrams (1977) 437.

no rationale for the dialogue in which we are now engaged.”⁸⁴ Ironically, Abrams would refuse to speak with Miller after their panel at the MLA. Still, across Abrams’ essay, we see an abiding anxiety around a tendency taken to be anti-Western and anti-Human.

Miller’s response, “The Critic as Host,” would become one of his most cited and anthologized pieces of writing, and would in fact be expanded as part of the “Yale School’s” 1978 non-manifesto, *Deconstruction and Criticism*.⁸⁵ Amid a dizzying dispensation of the worlds of meaning broached by only a fragment of a sentence from the earlier exchange between Booth and Abrams, Miller throws down the gauntlet.

If “deconstructionist principles” are taken seriously, [Abrams] says, “any history which relies on written texts becomes an impossibility.” So be it. That is not much of an argument. A certain notion of history or of literary history, like a certain notion of determinable reading, might indeed be an impossibility, and if so, it might be better to know that, and not to fool oneself or be fooled. It might, or it might not. That something in the realm of interpretation is a demonstrable impossibility does not prevent it from being “done,” as the abundance of histories, literary histories, and readings demonstrates. On the other hand, I should agree that “the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.” It has consequences, for life and death, since it is inscribed, incorporated, in the bodies of individual human beings and in the body politic of our cultural life and death together.⁸⁶

What deconstruction allows, for Miller, is so much greater than what it disallows. If a certain form of literary history is “impossible,” it is not then also *prohibited*. Rather, deconstruction, as one place-name for “theory,” allows us to pursue impossible projects *as impossible projects*.

By the latter 1980s, the bogeyman of critical theory had several uses. For a member of the old guard like René Wellek, who had also been at Yale for all the years of the rise and eventual collapse of the Yale School, the most “extreme” formulation of this mode of literary theory, “looks for the

⁸⁴ Abrams (1977) 438.

⁸⁵ Bloom, et al. (1978). By the time of the melee at the MLA, as it was called by no one, the “Yale School” consisted of the aforementioned Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, with Jacques Derrida a yearly visitor and accomplice. By 1975, there was a stir about the new “hermeneutical mafia” on the New Haven campus (Pritchard). In a 1976 essay in *The Georgia Review*, Miller would announce the Yale School as a group of “uncanny” critics, critics whose works probe the limits of reason (Miller 1976). A small industry emerged to explicate the works of this School. For an early collection of commentaries, see Arac, et al (1983). For a recent history, see Redfield (2016).

⁸⁶ Miller (1977) 439-440.

abolition of man, denies the self, and sees language as a free-floating system of signs,” and “leads to total skepticism and ultimately to nihilism.”⁸⁷ Though he had co-authored one of the earliest texts on literary theory, against the deconstructionists Wellek took a stand, echoing Moss, Jameson, and Abrams: “I reject the theories of some structuralists and poststructuralists who advocate “the abolition of man” (whatever that may mean), who are content with the presumed “prison house of language” and claim a complete systematization of all literature.”⁸⁸ The striking feature of these critics is the wide political terrain they cover. From classical liberals to dyed-in-the-wool Marxists. One of the most infamous screeds against theory would come in 1987, the same year as the dubious battle that took place on the pages of *New Literary History*, in Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind*, which saw on American college campuses a concerted effort to destroy Western Civilization.⁸⁹

The theory wars, which I have only glossed here, cut across the American university. Within them, we see the relationships between conceptual debates and the structural adjustments of institutional life in American higher education. Shifts in political economy of racial capitalism in the beginning of the period called neoliberal, and shifts in the libidinal economies of antiblackness amid the upheavals of a Second Reconstruction. The theory wars cannot be reduced to either component. They are not reducible to the shifting demands of a structurally vexed profession, nor can we treat theory as some transcendental residue of thought.

In Dubious Battle

The Age of Theory coincided with a new moment in Black literary criticism. In the beginning years of this new age, Black critics faced an ensemble of institutional challenges. Black critics were

⁸⁷ Wellek (1983) 2.

⁸⁸ Wellek (1983) 8.

⁸⁹ Bloom’s book, a malignant little contribution to the culture wars, offered tepid denunciations of the supposed nihilism of fashionable French theories. But what cut at Bloom even more, the same thing that so frightened Harold Bloom over at Yale, or Hannah Arendt down at the New School, was the advent of Black Studies as an administrative concession to Black student organizing. For a perceptive reading of this facet of Bloom’s resistance to theory, see Judy (1993).

(formally and informally) barred from teaching at elite research universities and presenting research in leading publications. Opportunities to teach between historically Black schools and teaching colleges were marked by meager pay and exhausting teaching loads. In the world of non-academic publishing, editors turned to established or celebrity Black authors for criticism. The work of Black critics circulated in Black publications—such as the Johnson Publishing imprints *Negro Digest/Black World*, *Jet*, and *Ebony*, the *College Language Association Journal*, and local and smaller-run newspapers, weeklies and magazines. Limited access to academic publishing meant greater barriers to being circulated in classrooms and networks of citation, as well as being pushed deeper down in fewer archives.

From the middle of the 1960s, there was a new expansion of Black publishing houses and a slow growth of graduate students and faculty (junior and senior) at campuses that had long been racially exclusive. From 1968 onward, a number of campuses established programs in Black Studies. At elite schools, these programs were underwritten by the Ford Foundation, which had also funded the Hopkins conference in 1966. From the start, Ford prioritized funding graduate study in Black Studies, to develop a professionalized class of experts on Black life in America, to establish standards for what would constitute knowledge in the new field, and to ensure that these knowledges be available to anyone with interest, irrespective of race.⁹⁰ These new institutional spaces, coupled with the crowding out of other possibilities, brought with them opportunities to consolidate new fields of study, new areas of expertise, and new niches in the academic marketplace.⁹¹

Among the most energetic and pugnacious of the new experts on Blackness was Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates began his career in literary criticism with broadsides against the heavies of the Black

⁹⁰ A 1969 position paper, “Notes on Black Studies,” prepared by the Caribbean-born economist, Sir Arthur Lewis, for head of the Ford Foundation, McGeorge Bundy, lays out much of what became the Foundation’s approach to funding Black Studies in the ensuing decades: “The foundation should presumably support only programs intended for both Black and White students.” He added, “Those who care for Black students and Black Studies should support only genuine intellectual inquiry, of the kind which the militants do not want” (quoted in Farrah Jasmine Griffin’s “Introduction” to Ford [2007], xiv).

⁹¹ See Ferguson (2012).

Arts Movement, whom he deemed “race and superstructure” critics. With a string of special journal issues and edited volumes, and buoyed by a Mellon Foundation fellowship and an inaugural MacArthur “Genius” Grant, Gates helped assemble a “Yale School” of African American Literary Criticism (AALC) as an idiosyncratic mix of bourgeois class conventions, vernacular flourishes, and *ad hoc* borrowings from the world of High Theory.⁹² Moving between registers was central to his rhetorical and theoretical apparatus. Among the responses Gates solicited to his 1985 special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, “‘Race,’ Writing, and Difference,” we Gates too theoretical for a vernacular critic like Houston Baker, and a sloppy theorist to the establish French theorist Tzvetan Todorov.⁹³ Gates’ response deposes the racism of Todorov’s criticism at some length. The latter’s gestures to universality or (supposed) egalitarianism are, for Gates, a mode of neocolonialism. Their “claims to ‘the universal’ somehow always end up lopping off our arms, legs, and pug noses, muffling the peculiar timbres of our voices, and trying to straighten our always already kinky hair.”⁹⁴ As for Baker, Gates slides into a performative familiarity: “No, Houston, there are no vernacular critics collected here; nor did you expect there to be. Todorov’s response forces me to realize that the discursive dualism that you criticize is still urgently needed. For we must attack the racism of egalitarianism and universalism in as many languages as we can utter. Todorov can’t even hear us, Houston, when we talk *his* academic talk; how he gonna hear us if we ‘talk *that* talk,’ the talk of the black idiom?”⁹⁵ And so Gates moves across registers. Too theoretical for one camp (who lack his sophistication), and too *Black* for another camp (the white liberal racists).

By 1985, the conflict between AALC and Black Arts might have appeared to be at an impasse. Ostensibly, Gates was at work on two major projects: the development and discernment of a canon

⁹² See his contributions to Fisher and Stepto (1979), and Gates (1981), (1983), (1986a), (1986b), (1987a), and (1988).

⁹³ See Baker (1986) and Todorov (1986).

⁹⁴ Gates (1986b) 209.

⁹⁵ Gates (1986b) 210.

of African American Literature, and a theorization of the *Blackness* of “Black” literature, its “signifying Black difference,” found in the operations of language in a text rather than the biographies of authors. The tension between the two projects was that Gates’ *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* was not organized according to the operations of language within given texts. In other words, the tradition Gates sought to define, by way of the operations of language internal to a text, was always-already an *extra*-textual tradition. The tension within his theoretical project was that “Black literature,” whatever it might mean, could only ever exceed the theoretical apparatus applied to it.⁹⁶

Were it not for Gates and Baker’s responses, Joyce Ann Joyce’s essay might have disappeared within the new deluge of academic publishing in the 1980s, as computerized word processing and desktop publishing marked a permanent shift in the material production of academic knowledge. Joyce’s “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism” is, in part, an extension of her work on Richard Wright—the subject of her dissertation and first book—drawing connections between critical figures of previous generations and those of her own moment. But Joyce’s essay begins with an anecdote about an exchange between her and a former student, a young Black woman who had trouble some trouble with an article by James Baldwin published in *Essence*. If she, the student, had trouble with Baldwin’s prose, then she could only imagine the trouble other readers of *Essence* might have with it. Joyce describes her response as a form of reactive defensiveness—“How is [James Baldwin] *supposed* to write?”⁹⁷ Her student’s response, “He is supposed to be clear,” might also be read as Joyce’s moral for all Black writers—of both literature and criticism. “I realized,” Joyce writes, “that I was trapped by my own contradictions and elitism.”⁹⁸ We might read a different lesson in Joyce’s exchange with her student. It was never a question of whether James Baldwin, in his essay from the

⁹⁶ The same tension was at work in Baker’s theorizations of Black literature as an expression of a Blues matrix. See Baker (1984).

⁹⁷ Joyce (1987a) 335; emphasis added.

⁹⁸ Joyce (1987a) 335.

April 1984 issue of *Essence*, should be clearer. This is only an individual instance of a larger problem. The student was concerned, rather, with what Joyce subsequently calls “the intricacies of the relationship of the writer to the audience, by the historical interrelationship between literature, class, values and the literary canon, and finally by [...] how all these complexities augment ad [infinitum] when the writer is a Black American.”⁹⁹ Joyce’s *first* mistake was to think that James Baldwin was the problem, and that the solution was to become a better reader of Baldwin. This anecdote became a sticking point for both Gates and Baker in their responses to Joyce.

For Joyce, the debates among Black literary critics of the late 1970s and early 1980s had forerunners in earlier moments of Black literary ferment, especially the Renaissance era of the 1920s and the height of Civil Rights in the 1960s. At each moment, writers and critics argued over the determinative roles of race and class in the creation of both literature and literary criticism. Specifically, whether a writer’s class status (or class aspirations) shaped their political project or the utility of their work for grassroots Black political and social activism. As a reader, teacher, and scholar in the 1980s, Joyce found something stultifying and debilitating in the new generation of Black critics, Gates and Baker among them. It would be reductive to say that Joyce read Gates and Baker as, somehow, “rejecting” their Blackness by producing scholarship that interwove Euro-American poststructuralism with Black literature. Rather, Joyce read Gates and Baker as belonging to a tradition of Black bourgeois writers and critics, who wrote toward a Black liberalism that borrowed the energy and dynamism of Black radical traditions while ignoring the political demands of the Black masses—if not also condescending to or speaking on their behalf.

Gates went on the offensive. His response to Joyce A. Joyce claimed not only the territory of AALC, but also the entire terrain of an “authentic” Blackness—a postmodern Talented Tenth. Not only that, Gates further positioned himself as the gatekeeper of Black *feminist* criticism as well. The

⁹⁹ Joyce (1987a) 335-336.

remainder of this section will focus on key shifts that occur across and within the texts. These shifts might also be called “distortions,” with Gates and Baker each offering funhouse mirror experiences of Joyce’s text. While there is an apparently *ad hoc* quality to the lines of argumentation—Baker himself abandoning the paragraph form in favor of a list of Joyce’s supposed “errors”—I want to track an underlying logic that amounts to both a *critique of* Black feminism and a *claim to* Black feminism. The category of Black feminism is troubled by Joyce herself, insofar as her position is not readily readable as “feminist” according to the protocols of Black feminism developed in the wake of their 1987 debate. Joyce’s allegiances to Black cultural nationalism and the Black Arts Movement place her at odds to some interpretations of Black feminism, and Joyce articulates her objection to the sexist tone and content of Gates and Baker’s responses as an abnegation of their responsibility *as Black men* “to demonstrate love and respect for a Black sister.”¹⁰⁰ Joyce functions as a stand-in for *both* Black feminism and Black nationalism in the texts of Gates and Baker, producing a series of key distortions.

In Gates’ response to Joyce, the central concern of her essay, the “interrelationship between literature, class, values and the literary canon,” is transformed into a charge of being either anti-Black or non-Black, of desiring to escape Blackness.¹⁰¹ Much of Gates’ response, then, becomes a defense of his credentials as a Race Man, though he is also cautious not to reify the racial referent. In fact, by moving the goal posts in this way, Gates is able to underplay and ignore the different class interests at work among Black people in America, erasing the very intraracial diversity he claims to be protecting from an antiquated Black nationalism. But if Gates is on the side of individual freedom of conscious for Blacks, he is also in favor of a cynical mode of Black “love.” Gates’ response is structured around the question of love and Black literary criticism, and around the assertion that it is love for Black culture, Black people, and their literary tradition that demands critics “bring to bear upon it honesty,

¹⁰⁰ Joyce (1987b) 382.

¹⁰¹ Gates (1987b) 335.

insight, and skepticism, as well as praise, enthusiasm, and dedication.”¹⁰² If this is so, Gates places Joyce outside of the tradition. And not only Joyce, but her student, a young Black woman. Joyce’s story of her student’s trouble with Baldwin, on Gates’ reading, is “only remarkable for what it reveals about her student’s lack of reading skills and/or training.”¹⁰³ The student is so deficient, indeed, that it leads Gates to question the veracity of the tale—“Perhaps the anecdote is merely apocryphal, after all.”¹⁰⁴ Forgetting, apparently, that he is addressing an adult Black woman who is also a colleague and doctor of philosophy, as well as an adult Black woman who is his colleague’s student, he proffers, “next time, give the child a dictionary, Joyce, and make her come back in a week.”¹⁰⁵ Gates here does a poor job of demonstrating the subtle pleasures of signifyin(g). And it is on the matter of signifying that Gates delivers his most venomous parenthetical dig. On Gates’ reading, Joyce doesn’t understand that signifying is itself a deconstructive practice, demonstrating the extreme degree to which Joyce is, herself, obviously alienated from everyday Black people: “If you don’t believe me, by the way, ask your grandparents, or your parents, especially your mother.”¹⁰⁶ These moments in Gates’ response illustrate the degree to which a gendered and sexualized violence scaffolds his critical disposition towards Joyce. By virtue of her criticism of Gates’ critical practice and its relation to the politics of class in the post-Civil Rights academy, Joyce is jettisoned into a no-man’s land where desire and violence are interleaved. That is, she occupies in Gates’ discourse a Black feminine/feminist position.

In his response to Joyce, Houston Baker reverses the power dynamics at play and takes on the role of victim to conservative Black feminists. He is “under attack” from Deborah McDowell at a panel discussion,¹⁰⁷ and he suffers a “grossly erroneous attack” as an Afro-American literary critic at

¹⁰² Gates (1987b) 347.

¹⁰³ Gates (1987b) 353.

¹⁰⁴ Gates (1987b) 354.

¹⁰⁵ Gates (1987b) 354.

¹⁰⁶ Gates (1987b) 359.

¹⁰⁷ Baker (1987) 363.

the hands of Joyce A. Joyce and the editors of *New Literary History*.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the “academic world” itself is pleased to take advantage of “any attack whatsoever on anything Afro-American,” especially if the culprit is a Black woman.¹⁰⁹ Baker, like Gates, insists on a mode of intraracial solidarity that is predicated on Black women agreeing with him. This original sin places Joyce and McDowell outside that sphere of solidarity—within which he might be ethically impelled to be open to being held accountable by his Black female colleagues. Instead, Baker attributes to his critics/attackers (real and, in the case of Deborah McDowell, imagined) “a new black conservatism, one that ironically derives from black women critics.” He adds, “I say ‘ironically’ because in the world of avant-garde literary study today, it is possible to think that black women, above all others perhaps, should be in the vanguard of one of the most exciting areas of literary criticism and theory in the United States.”¹¹⁰ The effect, across the two responses, was to position Joyce A. Joyce, Deborah McDowell, and the strange bedfellows of Black cultural nationalists and Black feminists as trapped within the “resistance to theory” that Gates borrows from his former colleague at Yale, Paul de Man.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Baker (1987) 368.

¹⁰⁹ Baker (1987) 369. Interestingly, in the combination of victimhood and animus (his sense of being attacked alongside the force of his “counter”-attack), Baker’s text recalls that of a key player in “The Black Sexism Debate” that filled the pages of *The Black Scholar* in 1978. Predicated by sociologist Robert Staples’ slam piece on the works and characters of Michele Wallace and Ntozake Shange, the resulting forum included voices from across the political spectrum and ended with closing words by Staples himself. In his response to those “angry black feminists,” Staples observed pointedly that, “it almost appears that Michele Wallace’s anger, confusion and logic has infected the black female body politic,” and that, contrary to such divisive figures, his “objective should not be confused with the anger, confusion and defensiveness that characterizes the work of angry black feminist” (Staples [1978] 63).

¹¹⁰ Baker (1987) 367.

¹¹¹ De Man’s essay began as an assignment from the Modern Language Association, and was repurposed for a special issue of *Yale French Studies* edited by his former student, Barbara Johnson. Faced with the task of writing an introductory and summative text on “literary theory,” de Man “could only try to explain, as concisely as possible, why the main theoretical interest of literary theory consists in the impossibility of its definition” (3). That is, though one might delineate common themes, schools of thought, and different traditions, the story of literary theory is the story of its own impossibility. For de Man, “nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory is itself this resistance. The loftier the aims and the better the methods of literary theory, the less possible it becomes. Yet literary theory is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance. What remains impossible to decide is whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall” (20).

The Race for Theory

The *New Literary History* fiasco sent a message to practitioners that African American Literary Criticism ran through Gates and Baker, and that there would be consequences for dissent. In print, no Black feminist critic defended Joyce A. Joyce. In a later essay, Joyce observed that while her Black colleagues had, privately, expressed concern and consternation over the power Gates and Baker held in the field, and implicitly over their careers, in the years before their exchange was published, after its publication she found herself isolated both academically and personally.¹¹² It was primarily white feminists and white African-Americanist critics who chose to expand political capital on defenses of Joyce Joyce.¹¹³ Black feminists mentioned the conflagration in passing, as an unfortunate and embarrassing waste of energy by all involved. It was a white critic, Harold Fromm, who took to the pages of *New Literary History* to offer a critique of Gates and Baker.¹¹⁴ Further critiques of Joyce Joyce came from students of Gates and Baker. Gates' protégé Kwame Anthony Appiah devoted a portion of his 1989 essay, "The Conservation of 'Race,'" to a critique of Joyce, and Baker's student, Michael Awkward, laid out a critique of Joyce in his "Race, Gender, and the Politics of Reading" (1989), both essays appearing in *Black American Literature Forum* (Baker and Gates both sat on the editorial board, where they remain Associate Editors). Taking a cue from Gates, Michael Awkward made himself involved in a series of critical conflicts in the latter 1980s and early 1990s. Besides his critique of Joyce, his 1990 response to Fromm's article took on the tones of Gates' response to Tzvetan Todorov, and led to a further dispute between himself and Kenneth Warren.¹¹⁵

Within this series of critical conflicts, Awkward also penned a response to Barbara Christian's essay, "The Race for Theory," first published in 1987 after being delivered as a conference paper at

¹¹² Joyce (2000) 477.

¹¹³ See Abel (1993) and Homans (1997).

¹¹⁴ Fromm (1988).

¹¹⁵ See Awkward (1988), (1990), and (1992).

Berkeley in 1986. The conference, “The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse,” was organized by Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd, and stretched over three spring days during which “most of us ‘minority scholars’ [...] got together and talked to each other, but not about literature. I’m not sure exactly what we were talking about, but it was clearly very boring, alienating, and had very little to do with what I thought we were there for.”¹¹⁶ For Christian, the conference “had something to do with mimicking what was thought to be the way in which one ought to talk about literature if one were to be *validated* and *respected* today.”¹¹⁷ In a later essay, Christian describes writing the essay “in three hours, pretty much as a way of relieving the boredom I happened to be situated in” at the conference.¹¹⁸

Where Gates’ had diagnosed a “resistance to theory” in Joyce Joyce’s work, Awkward begins his response to Christian with the assertion that Christian’s essay “leaves no doubt in the mind of its readers that the esteemed black feminist critic is – in the words of the controversial Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels essay – against theory.”¹¹⁹ The rhetorical structure of Awkward’s opening gambit offers an outline of his concerns. He marks himself as a knowing and perspicacious reader (“leaves no doubt”) while also aligning himself with any generic reader—he offers an insight only to declaim it as obvious. His reference to the “mind of its reader” foreshadows his later concern with reader-response theory. And he reduces Christian’s critique of the institutional and intellectual politics of a particular, hegemonic, construction of literary theory as being “against theory” in line with Knapp and Michaels. Knapp and Michaels’ essay does not take a position “against” this or that theoretical school, but against the *entire project of literary theory*. They were concerned with the ways that *all* modes of literary theory rest on impossible and unnecessary assumptions regarding the nature of literary texts and their interpretations.¹²⁰ Christian’s essay, on the other hand, does not. Indeed, this opening

¹¹⁶ Christian (2007) 55-56.

¹¹⁷ Christian (2007) 56; emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Christian (2007) 56.

¹¹⁹ Awkward (1989) 238.

¹²⁰ For Knapp and Michaels, “the mistake on which all critical theory rests has been to imagine that these problems are real. In fact, we will claim such problems only seem real—and theory itself only seems possible or relevant—when theorists

comparison initiates a series of misreadings that structure Awkward's text. In this section I want to focus on two of these misreadings—misreadings of Christian and Paul de Man—and their significance to the more general project of eliding the ethical critique of the academy that animates Christians' text.

Christian's essay has become a totem for "the resistance to theory," and for being "against" theory. This is striking because Christian is more "against" theory in the sense of proximity, contact, or collision than she is "against" theory in the sense of opposition or aversion. Christian's real opposition is to that tendency of theories to perform a dual operation of overestimating their own reach and of closing down the movement and vitality of their objects. On this score, Christian's operation is opposed to the solo voice, in favor of the chorus, insofar as, for readers of Black women's literature, "our work *is* a collective endeavor."¹²¹ This she sets in opposition to "that moment when one creates a theory, thus fixing a constellation of ideas for a time at least, a fixing which no doubt will be replaced in another month or so by somebody else's competing theory."¹²² Elsewhere, Christian's description of women of color's practices of theorizing unfolds as a series of points of commonality with deconstruction. Theorizing, in the tradition with which Christian identifies, takes place within "the play with language," and in the "form of the hieroglyph" as both phonetic ("abstract," "communicative") and non-phonetic ("sensual," "beautiful").¹²³ Christian here is in oblique conversation with Derrida's engagement with the Western phonocentrist tradition and his critical operation of engaging the free play of meaning within texts. This is not to say that Christian is

fail to recognize the fundamental inseparability of the elements involved" (724). That is, any theory that explores the relationship between the meaning of a text and the intent of its author, for instance, fails because meaning and intent are one and the same thing. Knapp and Michaels take issue equally with an M.H. Abrams as with a J. Hillis Miller, a John Searle and a Jacques Derrida, a René Wellek and a Paul de Man. Ultimately, for Knapp and Michaels, theory "is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without. Our thesis has been that no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end" (742).

¹²¹ Christian (1989) 227.

¹²² Christian (1989) 226.

¹²³ Christian (1989) 226.

an unwitting deconstructionist, but that deconstruction arrives—belatedly—at a Black critical operation.¹²⁴

Nonetheless, we might leave the actual theoretical *beft* of Christian’s work to one side and point to a different register of Christian’s critique of the hegemony enjoyed in the contemporary academy by “theory.” At several points in the essay, Christian articulates her opposition to the mugger’s choice of whether to engage with poststructuralism or abandon one’s professional aspirations. Whether or not Christian thinks post-structuralist criticism has anything to offer Black women’s literature (and the corollary question of whether Christians’ opinion on the matter carries the necessary institutional *force* to shape anyone’s critical practice), her critique is not simply ideological, as in Awkward’s reading, but tied concretely to the place and stakes of Black women in the profession. Awkward accuses Christian’s essay of both foreclosing the possibility of, and denying the present existence of, Black and Black feminist critics who *willingly* make use of Euro-American critical theory. On this score, we might consider a point Christian makes about her objection to the colonial distinction between periphery and center in post-structuralist theory, which she sees as deriving from “a Western dualistic or ‘binary’ frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it *is* major, usually through force *and then* through language.”¹²⁵ In this final clause Christian can be read at multiple levels of abstraction. First, it operates at the ontological level describing a subject coming into being through a violence that precedes the subject’s entrance into language. Second, it operates in an ontic register: the ways in which “othered” subjects experience force at the level of the everyday or the institutional. For Christian, it is not so much a matter of *her* policing the critical choices of her fellow critics as much as a concern with not having a choice in how

¹²⁴ Christian here is in conversation with the work of James Snead (1981) and (1991), for whom the “there” to which a teleological Western thought imagines it is heading is, in fact, where the tradition’s Black “other” has already been

¹²⁵ Christian (1989) 228; emphasis added.

one's critical work in done. Awkward shifts the flow of power; it is not that the institution forces practitioners to engage with "theory," but that *Christian* is forcing other critics *not to*.

Turning to Paul de Man, Awkward offers Christian's work as an instantiation of "the resistance to theory." Awkward cites one passage of de Man's essay, in which de Man distinguishes literary *theory* from the historical and critical practices which preceded it by dint of a further linguistic pre-occupation. But the question remains as to what is meant by a "resistance" to theory. Awkward makes recourse to a *non-theoretical* conceptualization of resistance. For Awkward, as well as for Gates, *resistance is reduced to refusal, and refusal is reduced to an instinct or reflex*. "Resistance" is here a psychological malady, not a political posture nor a psychoanalytic concept. Awkward's argument is to move *beyond* this resistance to theory in order to bring new life to the fields of Black and Black feminist criticism. But de Man's essay begins and ends with the caution that "nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance. The loftier the aims and the better the methods of literary theory, the less possible it becomes."¹²⁶ Resistance, in de Man's text, cannot be reduced a pathology to be overcome.

What, then, is the basis for Awkward's claims to the value of theory, if his own engagements with theory take the form of a pair of misreadings (of Knapp and Michaels, and of de Man) and a digression on what Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" might have been if she had engaged with reader-response theory? It turns out that Awkward's central argument on behalf of theory is precisely Christian's argument *against* the hegemony of "theory." That is, for Awkward, "theory" is valuable *because* it is hegemonic: "if the literature of black women is to continue to make inroads in the *canon*, if it is to *gain the respect* it doubtlessly deserves as an ideologically and analytically complex, analytically rich literary tradition within an *increasingly theoretical academy*, it will *require* that its

¹²⁶ de Man (1982) 20.

critics continue to move beyond description and *master the discourse of contemporary literary theory*.”¹²⁷ Black feminist critics would do well, Awkward argues, to fall in line with “an increasingly theoretical academy.” Awkward’s “critique” of Christian takes on the status of a police action, the enforcement of institutional hegemony, punishment for stepping out of line. Awkward concedes Christian’s central point and affirms it. It isn’t that Christian’s analysis of the institution is wrong, but her attitude towards the institution becomes the (disavowed) site of Awkward’s critique.

Caring for Black Feminist Criticism

Black feminism, as a privileged discourse for a critique of the genres of man, their historical emergences, and the patterns by which they produce life and death, has been a prominent term in academic discourses before. In our own moment, there circulate a set of demands organized around the politics of citation. There is a shorthand demand to “read Black women” and to “cite Black women.” These demands have circulated across academic discourses before. And they’ve been heeded before. Across the 1980s and 1990s, critics and theorists took pains to read and to cite Black women. Sometimes out of a sense of political obligation or guilt, and sometimes energized by the promise of possibility. But there is something, some *thing*, that escapes or exceeds citation.¹²⁸

Another forgotten moment in the institutional history of critical theory and cultural studies: in the early 1990s, a recently minted PhD from a private research university, mentored by a major feminist theorist, herself a key figure in the emergence of poststructuralist feminist theory, submitted an article deriving from their dissertation project to a major academic journal. Their article made use of the high theory of the moment to reconsider the literary criticism of Barbara Smith as an inaugural

¹²⁷ Awkward (1989) 243; emphasis added.

¹²⁸ For two signal readings of the ways Black writing operated in the academic discourses of white feminists, see Elizabeth Abel, “Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): 470-98, and Ann duCille, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies,” *Signs* 19, no. 3 (1994): 591-629.

figure of Black feminist criticism. With reference to Stephen Heath and the intellectual milieu surrounding the British journal *Screen*, that is, with reference to a mode of criticism emerging from readings of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser (a generational difference from the Frankfurt School's readings of Freud and Marx), alongside certain feminist poststructuralists, among them Toril Moi, Joan Scott, and Gayatri Spivak, the author found in Smith a certain essentialism and an understanding of experience as direct evidence that undermined her most radical insights. As a piece of academic writing, it has all the hallmarks of a junior scholar's first publication. Compared to the arguments made by Black male critics of that moment, this non-Black feminist's critique was lukewarm.

The journal invited Smith to reply. Her response made several important points about the context in which she was writing, the audiences for whom she was (and was not) writing, and her relationship to an academic world that had pivoted fully to an even more abstract mode of theorizing than the one to which Elizabeth Bruss had devoted a book. Smith's goal was never simply to participate in the academic workplace. Rather, she wrote, "my ultimate goal was Black women's liberation, i.e. more freedom, more respect, more choices and less invisibility, less violence, and less abuse for living, breathing Black female human beings. It is obvious from the condescension and mean-spiritedness with which you write that your agenda is quite the opposite."¹²⁹ Smith's reader was careful but not animated by a spirit of care. She read Black women, and a Black woman returned her reading. That the entire exchange is lost in the archive says something important about how histories of Black feminist theorizing become dispersed in a critical landscape that only occasionally takes interest in Black women. But this episode also tells us something about the work of critical writing.

One can be a careful reader without being animated by a spirit of care. And, we well know, one can be animated by a spirit of care and not be a careful reader. But there's a worse path. One can be animated by a spirit of care—of love, even—*and* be a careful reader, and, nonetheless, not

¹²⁹ Smith, (1993) 654. See Chay (1993).

accomplish anything, for anyone. And *do* nothing. Do nothing but inhabit the tragic nowhere of failed love. More tragic, still, we can never predict our arrival in that desperate nowhere, that dead letter office. Except, we know, some part of us is always there. Our best intentions cannot protect us from the desolation of a love that never arrives.

CHAPTER TWO:

Ungendering Assata Shakur

At one point Mrs. Chesimard's attorneys walked out of the courtroom after Edward Barone, an assistant Middlesex County prosecutor, who had argued the case against Mrs. Chesimard, referred to her as "an animal." Lewis Meyers, one of the defense lawyers, objected, saying, "Mrs. Chesimard is a black woman, not an animal." Joseph F. Sullivan, 'Assault Charges Add 26 Years to Mrs. Chesimard's Life Term'¹³⁰

Every feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding African-Americans, as we encounter, in the juridical codes of slavery, personality reified.

Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe'¹³¹

Mile Marker 78, New Jersey Turnpike

2 May 1973. After midnight. If we know the story of Assata Shakur, we know the shootout on the New Jersey turnpike. Shot with her hands up. We know of the bullet that broke her collarbone and severed her median nerve, that she couldn't raise the arm that, it was claimed, she used to fire on the troopers. We know of her torture at Middlesex General Hospital, and the Black security guard and the Black nurse who saved her, as far as they could. By 3 May, police from New York and New Jersey provided the *New York Times* with a narrative of Shakur as "the soul" of a formation called the Black Liberation Army.¹³² The 26-year-old Shakur would spend the next six and a half years in state custody, until she was freed from the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women on 2 November 1979.¹³³ Along

¹³⁰ *New York Times*, 26 April 1977, pg. 83.

¹³¹ Spillers (1987) 78.

¹³² "Seized Woman Called Black Militants' 'Soul,'" *New York Times*, 3 May 1973, pg. 47. (Elsewhere in the *Times*, a reporter caught up with a line of tourists visiting the White House as the Watergate investigation moved along toward an uncertain conclusion. Paul Schnelder, a Navy radio operator from St. Paul, offered, "Politicians are all crooks anyway." A mother chaperoning a school trip from Westchester County hoped, "Congress is going to be forced to pass legislation to control campaign funds." "Tourists Ask: Why All the Fuss?" pg. 34.) In January of 1973, the poet Nikki Giovanni remarked in conversation with the poet and novelist Margaret Walker, "one thing the papers keep saying about the Black Liberation Army is that the Establishment can't infiltrate it, and, you know, they can't infiltrate it because it does not exist. There is really no such thing as a Black Liberation Army. There are people they have trained to be their killers who are now back to kill them" (Giovanni and Walker 23). Giovanni's comments are a useful reminder that, though the Black Liberation Army did name a loose network of militants during an era of increased state violence and a new iteration of policing and imprisonment focused on the warehousing and premature death of Black persons, the 'Black Liberation Army' also existed for the agents of state violence as a general pretext for counterinsurgency. For the mass media, this figure justified state repression in the same way as the enemies of the state that preceded and followed the BLA.

¹³³ "Miss Chesimard [sic] Flees New Jersey, Helped By 3 Armed 'Visitors.'" *New York Times*, 3 November 1979. (Elsewhere in the *Times*, the Chrysler corporation sought a \$3 billion relief package from the federal government. Park Chung-hee, the long-time US-backed military dictator of South Korea, was laid to rest after he was assassinated weeks earlier. The people of Bolivia launched a general strike following a 1 November coup d'état; the coup failed weeks later. US unemployment rose slightly pushed primarily by losses among Black industrial workers. Mick Jagger and his wife,

the way, Shakur was shuttled back and forth between New Jersey and New York as she faced ten separate indictments and was tried seven times before she was convicted in New Jersey on 25 March 1977.

Before, during, and after her trials in New Jersey, Shakur was held in solitary confinement in the Middlesex County Jail (a men's jail) and, after her conviction, in Yardville Youth Reception and Correctional Institution (a men's prison). At that time, Shakur was the only woman ever to be held in one of New Jersey's men's prisons.¹³⁴ Shakur was transferred to Yardville on 7 April 1977, following her conviction in late March 1977. By the next week, Shakur's legal team filed suit for her to be moved out of Yardville and back to Clinton.¹³⁵ A federal judge denied Shakur's request a month later. Shakur's team appealed the decision to the Third Circuit Court, and their affirmation of the lower court's ruling was handed down in February of 1978.¹³⁶ In a later interview, Shakur described her imprisonment at Yardville:

After I was convicted in 1977 I was taken to [Clinton] prison for women for about a week, and after that I was transferred to Yardville, which is an all-men's prison. Not a jail, a prison. They gave me a booklet: "These are the rules for the New Women's Unit at Yardville Prison." I was the only woman in the New Women's Unit and they told me that I was going to be there for the rest of my life. They got a prison psychologist to testify that I was a hardened revolutionary and that no amount of time in solitary confinement would bother my mental health whatsoever. I was kept in this—it was like a cage—within a completely isolated section of the prison. There were two guards in front of the cell at all times, lights at all times.¹³⁷

Bianca, announced their divorce. And the American Stock Exchange won state funding for a new headquarters in lower Manhattan, which several state legislators panned as "a government subsidy for a bastion of capitalism.") On Shakur's escape, see Burrough (2016).

¹³⁴ See Lennox Hinds' 'Foreward' in Shakur (1987), as well as Clarke (1977), Lynch (1978), and Women Against Prison (1975).

¹³⁵ "Suit Seeks Transfer for Mrs. Chesimard," *New York Times* 12 April 1977, pg. 71. (Elsewhere in the *Times*, French officials admitted to sending military advisors into the Republic of Zaire, as fighting intensified in the country's mineral-rich Katanga province. The United States delegate to the United Nations warned against undue paranoia regarding the presence and influence of Communists in Africa. And down in column five, below the fold, a report on the "Growing Part-Time Work Force" in the American economy. "Part times are most obvious selling clothing at Sears, or dispensing hamburgers at McDonald's. But they are also busily punching keyboards in offices, teaching in universities, selling insurance or standing watch as security guards." Referring to their growing importance: "The implications of this swing have just begun to be studied but they may be significant. Part times, for example, provide a low-paid but eager work force, which delights employers. They are hard to organize, which disgruntles unions.")

¹³⁶ *Chesimard v. Mulcahy*, 570 F.2d 1184, 1187 (3d Cir.1978).

¹³⁷ Shakur (1993) 214.

Both the fact of Shakur’s imprisonment in otherwise sex-segregated facilities, and the forms of violence she magnetized—as a “terrorist,” as an enemy of the state, as a “cop-killer,” and as a Black woman—within those spaces, call to mind Patrice Douglass’s reading of Shakur’s eponymous 1987 autobiography: “the reader is confronted with the contradictions of experiencing empathy for Shakur as a Black woman subjected to unfathomable brutality, and reckoning with how the coordinates of gender are undone in the case of Blackness.”¹³⁸ I have argued elsewhere that “Blackness disrupts the capacity for these categories [gender and sexuality] to form a body.”¹³⁹ On that occasion, I was responding to Zakiyyah Jackson’s argument that, “the violence that produces blackness necessitates that from the existential vantage point of black lived experience, gender and sexuality lose their coherence as normative categories.”¹⁴⁰ These arguments each harken back to the moment in Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* when Hartman outlines “the contingency of woman as a category” in the violences that animate the legal regime of slavery.¹⁴¹ Telescoping further back, these formulations each tarry in some way with Hortense Spillers’ formulation of “ungendering” in her “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” For literary critic Samantha Pinto, “[‘Mama’s Baby’] now undergirds much of what we might think of as the main thread of Black feminist historical and literary/cultural studies practice—that the language of gender, namely the designation ‘woman,’ does not necessarily include Black women.”¹⁴²

But if Blackness names a crisis of coherence for normative categories, for the coordinates of gender, and for the capacity of what Sylvia Wynter calls “the genres of Man” to form a body, what does this mean for Black studies, for Black Study, or for the project of a feminist Black radicalism?¹⁴³ We might read the contemporary critical concern with delineating genres of being as attempts to

¹³⁸ Douglass (2020) 91. See also, Douglass (2018).

¹³⁹ Bliss (2015) 88.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson (2011) 359.

¹⁴¹ Hartman (1997) 101.

¹⁴² Pinto (2017) 26.

¹⁴³ See Wynter (1990) and (2003), and Thomas (2006).

account for the productive force of violence. Or, attempts to understand how a constellation of violences, what we briefly call racial slavery, *made* a world. For better or for worse, these critical gestures tend to be linked to desires to make other worlds. At least, to break this world.

Shakur's cases here become exemplary iterations of the relationship between theorizations of gender and theorizations of Blackness. On its face, we might read Shakur's imprisonment in men's facilities as instances of Spillers' "ungendering." The cultural apparatus surrounding feminine engenderment is shorn away in an act of misgendering by the State. But a theorization along these lines relies on a figure of gender as coherent, stable, and fixed against an ungended Blackness as incoherent, fluid, and fugitive. Gender in formulations like these is a prison for the soul. Movement is freedom. Freedom is movement. In *Black on Both Sides*, C. Riley Snorton provocatively offers, in his reading of racial and gender "passing" in antebellum narratives of escape, that "ungendered blackness provided the grounds for (trans) performances for freedom."¹⁴⁴ This chapter will argue that binaristic accounts of the relationship between gender and ungending, where gendering and ungending name mirrored and symmetrical processes, fail to capture the work of gender, and so also offer only a limited account of ungending. I will argue that Shakur's cases are exemplary for the ways they reveal the violences that precede and exceed the violence of gendered subjectivity.

In the next section, I will examine how Shakur herself theorized the relationships between Blackness, gender, and violence during her imprisonment in the 1970s. The following section will contextualize Spillers' formulation of ungending with respect to contemporaneous feminist theorizing around gender. It will also posit ungending not as the *loss* of gender, but as a species of *lack* or an originary positivity. The final section will return to Shakur's imprisonment at Yardville and offer a reading of Shakur's denied application for a preliminary injunction against her continued imprisonment there. In each case, a violence that appears to exceed accounting reveals itself in an

¹⁴⁴ Snorton (2017) 58.

ontological dimension, as productive of an ontic phenomenon (here gender and the law). My reading of Spillers resists taking ‘ungendering’ simply as the loss or theft of a pre-existing quality called ‘gender’ with respect to the enslaved. Rather, ‘ungendering’ names a process ontologically prior to gendering that produces gender both as binary and spectrum. Likewise, my reading of the Shakur case reads the violence of imprisonment and court not as aberrant but, as Shakur tracks in the continuity of violence across civil society, as the condition of possibility for all particular social structures. Blackness, then, does not simply name that which undoes the coherence of gender as a normativizing ordering of bodies—in the prison, on the street, or on the page of a legal decision—but the ontological precondition for (the) law (of gender).

Women in Prison

In a December 1975 interview with the activist group, Women Against Prisons, Shakur responded to the charge that the women’s liberation movement had produced new levels of violence among women, saying, “it’s a screen to avert us from seeing the violence of society as a whole. Women have been raped throughout history and now when we fight back, now that we have the consciousness to fight back – they call us violent. To blame the Women’s Movement for creating a violent monster is insane. The violent monster is the American government.”¹⁴⁵ For Shakur, the spectacularization of (women’s) resistance normalizes the structuring and longstanding violences of “society as a whole.” Resistance, individual or collective, becomes legible only as criminality and monstrosity, and, at the same moment, oppression is rendered illegible as such.¹⁴⁶ Asked about the necessary conditions for building trust between Black women and white women, Shakur responds, “Practice.” She adds, “It would be insane for Black people not to have distrust of white people. The only way that [mistrust]

¹⁴⁵ Women Against Prisons (1976) 4.

¹⁴⁶ See Hartman (1997), especially chapter 3.

can be replaced by trust is when we see white people struggling against the same enemy. If we all can say, 'I prefer death to controlled liberty,' then we can be one."¹⁴⁷ Shakur's distinction here is instructive. The great life-breaking machine of modernity does not produce free, complete, or whole subjects, the citizen-subjects of liberal freedom. Shakur articulates the unfreedoms of this existence as a controlled liberty. The pathway to multiracial coalition is choosing an opening onto death over a liberty founded in domination.

In a 1978 article for *The Black Scholar*, "Women in Prison: How We Are," written during her incarceration on Riker's Island, Shakur describes the site of the prison as one impression point along a continuum of institutions that position Black women within a web of violences:

For many [women in prison] the cells are not much different from the tenements, the shooting galleries and the welfare hotels they live in on the street. Sick call is no different from the clinic or the hospital emergency room. The fights are the same except they are less dangerous. The police are the same. The alienation is the same. The racism is the same. The sexism is the same. The drugs are the same and the system is the same. Riker's Island is just another institution. In childhood school was their prison, or youth houses or reform schools or children shelters or foster homes or mental hospitals or drug programs and they see all institutions as indifferent to their needs, yet necessary to their survival.¹⁴⁸

For Shakur, all of the institutional formations of racial capitalism are variations on the theme of imprisonment. And this extends to the ways care, companionship, and relationality are institutionalized across the lifeworld.

"Days are spent in pleasant distractions: soap operas, prison love affairs, card playing and game playing."¹⁴⁹ Shakur's essay is an ersatz autoethnography. She curates prison life with a sociologist's eye. As a politico, she writes from a position of solidarity with the women imprisoned at Riker's. As an ethnographer, we note her unhappiness. The ways she recognizes some deficit in the political education of imprisoned women, but also the tones of her disappointment. She may also have been

¹⁴⁷ *Women Against Prisons* (1976) 4.

¹⁴⁸ Shakur (1978) 13.

¹⁴⁹ Shakur (1978) 11.

imprisoned at Riker's five years earlier, in July of 1973, when incarcerated women initiated a hunger strike, "demanding, among other things, a legal library, an end to massive and lax prescription of 'diagnostic' medication, decent food, and limitation of solitary confinement to three days."¹⁵⁰ The prison administrators broke the strike on its sixth day, shuttling its leaders across different housing units and solitary confinement.¹⁵¹ By then, the strike had been publicized in New York's alternative press, and the strikers won several concessions, including a legal library. By 1978, the prison's creative writing programs had already been slashed. And, on Shakur's observation, only a small number of incarcerated women at Rikers were involved in the study of the available law books.

Shakur spends more time discussing another of the pleasant distractions available to women in prison—love affairs. Same-gender relationships in Riker's were almost never understood through the language of the feminist and lesbian movements. "Most, if not all, of the homosexual relationships here involve role playing. The majority of relationships are either asexual or semi-sexual. [...] Basically the women are not looking for sex. They are looking for love, for concern and companionship. For relief from the overwhelming sense of isolation and solitude that pervades each of us."¹⁵² On this score, Shakur is naming dynamics that also exist outside the confines of the prison—where sex is the price paid for moments away from a pervasive alienation. Shakur the sociologist of incarceration also notes the internal dynamics of these role plays. "Women who are 'aggressive' or who play the masculine roles are referred to as butches, bulldaggers or stud broads. They are always in demand because they are always in the minority. Women who are 'passive,' or who play feminine roles are referred to as fems."¹⁵³ Within the dynamics of butches and fems, Shakur sees "the most oppressive,

¹⁵⁰ Muske (1978) 30.

¹⁵¹ Too often, work on incarceration focuses on the immobility or constrained mobilities of incarcerated people. But incarceration is also interwoven with state technologies of logistics, and the movement of persons across and within institutions.

¹⁵² Shakur (1978) 11.

¹⁵³ Shakur (1978) 11.

exploitative aspect of a sexist society.”¹⁵⁴ She observes the violences committed by butch women against fems, the ways butch women attach themselves to fems with the most resources or the most access to contraband, and the ways butch women demand domestic labor from their partners. But Shakur also notes that butch women are not always born, as it were, but made. “Once in prison changes in roles are common. Many women who are strictly heterosexual in the street become butch in prison. ‘Fems’ often create butches by convincing an inmate that she would make a ‘cute butch.’”¹⁵⁵ Women in prison experience performances of gender as preconditions for sexual relationality. In this way, they are not unlike their contemporaries outside of the prison. Gender is a methodology for navigating the messy and vexing problem of sexuality.

Un/Gendering

If *Dasein* as such belongs to neither of the two sexes, that doesn’t mean that its being is deprived of sex. On the contrary, here one must think of a pre-differential, rather a pre-dual, sexuality—which doesn’t necessarily mean unitary, homogenous, or undifferentiated.

Jacques Derrida, ‘*Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*’¹⁵⁶

There is an implicit agreement across different discourses that to think about Blackness is not to think about ‘gender,’ and I want to track the different directions from which that conclusion is made. Non-Black feminist discourses rely on a conceptualization of gender as process or object of study that crowds out an ungendered Blackness or a Black study of gender. Black feminist discourses, notably across the oeuvre of Hortense Spillers, offer a positive theorization of ungendering as that upon which gendering gains its coherence. The task as I see it is to think gendering and ungendering together without reducing them to a binary opposition. Or, without reading the nature of the opposition as symmetrical, as mirrored images of each other.

¹⁵⁴ Shakur (1978) 12.

¹⁵⁵ Shakur (1978) 12.

¹⁵⁶ Derrida (1983) 72.

Such a reading of ungendering can lead in (at least) two unhelpful directions. On one hand, it can produce readings of ungendering as a variation on the theme of gender, as a particular mode of gendering—e.g., white women experience gendering as a set of imperatives regarding bodily comportment and social, cultural, and political injunctions, and Black women experience ‘ungendering’ insofar as they experience a different set of imperatives and injunctions. This quasi-social constructionist reading of ungendering, I will show, misses the radical revision of the feminist project that Spillers produces in her theorization. On the other hand, ungendering can be read as a reversal of the gender priority, a way to deny differentiation as such within the field of racial Blackness. This becomes a variation on the argument that racism must take political priority over sexism, rather than that Blackness is *ontologically* (rather than politically) prior to and productive of gender. Blackness exceeds and produces something called ‘gender,’ just as Blackness exceeds and produces something called ‘race.’ We arrive here at Jared Sexton’s preliminary definition of race as “a production of bodily (not biological) difference at the nexus of *violence and sexuality*, where the heuristic distinction between the latter terms is often difficult to retain at the level of lived experience.”¹⁵⁷

Ungendering names something prior to gendering, that gives rise to gendering, but what ‘gender’ and gendering refer to are not themselves self-evident, and different feminist discourses offer different theorizations on gender. I want to focus briefly on a particular post-structuralist genealogy of the term that has focused on de-naturalizing gender. Or, rather than a ‘genealogy,’ I want to trace, in broad outline, a narrative of gender’s career as a concept. “Gender” shifted from the *essential* and *immutable* expression of a pre-existing biological sex to *contingent cultural* expressions of that biological fact. This sex/gender divide was taken up in fields ranging from sexology and sociology to anthropology and psychoanalysis.¹⁵⁸ ‘Gender’ itself might refer to modes of comportment; practices

¹⁵⁷ Sexton (2008) 9; emphasis added.

¹⁵⁸ See among others, Scott (1986), Haraway (1991), and Butler (2006).

individual and collective, micro and macro; a teleological or non-teleological process of self-development or becoming; etc.... The next turn of the screw was for the category of sex to shift from an uncontested biological *fact* referring to some prior ontological ground (the existence of sexual categories) to yet another social-cultural-political construction. Sex, then, is no less culturally constructed than gender.¹⁵⁹

At each stage along the way there is a problematization of gender for the Black subject. If gender refers to a particular expression of one's sex (biological-essential or constructed-cultural), then it can be said that the Black subject is prevented in various ways from attaining that expression or having it socially recognized and sanctioned. But at what point do these practices become *ungendering*? Approaching Spillers' formulation requires a further trip down the path laid by a feminist psychoanalysis. In Joan Scott's work on a psychoanalytically-informed feminist historiography and theory, she offers a useful, tentative, definition of gender 'not [as] the assignment of roles to physically different bodies, but [as] the attribution of meaning to something that always eludes definition.'¹⁶⁰ (6). This something that always eludes definition is sexual difference, or sexuation, Lacan's conceptualization of how 'the subject itself is formed through a subjection *to* sexual difference.'¹⁶¹ On this point, Jared Sexton offers a useful gloss of the Lacanian problematic:

sexual difference concerns how one takes up a relation to *jouissance*—the insufferable tension of enjoyment, the ineffable, pulsating force of prelinguistic Being left over by our 'symbolic castration': sexuation involves choosing sides in a discrepancy of modes of enjoyment. Of course, as psychoanalytic experience has shown, whether one takes up the masculine or feminine position cannot be determined by recourse to any biological data or social convention.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ In "The Sexual Compact," Joan Copjec (2012) marks an important shift in the theorization of sexual difference that occurs in across the 1980s and shapes the field in the following decades. After a brief period of détente between feminism and psychoanalysis, feminist theory shifted again away from a psychoanalytic account of *sexual* difference in favor of an account of the techniques and technologies of *gender*. For Copjec, the more compelling question for theory is not the movement from one to two, or from two to two-thousand, but the movement from zero to one. Feminist theorizing had shifted focus onto a field of multiplicity without asking after the invention of One. And what is lost in this shift is precisely sexuality.

¹⁶⁰ Scott (2011) 6.

¹⁶¹ Butler (1992) 140.

¹⁶² Sexton (2008) 181.

Sexuation refers to how subjects come to inhabit a position within the symbolic vis-à-vis *jouissance*, and it is absolutely and essentially unconcerned with matters of biology and sociology—how one is embodied or how one inhabits the social world has no essential bearing on whether one takes up a masculine or feminine psychic position. The machinations of sexual difference, then, are that which always elude definition and that which gender attempts to force into coherent form. As Scott writes, “Gender... is the study of the relationship between the normative and the psychic. Gender consists of the historically specific and finally uncontrollable articulations that aim to settle the confusions associated with sexual difference [sexuation] by directing fantasy to some political or social end: group mobilization, nation building, support for a specific family structure, ethnic consolidation, or religious practice.”¹⁶³ This is the definition of gendering—as a mode of always and necessarily incomplete and unsuccessful meaning-making rather than any number of conceptualizations of gender as the meaning thing itself—that allows us to approach ungendering, particularly insofar as ungendering marks the disavowed and unapproached source of gendering’s meaning-making capacity.

Gender appears as a human category in the wake of the presence of the Human as universal(izable) category, which is to say that it arises in the shadow cast by racial slavery. We may follow Spillers and begin from this “beginning,” with racial chattel slavery in (at least) its career in the “New World” as “a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation.”¹⁶⁴ And, along the same lines that the Human and the Slave do not constitute a symmetrical opposition (or even a *binary* opposition when the relations of settler colonialism are included), gendering and ungendering do not form a neat pairing. I want to linger on this point for a moment, because it cannot be said that the process called gendering produces a coherent or “whole” subject, or that there is “successful” and/or “complete” gendering, and that ungendering simply names an unsuccessful and/or incomplete

¹⁶³ Scott (2011) 20-21.

¹⁶⁴ Spillers (1987) 68.

gendering that produces an incoherent or fractured subject.¹⁶⁵ This misrecognizes both processes. A gendered subject is never “successfully” or “completely” gendered because “gender” does not name an attainable or coherent categorization of human being. Gendering and ungendering do not function as a fork in the road of subject formation. If “gendering” names the fantasies that accrue around the incoherence of sexuation, then we might say, provisionally, that “ungendering” names an encounter with sexuation the results of which are not sutured by a collective fantasy. More pointedly, the ungendered subject is that around which Human fantasies of gender—i.e., everything from the family to the nation to the global economy and the project of the human sciences—take their incomplete(able) form(s).

Variations on “ungendering” recur throughout Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987), but prefigurations of this formulation appear at least as early as 1985.¹⁶⁶ To some degree, “ungendering” in its earliest formulations is linked to the politics of complexion. In her review of Barbara Christian’s *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985), Spillers spends time with the figure of the “tragic mulatta” that Christian traces through the itineraries of Frances E. W. Harper, Jesse Fauset, and Nella Larsen. At one level, Spillers contends, the light complexion of, for instance, Laurentine Strange in Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), works to “[repeat] certain conventions of the romantic novel.” However,

if we go beyond the surface, though, and ask deeper questions of Harper’s, Fauset’s and Larsen’s characters, we might well discover a concealed structure of traits that would *designate “black” and “female” as an impossible simultaneous pairing*; because “blackness” or the masking of color has been eliminated, the “tragic mulatta” allows us to see more fully, I believe, how *“femaleness,” as a category of social production, has never assimilated to “black” and vice versa*. By focusing on the problem of the characterization of the “tragic mulatta,” Christian opens up the borders of a prior closure; Afro-

¹⁶⁵ Indeed, in the closing chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (2006) draws our attention to the necessary failure internal to gender: “The injunction *to be* a gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated” (199).

¹⁶⁶ It is the task of another piece of writing to link Spillers’ formulation to earlier work by, among others, Toni Cade Bambara, who articulates a figure of “Blackhood” as the possible “neuter” alternative to womanhood and manhood. See Bambara (2006) 109.

American writers in our time have taken flight from this thematic with the speed and intensity of lightning.¹⁶⁷ To the degree that “racial ambiguity,” itself a status that shifts across time and context, marks distance from Blackness, it also permits access to the impossible promises of femininity. (And Spillers notes, too, that in the moment of the 1980s, the impossible simultaneity of Blackness and gender was not a topic for tarrying with.) Similarly, in her own reading of Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953), Spillers draws attention to the remarkable everydayness of Brooks’ heroine being “black-skinned.”¹⁶⁸ Spillers sits with Maud Martha, left by her husband alone on a bench at the Foxy Cats Ball. Maud Martha’s husband is enamored with class aspirations that run contrary to his wife’s hue. For Spillers, Maud Martha sitting on the bench at the Foxy Cat Ball brings us to the question and the challenge of how to “break the subject up into little compartments of stress.”¹⁶⁹ That is, when Maud Martha is sitting on the bench, “trying not to show the inferiority she did not feel,” we cannot, ultimately, disentangle the axes along which she is injured.¹⁷⁰ “The extra-text that speaks loudly, even when none of the agents mouth it dramatically, and the text of Maud Martha’s consciousness are interlarded threads cut across the same bias.”¹⁷¹ In its original publication, Spillers’ essay moves on from here directly. But in its 2003 republication, the text breaks open precisely here. Spillers introduces a new passage here, referring to work that was ongoing in 1985 and 2003 and into the present:

The “extra-text” to which I refer, examined at greater length in an ongoing work, traces the historical implications of African-American women’s community as a special instance of the “ungendered” female, as a vestibular subject of culture, and as an instance of the “flesh” as a primary or first-level “body.” Because African-American women in their historic status represent the *only* community of American women *legally* denied the mother’s access to her child, their relationship to the prerogatives of “gender” must be reexamined as the select stratagem of an ethnic solidarity; of the

¹⁶⁷ Spillers (1985b) 9; emphasis added.

¹⁶⁸ Spillers (1985a) 235.

¹⁶⁹ Spillers (1985a) 245.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Spillers (1985a) 246.

¹⁷¹ Spillers (1985a) 245.

dominant community's strict exploitation of the gender rule as an instrument of a supremacist program.¹⁷²

The extra-text of Maud Martha's complexion, as an insufficient synecdoche for her Blackness, brings us to the historical question of 'the "ungendered" female,' and the relationship between femininity, maternity, and world-making forms of violence.

Here we arrive at the text of "Mama's Baby." It is in the context of denuded relations of force that Spillers introduces ungendering. A feminist encounter with the archive of slavery brings the reader to historical and discursive scenes of Black women as objects of an other's violence. "This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh "ungendered"—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations."¹⁷³ By implication, "protected" and "gendered" lie beside each other in a chain of equivalence. "Protected" implies the many constituent threads of a social structure, not the least of which is law. The essay draws our attention to a legal regime organized around the wanton openness of Blackness to violence. The legal regime cuts across the criminal code to the entire arena of property and contract. The next moment in the essay where "ungendered" appears is after Spillers' reading of the famous etching of the interior of a slave ship called the Brookes. Spillers draws attention to the proportions of space allowed for female and male enslaved persons. "These scaled inequalities complement the commanding terms of the dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing project of African persons" at work in the Trans-Atlantic trade.¹⁷⁴ In this usage, ungendering is part of a larger program by which African persons also experience a loss of humanity and of personhood.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Spillers (2003) 149. A note within this passage leads the reader to two other studies, both originally published in 1987, "Mama's Baby," and "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor." The latter study is focused primarily on the question of "race-mixture."

¹⁷³ Spillers (1987) 68.

¹⁷⁴ Spillers (1987) 72.

¹⁷⁵ We note here the etymology of "person" as the "mask that adheres to the face of the actor, but without being identified with it" (Esposito 2012, 8). Esposito's text also draws attention to the vexed genealogy of personhood through Roman law, and its place in determining "the most decisive distinction: the one that characterizes the slave, situated as he [sic] is right in the middle, or in the passage, between person and thing, and thus definable both as a living thing and a reified person" (9).

The modes of openness characterizing the lifeworld of the enslaved also encompass the space of relationality. In her reading of the narrative of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent, Spillers clues into the narrator's openness to violation from both men and women. "Though this is barely hinted on the surface of the text, we might say that Brent, between the lines of her narrative, demarcates a sexuality that is neuter-bound, inasmuch as it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male/female." The terrain of sexual violence across the color line (or, the terrain of a sexuality under a total asymmetry of agency) includes the entire gender spectrum. Spillers adds, "since the gendered female *exists for* the male, we might suggest that the ungendered female—in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another *woman* or man."¹⁷⁶ This passage finds Spillers taking seriously a tradition of feminist theorizing on the relational weave that produces "the gendered female." This figure, "the gendered female," implies not only Spillers' "*ungendered* female," available to a pansexual violence, but a "female" that is *not* gendered.¹⁷⁷

It is to this end that we might read Spillers when she writes that "we would gain, in short, the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture."¹⁷⁸ A political project aimed at ending slavery as a structure of irrelationality, rather than as set of unfree labor practices, might produce this potential for differentiation as it finds expression across multiple venues. Spillers points out that such a project might "appear reactionary, if not dumb" at a moment when feminist discourses were concerned with a thoroughgoing dissolution of the gender concept itself. But the deconstructionist position towards gender is not necessarily itself an affirmation or embrace of ungendering. Indeed, for all the gender trouble of the past decades and their assaults on binaristic gender thinking, we have

¹⁷⁶ Spillers (1987) 77; emphasis in original. In the 2003 republication of "Mama's Baby," the italicized words change. 'Exists' remains italicized, but 'for' and 'woman' are now rendered without italics.

¹⁷⁷ Though Spillers' only gestures in this direction, the possibilities of this other figure are explored by Oyèwùmí (1997), Wynter (1990), and Boyce-Davies (2018).

¹⁷⁸ Spillers (1987) 66.

little show for it besides a proliferation of normative and normalizing gender categories. Or, a growing recognition of just how diverse are the practices and performances that occur under the umbrella of the so-called gender binary. The project of a radical white feminist gender deconstruction is still something different from an embrace of the ungendering constitutive of Blackness. The dissolution of the gender concept never arrives, and we are left with gender caught in an elliptical orbit around Blackness, which is to say the fantasy around which gender coheres in the first place.

Spillers' *potential* for differentiation is something altogether different from Butler's recognition of already-existing but currently non-normative genres and practices of being.¹⁷⁹ How are they different? Under the conditions of Middle Passage and racialized chattel slavery, "the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join."¹⁸⁰ That is, it is specification and differentiation *as such* that are foreclosed for the Black subject. These modes of specification—"biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological"—are, for the Black subject, an absence that function as the scaffolding upon which Human gendering finds its form. In this way, "gender, or sex-role assignment, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff, sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge for the African-American female in this historic instance, except indirectly" at the site of a reproduction without futurity.¹⁸¹

Here we might draw out the question of differentiation through Jacques Derrida's exploration of the place(lessness) of sexual difference in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Derrida remarks upon

¹⁷⁹ For Butler (2006), the political "task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible" (203).

Butler (2006) 203.

¹⁸⁰ Spillers (1987) 67.

¹⁸¹ Spillers (1987) 79.

the near absence of sexual difference in Heidegger's long explication of *Dasein*, finding, however, that it is precisely *in* this term, "*Dasein*," that a reading of the relation between sexual difference and ontological difference is available in Heidegger. Derrida tracks, in lectures concurrent with the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's commentary on choosing the term '*Dasein*' as his object of study, "for the being which constitutes this analytic, the title 'man' has not been chosen, but the *neutral* title '*das Dasein*'";¹⁸² indeed, for Heidegger, this "neutrality means also that *Dasein* is neither of the two sexes."¹⁸³ It is this *neutrality* of the term to which Derrida draws our attention. *Dasein*, as neutralized, as a-sexualized, is not, on Derrida's reading, the absence of gender or sexual difference, but "the positive and powerful source of every possible 'sexuality.'"¹⁸⁴

In her reading of this "asexual neutrality" articulated by Derrida, Andrea Hurst argues against reading sexual difference (gendering) as simply "opposed" to asexual neutrality (ungendering). "Rather," Hurst observes, "they are on the same side in the sense that asexual neutrality becomes the condition/power whose erasure/effacement/forgetting first makes the sexual binary possible."¹⁸⁵ Ungendering, on this reading, possesses what Derrida calls an "originary positivity," a power or potential for the production of ontic difference. Ungendering, or Derrida's "originary positivity, at the ontological level, is the condition of the possibility of ontic difference rather than *vice versa*."¹⁸⁶ The specific sites of ontic differentiation to which Spillers draws our attention, the "biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological," are all exceeded by a prior force, what Derrida calls, following Heidegger, ontological difference, and what Spillers calls, in the context of racial slavery, ungendering.

¹⁸² Quoted in Derrida (1983) 69; emphasis added.

¹⁸³ Derrida (1983) 69.

¹⁸⁴ Derrida (1983) 72. What Derrida here calls 'sexuality' maps more closely to 'gender' in its contemporary usage.

¹⁸⁵ Hurst (2008) 246.

¹⁸⁶ Hurst (2008) 246.

The question of reproduction that Spillers draws our attention to is also key here. “In the historic formation to which I point,” Spillers writes, “motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they *seem* to speak the same language.”¹⁸⁷ If (part of) the work of white feminist theorizing to that point had been to reveal the violence of a patriarchalized maternity, then Spillers offers how that violence which accrues around female subjects is preceded by a violence that disarticulates completely the maternal presumption. And just as the maternal function is denied the Black subject by a violence that precedes the violence that positions non-Black female subjects as instances of maternity, so too is the domestic space foreclosed as a site for the production of gender as a social practice. “I would suggest that ‘gendering’ takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes. Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those persons it ‘covers’ in a particular place.”¹⁸⁸ The *domestic* should not be here confused for this or that specific *home* or family unit. It is, instead, a metaphor for the shared space of fantasy production. The violence of racial chattel slavery is that which casts the Black (in its collective articulation) outside of the sphere of domesticity, even and especially at the same time that Black *people* inhabit the domestic’s various incidents.

I have mentioned already that the move towards gender dissolution revolves around Blackness without threatening the relative stability of its subjective coherence. For Spillers, “this problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject.”¹⁸⁹ That is, a politics

¹⁸⁷ Spillers (1987) 78.

¹⁸⁸ Spillers (1987) 72.

¹⁸⁹ Spillers (1987) 80.

that takes ungendering seriously, which is to say a politics emerging from a feminist Black radicalism, is not aimed at sloughing off various contingent markers of femininity or masculinity, but at “*claiming the monstrosity*” of an ungendered Black femininity.¹⁹⁰ It could be that we as yet cannot properly theorize monstrosity, or that monstrosity continues to elude definition.

Appeals, Decisions

Shakur appeared as a crisis for the authorities who produced her as monstrous. Having spent years rendering her as the ultimate danger to society in the hope of landing a conviction, any conviction, they were left with the predicament of incarcerating a monster. New Jersey’s only prison for women, the facility in Clinton, had only one maximum security wing, holding seventeen persons captive. Shakur’s presence there brought along a raft of new, armed guards. The other inmates initiated a work stoppage to protest the new guards. Though striking a tough posture in the press, asserting that jailers don’t take orders from their charges, prison authorities initiated her transfer to Yardville in April of 1977.

At that time, her legal team filed an application for a preliminary injunction against her continuing to be held in Yardville.¹⁹¹ The application was rejected by the District Court of New Jersey, and the decision of the lower court was affirmed by the US Third Circuit Court of Appeals on 3 February 1978. In the interim, Shakur was transferred once again to New York to stand trial for previous charges that were eventually dismissed and returned at the conclusion of that legal action to Yardville. Shakur’s appeal rested on several claims:

- 1) that state law and custom gave her justifiable expectation, and hence a protected liberty interest, in being placed in a prison for women, an expectation of which she was deprived without due process of law.

¹⁹⁰ Spillers (1987) 80.

¹⁹¹ Williams, Evelyn. *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African-American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. Lincoln, NE: IUUniverse.com, 2000, p. 163.

- 2) that her confinement alone was an illegal infringement on her freedom of association.
- 3) that her indefinite solitary confinement constituted cruel and unusual punishment.
- 4) that her confinement arbitrarily denied her access to the rehabilitative facilities of the prison system, in violation of the equal protection clause, and
- 5) that she was being treated differently from other prisoners on the basis of her prior statements and associations in violation of her rights under the First and Fourteenth Amendments.¹⁹²

Of these several claims, the only claim the appeals court sought to contradict was the final one. The previous several claims were accepted by the court but did not constitute wrongs to be redressed. The case raises the issue of the functions and capacity of state violence both in how its violence can work in agreement with rather than in contradiction to the claims of the victims of state violence, and in how the state worked to un-make Shakur as a female subject. Each of these points, furthermore, helps to illustrate the work of ungendering in the production of persons as Black.

Returning to Shakur's appeal, the court fundamentally agreed with the first point raised by Shakur's counsel; that is, the court's violence was not articulated as a contradiction to Shakur but as an agreement with her. The court's decision argued that while Shakur's rights *weren't not violated*, that the case was not so bad as to constitute an injury. Her rights were violated, but only briefly; her rights were violated, but her cell was "relatively commodious," her rights were violated, but she was temporarily in New York.¹⁹³ Shakur's appeals to the first, eighth, and fourteenth amendments were rejected on the basis that New Jersey state authorities assured the court that "Shakur will be provided with a hearing by the New Jersey prison authorities within seventy-two hours of her return to New Jersey custody, and with a hearing before Judge Fisher within forty-eight hours of such return, at the latest. Under these circumstances, we cannot say that she has demonstrated any probability that she is being or will be deprived of a liberty interest without due process of law."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Chesimard v. Mulcahy, 570 F.2d 1184, 1187 (3d Cir.1978)

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

The court could find “no reversible error” in the District Court’s decision because Shakur faced only “a brief deprivation” of her rights. *If* the actions of the state constitute a wrong, the court states, “any such denial will only be a short one” and does not amount to an “irreparable injury.”¹⁹⁵ That is, insofar as the court is *unable* (or *unwilling*) to provide a legal remedy for the violation of Shakur’s rights, it obviates its very capacity to provide a legal remedy. The court itself undergoes a transformation in the face of Shakur’s claims: rather than deny the claim for redress made upon the court, the court denies its ability to remedy based on an economy of scale, violations too small for the court to act. The court’s reasoning here is that although the state’s actions couldn’t be said to not violate Shakur’s rights, it nonetheless was not demonstrated that the state’s actions were *enough* to constitute a violation of her rights. We find a distinction of scale rather than of kind. We find here that the court does not consider the force of the state’s action to be such to be an injury. Indeed, the court describes Shakur’s accommodations at Yardville in detail:

According to the findings of the trial judge who personally examined the facility, Shakur was confined in the largest cell in Yardville, measuring 109 square feet. The cell, which was a converted office, contained tables and chairs and a radio. A television set in a larger adjoining room was available for Shakur’s use, and she had access to both telephone and mail. The windows of the cell could be opened to admit fresh air, and Shakur was permitted to exercise in a large gymnasium. In addition, she was permitted to see attorneys in the evenings and has retained her own books, papers and clothing.¹⁹⁶

The conditions of Shakur’s imprisonment are rendered in terms of square footage, access to furniture and ‘fresh air,’ and access to a ‘large’ exercise area. The language of scale saturates the court’s reasoning on these points. The size of Shakur’s accommodations eclipses the scale of the violation of her rights. Just as the state had argued that, as a ‘hardened revolutionary,’ ‘no amount of time in solitary

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

confinement would bother [her] mental health whatsoever,' we find in the court's decision that Shakur is a site upon which wrongs cannot become injuries.¹⁹⁷

The question of Shakur's right to association and of her being singled out for special punishment raises the issue of the mutability of Shakur's gender status before the State's structures of violence. In the court's reasoning, the violence ascribed to Shakur's person un-makes her as a female subject. Her removal from Clinton was premised on "the violent nature of Shakur's crime, and on her connection with the 'Black Liberation Army,' a self-described 'urban guerilla' organization."¹⁹⁸ The selective treatment of Shakur, based on her political affiliation, does not constitute differential treatment "because of hostility to her political views" because "there is unrefuted evidence that Shakur is a member of a self-described group of 'urban guerillas'" and is thus not "being punished for the exercise of her first amendment rights," but is "being subjected to close supervision in the interest of prison security."¹⁹⁹

Security replaces scale here. A footnote informs that "Clinton is a prison camp surrounded by only wire fences. It has no guard towers"; the "presence of additional armed guards" at Clinton led to "a work stoppage among the other prisoners" and Shakur was transferred "to relieve this situation."²⁰⁰ Shakur's person is not that upon which gender is written, according to a particular feminist understanding of the social and cultural life of gender, but that upon which threat, danger, and violence are written—a threat that could not be contained by the women's facility, and a person that was unincorporable within the men's facility. The court says little about Shakur's segregation within the men's

¹⁹⁷ Something similar was at work in the 1980 case of the Black insurgent political prisoner Safiya Bukhari, who filed suit against a Virginia correctional facility after serving ten and a half months in isolation and 26 months in maximum security after an attempted escape (other escaped prisoners averaged about 13 weeks isolation and about 15 weeks in maximum security). The court ruled that Bukhari's treatment was legal by dint of her "alleged political associations with the Black Liberation Army." Shakur's escape in November 1979 was introduced as evidence supporting Bukhari's continued imprisonment in maximum security. See *Bukhari v. Hutto*, 487 F. Supp. 1162 (E.D. Va. 1980).

¹⁹⁸ *Chesimard v. Mulcahy*.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

prison besides that “she was not permitted to associate with the male inmates.”²⁰¹ The size and state of her accommodations are commented on at some length, as is the length of her stay there, but nothing is said of the male prisoners besides that Shakur “was not permitted to associate” with them. It is not clear whether Shakur is seen as a threat to them, that they are seen as a threat to her, or what the nature or substance of the threat is that marks Shakur as beyond even the categorizing violences of the carceral state. But Shakur marks a crisis of categorization, a short-circuiting of the fantasy of Human gender, a traumatic event that disrupts the logic and operation of the court.

Shakur is subject to a double maneuver here, not only is she in excess of the women’s prison and the law of female gender, but she is unincorporable within the men’s prison and patriarchal law.²⁰² That is, exiting the women’s prison is not an entry *into* the men’s prison. Rather, Shakur occupies a non-space that is both internal to and distinct from the men’s prison. It is not simply that Shakur occupies “the New Women’s Unit at Yardsville Prison,” she is, *in her person*, a women’s prison. The same was true during her earlier solitary confinement in the basement of the Middlesex County Jail (also a men’s facility). In a January 1978 interview, Middlesex county sheriff Joseph De Marino was lauded for his ‘innovative’ approach to the Shakur case, boasting that “many of the techniques used here are being used by many agencies nationwide.”²⁰³ In her own reflections, Shakur offers a different logic behind the “innovations” of state violence that accrued around her person. “The point,” Shakur observed, “was to just do everything possible to make me suffer.”²⁰⁴ This is, perhaps, also the logic at work in the above account of ungendering. There is a violence prior to the violence of gendering, a violence that is not gender-specific but that sets the stage for each violence that follows. Shakur is constructed as the natural receptacle for this violence, such that no amount of suffering can be “too

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² My thinking here is shaped by Sora Han’s comments on this paper at the 2014 meeting of the American Society of Criminology in San Francisco.

²⁰³ Lynch (1978).

²⁰⁴ Shakur (1993) 208.

much.” Rather than simply being expelled from one site (the prison) or categorization (“woman”), Shakur becomes the irruptive force of a placelessness that disrupts whichever particular place she occupies. In the psychic life of antiblackness, Shakur comes to represent the very “tear in the world” that Dionne Brand locates at the (non)site of the door of no return, the world produced as the shadow of racial slavery.²⁰⁵

In March of 1978, a month after the Third Circuit Court’s ruling and after the case in New York was dismissed, Shakur was returned to Yardville. A week later, Shakur was transferred again, this time to the Alderson Federal Correction Institution in West Virginia, which was at the time the only federal maximum-security prison for women. She remained in Alderson until 20 February 1979, when the maximum-security wing in Alderson was closed. She was returned to the women’s prison in Clinton. By then, the extra security was gone, as was the press coverage. The move didn’t even receive a mention in the New Jersey Briefs section of the *Times*. It wasn’t until Shakur escaped in November of 1979 that the move from Alderson was publicized, as prison officials struggled to account for the lax security around the prisoner whom they made a spectacle of guarding. Line items in state budgets. Cargo to be transported. The libidinal economy of state violence meeting the deadly life of logistics.

²⁰⁵ Brand (2002) 4.

CHAPTER THREE:

Black Feminism Out of Place

Limit

Internal to a tradition of Black women writing in the United States is a practice of critique at, and on, the limits of institutionality.²⁰⁶ Across a number of major texts, Black feminists have offered pointed critiques of the institutionalization of feminism both as a political movement and as an academic enterprise pursued under the rubric of women's studies. In her preface to *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara ([1970] 2005) asks and answers, "How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women? Are women after all simply women? I don't know that our priorities are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to depend on this new field of experts (white, female)."²⁰⁷ In her 1971 *New York Times Magazine* commentary on the burgeoning feminist movement, "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib," Toni Morrison ([1971] 2008) offered more pointedly that "black women have no abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people. Whether vying with them for the few professional slots available to women in general, or moving their dirt from one place to another, [black women] regarded them as willful children, pretty children, mean children, ugly children, but never as real adults capable of handling the real problems of the world," adding that "there is also a sense among some black women

²⁰⁶ Here I am nodding to Hortense Spillers's (1985c) afterword to *Conjuring*, which opens with reference to the "community of black women writing in the United States" as "a vivid new fact of national life." Her formulation of "black women writing" signals both "the palpable and continuing urgency of black women writing themselves into history" and "the variety of aims that accompany their project" (249). The choice of verb over noun anticipates the strategy deployed by Barbara Christian (1987) in "The Race for Theory," choosing "theorizing" over "theory." I follow this strategy in my discussions of "Black feminist theorizing" throughout the present text. Likewise, my use of "tradition" follows Spillers, signifying that traditions "are not, like objects of nature, here to stay, but survive as *created social events* only to the extent that an audience cares to intersect them" (1985c, 250). My hope with these formulations is to foreground the capaciousness and contingency of a field of inquiry called Black feminist theorizing while signaling also the political and intellectual work of its practitioners.

²⁰⁷ Bambara (2005) 4.

that Women’s Lib is nothing more than an attempt on the part of whites to become black without the responsibilities of being black.”²⁰⁸ Or, we might take Audre Lorde’s 1979 commentary on “The Personal Is Political” panel at the conference, *The Second Sex: Thirty Years Later*, when she asks, “what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two black women who [presented] here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.”²⁰⁹ From Lorraine Bethel’s (1979) “What Chou Mean *W*e, White Girl?” to Mikki Kendall’s (2013) Twitter hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and beyond, Black feminists have produced a running commentary on the racial politics of institutionality, a body of critique that, in form and content, constitutes an element of Black feminist discourse as such.²¹⁰

At the same time, no body of theorizing has been as widely appropriated during the period of feminism’s institutionalization as Black feminism. And no Black feminist concept, save perhaps identity politics itself, has been as widely institutionalized in this milieu as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) formulation of intersectionality. In the decades following the publication of Crenshaw’s initial essays, intersectionality has become a central concept in the field of gender and sexuality studies and in feminist and antiracist political organizing. But across these spaces, intersectionality has largely been rendered as a crude topographical instrument, a method for locating oneself at the intersection of multiple discrete identities or modes of oppression. With this handy bit of way-finding, one could account for one’s unique experiences as, for instance, a cis white male with a particular access to class privilege and a particular access to citizenship rights in the place where one resides. The big question during the early days of my undergraduate education in women’s studies was whether to conceive of

²⁰⁸ Morrison (2008) 27, 29.

²⁰⁹ Lorde (1979) 5. Lorde’s remarks were later revised and widely anthologized as “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” On this moment in Lorde’s work, see also Bliss (2013).

²¹⁰ For a profile on Kendall that provides background on the hashtag as well as her artistic-intellectual-political practice, see Ross (2014). Also see Kendall’s (2020) debut collection of essays, *Hood Feminism*.

the various elements of my identity as lines on a plane or as streets on a map. As time passed, “intersectional” became its own political identity. In a welcome step away from the wave metaphors of old, the appellation “intersectional feminist” became de rigueur among the young and the feminist.²¹¹ Under these conditions, it was easy to grow exhausted with the concept’s ubiquity, the shallowness of its application, and the moral bent of its prescription. But that exhaustion was, and still is, a commentary on the reception of intersectionality and not a critique of intersectionality as such. Much less is it a reading of Crenshaw’s formulation or the multiple genealogies of Black feminist theorizing in which her work is embedded and to which it contributes, such as the critical tradition with which I opened this chapter.

Crucially, this line of critique internal to Black feminism has not been premised on producing Black women as simply aggrieved, injured, or woundedly attached to white women, white feminism, and white institutions. Instead, what we find is an immanent critique of the institutional life of feminism: a critique not only of feminism’s long-standing and continuing normative whiteness but of the very liberal multiculturalism that the incorporation of Black feminism is taken to signify. This tradition within a tradition allows us to interrogate the nature of incorporation and institutionalization. What would it mean for Black feminism, Black feminists, Black feminist concepts, to be incorporated within the institutional life of entities animated—brought to or given life—by antiblackness? Following this line of critique, I would say provisionally that the limits of institutionalization are marked by a remainder, an excess that cannot be incorporated. But this excess does not necessarily resist incorporation in the sense of a heroic and (self-)determined resistance. Rather, it appears, itself, as a resistance of incorporation, as that which institutionality cannot incorporate and so appears only as a monstrous symptom. And Black feminism, as immanent critique, reveals the degree to which each

²¹¹ Responding, perhaps, to Flavia Dzodan’s (2011) polemic, “My Feminism Will Be Intersectional or It Will Be Bullshit,” the Internet generation has gone to great lengths to forge a both/and approach.

institutionalization of feminism—be it a normatively white feminism or liberal multiculturalism—shares the same limit. Following this line of thought, liberal multiculturalism does not represent an incorporation of Black feminism any more than the normatively white feminism of an earlier moment. Each institutionalization of feminism operates in this way as a resistance to Black feminism, and Black feminist theorizing names the critical practice that operates, that invents, at the impossible limits of institutionality.

Now, any attempt to approach the career of this concept called intersectionality is freighted with an extensive secondary literature. Much of this voluminous literature implicitly or explicitly reads intersectionality within a tradition of Black feminist theorizing on compound subjectivities and interlocking oppressions, or what Vivian May (2015) explores as a “matrix thinking” set in opposition to “single-axis logics.” Among others, references are made to Frances Beale, Patricia Hill Collins, and Deborah King as impression points in the development of the intersectionality concept—indeed, all three are mentioned by name by Crenshaw (1991) herself. This tradition also aligns with certain iterations of feminist standpoint theory (*pave* Collins) and with theorizations of situated knowledge (following Donna Haraway). Much work written in defense of intersectionality focuses solely on these traditions. On these readings, intersectionality is taken to refer to the positioning of particular subjects within structural relations of power. The resulting subject-position is the location upon which standpoint theory stands and in which knowledges are situated. These readings crowd out other Black feminist traditions within which Crenshaw’s formulations might be located. This occlusion is endemic to what Jennifer Nash (2016) has recently called the “feminist originalism” animating defenses of intersectionality, the desire to return (again and again) to the text of Crenshaw in search of a true

intersectionality. Occluded here are traditions of Black feminist theorizing on placelessness, absence, disappearance, and singularity.²¹²

My interest here is to step away from this expansive, even overwhelming, debate in order to read, in Crenshaw, elements of an alternative tradition of Black feminist theorizing. And I would acknowledge immediately that the elements of Crenshaw that interest me are at best marginal in Crenshaw's own text. They are, nonetheless, present and available in Crenshaw, even if they have fallen away in the subsequent rush to incorporate and institutionalize intersectionality. My reading of intersectionality is not meant as a rearguard defense or call for return to some prior plenitude before the purity of intersectionality was besmirched by a hostile academy. Rather, I am interested in the ways a "return" to intersectionality can lead to unexpected new territories and nonterritories. To this end, I turn to the works of Hortense Spillers, particularly her suite of essays from the 1980s on Black female subjectivity, to read an intersectionality through the interstitial. It is in the non-space of the interstice, the empty space of the Black female subject, that I hope to articulate something internal to intersectionality's theorization that exceeds and implodes institutional space.²¹³

Across its reception, by friend and foe alike, intersectionality is constructed through spatial metaphors operating according to a logic of capture. That is, the spatial politics of the critique of intersectionality (and of Black feminist theorizing, by extension) reveal a desire toward enclosure, a carceral logic that doesn't simply arrest the movement or motion of Black feminist theorizing but produces a world in which *any* movement and *any* motion occur *within* the space of captivity. To

²¹² See Bliss (2015) for more on the distinction between particularity and singularity with regard to Black feminist theorizing.

²¹³ I've struggled with whether to retain the phrase "Black female subject" or to find a term without the biologizing and cis-normative baggage of "female." However, it seemed that each alternative subject I attempted (femme, feminine, feminist) carried similar baggage. Further, none address the ways Spillers's work on Blackness—what Andrea Hurst might call an "originary positivity" (2011, 237-60) or what Spillers terms the "zero degree of social conceptualization" (2003, 206)—troubles any easy distinction for Blacks between trans and cis. In the end, I chose to retain the term from Spillers knowing no term, yet, does justice.

anticipate my discussion of Crenshaw below, this logic of capture or desire toward enclosure renders Black women as buried subjectivity, producing the ground upon which all other subjects stand. Put differently, the projects variously called feminist, women's, gender, or sexuality studies are animated by a desire to capture the Black female subject. As I have elaborated above, Black women have written about these desires over the course of at least the past half century. Black women are the object(s) of desire marking the limit that constitutes the field of women's studies. Black feminism and Black feminist concepts are institutionalized to the degree they can be separated from Black women, and they are critiqued to the degree they cannot.

In this chapter, I offer a close reading of how the critique of intersectionality operates as a site where broadsides against Black feminist theorizing can be produced under the dispassionate guise of theoretical disagreement. I am particularly interested in the critique of intersectionality produced under the heading of assemblage theory, and especially in the work of Jasbir Puar. Puar's work over the last decade has interwoven legitimate and compelling critiques of intersectionality's *reception* in feminist scholarship and activism with a striking and symptomatic anxiety about the status of Black feminism and Black women in the field. My focus on Puar is not meant to individualize practices of (mis)reading Black feminism, but to perform close readings on a series of related texts. While Puar cannot stand in for a field formation, her work is noteworthy for being widely read across multiple fields in and beyond the academy. It is because Puar offers salient and radical political interventions across several fields that I am interested in how the critique of intersectionality operates within her work.²¹⁴ Further, Puar's work is important here because it challenges the white supremacy of institutional feminism while

²¹⁴ Too often, critiques performing close readings of single texts or authors are dismissed with the suggestion that if one simply reads another author or text, the argument collapses. The impulse to dismiss antiblackness as the limitation of particular authors, rather than as a structuring energy in (at least) Western intellectual practice, as such, is beyond the scope of the present chapter. However, for a reading of the "post-intersectional" moment that engages with the atmosphere or atmospherics of the critique of intersectionality, see Tiffany Lethabo King's (2015) recent work on the contemporary push toward the post-identitarian.

simultaneously critiquing the identitarianism associated with women-of-color feminisms. Puar's engagement with a postidentitarian iteration of feminist/queer theory allows an even deeper reading of the limit of institutionality. An analysis of this queer, antiracist, postidentitarian critique of intersectionality, one of the most radical versions of an institutionalized feminism, reveals that a line of argumentation can offer a radical opposition to white supremacy while being subtended by a logic of capture.

The Critique of Intersectionality

In her account of the history of contemporary Western feminist theory, Clare Hemmings argues that the narratives feminist theory constructs about itself have had the effect of producing, among several things, a telos of progress. The limited vision of the 1970s gave way to the force of lesbian and woman of color feminist critique in the 1980s, which then gave way to a new theoretical sophistication in the 1990s and beyond. Within this construction, Hemmings argues, "black feminist critique is frequently inscribed in Western feminist progress narratives as *catalyst* to a more general focus on difference" embodied by the poststructural turn of the 1990s.²¹⁵ To my mind, Black feminism in the present suffers from a strange double gesture on this score: intersectionality functions as a synecdoche for Black feminism and is then used to discipline the work of Black feminism. Thus, while "it is no exaggeration to say that intersectionality circulates today as *the* primary figure of political completion in U.S. identity knowledge domains," it has no bearing on the political condition of Black women, in or out of the academy.²¹⁶ In this regard, intersectionality appears as a victim of its own success, which is to say its success is the very mechanism of its victimization. Indeed, as intersectionality takes the place of Black feminism, it prematurely declares the end of Black feminism.

²¹⁵ Hemmings (2011) 44.

²¹⁶ Wiegman (2012) 240.

To wit, if intersectionality is ubiquitous and Black feminism *is* intersectionality, then Black feminism is ubiquitous and has won the day.²¹⁷

The temporal dimension of this dynamic has been examined in probing detail across the recent itinerary of Jennifer Nash (2010, 2014), who has elaborated the desires internal to women's studies' encounter with intersectionality across some half-dozen articles (and counting) over the last decade. In "On Difficulty: Intersectionality as Feminist Labor," Nash writes that "the fetishization of intersectionality suggests the existence of a kind of feminist theoretical utopia, a promised land where the 'etc.' that marks so much scholarly writing on identity ('race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, etc.') will be replaced by an attention to *all* difference."²¹⁸ The apparent embrace of intersectionality in women's studies—its ubiquity on the conference circuit, in department and program descriptions, and in publishing venues—is energized by a desire to displace and move "beyond" Black feminism and Black women. The fetishization of intersectionality and the desire to read *all* forms of difference are, precisely, desires to move beyond the asserted parochialism of Black women, especially if they happen to live in or write about the United States. This desire is akin to the desire described a generation earlier when Ann duCille wrote of an academy eager to "have that 'signifying black difference' without the difference of significant blackness."²¹⁹

In "Institutionalizing the Margins," Nash elaborates what she calls the two "temporal orientations" at work in the institutionalization of intersectionality.²²⁰ On one hand, the project of "feminism-future" operates as a "movement of intersectionality toward the inevitable future" with "calls for more intersectionality, an attention to more intersections, and pleas for more disciplines adopting intersectionality."²²¹ On the other hand, "feminism-past" locates intersectionality "in an

²¹⁷ For outlines of this "post-Black-feminist era," see duCille (2010) and Alexander-Floyd (2011).

²¹⁸ Nash (2010) np.

²¹⁹ duCille (1994) 600.

²²⁰ Nash (2014) 60.

²²¹ Ibid. 46.

already-transcended past” and issues “a call to move beyond intersectionality—its hegemony, its problematic practice, its shortcomings, and its insistent use of identity-based knowledge and remedies” because “the valuable insights of intersectionality have already been incorporated into feminism.”²²² In both cases, “intersectionality’s imagined peril hinges on its attachment to black women’s bodies, and its promise comes from its willingness to transcend the (imagined) social location of black women.”²²³ On Nash’s reading, “black women’s bodies are not the subjects of the present moment; they are, in fact, constructed as out of time,” and the “ongoing preoccupation of women’s studies with intersectionality... performs a certain kind of violence on black women’s bodies and on black feminism: presuming that black women’s bodies are always already anachronisms.”²²⁴ I am interested in reading Nash’s formulations at a slight angle, to say that being excluded from or outside of the present is something different from disappearance or erasure, but rather an enclosure, in the present, *as* the past or *as* the future. Out of time and out of place, Black feminist theorizing can offer a point of access to a no-when and no-where that might disrupt the desire toward captivity that animates feminism’s encounter with Black feminism and Black women.

In this section, I turn to one body of writing that understands itself to offer a critique and complication of intersectionality through a turn to assemblage. Over the last decade, Jasbir Puar has offered a field-defining series of critiques of intersectionality through her explication of assemblage theory. Across her “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages” (2005), *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), and “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory” (2012), Puar critiques intersectionality as, first, anachronistically located in and of regimes of discipline; second, collusive with the post-9/11 national security state; and, finally regressively attached to identity. In her 2012 piece, Puar writes self-reflexively on the controversy

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid. 60-61.

²²⁴ Ibid. 61.

produced by her critique of intersectionality. She characterizes responses to her argument that “intersectionality as an intellectual rubric and a tool for political intervention must be supplemented— if not complicated and reconceptualized—by a notion of assemblage,” as “anxieties about [her] apparent prescription to leave intersectionality behind (as if one could).”²²⁵ These anxieties have produced demands for her to articulate “the political usages of assemblages and assemblage theory,” operating from the belief that there is nothing politically useful about nonrepresentational forms of politics.²²⁶ That is, the misreading of Puar as antagonistic to intersectionality is tied to an attachment to the subject and subject-oriented forms of political work. My reading of Puar is not concerned with the political efficacy of assemblages or assemblage theory. Rather, my interest lies in what falls outside of Puar’s description of her critique of intersectionality: namely, an anxiety that manifests as hostility toward the project of a radical Black feminism. What critical readers of Puar have caught in her several interventions on intersectionality is a tendency to align Black feminism with state violence generally, and the post-9/11 US imperial project specifically, something far different from an anxiety about the political stakes of leaving intersectionality behind, as if one could.

Central to Puar’s critique of intersectionality and her advocacy for assemblage is her reading of the relation between disciplinary societies and societies of control; that is, Michel Foucault’s elaboration of discipline and punishment as techniques of sovereign power, and Gilles Deleuze’s later elaboration of societies in which power is administered through modulations of bodily matter, financial markets, data streams, and affective intensities. For Puar, the shift from discipline to control is also a shift from the self-possessed subject of rights-based and identitarian politics to “bodies as matter” within a “nonrepresentational, non-subject-oriented politics.”²²⁷ “To dismiss assemblages in favor of retaining intersectional identitarian frameworks,” Puar writes, collapsing “intersectional” and

²²⁵ Puar (2012) 50.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Puar (2012) 63, 50.

“identitarian” into a single compound adjective, “is to dismiss how societies of control tweak and modulate bodies as matter, not through signification or identity interpellation but rather through affective capacities and tendencies.”²²⁸ Put simply, a different society requires a different analytic.

Puar wards against a totalizing account of both the control society and assemblage theory, however, by recognizing that multiple regimes of power can operate at once. “To render

²²⁸ Ibid. 63. Puar’s engagement with the figure of the assemblage, or with what in Deleuze and Guattari is called *agencement*, makes recourse centrally to *A Thousand Plateaus* and Guattari’s “I am an Idea-Thief,” an interview published the same year *A Thousand Plateaus* was published in French. What is striking, at first, about Puar’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari is the introduction of a strange certainty with regard to the meaning of their work. In part, Puar follows here the community of (mostly white, mostly male) Anglo-American community of Deleuzians and Guattarians (and the two in combination), which has produced a robust and occasionally dizzying body of writing out of the network of concept-metaphors at work (at play) in Deleuze and Guattari’s collectively-authored works. That Puar’s engagement with Deleuze and Guattari fits so comfortably with the high theory avant garde’s consensus is notable insofar as their work has, in a few short decades, become the stuff academic consensus-building. That is, Puar follows an Anglo-American tradition of reducing the seemingly irreducible.

Interesting, then, that Puar opens the 2012 piece with Brian Massumi’s observation in *Parables for the Virtual* (2002) that “grids happen.” (The bumper sticker wisdom that “shit happens” stands ready to mind here.) That is, “social and cultural determinations feed back into the process from which they arose” (8), grids appear to make sense, to produce moments of sense-making, within what Puar calls “the endless affirmative becomings of movement, flux, and potential” (49). For Massumi, determination and indeterminacy are “inseparable and always actually coincide while remaining disjunctive in their modes of reality” (8), a premise that, we will see, is considerably more supple and labile than the direction Puar moves in. The opening figure of the grid is noteworthy, also, for its resonance with art theorist Rosalind Krauss’ (1979) exploration of grids in modernist art. For Krauss, it is precisely because grids *don’t happen* that their ubiquity in modernist visual art requires attention: “Flattened, geometricized, ordered, [the grid] is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree” (51). But in the symbolic economy of Puar’s article, the identitarian feminist goddess is the figure of the grid, while the intersection of *techné* and *bios* at the figure of the cyborg, circuit boards implied if not themselves diagrammed, represents flux and becoming.

This confused alignment is not peculiar to Puar. There is, after all, a ‘cultural subject... concealed beneath the overwhelming debris of the itemized account, [and] between the lines of the massive logs of commercial enterprise’ that set in motion what we now call modernity (Spillers 2003, 210). Hortense Spillers offers us more on the figure of the grid in her ‘Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor’: “The world according to captives and their captors strikes the imagination as a grid of identities running at perpendicular angles to each other: *things* in serial and lateral array; beings in hierarchical and vertical array. On the serial grid, the captive—the chattel property—is the equivalent of inanimate and other living things’ (2003, 314; emphasis in original). In the ledgers of the slave trade, enslaved people are ordered alongside ‘other’ commodities, barrels of gunpowder, baled cotton, gallons of rum. For Spillers, ‘those subjects located at this juncture of saturated elements are both more and less than human, the former because they enter into a wider ecumenicalism with named and claimed things, or vocabularies of experience; the latter because it is their destiny by virtue of Christ’s church, by whom the country swears, and the spirit of national insurgence and constitutionality to be human first and only’ (315). These are the grids that haunt Puar’s project, or Massumi’s project, or the project of modernist art, or the project of the nation-state from the moment of its historical emergence. More and less than human, propertized human being, the capacity for the production of value.

intersectionality an archaic relic of identity politics,” she offers, while simultaneously producing “identity politics” as a time/place out of sync with the present, “bypasses entirely the possibility that for some bodies—we can call them statistical outliers, or those consigned to premature death...—discipline and punish may well still be a primary apparatus of power.”²²⁹ Puar’s concession to intersectionality is rife with a rhetorical hedging of bets (“possibility,” “some,” “may well”) that renders both intersectionality and those “statistical outliers... consigned to premature death” as anachronisms internal to the society of control. Puar’s formulation here recalls Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) formulation of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”²³⁰ The rise of mass incarceration, the militarization of the domestic police force, and the expansion of vigilante violence against Blacks over the past half-century are rendered by Puar as statistical anomaly and historical anachronism.

None of this is to say that the omnipresence of state-sanctioned and extralegal violences against Blacks means that ours remains a disciplinary society. Nor is it to say that resistance to antiblackness requires an identitarian politics, a rights-based politics, or a politics of the (fixed, coherent) subject. Formulations of control societies, assemblages, and postrepresentational politics need not crowd out an analysis of antiblackness. In many ways, when Deleuze (1992) imagines the perfection of the control society—capital as finance, education as perpetual training, health care as the management of risk populations, mobility constantly monitored and modulated—he is describing features of the lifeworlds of racial chattel slavery over the past half of a millennium.²³¹ Such an analysis

²²⁹ Puar (2012) 63.

²³⁰ Gilmore (2007) 28.

²³¹ Deleuze (1992) 7. The potential here to read Deleuze as a student of Black study, and the fact that Puar resists such a reading, says something about Puar’s practice of reading and her engagement with Deleuze (and Guattari). Along these lines, one might read Deleuze and Claire Parnet’s 1977 essay “Many Politics” (2006) as a precursor to Puar’s critiques of intersectionality that is notably absent from Puar’s several engagements with intersectionality. Writing in the space between the publication of the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Parnet open with an observation that would seem to be disallowed according to the protocols of Puar’s critique of Crenshaw: “Whether we are individuals or groups, we are made up of lines and these lines are very varied by nature” (93). Across this brief essay, Deleuze and Parnet detail

is disallowed, however, by Puar's alignment of Blackness, the identitarian, and the intersectional, on the one hand, with state sovereignty and disciplinary power, on the other. Puar's analysis aligns Blackness with state sovereignty through a double movement. First, Blacks, as Puar's unnamed "statistical outliers," are constructed as the paradigmatic subjects of discipline, sovereign power, state violence, and imprisonment. Second, Black resistance is rendered always and already as a plea to the state for rights, and for the redress or repair of an injured status.²³² In this formulation, Black subjection and Black resistance are both buried, anachronisms internal to the present. Indeed, following Puar's analysis, Black resistance (read: "intersectionality," read: "identity politics") colludes with state violence against nonblacks.

"As a tool of diversity management, and a mantra of liberal multiculturalism," Puar writes in "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," "intersectionality *colludes* with the disciplinary apparatus of the state—census, demography, racial profiling, and surveillance—in that 'difference' is encased within a structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid."²³³ This is over and against Puar's construction of queerness through assemblage theory, a queerness with "no entity, no identity to queer, [but] rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its

three types of lines, molar lines "of rigid segmentarity," molecular lines "with thresholds or quanta," and lines of flight (ibid). Without disappearing too far within their jigsaw of metaphors, Deleuze and Parnet's molar lines most closely resemble the categories associated with intersectional analysis, while molecular lines are the stuff of Puar's iteration of assemblage theory, "they trace out little modifications, they make detours, they sketch out rises and falls,' and they are home to becomings and micro-becomings, all of the stuff of the critique of intersectionality (ibid.). But Deleuze and Parnet never prioritize one line over another, writing that "there is no assemblage which does not include" molar lines (96), because "what we call an assemblage is, precisely, a multiplicity," and "any assemblage necessarily includes lines of rigid and binary segmentarity, no less than molecular lines, or lines of border, of flight or slope" (99). That Puar's appropriation of Deleuze eclipses the openness of these formulations speaks to the political and affective investments animating her encounter with Crenshaw, specifically, and Black feminist theorizing, generally.

On the third type of line, the line of flight, see Koerner (2011), who adjusts the translation more literally to "line of escape," which Deleuze and Parnet (and Deleuze and Guattari) take from George Jackson. This is another encounter between Deleuze and the Black radical tradition that Puar's analysis scrupulously avoids.

²³² Here I am invoking another critic of intersectionality, Wendy Brown. For a pathbreaking challenge to the critique of rights discourses, see Han (2015), especially chapter 1.

²³³ Puar (2005) 128; emphasis added.

defiance.”²³⁴ At the very moment when Puar is dismissing identity, she anthropomorphizes queerness through tropes of heroic resistance, a sudden shift from the affective to the sentimental. As she seems to abandon politicized identity, Puar produces a figure with which to politically, emotionally, viscerally identify. And it is this figure of heroic queerness that “suggests to [Puar] a move from intersectionality to assemblage.”²³⁵ Not the plea for rights but the scream of defiance. Not intersectionality in collusion with the disciplinary apparatus of the state but assemblages “[working] against narratives of U.S. exceptionalism that secure empire, challenging the fixity of racial and sexual taxonomies that inform practices of state surveillance and control, befuddling the ‘us versus them’ of the war on terror.”²³⁶ To the degree that intersectionality insists on a taxonomically knowable subject, a subject that can be named, that can be known and thereby contained and destroyed, intersectionality “and its underpinnings—an unrelenting epistemological will to truth—presupposes identity and thus disavows futurity.”²³⁷ The stakes couldn’t be higher. And it is hard to imagine anything like an ethical defense of intersectionality when it is aligned with the murderous program—international and domestic—of US imperialism. Importantly, Puar’s queer assemblage is not only screaming itself hoarse but is “coming forth at us from all directions.”²³⁸ That is, assemblage is mobile where intersectionality is stuck in place. In *Terrorist Assemblages* Puar lays out the stakes of this binary” “intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to *still* and *quell* the *perpetual motion* of assemblages, to *capture* and *reduce* them, to *harness* their *threatening mobility*.”²³⁹ Here Puar inverts the relation, claiming assemblage to be

²³⁴ Ibid. 127.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid. 128.

²³⁷ Ibid. Puar is consistent with the trend of rendering Black feminism as atheoretically political, as in the conciliatory footnote ending this section: “This is not to disavow or minimize the important interventions that intersectional theorizing makes possible and continues to stage” (2007, 138 n. 14), or in the politics of citation in her later piece. There Puar lists ten contemporary feminist academics (“to name a few”) associated with postrepresentational approaches (2012, 56). Puar’s references to Black feminists number only four: Audre Lorde (deceased), Angela Davis (emerita), the Combahee River Collective (disbanded), and bell hooks (who, here as elsewhere, functions more as a synecdoche for ‘Black feminism’ than a citation).

²³⁸ Ibid. 127.

²³⁹ Puar (2007) 213; emphasis added.

stilled while simultaneously constructing intersectionality as dangerously inert, recalling the logic of capture. Assemblage is constructed as heroic, dynamic, and mobile in sharp relief to intersectionality's regressive, still, stale attachment to the subject.²⁴⁰

And it is specifically the Black female subject to whom intersectionality is so problematically attached. Here the analysis shifts from the political to the pedagogical, from intersectionality's relation to statecraft to its life in the academy. Puar notes that, although intersectionality offers a critique of both feminist and antiracist discourses, "it has been more forcefully deployed as a feminist intervention to disrupt whiteness and less so as a critical race intervention to disrupt masculinist frames."²⁴¹ Puar never offers an account for this unequal deployment, nor does she do much to substantiate it, except that it plays into a foundational anxiety of feminist institution-building. Puar understands this anxiety as a desire to "[resecure] the centrality of the subject positioning of white women," while I have tried to describe this anxiety as a general desire toward the capture of Black women.²⁴² Nonetheless, intersectionality's ascendance within feminist studies has reified "the *specific difference* of 'women of color'" as the privileged object of intersectional analysis.²⁴³ This category of women of color, which Puar refers to as WOC (pronounced "wawk"), is "simultaneously emptied of

²⁴⁰The production of an animate "queerness" at this point in Puar's analysis returns us to Deleuze and Parnet's "Many Politics." "The second line," the molecular line which is the stuff of Puar's assemblage, they write, "has its own dangers," adding that "it is certainly never sufficient to trace out a molecular line, to be carried along a supple line" (103). Specifically, the danger of molecular lines obtains in the possibility of lionizing the figure of the marginal. "Some have said that we see the schizophrenic as the true revolutionary. We believe, rather, that schizophrenia is the descent of a molecular process into a black hole. Marginals have always inspired fear in us, and a slight horror. They are not clandestine enough" (104). The figure of a screaming queerness, too, would seem counter to their formulation. Reiterating this point, it is here in the text that Deleuze himself appears in parentheses, bearing his initials, to offer his own misgivings about the marginal. "In any case," he writes,

they scare me. There is a molecular speech of madness, or of the drug addict or the delinquent *in vivo* which is no more valid [than] the great discourses of the psychiatrist *in vitro*. There is as much self-assurance on the former's part as certainty on the latter's part. It is not the marginal who create the lines; they install themselves on these lines and make them their property, and this is fine when they have that strange modesty of men of the line, the prudence of the experimenter, but it is a disaster when they slip into a black hole from which they no longer utter anything but the micro-fascist speech of their dependency and their giddiness: 'We are the avant-garde', 'We are the marginals.' (104)

²⁴¹ Puar (2012) 51-52.

²⁴² Ibid. 52.

²⁴³ Ibid.

specific meaning in its ubiquitous application and yet overdetermined in its deployment.”²⁴⁴ This is a double motion by which the subject of intersectionality is produced only to be overdetermined. For Puar, WOC is emptied of specific meaning to the degree that it seems to include any nonwhite woman, as long as she can be “shown to be resistant, subversive, and articulating a grievance.”²⁴⁵ At the same time, WOC is overdetermined to the degree that “it is the difference of African American women that *dominates* the genealogy of the term.”²⁴⁶ WOC is both emptied of specific meaning and dominated by Black women. To be more precise, WOC is emptied of specific meaning *because* it is dominated by Black women.²⁴⁷ Puar here is interested in reading WOC as having been hijacked by Black women “driven by anxieties about maintaining the ‘integrity’ of a discrete black feminist genealogy.”²⁴⁸

And this anxiety runs deep. “This claim to intersectionality as the dominant feminist method can be produced with such insistence,” Puar writes, “that an interest in exploring other frames, for example assemblage, is rendered problematic and even produces WOC feminists invested in multiple genealogies as ‘race-traitors.’”²⁴⁹ In her critique of a certain deployment of intersectionality, relying on the production of WOC (dominated by Black women) as resistant and aggrieved, Puar produces feminist assemblage theorists as the aggrieved victims of identity police. Screaming defiance yet nonetheless bullied by unnamed, uncited, Black women, Puar’s radical critique of the post-9/11

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.; emphasis added.

²⁴⁷ Certainly, “women of color” is a slippery signifier. Historically, however, it has been deployed by nonwhite, nonblack women to simultaneously parasitize Black women’s political energy and displace Black women’s political demands. We might consider one genealogy of the term “women of color” as a contingent political identification within the context of the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston, as does Loretta Ross in a talk posted to YouTube by the Western States Center, an Oregon-based progressive political organization. Ross notes that the identification was born of nonblack women’s desire to be included in the plan of action put forth by the Black Women’s Caucus (Western States Center 2011). Whether this is parasitism or coalition politics depends on one’s perspective. While Ross leans toward the latter, we note that another member of the Washington, DC, contingent, Terri Clark (1978), warned at the time against “a false sense of security” produced by the “appearance of great unity” at the conference for which “much optimism has been vented in the feminist press.” “We think that the connections between single issues and the oppression of women have been made,” she cautioned, “we think that coalitions have been formed” (2).

²⁴⁸ Puar (2012) 52.

²⁴⁹ Puar (2012) 53.

national security state relies on the production of Black citizen-subjects who (re)produce the most profound violences of that state. Puar's critique produces Blackness as the source of the political repression of nonblack people of color.²⁵⁰

While not at all limited to Puar, it is this animating desire to displace Black women and Black feminist theorizing that troubles the turn to assemblage theory. Further, and finally, why is it that the conceptual work of Black feminism is so effortlessly aligned with the material work of state violence? Or, why are the works of Deleuze and Guattari not subjected to the same treatment? In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar refers, parenthetically, to the work of Eyal Weizman on the ways Deleuze and Guattari have been operationalized within Israel's military occupation of Palestine. She offers this "on a more cynical note," suggesting that assemblage theory shouldn't be consigned to the trash heap simply because it is useful in some instances to state violence.²⁵¹ But Weizman (2007) details the teaching of Deleuze and Guattari in Israeli military academies, the direct application of their work to US-backed military operations in occupied Palestine.²⁵² Puar makes no analogous claim, regarding intersectionality, to the direct use of Crenshaw's work by state or nonstate actors. On this point, Puar's argument consists entirely of an asserted *affinity* between the intersectionality concept (shorn of context) and the institutional instruments of state violence. So why this difference between analytics?

²⁵⁰ This desire also finds expression in Puar's formulation of 'sexual citizenship' arising from her reading of *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003, 138). For Puar, the overturning of anti-sodomy statutes in *Lawrence*, "the annexing of a black-white sodomy duo to civilization," has two principal implications. First, "as the ascendancy of whiteness achieved through the sexual and racial hybrid couple, a token of tolerance ... that now invites homosexuals despite or perhaps even because of national identity becoming more hegemonic than ever" (2007, 137). That is, an expression of white supremacist homonationalism in the service of the national security state. Second, "as a surrogate citizenship to black subjects who remain economically disenfranchised to the extent of their exclusion from the model minority ethnic, proffering sexual citizenship in the face of the failures of racial inclusion" (136-37). That is, the cynical inclusion of Blacks into the national project by expanding the range of the sexually (if not racially) normative. The flimsy assertion that the recognition of Black citizenship (itself a disingenuous premise) is the counterpart to or precondition for state repression against nonblacks (especially in the post-9/11 moment) is endemic to transnational feminist and queer theorizing, a theme taken up in Chapter Four above.

²⁵¹ Puar (2007) 215.

²⁵² Weizman (2007) 200-201.

Why does intersectionality *collude* with state violence while assemblage is *used* by state violence?²⁵³ Certainly, Deleuze and Guattari should not be judged guilty by association because the Israeli Defense Forces find their work useful, but this sort of bad-faith dismissal is the heart of Puar's critique of intersectionality. As Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall (2013) observe in their call for an expanded field of intersectionality studies, "it is far from mere coincidence that current debates about intersectionality's capacity to represent anyone other than Black women bear striking resemblance to courts' discomfort with centering Black women in class-action lawsuits."²⁵⁴ That is, there are resistances to intersectionality that ironically mirror the violences intersectionality means to address.

Intersectionality

What might we discover if we return to Crenshaw's theorizations of intersectionality? Does Crenshaw's work necessarily rely on the fixity and knowability of the subject, as on Puar's reading? Must it rely on a model of discrete and separable subjective components? We note first that Crenshaw's analyses in her two formative essays on intersectionality are, centrally, critiques of discursive structures. Crenshaw attempts to break the "already established analytical structure" within which "feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse" only function to the extent they engage with "(white) women" or "(male) Blacks."²⁵⁵ Intersectionality is an attempt to address "the paradigmatic political and theoretical dilemma created by the intersection of race and gender," in which "Black women are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women's experiences."²⁵⁶ This double motion, in which Black women are created only to

²⁵³ Puar (2007) 216.

²⁵⁴ Cho, Crenshaw, McCall (2013) 791-792.

²⁵⁵ Crenshaw (1989) 140.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 160.

be buried, points toward something different from merely an account of subject formation. It is not that Black women are housed at a point on the map where two roads meet, but that Blackness creates a discursive *nonspace*. A being at the intersection of Black and woman is not simply in a difficult place before the law, she is nowhere at all.

To recall my earlier discussion on Nash, antiblackness confines Blacks in the space of subjectivity, but not as subjects. Just as Black women appear in the present as anachronism, as asynchrony, so too do Black women appear in the space of subjectivity as its negative condition of possibility. To appear as buried subjectivity is to be out of place, no matter when and where one does (or does not) enter. At the same time, Crenshaw draws our attention to the conditions of possibility for subjectivity as such. That is, the production of Black women as buried subjectivity is the condition of possibility for something like subjectivity in general. I want to call attention here to a fundamental slippage between race and Blackness that characterizes not only Crenshaw's work but also writing on race generally. Some have interpreted this slippage, as Puar does, as evidence of the dominance of Blacks in intellectual and political discourse. As Sharon Holland has noted, calls to move "beyond the Black/white binary" operate according to this logic of capture, a desire to "correct" the slippage by subsuming and displacing Blackness within another term: race. Another type of corrective moves in the opposite direction.²⁵⁷ "In the antiblack world," Lewis Gordon writes, "there is but one race, and that race is black. Thus, to be racialized is to be pushed 'down' toward Blackness, and to deracialized is to be pushed 'up' toward whiteness."²⁵⁸ Gordon erases the slippage by identifying race with Blackness under conditions of a global antiblackness. And while Gordon pays careful attention to questions of gender, identifying Blackness solely as race nonetheless has the effect of eclipsing Black women. Askew to either of these positions, Black feminist theorizing allows for an articulation of

²⁵⁷ Holland (2012).

²⁵⁸ Gordon (1997) 76.

Blackness as neither identical to race (therefore degendered, therefore normatively male) nor a subdivision of race (therefore particular, parochial). Instead, Blackness is *irreducible* to race, to gender, to any mode of categorization. Blackness is the scandal to categories that makes categorization possible.

This approach to defining Blackness is enabled by a long tradition of Black feminist theorizing both in academic discourses and in aconceptual modes of theorizing through political, cultural, and intellectual practice. Nonetheless, it is far from the dominant position in any field, relying as they do on discrete modes of categorization. And this is precisely where Crenshaw intervenes (even while she is caught within an analytical structure that presupposes discrete categories), writing that, “Problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating ‘women's experience’ or ‘the Black experience’ into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.”²⁵⁹ It is the entire “analytical structure” that Crenshaw aims to challenge. Contrary to Puar's claim that intersectionality (re)produces the enabling intellectual frameworks of state violence, Crenshaw offers a formulation of intersectionality that undermines not only the enabling intellectual frameworks of state violence but also frameworks for addressing state violence. And this enabling intellectual framework Crenshaw sets out to undermine is the insistence that race and gender constitute discrete addends combined arithmetically to produce a sum—namely, the Black woman. Instead, the Black woman, as buried subjectivity, appears as something excessive of the sum of any constituent oppressions. This excess constituting “the intersectional experience” is

²⁵⁹ Crenshaw (1989) 140.

antiblackness. This is not to say, as on some readings, that intersectional analysis can only apply to Blacks, but that intersectional analysis, on this reading, challenges practitioners to take into account the degree to which antiblackness shapes *all* experiences. Again, this is not antiblackness as a synonym for racism, or even antiblack racism, but as the burying of subjectivity upon which subjectivity depends for its coherence, however illusory that coherence may be.

Intersectionality is not wedded to the subject so much as it indexes how subjectivity relies on Blackness as its negative condition of possibility. This radical critique of the subject seems much more consonant with Puar's theoretical framework than her critiques might suggest. The question is less about the degree to which Puar cannot see similarities between intersectionality and assemblage than about why Puar insists intersectionality is always already a corrupted analytic. To this end, we might note another central current across Puar's work, a desire to undermine simple binaries of domination and subordination, complicity and resistance. Puar is interested in the ways power functions to short-circuit this very binary; one is never simply or only resistant or complicit. And here again Puar is participating in a Black feminist analytic found in Crenshaw's work (though the citational absence of Black feminist scholars in Puar's work might seem to tacitly deny this). Take, for instance, the caveats Crenshaw offers regarding her formulation of intersectionality in "Mapping the Margins": "I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity. Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here."²⁶⁰ And then: "I consider intersectionality a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory. In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or

²⁶⁰ Crenshaw (1991) 1244.

separable.”²⁶¹ Intersectionality itself can be read as a concept becoming. It is a mode of deconstructing rather than solidifying identity, of revealing the subject to be disarticulated and disarticulable rather than either compound or complete. Intersectionality is not an insistence that identity is knowable or nameable. Instead, intersectionality approaches the known and named subject and challenges practitioners to look beyond, underneath, and around it.²⁶² The Black woman as a discursive object in either racist and sexist discourse or antiracist and antisexist activism is not a particularity but a buried subjectivity that makes possible particularity.

Crenshaw engages with the production of this buried subjectivity through both the discourses of domination and the discourses of resistance in order to show the interconnectedness of domination and resistance, not by “[implying] that the disempowerment of women of color is singularly or even primarily caused by feminist and antiracist theorists or activists,” but “by capturing, at least in part, the way that prevailing structures of domination shape various discourses of resistance.”²⁶³ That is, because resistance cannot be separated completely from that which it resists (a point with which Puar would readily agree), we must look beyond theories of subjectivity that rely on the whole and discrete subject. Crenshaw is not only concerned with how Black women are constructed in dominant

²⁶¹ Ibid. 1244 n. 9.

²⁶² This returns us a final time to Deleuze and Parnet, whose critical practice resonates here with Crenshaw in a way we would not expect with Puar’s readings on the air. The second and final section of “Many Politics” opens with the practical observation that “it is in concrete social fields, at specific moments, that the comparative movements of deterritorialization, the continuums of intensity and the combinations of flux they form must be studied” (101). That is, where Crenshaw’s location in legal studies is frequently marshaled as evidence for the fixity of intersectionality—some variation on “intersectionality loses its explanatory power outside of an analysis of the law”—it would seem that Deleuze and Parnet insist on the concrete and specific context as the necessary site for theorization. When Deleuze and Parnet arrive at something like a prescription for critical practice, they situate their position with the claim that “differences pass between the lines, even though they are all immanent to one another, all entangled in one another” (107). “This is why,” for Deleuze and Parnet, “the question of schizoanalytics or pragmatics, micro-politics itself, never consists in interpreting, but merely in asking what are your lines, individual or group, and what are the dangers on each. 1) What are your rigid segments, your binary and overcoding machines? ...2) What are your supple lines, what are your fluxes and thresholds? ...3) What are your lines of flight, where the fluxes are combined, where the thresholds reach a point of adjacency and rupture” (107-8)?

While my reading of Crenshaw does not aim to reconcile her formulations with those of Deleuze, Parnet, Guattari, or their Anglo-America communities of reception, the resonances between these discourses points toward a gap in Puar’s critique of intersectionality. Puar’s conclusions reflect a failure to read both Crenshaw and Deleuze and co. with the generosity on which Deleuze himself would seem to insist.

²⁶³ Crenshaw (1991) 1243 n. 4.

discourse—with its own attendant horrors—but with how they appear within strategies of resistance. When Crenshaw describes the position of the Black woman as a nonplace that resists entrance into discourse, she is talking about discourses that are meant to liberate Black women but are animated by the carceral logic producing Black women as buried subjectivity and producing all others as subjects. Thus, “although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to *a location that resists telling*.”²⁶⁴ This “location that resists telling” is the proper site of emancipatory politics as such. It is a nonsite that resists symbolization, and cannot be rendered as or in discourse. Puar might call this quality queerness, but she denies this quality to Blackness by aligning it with an “unrelenting epistemological will to truth” in the service of state power.²⁶⁵ In this sense, intersectionality has always already been assemblage, for those who care to take it seriously. Puar’s anxious distortions of intersectionality suggest that, rather than a terrorist queerness, Blackness proposes a mode of being too monstrous for Puar to engage. But this monstrosity is a central preoccupation of Hortense Spillers’s work on Black female subjectivity.

Interstice

Spillers’s corpus of criticism offers perhaps the best example in the tradition of Black feminist theorizing of a critical practice “that is and isn’t methodologically rigorous and that, as such, cannot be appropriated as a formal reproducible analytic.”²⁶⁶ This practice of reading, which Spillers has developed over half a century of work, is also a practice of writing, specifically, an “idiomatic writing,” “the creation of sentences that could *not* be anticipated, that violated the rules within the sights of

²⁶⁴ Crenshaw (1991) 1242; emphasis added.

²⁶⁵ Puar (2005) 128.

²⁶⁶ Rappaport (2001) 18.

grammar.”²⁶⁷ Spillers’s project is scaffolded by the insistence that “the *materiality of discourse* is as solid an aspect of political economy as the gross domestic product, and its far-flung subtleties and evasions, its coded displacements and well-choreographed insinuations, decidedly more pernicious as the missile that hides its hand.”²⁶⁸ Spillers’s critical practice and her formulations of Black female subjectivity are simultaneously path-breaking in their originality of insight and form, and firmly entrenched in a tradition of Black feminist theorizing.²⁶⁹ Spillers departs from Crenshaw both formally and theoretically, though in departing from Crenshaw, Spillers’s work can expand and deepen the insights of Crenshaw’s. Both Spillers’s intricate form and her wide-ranging theoretical insights refract the radical obscurity of slavery and recenter slavery and its logic of capture as central to thinking Blackness—as the condition for race, gender, sexuality—in the modern world.

In her “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” Spillers offers a metacommentary on Black women’s sexuality as “discursive static,” an object of study existing only in a distorted and obscured state within feminist discourse.²⁷⁰ In her twin orientation toward the discursive and semiotic registers of Black female sexuality on the one hand, and the structures of relation inaugurated by chattel slavery on the other, Spillers offers an account of Black female sexuality as a discursive field that resists location (or, a telling that resists location alongside a location that resists telling). “In other words,” Spillers writes, “before one could venture conceptualization on the sexual performative, she had to confront the entire landscape of prohibitions that literally mire its subjects in the nostalgic reiterative

²⁶⁷ Spillers (2003) 7.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ This is a Black feminist tradition that Spillers has been instrumental in analyzing. For Spillers (1985c), “‘Tradition,’ as I would mean it . . . is an active verb, rather than a retired nominative, and we are now its subjects and objects. Quite correctly, ‘tradition’ under the head of a polyvalent grammar—the language of learning woven into the tongue of the mother—is the rare union of bliss toward which African-American experience has compelled us all along” (260). Other figures who intersect (in manifold ways) with this tradition of Black feminist and queer theorizing on Blackness and/as absence or singularity include: Bambara, Lorde, Michele Wallace, Barbara Smith, Sylvia Wynter, Evelyn Hammonds, Joy James, Saidiya Hartman, Sharon Holland, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Christina Sharpe, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Patrice Douglass, to name a few whose works circulate in the academic milieu.

²⁷⁰ Spillers (2003) 13.

gestures of a frozen temporality.”²⁷¹ For Spillers, there is no object of study called Black women’s sexuality absent the “landscape of prohibitions” anticipating and locating Black women within the symbolic universe of New World slavery. Thus, while “the black female is, if anything, a creature of sex ... *sexuality* touches her nowhere.”²⁷² In Spillers’s formulation, “She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between human and ‘other.’ At this level of radical discontinuity in the ‘great chain of being,’ black is vestibular to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for society around her what a human being was *not*.”²⁷³ This constitutes, for Spillers, “the paradox of non-being” the Black woman inhabits.²⁷⁴ To exist in a place prior (“vestibular”) to culture, to only appear within “lexical gaps” in dominant discourse.²⁷⁵ To this end, the “black woman subject demarcated a sexual limit, at which point ‘sexuality’ did not have a name anymore. Sheer phenomena, *this* sexuality refused category, as a staging ground for the abnormal.... Focus on this supercharged investment became the obsessive property of this essay, which wanted to say, at last, that ‘superwoman’ had a sister with a very peculiar name, ... ‘we-don’t-do-sex-here.’ Actually, this sister is a twin, a study of a double text that says two things the same way except that one would not necessarily detect it.”²⁷⁶

Spillers locates the source waters of this bifurcated model of Black female sexuality in the original absence of Black women from the field of the sexual. To this end, Spillers writes that for Black women, “the absence of sexuality as a structure of distinguishing terms is solidly grounded in the negative aspects of symbol-making,” in which “the missing word” is “the interstice,” the nonsite

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid. 155.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 156.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. 14.

of Black women's sexuality.²⁷⁷ This is all to say that Black female subjectivity occupies a nonplace within the field of Western discourse. The violence that occasions the appearance of the Black woman as an historical actor is so great that this subject can only enter our field of view as a distortion, a gap, a black hole.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," continues the work of "Interstices" by returning to the well-worn ground of American chattel slavery "to try to generate a discourse" that might create space in academic discourse for the Black (female) subject, a position from which to theorize.²⁷⁸ To this end, Spillers's project extends beyond the ensemble of questions and the constellation of concerns presented in her essay, and extends also beyond a demand for the mere inclusion of Black (gendered) subjects in the intellectual projects of modernity. Rather, Spillers's project endeavors to understand Blackness not as "a figure of supplement to the dominant intellectual technologies" but "as their 'blindness' in the field of vision that enabled their 'insight' as a tool of speech performance."²⁷⁹

We can trace an outline of this project through Spillers' engagements with psychoanalytic theory throughout "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." The essay opens with a suggestive analogy between the figure of the "color line" as articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois and "the split subject that psychoanalytic theory posits."²⁸⁰ We might intuit here that both Jacques Lacan's split subject and Du Bois's subject of the color line are split by the Lacanian symbolic order, but Spillers offers that "the symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an 'American grammar,' begins at the 'beginning,' which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation."²⁸¹ For Spillers, the psychoanalytic subject's entrance into language is anticipated by the Du Boisian subject's

²⁷⁷ Ibid. 156.

²⁷⁸ Spillers et al. (2007) 300.

²⁷⁹ Spillers (2003) 11.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. 203.

²⁸¹ Ibid. 209.

entrance into the “American grammar.” Indeed, the entrance of the Black subject into the Lacanian symbolic order of modernity is “withheld,” for Spillers, “by the requirements of the engines of domination.”²⁸² The presence of a buried subjectivity called “Black” is conditioned by a violence *anticipating* the Black subject. The “American grammar,” what I have called antiblackness, is that which positions the Black subject before any emergence into the Lacanian symbolic order. To this end, Spillers offers a suggestive account of the power of returning to the site of Middle Passage—a practice seemingly unaccountable to the law of diminishing returns—when she writes that “in a very real sense, every writing as revision makes the discovery [of slavery] all over again.”²⁸³ Spillers describes an originary site that is both placeless and timeless, returning us to the space and time of the Freudian unconscious and the Lacanian Real. For Spillers, the Middle Passage is a utopian site within which African persons are transformed into Black flesh: “Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the oceanic, if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy on undifferentiated identity: removed from indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captives, without names their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all.”²⁸⁴ Blackness is utopian in that it emerges from “nowhere” and functions in something like the time of the unconscious explored by Freud, a nonlinear temporality in which the past lives continually in the present. Indeed, likening slavery to the Freudian symptom, Spillers elsewhere observes that “slavery... offers an analogous spectacle of successive displacements” in which “nothing is what it appears to be” and “little or nothing is called by its name.”²⁸⁵ Under these conditions, critical or interpretive work must “try to stand up this anarchically inverted arrangement of the social in order to hear its stutter more clearly.”²⁸⁶

²⁸² Ibid. 36.

²⁸³ Ibid. 209.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 214-215.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. 20.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

The Black female subject in a space-time ontologically prior to and productive of the symbolic order has two distinct features with respect to the symbolic. First, she is its condition of possibility; her exclusion is the traumatic kernel that inaugurates the symbolic. Second, we can only glimpse the Black female subject looking backwards, we see her through (beneath) the symbolic order that her “*being* for the captor” founds.²⁸⁷ To this end, Spillers opens the essay with those names that “isolate overdetermined nominative properties,” in which the Black female subject is “embedded” and “buried beneath.”²⁸⁸ Spillers offers us a Black female subject placed “out of the traditional symbolics of female gender” that must be *thought*—to say nothing of liberated—in a different way.²⁸⁹ Just as Spillers’s intellectual project conceives of Blackness as a foundational scotoma in the Western field of view rather than a potential additive to that tradition, “Mama’s Baby” asks us to think about the Black female subject through an analytic lens completely different from that with which we understand nonblack subjects. Not to be “free” as nonblacks are free but to pursue a *Black* emancipatory politics that operates by “*claiming* the monstrosity” of a Black subjectivity. This is a politics that “might rewrite after all a radically different text” of emancipation, a freedom struggle reconfiguring freedom by way of struggle.²⁹⁰

Finally, then, we can return to Black women writing at the limits of institutionalization. If institutionality is the site for the production and reproduction of subjects, is there an unsubject? A nonspace of the buried subjectivity of the Black woman? Toni Morrison offers something like a negative formulation of intersectionality that points the way. The Black woman, Morrison writes, “had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.”²⁹¹

²⁸⁷ Ibid. 206.

²⁸⁸ Ibid. 203.

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 228.

²⁹⁰ Ibid. 229.

²⁹¹ Morrison (2008) 24.

This practice of invention under conditions of “profound desolation” recalls an even older Black feminist formulation, the motto of Nannie Helen Burroughs’s National Training School for Women and Girls, since widely repurposed: “We specialize in the wholly impossible.” A political, cultural, intellectual practice of invention under impossible conditions. Indeed, this practice, honed to the point of specialization, is something like an intersectional project invested in claiming monstrosity. If “the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible,” “the invention of that which did not appear to be possible,” then it could be that *only* a radical Black feminism offers the possibility of a monstrous politics, rather than a politics of those “normal monstrosities” catalogued by an assemblage theory anxious about Blackness and Black feminism.²⁹² If we take Black feminism seriously, not only as “a discipline with a history and a body of rigorous scholarship and distinguished scholars underpinning it” but as the practice of an impossible inventiveness, then we allow for ourselves the possibility of opening up those nonspaces feared by both state power and its most radical critics.²⁹³ Taking intersectionality seriously, understanding it within broader genealogies of Black feminist theorizing, opens a door to those parts of the map that don’t yet exist, the proper domain of monsters.

²⁹² Derrida (2007) 44. I refer here to Puar and Amit Rai’s figure of the “monster-terrorist-fag” as what Jacques Derrida has called a “normal monstrosity.” “Monsters cannot be announced,” Derrida writes, “one cannot say: ‘Here are our monsters,’ without immediately turning those monsters to pets” (1994, 80). The terrorist in Puar’s work, to the extent that it relies on the figure of the Black citizen-subject, is just such a monster-turned-pet, a supposed figure of the unrepresentable that is a symptom for the refusal to reckon with the problematic of a global antiblackness.

²⁹³ duCille (1994) 603.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lose Everything

Narrativity sustains the glamour of historical violence. Narratives create violence as an isolated, identifiable topic or subject. We have all been trained to locate violence historically—that is, as a certain type of eruption against a background of generally nonviolent human experience. From this perspective, violence can be accounted for through historical accounts of the circumstances in which it occurs. Violence is thus reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated. Having been conditioned to think of violence within narrative frameworks, we expect this mastery to take place as a result of the pacifying power of such narrative conventions as beginnings, explanatory middles, and climactic endings, and we are therefore suspicious of works of art which reject those conventions.

Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, “Merde Alors”²⁹⁴

In the Panther Party what keeps your spirit up is the fact that you are willing to die for your freedom. You know that in a revolution, when you talk about armed struggle you really are going to the point of winning or dying.

Joan Bird, *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*²⁹⁵

Narrative, Violence

In the State’s version of the story, Joan Bird has something to prove.

The 19-year-old Bird is proving herself; naïve, idealistic, full of revolutionary fervor. Around 9 P.M., on a freezing January night in 1969, she parks Clark Squire’s rental car in a clearing off Harlem River Drive, just south of the hundred-year-old High Bridge spanning the Harlem River toward the western shore of the Bronx. Five hundred yards away, across a river and rail lines and Major Deegan Expressway, a dynamite bomb waits outside the 44th precinct house in the Bronx. If all goes according to plan, the bomb detonates and officers from the station rush outside, greeted by sniper fire from Squire and Lumumba Shakur, section leader of the Harlem office of the Black Panther Party. An attack lifted from *The Battle of Algiers*. Part of a terror campaign to sow fear and disorder, with homegrown guerillas emerging from the dark slums and melting back into them. The multi-pronged strike against the Establishment included simultaneous bombings of a school district building and two other police stations. Only, the bomb doesn’t detonate.

²⁹⁴ Bersani and Dutoit (1980) 28.

²⁹⁵ Bird in Balagoon et al. (1971) 306.

(Their dynamite doesn't detonate because their dynamite isn't dynamite. Since June of 1968, as soon as the Black Panther Party opened a branch in New York, an undercover agent with the NYPD Bureau of Special Services has been volunteering with the New York Panthers. Ralph White, alias Yehwah, had just graduated from the police academy. He was brash and unstable, but charismatic enough to win Shakur's friendship. In late 1968, through happenstance and blind luck, the Panthers come into possession of some twenty-five sticks of dynamite. White, ignorant of their planned uses, spirited the explosives away to the department's explosives unit. There, the dynamite is replaced with a mixture of clay and oatmeal.)

When the "bomb" detonates beside the Bronx precinct, a blasting cap explodes and breaks some windows but little else. Before the rifle leaves the trunk, two patrolmen approach the parked car. After a short exchange, the motorists open fire. One of the dozen-odd rounds cuts through Patrolman Roland McKenzie's leather summons pouch. The two men escape into Highbridge Park.

Left behind, Joan Bird hides beneath the dashboard. Bird is pulled from the car and frisked, placed under arrest and shuttled to the 34th precinct house. She gives false names for herself and her accomplices and a false home address. Almost immediately she's overcome with guilt, torn up with fear of how her arrest will shame her parents. Overcome with fear for herself and her family should her erstwhile comrades punish them for her being captured, for her failure, for cooperating with the police. Detective Delmar "Scotty" Watson takes her confessions: "he had her taken to the locker room where they could be alone; and, in a very little while, he was calling her 'Joan' and she was calling him 'Scotty.'"²⁹⁶ In short order, Watson uncovers the truth of her identity, her rite of passage, her initiation through bloodshed, and the Panther Party's mission of destruction. Squire's signature on the car rental slip leads to his arrest at home later that night. The next day, Lumumba Shakur is arrested when he

²⁹⁶ Kempton 79.

arrives with his attorney at the precinct, demanding Bird's release. The three are charged with conspiracy to murder the two officers.

The case falls apart. The evening of the shootout, Shakur and Clark were both attending an event fifteen blocks south at Harlem's Rockland Palace. In their company was the same police informant who had swapped in the phony explosives. Sekou Odinga and Kuwasi Balagoon, named over the course of Bird's marathon confession, are sought in connection with the shootout off Harlem River Drive. Balagoon is arrested later in New Jersey on a different charge. Odinga remains underground for twelve years. Bird makes bail, only to be arrested again less than a month later, in the early morning raid that begins the long trials of the New York 21.²⁹⁷

In Joan Bird's version of the story, Bird, Balagoon, and Odinga are parked in a clearing beside Harlem River Drive. Two officers approach the car, Odinga may have fired a shot to create cover for their escape, but the officers do empty their guns. They report to their supervisors the dozen shots from the men outside the parked car, however much it might strain credulity to come under fire from two men, six feet away, and come away unscathed—save McKenzie's wounded summons pouch (the summons book inside never reappears). Bird is left behind. The rifle found in the trunk is equipped with four cartridges and no telescope. On a moonless January night, the Panther snipers have four rounds to navigate the sixteen hundred feet between their perch and the Highbridge station house.

When Bird arrives at the 34th precinct, some fifteen minutes later, admitting detective Frank Ruggeri recalls asking McKenzie, "Did you work her over?" McKenzie testifies that Bird may have had a "mouse" beneath her eye from diving under the dashboard. Bird's mother would testify: "I looked at Joanie and her face was all busted up. 'God in heaven,' I asked her, 'Who did this to you?'"

²⁹⁷ The details making up "the official story" here were collected from stories published contemporaneously in the *New York Times*, as well as books published shortly after the trial by journalists (Kempton), law professors (Zimroth), and one juror from the trial (Kennebeck).

And Joanie was too scared to speak. She could only point to Roland McKenzie.”²⁹⁸ In Murray Kempton’s book-length account of the arrest and subsequent trial of the New York 21, *The Briar Patch*, Bird’s mother recalls that, sometime after 3 a.m., Detective Watson went away, and “Patrolman McKenzie employed the interval of her confessor’s absence to take Joan Bird into a separate and closed room, from which Mrs. Bird heard first the words, ‘You lying little b-----,’ and then a thump and then a scream. After McKenzie brought her back, her daughter whispered that he had kicked her.”²⁹⁹ Afeni Shakur, the only other woman among the Panther 21, would recall to her biographer, Jasmine Guy, “they beat her[...]. They tortured her. They hung her out a window and threatened to drop her. And when they were through, they slammed her into that rat-infested Women’s House of Detention. She never received medical attention after she was beaten. They just left her in her cell to rot...”³⁰⁰

In *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*, Bird describes the long torture that extracted just enough actionable information to constitute her “cooperation.” In breathless sentences she recounts, “I was found in the car by the pigs and they dragged me out and began to beat and stomp on me and use heavy blackjacks and beat and kicked me in the stomach, lungs, back, and handcuffed me, and then took me up to the racist pig station and told me that I’m under arrest and that I have no rights they are bound to respect, telling me that I had better tell them the truth or else they were going to kill me or bomb up the Panther offices.”³⁰¹ Shakur recalls, “When she came into court the next day, you could see the boot mark on her cape from where she got stomped. It was a plaid cape, and you could see the boot marks on the back of her when she stood up in court.”³⁰² By May of 1969, a month after the mass arrest of the New York Panthers, the New

²⁹⁸ Kempton 84.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Guy 75.

³⁰¹ Balagoon et al., (1971) 305.

³⁰² Guy 91.

York Times named Bird under the headline, “Plot Confession Laid to Panther.”³⁰³ “And they put on this masquerade,” Bird writes, “they put out to the public’s eye through the mass media that I was going to be held as a material witness and turn evidence on the rest of the defendants. This is the type of tactic they tend to use—divide and conquer.”³⁰⁴ Ultimately, her “confession” amounts to very little. She recants almost immediately. “Scotty” Watson, the friendly detective, the gentle father confessor, “had neglected to reduce her confession to a form preserved immutable and irrefutable; her voice on a tape or her signature at the bottom of a transcript.”³⁰⁵ Under cross examination he admitted he had “made ‘mental notes’ that he later reported to superior officers.” The detective “said he had asked for a tape recorder but was told none was available at the police station.”³⁰⁶

In both stories there are moments that beggar belief. In both stories there are gaps, omissions, and contradictions. There are missing hours, motivated distortions.³⁰⁷ There are moments in both stories that testify to the everyday failures of a tragic humanity. An ill-conceived plot, a sniper attack without bullets, the vicious beating of a vulnerable person, a tortured confession, a mother helpless to protect her child, saving face, saving one’s own life, embracing or resigning oneself to different unfreedoms. Her confession, her recantation, her story of 19 January 1969, and every day and night to follow, would be rendered through the conflicting motivations of an adversarial court system and partisans in a longstanding war of position. Her story carries the weight of histories that exceed and anticipate the punctuality of her appearance. Every version of Joan Bird’s story bears these traces.

³⁰³ *New York Times*, 14 May 1969, pg. 48.

³⁰⁴ Balagoon et al. (1971) 306.

³⁰⁵ Kempton 84.

³⁰⁶ *New York Times*, 15 Jan 1971, pg. 24.

³⁰⁷ “In due course there would be pictures of Joan Bird with a black eye; and, though it might be difficult for the defense to establish that a policeman had blackened it, Detective Ruggeri took care to recall that he had noticed her injuries as soon as she was brought to the station house, which was to say that any excessive force used against her that night was the doing of no one inside his precinct house. Detective Ruggeri, knowing his duty, would sacrifice the patrolman and protect the squad” (Kempton, 78). For a recent exposé on the police practice of lying under oath, see Goldstein (2018).

This article is interested in the spaces between narratives. Somewhere between narratives we find both a historiography and a theorization of violence. Specifically, the violences from which emerged a set of movements, a constellation of insurgent formations operating under the name of Black Power. But also the violences that repressed and defeated these insurgent formations. Further still, there is the matrix of narratives that have constructed from Black Power two seemingly incompatible formations: Black nationalism and Black feminism. This article will trace in outline the routes by which Black nationalism and Black feminism were disarticulated from each other, and argue that between the texts of a feminist Black radicalism is a Black feminist politics inclusive of both a love-politics and a politics of insurgent violence. More immediately, these stories draw our attention to the relationship between narrative and violence.

In this scene we find the violences, pleasures, and politics of narrative. As Bersani and Dutoit put it, narrative constructs violence as “a certain type of eruption against a backdrop of generally nonviolent human activity,” with the effect of reducing violence to particular acts—and here we hold in tension the “act” as a specific, temporally bounded event, and the “act” as a segment within a larger narrative.³⁰⁸ The state’s narratives, the narratives crafted by the police and the court system, construct violent acts committed (or planned, conspired, imagined, or wished) by Panthers as such eruptions, as illegitimate and dangerous acts that disrupt the otherwise peaceful functioning of civil society.³⁰⁹ Further, the state is legitimate, is non-violent, precisely for its mastery of narrative forms, its capacity to narrativize its own legitimacy and to narrativize the deviant figure of the insurgent. And to the degree that antiblack violence is civil society’s nonviolence, Black liberation struggle, in whatever form, is necessarily illegitimate-because-violent. On the other hand, narratives *of* state violence struggle against the limits of the narrative form. Because state violence is an atmosphere, a climate, as ineffable

³⁰⁸ Bersani and Dutoit (1980) 28.

³⁰⁹ We might also say, more literally, that the state constructs anti-state violence by planting undercover agents who encourage non-state political actors to operate outside the boundaries of “legitimate” political activity.

as it is concrete, narrativizing state violence always risks reducing it to particular moments, maimings, and deaths.³¹⁰

As troubling as this conundrum is in the context of counter-hegemonic struggle and movement-building, more troubling still are the pleasures of identification with narrativized violence. For Bersani and Dutoit, “the immobilization of a violent event invites a pleasurable identification with its enactment” insofar as “a coherent narrative depends on stabilized images” and “stabilized images stimulate the mimetic impulse.”³¹¹ The violent act is frozen, suspended within the formal conventions of narrative, and when we interact with narrative we’re hailed, we’re seduced, we’re invited into an enjoyment of violence-as-act. Whether it’s the shock of violence that sets our story in motion, or the violence that disrupts our placid comfort in the middle of a story, or the catharsis of a narrative’s violent culmination. And, recalling the image Frantz Fanon famously offers of the colonized subject in the dark of the cinema, spectators identify with violence in promiscuous ways.³¹² Victims of state violence can, and do, identify with the narrativized violences of their victimizers, and victimizers can, and do, identify with the targets of violence. My argument here is not that there are better, more ethical objects of identification. Nor that there is something necessarily politically retrograde about identifying with forms of violence that we otherwise oppose. Is not the first function of a moral economy to enable the pleasures of transgression? A politics of moral hygiene, a politics of proper identifications, offers at least two (disavowed) pleasures: the pleasure of transgressing one’s moral code, and the pleasure of having a moral code. The challenge posed by Bird and Shakur’s life-writings is how to avow the experience, and the pleasure, of being troubled by our identifications without mistaking that pleasurable, destabilizing trouble for a politics.³¹³

³¹⁰ A number of critical and literary texts in recent years have endeavored to put words to ineffable violences. On the figure of climate, see Sharpe (2016). See also: Brand (2001); Hartman (2007, 2016); and Rankine (2004, 2014).

³¹¹ Bersani and Dutoit (1980) 28.

³¹² Rendered in Charles Markmann’s translation as, “In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me” (1967, 140).

³¹³ In her 2004 biography, Afeni Shakur offers an apt anecdote: “While I was in the Women’s House of Detention, I built relationships with white women who needed to touch the hem of your garment so that they could be made whole. They

Within the mainstream of academic cultural studies, Black feminist critiques of the historical project of nationalist Black liberation struggles have been interpreted, almost reflexively, as marking an unbridgeable gap between Black feminist politics (as necessarily anti-nationalist) and Black nationalist politics (as necessarily anti-feminist). The present article contributes to recent work in Black feminist historiography and cultural studies that recenter Black women's political, aesthetic, and theoretical labors at the heart of Black freedom struggles across the twentieth century. Within this body of scholarship, Black feminist critiques of Black nationalism and Black Power might more productively be understood as *immanent critiques* of Black Power. They demonstrate that Black feminism and Black nationalism were separated into opposing camps fitfully, incompletely, and over a period of decades.

As with the competing narratives that emerged around Joan Bird's arrest, there is something edifying in tracking the political investments shaping these competing narratives over the relationship between Black feminisms and Black nationalisms. The disagreement that emerges in these discourses is important because both discourses identify *against* state power and *with* the position of the radical Black woman insurgent. These distinct and conflicting projects share a set of political identifications and avowed allegiances. One's posture toward these competing accounts is irreducible to a politics of proper identifications. Instead, we encounter what Jacques Derrida calls the strategic wager, "a certain way of giving ourselves over to not-knowing, to the incalculable." For Derrida, "a strategic wager always consists in making a decision, or rather in giving ourselves over to the decision – paradoxically, in making decisions we cannot justify from start to finish."³¹⁴ Though this article tracks the political investments and theoretical genealogies of these discourses, and takes a position, the taking of any position occurs in a context that is "not absolutely determinable." The article closes with a reading of

would write me and visit me and ask me what they could do to help" (Guy, 105-6). Shakur describes mobilizing their fetishistic identification toward establishing a bail fund for incarcerated women with small bails but no way to pay them.

³¹⁴ Derrida and Ferraris (2001) 13.

Afeni Shakur's autobiographical and epistolary writings as reflections on love-politics, political violence, and the incalculable politics of the decision. In their work in and out of the Black Panther Party, Bird and Shakur gave themselves over to the incalculable, to what Bird calls a wager of "winning or dying."

Feminist Black Radicalisms

Look for Me in the Whirlwind interweaves the life narratives of sixteen of the Panthers indicted on Easter of 1969 for conspiring to bomb department stores, train stations, and municipal buildings. The trial was the longest and most expensive in New York history. Though the first trial resulted in no convictions, it destroyed the Party in New York. The *Collective Autobiography* was both a literary and political project, a collection of life writings and a tool for political education and fundraising. The narratives proceed more or less chronologically, with stories of early life and education transitioning into teenage and early adulthood awakenings or wanderings and the eventual encounter with the Black Panther Party and the case that takes over their young lives. As the two women in the collection, we might expect Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur to function in the text as models for what Kara Keeling calls the figure of the Black Revolutionary Woman.

By the summer of 1970, both Bird and Shakur were out on bail and working as the public faces of the Panther 21. In the text, they offer a study in contrasts. Bird was born and raised in New York. As a child she performed with a girls' dance troupe called the Crackerjacks, performing annually at Carnegie Hall. Shakur split her childhood years between Norfolk, Virginia, and Lumberton, North Carolina, as different variations on Jim Crow segregation. Bird excelled at a private Catholic high school, her parents had hope in the promise of a decent education and class mobility. Bird and her girlfriends called themselves La Group and worked different jobs to afford the fashions of the time. Shakur moved around to different high schools and found an outlet for an exquisite rage as the

president of the Disciple Debs, the women's auxiliary of the Disciples street gang. Bird was politicized when she read about a group of Black Panthers attacked by the police outside of the Brooklyn Criminal Court. She was eighteen when she joined the Party, taking nursing courses at night at Queens Community College. In early 1967, Shakur accepted an invitation to hear Bobby Seale speak at Seventh Avenue and 125th Street in Harlem. The "people listening were a mixture of people, it wasn't just cultural nationalists, the people dressed in dashikis, but" there were people "with processes too, and hustlers—I mean everybody was standing listening."³¹⁵ She recalls,

I don't remember much of what Bobby said that day, but I do remember him saying that the Black Panther Party didn't care whether you wore your hair processed or nappy or wigged. He said there were Panthers with processes (can you imagine?), Panthers with wigs, and they were some of the baddest [members of the party]. I knew he was right, because even though I didn't know anything about the Black Panther Party, I knew I had more respect for them than I had for all the organizations in the world. I *knew* they had heart.³¹⁶

The question here of "heart," linked later with the question of love, emerges from a class politics. From Bird's middle class striving to Shakur's rural-to-urban-underclass surviving, the various signifiers of class position in the context of African American life at mid-century meet together at the site of the Black Panther Party. The still-emerging Party challenged subtler "boundaries of Blackness," the politics of wigs and processes and who might be a proper representative of Black insurgency.³¹⁷ While Black Power and Black nationalist formations eventually cultivated their own modes of respectability, even tragic or onerous ones, Shakur identifies in the incipient Panther Party a site of possibility linked with interclass solidarity.

Around the turn of the century, a pair of edited volumes were published that began reassessing the legacies of the Black Panther Party. Charles Jones's *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)* (1998), and Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas's *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party* (2001), set

³¹⁵ Balagoon et al. (1971) 287.

³¹⁶ Balagoon et al. (1971) 288.

³¹⁷ The reference here, of course, is to Cohen (1999).

an agenda for revising the Party's history a quarter-century after state repression and internal dysfunction had ended its formal operation. In the latter volume, Cleaver, the one-time Communications Secretary of the Party, addressed directly the gender and sexual politics of the Party, and responded to narratives representing the Party as a group of hopelessly heterosexist and macho Black male revolutionaries. Cleaver makes two central points. First, the circulation of figures of the Macho Black Revolutionary tended to reproduce, in an uncritical way, the narratives of the dominant culture. In the psychic life of white supremacy, the figure of the Black Panther vacillated between the noble savage and the rapacious terrorist. The well-intentioned liberal academic of the 1990s, on Cleaver's reading, accepted the fantasies of the dominant culture as a patronizing gesture toward protecting Black women from Black Power.³¹⁸ Second, Cleaver offers an historical and empirical argument that, unlike the dominant culture (and unlike many radical formations against the dominant culture), women in the Black Panther Party 1) held gender-nonspecific positions in both the rank and file and leadership of the Party, 2) had mechanisms internal to the Party's structure for addressing gender and sexual violence that far exceeded those of the dominant culture,³¹⁹ and 3) made women's liberation (and later gay liberation) an explicit goal of the Party platform. For Cleaver, the motivated historical revision of the Panthers, often as a stand-in for all Black Power or Black nationalist organizing, is linked to a retrenchment of class divisions in Black social life.

³¹⁸ In this way, Cleaver's point is similar to those of a number of postcolonial feminists challenging the imperialism of western feminisms—perhaps the best-known iterations of this line of argumentation are those of Spivak (1981, 1988), Mohanty (1984), and Abu-Lughod (2002).

³¹⁹ Writing in 1993, in response to a public debate between Elaine Brown and Alice Walker, former BPP and Black Liberation Army member Safiya Bukhari made a similar point to Cleaver, writing, "the Black Panther Party put into place a mechanism for dealing with [male chauvinism, sexism, and domestic violence]—starting with political education and ending with bringing the responsible parties up on disciplinary charges" (Bukhari 2010, 60). But the mechanism of disciplinary charges was not without issues. In a deposition given in the late 1980s, Bukhari describes a particularly strange disciplinary charge brought against her: "Another time I was brought up on charges for stupid stuff. The Party had a policy of free love. Well, they called it free love. I called it political pimping. One of the Panthers decided he wanted to sleep with me. I was brought up on charges of refusing to sleep with him" (23). Unlike other charges she details, for which she was found guilty and sanctioned (failing to change her baby daughter's diaper, fighting with a friend over a practical joke), Bukhari doesn't say if she was found guilty of violating the free love policy. Bukhari's experience underlines the more surreal qualities of improvising a new social order.

For Farah Jasmine Griffin, the tragedy of the presumed fundamental opposition between black feminism and black nationalism led to the loss of “something very significant: the opportunity to really impact the lives of large numbers of black women.”³²⁰ In her contribution to a 2002 collection on Black Power and Black nationalism in the new century, Griffin reflected on the wide range of Black women’s voices and perspectives available in Toni Cade Bambara’s 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*. Bambara’s text brought together Black women with vastly different gender politics, all within a larger conversation about the situation of Black women in America. Over the next decades, Griffin remarks, Black women intellectuals split into separate camps, feminist and nationalist. On either side, “black nationalist women have accused leftist and left-liberal black feminists of being too influenced by white feminism and thus remaining marginal to the concerns of most black women,” while “black leftist and left-liberal feminists, too often wounded from encounters with certain black nationalists, have had little desire to continue a dialogue with anyone articulating nationalist perspective.”³²¹ Griffin offers that “the disconnection between black women who are feminists and black women who are nationalists is often based on class *as much as* it is on ideological differences.”³²² Much has been said about the emergence of a “new Black middle class” or “new Black bourgeoisie” in the era called “post-Civil Rights,” and analyses tend to focus more on social mores and attitudes than on economic markers, which tend to show less in the way of actual upward mobility. Nevertheless, Griffin and Cleaver both note the impact of hardening class-based *attitudes* in the late twentieth century on both historical and contemporary readings of the relationship between Black feminisms and Black nationalisms.

³²⁰ Griffin (2002) 123.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.; emphasis added.

Around the same time as Griffin's essay, Black feminist historians began documenting 20th century Black feminist organizing, in and outside of Black Power organizing.³²³ Ashley Farmer's *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (2017) stands out in this emerging literature as one of the most expansive works on Black women's political organizing across the middle of the twentieth century. *Remaking Black Power* reframes the emergence of "Black Power" organizations as products of the previous fifty years of Black women's militant political organizing in the UNIA, the Popular Front era of the Communist Party USA, and the mid-century Civil Rights Movement. Without reviewing Farmer's entire project, her central insights into the historiography of Black feminism and Black nationalism, and her capsule history of Black women's militant organizing, will frame Bird and Shakur's place within the height and collapse of the New York Panthers.

The political theorizing that emerged from Black liberation struggles linked ideas of collective empowerment and autonomy with new conceptualizations of Black gendered personhood. These ideas circulated across a range of magazines and newspapers, sources that now exist primarily in archives, or have only been fittingly digitized or anthologized, and rarely factor in to the citational practices of contemporary academics. But in the middle of the last century, "the same periodicals, publications, and collections that scholars often use to frame Black Power as a male-dominated era

³²³ Kimberly Springer's collection, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing* (1999) and her *Living for the Revolution* (2005), and Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin's collection, *Sisters in the Struggle* (2001), cleared space and set an agenda for the historical study of Black feminist organizing and the political work of Black women in Black liberation struggles. Cheryl Higashida's *Black Internationalist Feminism* (2011) offered critical readings of several major Black women writers of the left, writers who cultivated a "nationalist internationalism" that have become unfashionable and largely disavowed in the era of decolonial and queer of color critiques. Carole Boyce Davies' work on the Black communist activist intellectual, Claudia Jones, have established an archive, in the edited collection of Jones' writings, *Beyond Containment* (2011), and placed Jones in the larger contexts of Black internationalism and Western Communism, in the biography, *Left of Karl Marx* (2007). The collection, *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (2009), assembled critical and biographical studies on over a dozen radical Black women across the middle of the twentieth century. Dayo Gore's *Radicalism at the Crossroads* (2012) pressed further into the histories of Black women in Communist Party USA and other mid-century labor struggles. In the last two years, a handful of books have taken on critical reappraisals of the gender and sexual politics of Black Power and Black nationalist movements. Robyn Spencer's *The Revolution has Come* (2016) offers a close engagement with the Black Panther Party in Oakland; Ula Taylor has reexamined the roles of Black women in the Nation of Islam in her *The Promise of Patriarchy* (2017); and Keisha Blain's *Set the World on Fire* (2018) looks at Black women's nationalist organizing in the period between the decline of Garveyism and the rise of Black Power. Within the institutional constraints and prerogatives of academic publishing, it has largely been historical studies that have worked through the labors of Black women in and around Black political and insurgent formations.

[were] brimming with information about black women's thoughts, actions, and philosophical leanings."³²⁴ While nationalist Black women's "models of womanhood were, at times, contradictory, problematic, and essentialist," Farmer argues that, "by demonstrating the different racial identities that black women could adopt, and how these models were related to the liberation of black men and women everywhere, they shaped the evolution of the era and molded a movement that redefined the meaning of race and identity in American life."³²⁵ Indeed, "Black women's distinct but coinciding calls for economic independence, armed self-defense, cultural restoration, and political mobilization in the early 1960s were all manifestations of their increasingly unapologetic demands for control and autonomy."³²⁶ Bird and Shakur's narratives draw our attention to the role played by state violence in the repression, not only of Black liberation struggle (understood as Black *men's* liberation struggle), of Black women insurgents.³²⁷ Farmer's text draws our attention to the contours of that state repression and how Black women militants developed theory and practice in response to and in excess of state violence across half of a century.

In Jasmine Guy's 2004 biography of Afeni Shakur, Guy finds in the family history of Lumumba Shakur an outline of a half-century of Black liberation struggle. "Lumumba's father was a Garveyite, so of course," Guy writes, "the logical progression for him to follow from Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association was to Elijah Muhammad, two dynamic forces empowering the Black man in America."³²⁸ Farmer's history of Black women's militant organizing draws similar paths. As the UNIA succumbed to state repression, Black women domestic workers in urban centers who had been politicized by Garveyism began increasingly to organize with the Communist Party USA, which seemed to demonstrate its commitment to racial justice with its support

³²⁴ Farmer (2017) 15.

³²⁵ Ibid., 19.

³²⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

³²⁷ See Davis (1971), Shakur (1978), and Bukhari (2010).

³²⁸ Guy 70.

in the 1931 case of the Scottsboro Boys.³²⁹ While the exigencies of the Second World War diminished the CPUSA's outward commitment to racial justice, Farmer notes, it remained a site for women like Esther Cooper Jackson, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Claudia Jones to organize and to publish on the political demands of Black women domestic workers. As an incipient Cold War led to the increasing repression of domestic Communists, the Sojourners for Truth and Justice emerged as a short-lived splinter group whose membership included Lorraine Hansbury and Alice Childress, the latter of whom wrote frequently in the Left press on themes of the exploitation of Black women's labor and the prospect of collective resistance. The figure of the "Militant Negro Domestic" served as a model for imagining Black liberation struggle throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. "Black women radicals used this ideal to reimagine domestic workers, and, by extension, all black women, as nationalist, Marxist, gender-conscious political actors who were at the vanguard of race, class, and gender liberation struggles."³³⁰ When Guy writes, "the Garveyites became Muslims, and the Muslims became Panthers," she bypasses the history of the Militant Negro Domestic and Black women's mid-century anti-capitalist organizing.³³¹ Lost in the historical reception of the 1965 Moynihan Report, around which so much of the early work called Black feminism organized itself, is that the figure of the Black woman domestic worker that it pathologizes is precisely the figure deployed by militant Black women radicals working to imagine new texts for Black liberation.

By the early 1960s, as "Garveyite frameworks again gained traction due to advances in civil rights and African independence struggles," Black women's post-war militancy was at once the *source* for an incipient Black Power era and that against which Black Power formations struggled most profoundly.³³² Black women's militant organizing was fundamental and foundational to the insurgent

³²⁹ On Black women organizing with Communist formations in New York, see Makalani (2016).

³³⁰ Farmer (2017) 49.

³³¹ Guy 71.

³³² Farmer (2017) 49.

formations of the 1960s. At the same time, as Angela Davis observed in 1971, the myth of the Black matriarchate operated as “an open weapon of ideological warfare” with “black men and women alike... its potential victims—men unconsciously lunging at the woman, equating her with the myth; women sinking back into the shadows, lest an aggressive posture resurrect the myth in themselves.”³³³ As “Black Power” and the figure of the Black macho revolutionary began to circulate globally, its origins with the militant domestic worker were subsumed by the spectacle of masculine violence and the fantasy of a recuperated masculinity.

Forms of Violence

In “‘We’ll Just Have to Get Guns and Be Men’: The Cinematic Appearance of Black Revolutionary Women,” Kara Keeling elaborates on the relationship between militant Black women during the Black Power era with masculine violence. Keeling tracks the responses to the Black Panther’s May 1967 protest of the Mulford Bill, aimed at ending Black Panther Party armed patrols of police. Images of Black Panthers, clad in leather, carrying shotguns and rifles, circulated across the world. The cinematic figure of “blacks with guns” became a point of condensation around which Party membership rapidly grew. The growth of the Party was thus linked with the figure of the armed Black revolutionary man. The Black Panther Party quickly became associated, in regional and national media in collaboration with the State and law enforcement, with increasingly extreme acts of violence, which reached a peak with the mass arrest of the New York 21. As former Panthers Kathleen Cleaver and Safiya Bukhari have noted, the construction of the Panthers in mass media had a decisive impact on later interpretations of the Party and its legacy. Contemporary scholars are all too prepared, Keeling recognizes, for a critique of the sexism of the Black Panther Party that marshals the macho image of armed Black men as self-evident evidence. But “rather than dismissing the image of blacks with guns

³³³ Davis (1971) 15.

as politically retrograde because macho or masculine and, therefore, necessarily exclusionary of black women,” Keeling contends that “for the Black Revolutionary Woman, the process of self-identification was predicated on the appearance of the Black as blacks with guns.”³³⁴ For Afeni Shakur, even months later, the effect of the Sacramento protest was decisive:

I read an old newspaper about the Sacramento thing. I didn't read it when it happened; I found out after it happened. What impressed me at the time was a line that said a policeman had put his hand on one brother's gun and he said, "Am I under arrest?" "No." "Then take your hands off my motherfucking gun. I have a constitutional right to this gun." I mean in 1967 that in itself was enough to blow anybody's mind.³³⁵

With the creation of images of Black masculinity in the figure of “blacks with guns” we are confronted by the non-obvious problem of Black engendering. Because an effect of enslavement was an ungendered Blackness, Black people barred from any claim to gendered humanity, Keeling notes that a central element of Black freedom struggles, antebellum and postbellum, was making claims on normative gender. For a Black man, then, to claim masculinity was to claim humanity and citizenship. Likewise, for a Black woman to claim femininity was to claim the degraded humanity and partial citizenship of non-Black women. Historically, Keeling observes, when Black men have tried “to claim the rights and privileges accorded to the masculine realm of citizenship,” Black men “have been feminized, both discursively and corporeally, most markedly through castration, but also through other modes of violence which intensify the relationship between the black male and his body, thereby reserving the masculine privilege of disembodied subjectivity for white men.”³³⁶ This cycle, of claiming a masculine gendered humanity and being rendered feminine and unhuman, continued into the middle of the century and the Black liberation movement. Claiming something other than masculinity in the name of something other than humanity is not, yet, a legacy of the mainstream of mid-century Black freedom struggle.

³³⁴ Keeling (2007) 80.

³³⁵ Balagoon et al. (1971) 288.

³³⁶ Keeling (2007) 83.

Under these conditions, “while the Panthers’ praxis effectively revealed and critiqued the complicity of femininity and the forms of sociality that enabled the racist exploitation of black bodies, it did not attend to the destruction of femininity’s dichotomous counterpart, masculinity, with the same vigor,” such that, for the Party, “masculinity and its affectations and accoutrements appear as the terms adequate to Black Liberation.”³³⁷ For Panthers like Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Safiya Bukhari, Joan Bird, and Afeni Shakur, there was no necessary relationship between masculine political violence and the non-participation of women. They may have been bonded together retroactively, but not out of any historical or conceptual necessity. Echoing Hortense Spillers, Keeling observes that, “other accessible aspects of the Black, especially his intimate relationship to femininity because of his close association with corporeality, would not have registered as revolutionary or as carrying the potential to liberate a people from the common sense in and against which the Panthers were working,” and “death, brutalization, and physical violation—acts that previously had inscribed femininity onto the black—were overwritten into heroism and ‘dying for the people.’”³³⁸ At this point, Keeling offers a compelling challenge to the common collapse of masculine and masculinist: “What is perhaps most innovative about the BPP’s cinematic appearance is that it threw into doubt the validity of the common sense that linked ‘man’ with ‘male’ with ‘masculine,’ if only for that any-instant-whatever in which one stared in amazement while the Panthers appeared.”³³⁹

Keeling pulls our focus to a moment when a range of possible futures were available, when the possibility of self-creation through violent resistance was available across the gender spectrum. Just as Spillers (1987) saw the potential in the capacity of Black men to hold and be held by the maternal within, as a function of their forced appearance as the constitutive outside of Western modernity’s emergent gender apparatus, Keeling demonstrates that Black women saw themselves

³³⁷ Ibid., 84-85.

³³⁸ Ibid. 85.

³³⁹ Ibid.

authorized by violence that was masculine but not (yet) patriarchal. Black women “recognized themselves in the masculine image of blacks with guns even when that image was composed primarily of recognizably black male bodies.”³⁴⁰ For Keeling, Black women’s pleasurable political identifications with masculine images of violence are “not a contestation of black feminist analyses since the sixties, but a caveat against uncritically deploying its historically specific critiques as though they were true in all times.”³⁴¹

The idea of Black Power emerged from longer histories of imagining new inhabitations of Black desire and embodiment. For Farmer, these gendered imaginaries emerged from the web of material conditions shaping Black women’s lives as (domestic) workers and militants. Farah Jasmine Griffin noted how the links between Black feminisms and Black nationalisms, which had sustained one another over generations, were severed over the course of the post-Civil Rights Era. This bifurcation coincided with the bifurcation of the post-Keynesian economy, as Black women left domestic work for the professions abandoned by the state (education and social services, chiefly), or were pushed out of domestic work into the continuum of survival work and incarceration that marked the apotheosis of the world’s first genuine prison society. The Black feminist theorizing that emerged from those material conditions was the motor force for mid-century Black radicalism, even as attempts to claim Black masculinity calcified into attempts to claim Black patriarchy. That transition was never guaranteed and was contested by feminist Black nationalists who sought to steer a course inclusive of both love-politics and insurgent political violence.

Violence, Love

³⁴⁰ Ibid. 87-88.

³⁴¹ Ibid. 88.

Shakur's recollections return often to a thematics of love and "heart." At a rally later in 1967, she recounts that "there were just so many people that said so many things that made so much sense, you know. They told you about love. It was just something different, it wasn't like that same old thing that I'd heard and dismissed. It was different, because they were talking about fighting at the same time that they were talking about things that were relevant to me right now."³⁴² The promise of the Panthers was in braiding together love and violence, though there is a productive ambiguity about how exactly these two terms are linked. The Panthers were talking about fighting at the same time that they talked about "things that were relevant to [her] right now." If love is what was relevant to her right then, then fighting is separate and related. But if what was relevant to her right then is something else entirely, then love and fighting are metonymically linked. Without resolving this ambiguity, we can hold in tension the potential for collective self-invention incipient in both love and violence. For Shakur, joining the Party is linked to an aspirational journey of personal development. Frequently candid about what she takes to be her shortcomings and limitations, Shakur offers the following unvarnished self-assessment: "I know that basically I'm a very fucked-up person. I'm not a very good person, I'm not pure and loving like a lot of people are that I know. A lot of revolutionaries that I know are. I'm not great, I'm none of those things."³⁴³ Personal salvation and righteousness were never preconditions for membership in the Panthers. Shakur is drawn to that when she remarks on the hair politics of the Panthers, and also when she finds space for a very fucked up person in the Panthers. Shakur is drawn to the vision of love offered by the Panthers to the extent that she understands herself as not pure and loving—"pure" and "loving" are linked concepts for Shakur—and in that way not like her revolutionary comrades. Even without being great, without being pure and loving, the Panther Party created a venue for Shakur to become something other than what she imagined herself to be.

³⁴² Balagoon et al. (1971) 289-290.

³⁴³ Balagoon et al. (1971) 290.

In “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” Jennifer Nash identifies a tradition of love-politics internal to second-wave Black feminism that reaches beyond romantic attachment toward a “theory of justice.”³⁴⁴ Nash reads in second-wave Black feminists like Alice Walker, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde a “call for ordering the self *and* transcending the self, “ and “a strategy for remaking the self *and* for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood.”³⁴⁵ On one hand, Nash challenges the absence of Black feminist writing in academic discourses on the politics of affect. At the same time, Nash follows a line of critique, made most forcefully within affect theory, on the limits of “identity politics” as the political work most associated with Black feminism. The Black feminist love-politics emerging from this tradition is both spatially utopian and temporally future-oriented. Not only does it imagine “the public sphere as a site organized around a shared utopian vision rather than around a wounded, shared identity that demands recognition of the wound,” its practitioners imagine “a world ordered by love, by a radical embrace of difference, by a set of subjects who work on/against themselves to work for each other.”³⁴⁶ Nash’s interventions challenge narrow conceptualizations of the horizons of Black feminist thought and politics, while also clearing space for theorizations of Black feminist love unencumbered by an academic sentimentality that would freeze Black feminism in time and space, safe to view without fear of contamination. Love-politics risks precisely contamination, risks the embrace of radical alterity and an unknowable futurity.³⁴⁷

The formulations of love and politics offered by Shakur, and emerging from the larger and longer histories of Black women’s militant organizing outlined above, come into productive tension with Nash’s theorization around the figure of the wound. For Nash, “Black feminist love-politics crafts a political community that eschews the wounded subject that lies at the heart of identity

³⁴⁴ Nash (2013) 2.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 3; emphasis in original.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 15, 18.

³⁴⁷ On this point, Nash is part of a larger conversation, including but not exhausted by Stallings (2015), Musser (2018), Nyong’o (2018), and Nash (2019).

politics.”³⁴⁸ Black feminist theorizing in the present is replete with attempts to rescue the figure of the Black woman from the notion that her existence is structured and defined by her wounds, by the violences done to her. Likewise, Wendy Brown’s (1995) now-famous formulation of the wounded attachment relies on the assumption that the two, wounds and attachments, are conceptually and normatively separable (i.e., they can be separated and they ought to be separated). For Brown, wounded attachments are superseded by collective aspirations, and Nash’s love-politics “crafts a collectivity marked by ‘communal affect,’ a utopian, visionary, future-oriented community held together by affiliation and ‘public feeling’ rather than an imagined—or enforced—sameness.”³⁴⁹ Within this tradition, the temporality of the wound is caught in the past and present. The wound occurs in the before, demands for their redress are caught in the here and now. Futurity in this formulation is reserved for those subjects who refuse to be defined by their wounds. But what if our attachments are the wounds we enjoy? Might we be attached to the future as a pleasurable wound-to-come? Or is the constant deferral of a future that never arrives a permanent wound around which we organize our present and narrate our past? In the letter that concludes *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, Shakur describes feeling, for the first time in her life, “like a woman—beaten, battered, and scarred maybe, but isn’t that what wisdom is truly made of?”³⁵⁰ Not simply the tortures and deprivations of state violence, the betrayal and disappointment of comrades, but a practice of collective study that incorporates insight with injury. The figure of the wound shifts from a quagmire of enforced sameness to an impetus for becoming. The love-politics that emerges from Black women’s insurgency prompts a new conceptual relationship with violence, a new imagining of a Black feminist violence.

A Black feminist violence would seem to be something other than what Keeling presented as Black women authorized by a masculine (if not male) violence. Likewise the paradox of Black women’s

³⁴⁸ Nash (2013) 18-19.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁵⁰ Balagoon et al. (1971) 361.

self-defense. In one of the most read chapters of her *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman offers the case of Celia, an enslaved woman tried and executed for murdering her captor and rapist. The reversal of assault and defense, by which Celia is transformed from victim to assailant, is the crux of a legal regime that only recognizes the personhood of the enslaved as criminality. Such that, to the extent that the slave possesses will or agency (rather than being a living extension of the will and agency of the master), they possess a criminal agency—"ascribing to the object of property an ensnaring and criminal agency that acted to dissimulate the barbarous forms of white enjoyment permitted within the law."³⁵¹ From the vantage of the present, Celia might be read as a subaltern who can speak, whose act is legible through conceptual frameworks of self-defense and self-possession.³⁵² Put simply: in defense of her bodily autonomy, Celia murders her captor. But can this be a sufficient framework for understanding Celia's act? This reading of Celia's act requires a translation that is an obliteration of Celia within the economies of force that render her vulnerable in the first place. That is, to read Celia as a self-possessed subject is to dispossess her of the dispossession from which she acts. Violent self-defense, for Black women, is not only thwarted by law, but takes place in a context in which self-possession is a necessary impossibility. The preemption of self-possession for the enslaved is the condition of possibility for the non-slave to imagine their own self-possession.

Elsewhere in *Scenes*, in "Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice," Hartman builds a conceptual apparatus for the theorization of self-defense without self-possession. What is unique about the forms of domination comprising racial slavery (or a global encounter with, and invention of, Blackness)? And how do those forms shape themselves around practices of resistance? For Hartman,

³⁵¹ Hartman (1997) 87.

³⁵² For Spivak, the question at the heart of "Can the Subaltern Speak?", and at the heart of her grandmother's sister's act, is not whether the dominated can speak but whether there is a conceptual and political infrastructure in place for interpreting the act on its own terms. See Spivak (2010).

the tactics that comprise the everyday practices of the dominated have neither the means to secure a territory outside the space of domination nor the power to keep or maintain what... is won in fleeting, surreptitious, and necessarily incomplete victories. The refashioning of permitted pleasures in the effort to undermine, transform, and redress the condition of enslavement was consonant with other forms of everyday practice. These efforts generally focus on the object status and castigated personhood of the slave, the pained and ravished body, severed affiliations and natal alienation, and the assertion of denied needs. Practice is not simply a way of naming these efforts but rather a way of thinking about the character of resistance, the precariousness of the assaults waged against domination, the fragmentary character of these efforts and the transient battles won, and the characteristics of a politics without a proper locus.³⁵³

The practices of resistance of the enslaved are something other than the self-defense of self-possessed subjects. They are not political acts nor are they agential in the sense of most political philosophy concerning political violence. The self that is asserted or claimed in the violence of the enslaved is different from the self of liberal subjecthood. Under slavery, “the brutal asymmetry of power, the regular exercise of violence, and the denial of liberty that make it difficult, if not impossible, to direct one’s own conduct... [challenge] facile assertions of slave agency and [cast] doubt on the capaciousness of transgression.”³⁵⁴ It is not that Hartman “denies” slave agency, or the fact of slave resistance. Rather, the agency of the enslaved is always partial in ways distinct from the agency of the liberal subject, the subject who inhabits the fantasy of self-possession.³⁵⁵ The resistance of the slave is always bent toward failure, victories are always partial and territory is not held. “Too often the interventions and challenges of the dominated have been obscured when measured against traditional notions of the political and its central features: the unencumbered self, the citizen, the self-possessed individual, and the volitional and autonomous subject.”³⁵⁶ For Hartman, “the concept of practice... enables us to recognize the agency of the dominated and the limited and transient nature of that

³⁵³ Hartman (1997) 50-51.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁵⁵ The fantasy of self-possession holds at least two meanings here. First, it is to say that liberalism’s subject is not, in fact, a self-possessed subject. It is not that self-possession is “real” for non-slaves and “denied” to the enslaved. Instead, it is to say that no subject is self-possessed, at least not in the terms set forth by the tradition of liberal political philosophy. Second, self-possession is a fantasy which, nonetheless, structures the lifeworld of modernity. It is an illusion with real effects. This account of fantasy builds from Žižek (1989).

³⁵⁶ Hartman (1997) 61.

agency.”³⁵⁷ The limited agency of the dominated is mirrored by the magnitude of their injury, a wound out of which an entire world emerged.

In a provisional way, emerging from these histories of feminist Black radicalisms we can find a theorization of violence as a form of force, or a range of those forms. Or as an expression of an intensity, or a range of these expressions. These forms and expressions exist within a matrix of forces and intensities that the psychic life of power calls nonviolence. A Black feminist violence might be many things. For Joan Bird it might be the wager of winning or dying. For Afeni Shakur it might emerge in the braid of radical love and revolutionary insurgency.

When Shakur speaks of her friendship with Sekou Odinga, she remembers someone who “wasn’t a rhetorician or somebody who knew all the theories, all he knew about was the basic love, and what you do when you love somebody, which is really what all deep feelings are about, anyway. He said everything springs forth from that. He was the most pure person I ever met in my life.”³⁵⁸ Shakur takes us to a moment when something about the promise of the Black Panther Party enabled her, or *at least* her, to work with and through ambivalence. For Saidiya Hartman the modes of practice through which the enslaved sought pleasure did not simply “provide a reprieve from domination,” they also *articulated* “these tensions, limits, fissures, wounds, and ravages.... The pleasure to be had was infected with despair, fear, dissatisfaction, and a desire for freedom.”³⁵⁹ What all deep feelings are about anyway. For Shakur, everything sprang forth from a love that might be claimed by those who were not pure and loving, claims that were always partial and always temporary, but which held the promise of a different dispensation to come.

Look for Me in the Whirlwind ends with a letter Shakur writes to the children in her life, those of her comrades on trial, and her own child, with whom she was then pregnant, who would become

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Balagoon et al. (1971) 292.

³⁵⁹ Hartman (1997) 78.

Tupac Shakur. Shakur remarks later that her letter, easy to miss between the group's open letter to the judge presiding over their case and an appendix chronology of the case, "was the one concession..., they had to print this letter if I was to participate."³⁶⁰ Shakur's letter holds onto the contradictions of her deep disappointment in the selves of some of her comrades, revealed under the strain and scrutiny of their long trial, alongside her abiding belief in collective, revolutionary struggle. She offers the letter as a corrective to the project of the collective autobiography, which she had resisted, because the children to whom she wrote would "wonder about all this mess that's going on now."³⁶¹ In February of 1971, Bird and Shakur were forced to return to jail when two fellow Panthers from the trial escaped the United States for Algeria. The fracturing of the New York 21 coincided with the splintering of the Panthers between factions led respectively by Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, in an internecine conflict provoked in part by US law enforcement. "Joan and I, and all the brothers in jail, are caught up in this funny situation where everyone seems to be attacking everyone else and we're sort of in the middle looking dumb."³⁶² In the time since she returned to jail, several months pregnant, she writes, "I've discovered what I should have known a long time ago—that change has to begin within ourselves—we still must face the problems of purging ourselves of the larceny that we have all inherited."³⁶³ Shakur short circuits individual and collective self-invention, the unsteady distance between singular and plural, to imagine a politics that might liberate her from an inheritance of dispossession. On one hand, dispossession is her only inheritance, the only thing available to a reproduction without futurity. And it is precisely that—all she possesses is a dispossession which possesses her—that she risks through collective struggle, an impossible gift and an impossible loss. With this gift, this inheritance, this loss, Shakur shifts her mode of address. "You must weigh our

³⁶⁰ Guy 90.

³⁶¹ Balagoon et al. (1971) 360.

³⁶² Ibid. 360-361.

³⁶³ Ibid. 361.

actions and decide for yourselves what was good and what was bad. It is obvious that somewhere we failed but I know it will not—it cannot end here. There is too much evilness left.”³⁶⁴

“I cannot get rid of my dream of peace and harmony. It is for that dream that most of us have fought—some bravely, some as cowards, some as heroes, and some as plain old crooks.”³⁶⁵ Bird’s wager of “winning or dying” is complicated by Shakur, who holds on to the contradictions of losing and living, of failure and survival, of collectivities that are marked by their full capacity for courage and cowardice. “Forgive us our mistakes,” she writes, “because mostly they were mistakes which were made out of blind ignorance (sometimes arrogance). Judge us with empathy for we were (are) idealists and sometimes we’re young and foolish.” The final paragraph combines, in a single sentence, the easy syntax of hope she finds in close, beloved relations, “Help me to continue to learn—only this time with a bit more grace...,” and the acquired or required language of the revolutionary vanguard, “...for I am a poor example for anyone to follow because I have deviated from the revolutionary principles which I know to be correct.”³⁶⁶ The tortured prose of this penultimate sentence distills the contradictions of a feminist Black nationalism and a revolutionary Black feminist love-politics. It holds the wish to risk everything and to lose everything, to find in revolutionary love and revolutionary violence a new practice of being. Shakur’s letter ends the *Collective Autobiography*, the statement of the New York Black Panther Party as it inhabited its long dissolution.

It ends with just this wish: “I wish you love.”

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. 361.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Hope Against Hope

I want to write rage but all that comes is sadness. We have been sad long enough to make this earth either weep or grow fertile. I am an anachronism, a sport, like the bee that was never meant to fly. Science said so. I am not supposed to exist. I carry death around in my body like a condemnation. But I do live. The bee flies. There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it.

Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*³⁶⁷

Reproduction Without Futurity

The polemical thrust of the interventions called queer negativity has opened a debate on hope and hopelessness that has left little room for middle ground, much less an altogether different terrain. This essay tries to find a different place(lessness) from which to theorize queer negativity and, or as, Black feminist theorizing. That is, to find in the interventions called queer negativity—the critique of reproductive futurity, of the family, of the politics of hope—their prefigurations and alter-articulations within Black feminist theory. This is not to say that queer negativity simply reproduces Black feminism in whiteface, but that Black feminist theorizing anticipates, or, rather, haunts the political imaginary articulated in queer negativity. Returning to Black feminist theorizing opens onto yet another political imaginary, one different from both the queer pessimists and their queer futurist critics. Black feminist theorizing offers a way of short-circuiting the dialectic of hope and hopelessness and allows for different theorizations of reproduction, futurity, and their coalescence at the site of the family.

I want to begin, then, with some reflections on the project of queer negativity. In the hands of literary theorist Lee Edelman, the antirelational position developed across the oeuvre of Leo Bersani has shifted from a critique of the sanitization of sexuality into a position against the reproduction of society—futurity—itself. Edelman's 2004 monograph, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, offers an iconoclastic revision and re-envisioning of the antirelational project. Edelman's text positions

³⁶⁷ Lorde (1980) 13.

itself against ‘reproductive futurity,’ or, ‘the dominant ideology of the social [... that] represents futurity in the image of the innocent child.’³⁶⁸ This image of the Child is central to Edelman’s work, insofar as the force of its presence polices queerness and queer politics. For Edelman, the Child ‘remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, [and] the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention’³⁶⁹ Thus, Edelman offers a vision of a queer ethics that is against the future and against the Child that symbolizes the future.

Indeed, the force of Edelman’s polemic obtains in his insistence that queers embrace the very disorder imputed to them by the dominant society. In a much-cited passage, Edelman argues that resistance must *affirm* ‘what the Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop’ (29). For Edelman, this is precisely to argue that ‘what is queerest about us[...] is this willingness[...] to insist that the future stop here’ (31). In other words, ‘the queer[...] is the figure currently capable of unraveling the libidinal economy of signification through which a particular dominant socius reproduces itself’ (Keeling 567-8). It is in the rejection of the future—indeed, an embrace of this rejection—that Edelman discovers the possibility of fundamentally undoing the dominant social order.

Critiques of Edelman have run the gamut from accusations that his arguments amount to little more than a dissembled optimism, that he ignores the polymorphous perversity of really-existing children, that he misapprehends Lacan entirely, and that his polemic is overwritten by an intransigent, smirking whiteness that limits the applicability of his conclusions.³⁷⁰ Fair enough. For my part, I am

³⁶⁸ Dean (2006) 827.

³⁶⁹ Edelman (2004) 3. Hereafter cited in text.

³⁷⁰ For the former criticisms, see Snediker (2009) and Dean (2008).

interested in how the latter critique has been marshaled by some utopian (or, to borrow from José Muñoz, anti-antiutopian) queer theorists whose critiques rely on the figure of the ‘other’ child.³⁷¹ In a 2007 *GLQ* roundtable, Jack Halberstam describes Edelman’s project as ‘utterly compelling[...] for certain subjects in certain social locations. For others, that place of pure critique might constitute epistemological self-destruction.’³⁷² To which Edelman challenged, especially for Halberstam’s ‘unidentified “others,”’ ‘why not endorse, to the contrary, “epistemological self-destruction” for all? Why not accept that queerness, taken seriously, demands nothing less?’³⁷³ In their endorsement of Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Halberstam restates this position, that ‘for some queers, particularly for queers of color, hope is not something one can afford to lose and for them giving up on futurity is not an option.’ Muñoz himself offers that ‘the future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity.’³⁷⁴ For Halberstam and Muñoz, Edelman’s stubborn refusal of futurity is structured by the privilege of having a guaranteed future, foreclosing the possibility that his project can speak to the concerns of queer people who don’t occupy positions of epistemological privilege.

More interesting, perhaps, is to consider how Edelman’s avoidance of race *weakens* his critique of the Child and futurity. Neither Edelman nor his utopian critics seem willing or able to imagine a mode of reproduction that is not reproductive futurism; that is, Black reproduction. On this score, we can consider Hortense Spillers’ foundational essay, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.’ In her gloss of the Moynihan Report, Spillers seems to anticipate Edelman’s well-known passage, quoted above: ‘According to the Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s celebrated “Report” of

³⁷¹ Muñoz describes anti-antiutopianism as ‘not about a merely affirmative or positive investment in utopia,’ adding that ‘gay and lesbian studies can too easily snap into the basically reactionary posture of denouncing a critical imagination that does not short-sightedly deny anything but the here and now,’ and describing antirelational and antiutopian orientations as ‘failures of imagination in queer critique.’ See Muñoz (2006).

³⁷² Dinshaw et al., 194.

³⁷³ Ibid., 195.

³⁷⁴ Muñoz 95.

the late sixties, the “Negro Family” has no father to speak of—his name, his law, his symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community.³⁷⁵ On Spillers’ reading, the father, the L/law, and the ‘whole network of symbolic relations’ that Edelman rejects in the name of the queer are foreclosed *a priori* for the Black. Spillers marks how ‘the Black family’ is refused entry into the symbolic order except negatively as a site of pure dysfunction. This incoherence that accrues around Black filiation is also what Orlando Patterson has labeled ‘natal alienation.’

One of the ‘constituent elements’ of slavery described in his *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson offers natal alienation as ‘what is critical in the slave’s forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations.’³⁷⁶ I want to rest on this point for a moment, because it is a point that queer negativity is unwilling to theorize and that queer anti-antiutopianism theorizes only to the extent that it can still enable an orientation toward the future. What does reproductive futurity mean for the natively alienated? What is the status of the Child or of the family for those ‘alienated from all “rights” or claims of birth?’³⁷⁷ What does reproduction mean for a ‘genealogical isolate?’ Patterson offers a formulation much like those of Edelman and Spillers in describing the natively alienated: for the enslaved, seeking out, creating, or maintaining synchronic and diachronic bonds ‘meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage.’³⁷⁸ Rather than argue, following the anti-antiutopians, that ‘others’ cannot ‘afford’ to give up on hope for the future, we might argue instead that Edelman doesn’t account for those modes of reproduction that are not future-oriented, the children who do not register as such, and the ‘families’ that are not granted the security of nuclear bonds. And we might find with this reproduction without futurity not a crisis scenario demanding redoubled attention to either the

³⁷⁵ Spillers (2003) 204. Hereafter cited in text.

³⁷⁶ Patterson 7.

³⁷⁷ Ibid. 5.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

family (Moynihan, et al.) or the future (the anti-antiutopians), but an opportunity to develop a politics of position that inhabits the incoherence of Black reproduction. Reproduction without futurity, then, names nothing more (and nothing less) than the queer capacity of Blackness to reproduce without being productive and to orient lives extimate—simultaneously internal and external—to sociality as Edelman might understand it.

Towards this end, what is most useful in Edelman's account is his reading of queerness as a structural position. No matter what sorts of liberal or conservative politics individual queers might affirm, for Edelman, 'the structural position of queerness[...] and the need to fill it remain' (27). But this structural position that Edelman attempts to theorize from is not the un-raced (read white) queerness he imagines it to be. That is, while the *experience*, the *archive*, and the *politics* of Edelman's queer are white (and soundly and appropriately critiqued for this reason), the *position* of Edelman's queer is Black. This dissonance is less the fatal flaw of Edelman's thesis, as the utopians might have it, but its enabling condition. Edelman's analysis comes even closer than his critics' to reckoning with Blackness as a (queer) structural position, and to reckoning with the sort of epistemological violence that might be necessary to undo a social order.

Hope Against Hope

In her reading of Audre Lorde's poem, 'Preface,' in its connection to contemporary Black women's vampire novels, Alexis Pauline Gumbs offers that Lorde's poem, as well as the project of a number of other Black women writers of speculative fiction and fantasy, 'draws on both horror and utopia' in a way that 'hinges on the stakes of reproduction and the possibilities of productive relationality on different terms.'³⁷⁹ That is, these Black women writers attempt to imagine different modes of kinship across generations in the face of a world that does not recognize the filial claims of

³⁷⁹ Gumbs (2011) 141.

Blacks, generally, and the maternal claims of Black women, particularly. On Gumbs' reading, the vision of a different future of Black queer kinship across generations is the utopian, and the threat posed to the status quo in a world that is antiblack, anti-woman, and anti-queer is the horror. For Gumbs, this simultaneity of horror and utopia is distinctive of a 'queer Black feminist futurity' insofar as, and here she follows José Muñoz, 'for queer young people of color to even survive, to even imagine that they would exist within the future is quite a queer proposition in the face of state and hate violence used to erase them from the planet as themselves.'³⁸⁰

While Gumbs distances herself from the project of Lee Edelman's *No Future*, described as his 'hell and Hitchcock polemic,' her embrace of the horror of Black female subjectivity is of a piece with Edelman's articulation of the death drive and queer negativity. Just as Edelman insists that queers 'should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction' (16), Gumbs offers that, perhaps, 'conservatives have been telling us the truth all along. Black women are queers raising up an underworld that threatens the light of a capitalist day. Black lesbians will destroy the American family. Our kind are dangerous because we show that there is something better beyond the tick of capital where life breaks down into differentially billable hours.'³⁸¹ Gumbs' affinity for the project of queer futurity alongside her Black feminist revision of Edelman's embrace of horror offers an instructive disjuncture that strikes at the heart of utopian affect. It captures the ambivalence of realizing that nothing is better than the present; that is, *nothing* is preferable to *this* present. It also brings to light the dissonance that arises when an analysis attempts to reconcile position with politics, the structural with the performative, and the historical force of slavery with futurity.

³⁸⁰ Ibid. 133.

³⁸¹ Ibid. 132.

To my mind, the apparent dismissal of queer negativity in Gumbs' text is indicative of the difficulties of merging utopia and horror, of imagining the utopian from the position of social death. This dismissal of pessimism in the realm of political thought has been well documented in Joshua Dienstag's study of pessimism as a mode of political theorizing. He writes that while pessimists 'are often admired for their style, or respected for the critiques they offer, their apparent lack of a "positive project" is made to appear as a badge of second-rank philosophical status. They interest us; but, it is believed, they cannot possibly orient us.'³⁸² Gumbs describes her project in the essay as 'looking at the two rhetorically impossible claims "Black maternity" and "queer intergenerationality" together' in Black feminist speculative fiction.³⁸³ But the latter claim is not *rhetorically* impossible in a political and critical context that offers a queer futurist position that projects the liberal gay notion that 'it gets better' onto an unseen and unseeable future in the name of 'queer of color youth' who 'cannot afford' despair. Rather, we arrive at the *structural* limit that precludes Black maternity and Black intergenerationality from cohering, what I have earlier called antiblackness, and the limit that interests but does not orient both queer negativity and queer futurity.

In this closing section, I want to track the question of affect as it appears in Toni Morrison's 1976 essay, 'A Slow Walk of Trees,' and the resonances between her dialectic of pessimism and optimism and present disputes over the political and affective orientations of Black studies. I want to suggest, following Joy James, that what is characterized as hopeless, pessimistic, nihilistic, or cynical, offers instead a hope *against hope*, the possibility of politics not simply as hope for a different or better world, but as the ardent refusal of *this* world.

Originally published in the *New York Times Magazine* on the occasion of the American bicentennial, Toni Morrison's essay, 'A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless

³⁸² Dienstag (2006) 3.

³⁸³ Gumbs (2011) 131.

(as Grandfather Would Say),’ offers a series of portraits beginning from her grandfather, John Solomon Willis, and grandmother, Ardelia Willis, and moving on generationally to her mother and father, her brother and herself, and into the young Black people of the late 70s. But it is her account of her grandparents, with living memories of life before the Emancipation Proclamation, who structure Morrison’s text. And their portraits indulge in an interplay of optimism and pessimism that I find particularly instructive, especially in relation to ongoing debates over the viability of afro-pessimism. In Morrison’s account, her grandfather was an ‘unreconstructed black pessimist’ who, ‘when at age five[...] heard from the old folks that “the Emancipation Proclamation was coming,” [...]crawled under the bed.’³⁸⁴ And this neatly characterizes certain caricatures of contemporary so-called afro-pessimists—theorists who share with her grandfather a similar ‘habitual response to the promises of white people: horror and an instinctive yearning for safety.’³⁸⁵ On the other hand, Morrison’s grandmother ‘was of a quite different frame of mind and believed that all things could be improved by faith in Jesus and an effort of the will.’³⁸⁶ We are reminded of certain contemporary caricatures of so-called black optimists—theorists whose abiding faith in the power of the performative to evade the grasp of captivity approaches the ecclesiastical.

It is significant, then, that Morrison should render her account through the lenses of the matrimonial, the reproductive, and the intergenerational that seem to foreclose an analysis that exceeds the limits of the oedipal family. And, I think, it isn’t some fidelity to the heterosexual reproductive couple that guides Morrison’s analysis, but, on the contrary, it is a fidelity to imagining pessimism as that which can interest us but never orient us that leads Morrison to construct her family history within the proscribed terms of the nuclear family. And it is in this family affair that the (grand)father as pessimist is the one whose interpretation is undermined by his own inner desire to believe something

³⁸⁴ Morrison (2008) 3.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. 4.

better of the world. For Morrison, the truth of her grandfather lied less in his bleak pronouncements on the nature of things and more in his musical performance, in his skill with the violin. Reflecting on the persistence of antiblack violence into her present, Morrison muses that, ‘If he were here now, my grandfather, he would shake his head, close his eyes, and pull out his violin—too polite to say, “I told you so.” And his wife would pay attention to the music but not to the sadness in her husband’s eyes, for she would see what she expected to see—not the occasional historical repetition, but, like the slow walk of certain species of trees from the flatlands up into the mountains, she would see the signs of irrevocable and permanent change.’³⁸⁷ And, to Morrison’s mind, it could well be that her grandfather, in his connection to performance, agreed with his wife because, ‘after all, he did hold on to his violin.’³⁸⁸

In an account of the affective structure of Black radicalism, Cornel West offers a formulation resonant with Morrison’s reading of her grandfather’s performance. For West, ‘black radicalism hopes against hope if only to hold out the dream of freedom in a never-never land[...] in order to survive in the deplorable present.’³⁸⁹ This is Black radicalism as ‘survival and sustenance,’ set in anticipatory opposition to his later, famous formulation of ‘Black nihilism’ in *Race Matters*.³⁹⁰ But what is crowded out in this mode of optimism, just as what is crowded out by queer futurity generally, is the possibility of there being something beautiful or generative or sustaining in the pessimistic and the negative. That is, we might undermine the logic that holds an ‘unreconstructed Black pessimism’ and the violin as contradictory, we might close the gap between pessimism and possibility. And, further, embracing horror, embracing pessimism, might also create space for thinking beyond the nuclear family, for thinking a Black feminism that follows neither the father nor the mother, but that embraces the sorts

³⁸⁷ Ibid. 5.

³⁸⁸ Ibid. 14.

³⁸⁹ West 10-11.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. 10.

of queer kinship networks that have always shaped Black life in the New World.³⁹¹ Returning to Gumbs, ‘Blackness is already external to patriarchy, a haunting presence that the (white) patriarchal structures characterize as antithetical and destructive of the norms they were built to perpetuate.’ We have, instead of the reproductive futurity Edelman finds at the site of the Child, we have ‘a Black, and therefore deviant, future.’³⁹² Here we might have something different than the optimists’ injunction to think something better of the world in the name of young people who, we are told, ‘can’t afford’ pessimism.

At this point, we might make two interventions into this question of affordability. First, the figure of ‘young queer people of color’ is insufficient for thinking the distinctions between Black queers and non-Black queers of color. The move towards a big-tent coalition politics undermines, in both theory and practice, the singularity of antiblackness—not anti-Black racism but, as articulated across this project, the negative possibility for the Human in both its universal and particular registers. Second, the queer futurist argument is subtended by a ‘politics of scarcity at the level of subjectivity’ that mischaracterizes the entire question of futurity.³⁹³ The argument that young Black queers cannot ‘afford’ pessimism ‘understand[s] current forms of being as inadequate, rather than over abundant.’³⁹⁴ This is to say that Edelman’s line of thought makes it possible to recognize the overwhelming *overpresence* of futures for those racialized and queer kids that Muñoz claims ‘are not the sovereign princes of futurity.’ What does it mean that the argument that futurity is a scarce resource relies so heavily on figures of Black queers who have been murdered? Muñoz’s argument, for instance, summons three murdered Black lesbians to demonstrate that young queers of color (we note the slippage from Black to ‘of color’ in the argument) cannot abandon futurity-as-hope and hope-as-

³⁹¹ Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black* offers an extended engagement with the career of ‘the Black family’ in both sociology and literature.

³⁹² Gumbs (2011) 142.

³⁹³ Desideri and Harney 169.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 170.

futurity. That is, focusing on the spectacle of state and state-sanctioned Black queer death obscures the structuring violences that accrue around Black queer survival.³⁹⁵

On this front, Gumbs' readings of the figure of Audre Lorde are instructive in demonstrating the multiple ways that premature death is something other than the foreclosure of futurity as such. In her reading of 'Preface,' Gumbs refers to the ways Lorde's words continually appear and re-appear in feminist writings, at protests, and in other venues, constituting 'a sacred repetition,' one way that Lorde 'survives into the present.'³⁹⁶ Elsewhere, Gumbs has written of Lorde's multiple denied requests for medical leave while teaching at Hunter College, noting that 'Black feminists are a trouble more useful as dead invocation than as live troublemakers, raising concerns in faculty meetings. And those institutions continue to make money and garner prestige off of their once affiliated now dead faculty members.'³⁹⁷ Access to the future as 'sacred repetition' exists alongside access to the future as 'dead invocation,' complicating the implicit collapse of optimism onto futurity at work in this politics of scarcity. Disentangling optimism from futurity is essential here. There are many ways of accessing and inhabiting the future, and the problem is not that young Black queers have *no* access to the future but that the future is, itself, structured by an antiblackness that shapes access to future(s) for *all* subjects. In her own reading of Edelman alongside Fanon, Kara Keeling has observed that 'from within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all.'³⁹⁸ How to recognize and how to embrace 'a black future' is the very task precluded by the project of queer futurity, which evades antiblackness' structuring violence in favor of spectacular acts of violence.

To this end, and in closing, I turn to Joy James's formulation of Afrarealism, a concept in conversation with 'afro-pessimism' that avows a form of realism. For James, Afrarealism names a

³⁹⁵ The distinction here between spectacular and structuring violence is indebted to Martinot and Sexton (2003).

³⁹⁶ Gumbs (2011) 132.

³⁹⁷ Gumbs (2012) np.

³⁹⁸ Keeling (2009) 578.

resistant mode of Black feminist theorizing attuned to ‘the beauty of survival,’ and a practice of politics that is ‘terrifyingly beautiful because it is violently transcendent.’³⁹⁹ There must, in James’ formulation, be room to think about the ‘beauty and pleasure in confronting the real’ (pocorganize). And we might here read ‘the real’ of Afrarealism in a Lacanian idiom as that which both resists symbolization and is the condition of possibility for symbolization itself.⁴⁰⁰ Of course, this real is also Hortense Spillers’ ‘interstice,’ the Black woman fallen ‘into the great black hole of meaning.’⁴⁰¹ In this account, beauty is not the sole property of futurity; possibility is not the sole property of optimism. This reading of beauty and possibility in Black feminist theorizing is related but not identical to the project of queer negativity. It’s related insofar as both articulate a politics from the position of Black subjectivity, but queer negativity does so symptomatically while James does so in an open avowal. Just as we move beyond the apparent contradiction of the pessimist with a violin, we might square the circle of a reproduction without futurity—a Black future. If we extricate ourselves, our politics, our theorizing, from a dialectic of optimism as the slow walk of trees and pessimism as hopelessness, we might find that the horror of the Real is the beauty of a Black feminist utopian.

³⁹⁹ James (2013) 128.

⁴⁰⁰ For an articulation of the Lacanian Real along these lines, see Žižek in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek (2000), particularly his final essay, ‘Holding the Place’: The Lacanian Real is[...] not simply a technical term for the neutral limit of conceptualization. [...] The Real is neither pre-social nor a social effect – the point is, rather, that the Social itself is *constituted* by the exclusion of some traumatic Real. What is “outside the Social” is not some positive a priori symbolic form/norm, merely its negative founding gesture itself (311).

⁴⁰¹ Spillers (2003) 156.

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