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Paradigmatic Acoustics: Blackness, Performance, and the Quotidian Politics of Sound
DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Culture & Theory

by

Nicholas Brady

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Chair
Professor Jared Sexton
Professor Frank Wilderson

2018

DEDICATION

To

My Mom and Dad
Everything you gave
Was not in vein

And
My Grandfather
Hope you are resting
with the ancestors

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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- “Spinning on Blackness: Wading through the Contradictions of Frank’s Ocean,” *The Feminist Wire*, 7/18/2012, <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/07/spinning-on-blackness-wading-through-the-contradictions-of-franks-ocean-2/>.
- “...Like Tears in the Rain,” *The Afro-American Newspaper*, 9/10/12, <http://www.afro.com/sections/opinion/story.htm?storyID=75861>.
- “Louder than the Dark: Towards an Acoustics of Suffering,” *The Feminist Wire*, 10/11/12, <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/louder-than-the-dark-towards-an-acoustics-of-suffering/>.

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- “Black Atmospheres and the Impossibility of Voice” *Emerging Voices Conference*, Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies, University of Rochester, April 2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Paradigmatic Acoustics: Blackness, Performance, and the Quotidian Politics of Sound

By

Nicholas Brady

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture & Theory

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Chair

“Paradigmatic Acoustics: Blackness, Performance, and the Quotidian Politics of Sound” focuses on black music and performance that operate in the rising dominance of telecommunications. Communicative capitalism names the conjoining of the telecommunications industry (radio, television, cinema, and the varying digital platforms) and financial speculation during late capitalism that blurs the boundaries between civil society and social surveillance. Black music figures as a prominent force in the rising profits and power of the telecommunications industries. My research identifies how black music is used as a sophisticated means for commodifying the participation, attention, and affect of the general public using digital interfaces. The first part argues for a different view than one that see "riots" as "the language of the unheard." Instead, this project explores how the rebellions operated as an active resistance to communication, forming a politics of sound, relation, and care that affirms the non-communicable and poetic aspects of black antagonism in an active refusal of the confluence between communications technology, police power, and politics. The second part historicizes this telecommunications boom as an aspect of what Dr. Saidiya Hartman once called “the afterlife of property” and the theories of commodity, subjectivity, and property that racial slavery and anti-black racism produced. By centering the social predicaments and existential conditions that Black performers work through, my intellectual project explores black music as a key site to interrogate the shifting meanings of the political in our moment. In this way, blackness is more than its contemporary ubiquity; instead I argue that black sound and performance displays how black voice is a troubling presence for communicative capitalism and theories of political subjectivity in general.

INTRODUCTION

Estelle Axton and other artists on Stax Records found that August 11, 1965 was a bad day to get a flight out of Los Angeles. Axton was a co-founder and executive of Stax Records. She was in Los Angeles overseeing a performance showcasing all the talent of the then burgeoning independent music label. This showcase was named the Stax Revue featuring artists such as Booker T and The MGs, Carla Thomas, and the Astors. The show was booked at the historic 5/4 Ballroom in Watts, then called the west coast Apollo theatre, on August 7th and 8th. The showcase was meant to grow Stax's presence on the west coast. When the date for the flights back were picked, August 11th would have appeared to be a day like any other day. Instead, an arrest turned into what would be known as the Watts rebellion of 1965. Axton commented, "The whole situation was eerie because were in the thick of things, and yet not... looking at the news we'd say, 'Jeez, we were just in that area.'" (Bowman)

It would not be a complete coincidence that Stax performed in Watts just days before the rebellion. Beyond the inconvenience of missed flights, these two events – the Stax Revue and the Watts rebellion – are linked by something else: the Magnificent Montague and his catch phrase "Burn, Baby, Burn." Montague was a recently hired DJ for the KGFJ radio station in Los Angeles. He was the morning DJ with one of the more popular shows in LA catering mostly to Black residents listening to R&B music. His show was most known for Montague's signature statement "Burn, Baby, Burn." He would sprinkle this phrase across his show, from signifying a song he felt was a hit to allowing his audience to call in and say the phrase back to him. Montague's rhetorical style was inspired by his friendship with Malcolm X, learning the power of turns-of-phrase for building an audience. While Montague was not explicitly political in his radio commentary, he would set aside time on his show and allow Black residents to voice their

opinions, sometimes in criticism of the police in their neighborhoods. A motif in Montague's autobiography *Burn, Baby, Burn* was not wanting to seem like an uncle tom to his viewership, so he took steps to not politicize himself but also not alienate himself to viewers with more radical positions (Baker and Montague, 128). Montague's popularity as a radio DJ allowed him to make money on the side hosting concerts and other events across the city (Baker and Montague, 131). Axton, Jim Stewart, and other executives of Stax felt that Montague would be a perfect host to bridge their music to the Los Angeles area. Montague featured the songs of Stax artists before the performance in exchange for the right to host and make money off the Stax Revue show at the 5/4 Ballroom (Bowman). Montague's hosting style followed his DJ style, using his signature phrase at the beginning and even in the middle of performances. Because of the audience's familiarity, Montague screaming "Burn, Baby, Burn" created a call-and-response energy from the crowd and the performers. At the beginning of Booker T and the MG's performance of "Boot-Legg" Montague asks the audience, "Are we burning?" The Audience screams back at him and he responds, "Then burn, baby, burn!"

When the police arrested the Frye family on August 11 in Watts, many community members surrounded the police and attempted to intervene when Marquette fought back. When the police eventually pulled their cars back from the growing crowd of residents, many residents could be heard chanting "Burn, Baby, Burn" to themselves and to the police (Horne, 128). We will go into more details about the Watts rebellion in Part 1 of this dissertation, but the event gives us a powerful way to understand the role of sound into black political formation. In this moment, the residents that choose to stay outside transformed "Burn, Baby, Burn" from a popular phrase to a rallying cry for the burgeoning rebellion. The residents began to throw

bottles and light cars on fire bringing a different meaning to the phrase than Montague's original intention.

The police and many residents of Los Angeles viewed Montague's continued use of the phrase as inciting further riots. The Los Angeles Times ran an editorial with the words of a frequent radio listener who blamed programs like Montague for inciting the riot by making "incredibly damaging statements on the air at the height of the trouble..." (Horne, 326). On the third day of rioting the police sent officers to KGFJ to demand that Montague should stop saying "Burn, baby, burn" on the radio. While Montague was a black Disc Jockey, his radio station was white owned and sympathized with the Police's account of the incendiary nature of Montague's phrase. Under the pressure of his producer, Montague would change his phrase to "Have Mercy" to keep the energy of his delivery up while assuaging the pressure (Baker and Montague, 135).

The actions of different political actors during the Watts rebellion infused contested meaning into the phrase "Burn, Baby, Burn." So much so that the phrase itself has found a longer shelf life than Montague could have imagined. The phrase would become famous as the catch phrase of the disco song "Disco Inferno" in 1975. When Vietnam war protesters burned the flag in 1970 they chanted the phrase as well as right-wing protesters chanted it when certain convicts were given the electric chair in the 1980s (Baker and Montague, 137). What is important for our study is the way the phrase was picked up by residents both before and during the rebellion. While the police were wrong to assert that Montague played an inciting role, Gerald Horne points out that it is not for nothing that the phrase found rhetorical success in Watts. In his investigation into the Watts Rebellion *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, Horne writes:

The use of *burn* may not have been intended as an incendiary cry, but its frequent invocation by disc jockeys and others was a reflection of the strength of this term and its resonance in black folk culture. In LA fire was a constant menace, arson was becoming ever more popular, and many of the blacks came from a region where fire and arson were favored tactics during slave rebellions; the popularity of the phrase “Burn, baby, burn!” was difficult to separate from this context. (Horne, 327)

In their performative recitation of the term they created multiple public sites for deliberative activity. Montague’s radio program was one of these implicitly deliberative spaces, but the phrase itself diffused into spaces of the everyday, gaining a rhetorical currency across different conversations. Horne points us to the folk rhetorical traditions of Fire, whether religious eschatology (“the fire next time”) or using fire to describe power or excitement in narrative. Montague refers to callers using the phrase to describe their frustration with police terror and the successful voting down of the Fair Housing Act in Los Angeles (Baker and Montague, 125). Unlike the conservative narrative of rioters as people who lost their minds in a moment of excitation or frustration, the phrase “Burn, baby, burn!” historicizes resident’s uprising as an intensification of a long-standing critique of anti-black policymaking and practices. These quotidian recitations were a form of auditioning how the residents would use the phrase “Burn, baby, burn!” as a rallying cry.

Horne’s use of the word *resonance* points us towards the utility that a critical vocabulary of sound can provide in understanding the politics of rebellion. Resonance etymologically breaks down to “sound again” and is also connected to the Latin word for “echo.” Resonance thus

points us to a sound that affects us deeply through its capacity, implicit or explicit, to relate or recall other sounds or feelings. Resonance is different from mimicry in that when one sound resonates with another it does not mean an attempt to copy. Resonance is also different from appropriation in that the relationship between the sound and what it recalls does not necessarily mean it has taken something directly from the past sound. Instead, we can say resonance describes an inexplicable relationship between two sounds where one sound, by the mysteries of memory and affect, becomes deeper by its ability to force one to recall something else. One may not even be conscious of the past the sound recalls, we only feel the reverberation. Resonance is a rich term than because it describes the possibility of a historical relationship that does not need to be reduced to a causal relationship. When Horne says “Burn, baby, burn” resonates with the use of arson in past slave rebellions, he does not mean the residents are making an explicit connection, but are enacting a practice that connects them to a past. A resonance than describes how contemporary practices may relate to a past that they are disconnected from, the way an echo is a real sound that can lingers past the destruction of its original source of sound. Robin Kelley points out in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, the vast amount of black resistance remains outside the bounds of organized activity -- it remains clandestine, unorganized, or purposefully evasive due to diffusion of terror across the social. Kelley points us to “infrapolitics” as the field of “daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts” that have a cumulative, but unthought effect on power relations.

Thinking about working class culture in struggle with corporate cultural forms, Stuart Hall describes three different ways to think of popular culture in his piece “Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular.” The first definition of popular culture is one that views “popular” as meaning mass audience or wide circulation. Hall criticizes this model for making the working

class into blank slates, too gullible to resist the machinations of corporate control. The second definition is one that views popular culture as whatever “cultural” activities undertaken by the working class. This approach tends toward inventory as methodology, Hall criticizes the essentialism of this approach that must assert strict boundaries between “high” and “low” or “mass” culture. In opposition to these two approaches, Hall suggests his own approach inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci. Hall’s approach centralizes the contestability of popular culture and sees popular culture as a site of political struggle. As a result of the historical process of contestation, the dynamics and form of different realms of culture can shift and take on features of other spaces. That black music resonates with black politics is not a controversial statement, but our study will be much more interested in exploring the dynamics of how these two categories not only resonate but are inexplicably bound together.

This Dissertation will explore how Black sound acts as a resonant space for black deliberation on politics and identity. While many of the chapters will explore songs or popular artists, these essays will not be a musicological analysis. Instead, this dissertation will investigate how sounds thought broadly – utterances, speech, performance, songs, chants – become useful quotidian spaces of collective critical engagement with blackness, politics, and identity. Our dissertation focuses on how sound is simultaneously a material phenomenon produced in social and technological relations while also operating as an interpreted and imagined object. What are the acoustics of black political activity from below? Here an acoustical analysis focuses our attention away from the object of study itself toward the conditions for how sound is heard, interpreted, imagined, and contested.

One of the central assumptions of this dissertation is that blackness is not a historically constant or consistent identity, but “Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and

abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle” (Hartman, 57). Saidiya Hartman writes from this view of blackness as social relationality in her 1997 text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Focusing on the quotidian features of slavery, Hartman shows how relations of domination exceed the logic of a productive power relation that engenders resistance. On this note, Hartman specifies why the slave relation is fundamentally different than a power relation described by Foucault and others, “the operations of power appear more repressive than productive, and the attendant forms of subjection seem intent upon preventing the captive from gaining any measure of agency that is not met with punishment...” (Hartman, 55). The relation of domination cannot simply be reversed through individual play or resistance, for each individual act that falls outside the master’s will is met with negating violence. Blackness, then, according to Hartman, names this social antagonism produced from the persistent and gratuitous repetition and display of this negating violence. Hartman’s analysis reveal that the slave’s uses are near infinite: the slave as medium of exchange, commodity, object, thing, nonconsensual sex toy, and even subject, albeit under erasure, criminalized, and terrorized. The slave is compelled to perform, for its ultimate purpose is the creation of social fantasy, including the social generation of wealth. This social death names a position that is best described as liminal instead of excluded, as Wagner describes, blackness “indicates existence without standing in the modern world system. To be black is to exist in exchange without being a party to exchange” (Wagner, 1). This dissertation explores how sound is a mediating force in this social struggle over the meaning of Blackness.

Our focus on the interstitial and quotidian reflects the difficulty black people have found in producing political space given not only the despotic power of anti-blackness, but the way its

terror has diffused across the social. William Novak illuminates this distinction between despotic power (power of small group of elites to rule without effective challenge) and infrastructural power (power of the state or governing elite to distribute power and penetrate civil society). This distinction is not a description of different types of societies, but analytically distinct forms of power that operate together in different dynamics of governance. Novak combats the myth of a supposedly “weak” (or less totalitarian) American state by showing the American polity has preferred infrastructural over despotic power. The enactment of power in America is driven by its capacity to distribute power and authority to lower entities, including deputizing individuals and civil society. An example of this is the American appropriation of the Posse Comitatus doctrine. Gautham Rao speaks of the ubiquitous use of Posse in antebellum America as an additional reserve force to supplement the small police forces emerging in cities. Rao explores the tension between the universal support among white men for state/local usage of Posse and refusal of many citizens to engage in Posse called for by federal officials. In addition, Rao discusses the use of Posse to require that all citizens join in the collective endeavor to keep slaves captive on plantations -- the social genesis of slave patrols. Posse is an example of infrastructural power, for it distributes the state’s monopoly on legitimate force and judgement to its citizens through deputization. Posse among other state and local statutes formed incentives for social fields to develop around the capture and policing of slaves. Across the history of the US, From the Posse to “lynch law” to “mass incarceration,” black enfranchisement and political power has found significant opposition by terror and infrastructural exclusion.

Focusing on the infrastructural power of anti-blackness brings our attention toward micro-political struggles over the meaning of blackness. Instead of focusing on the macro-intellectual debates, this study will investigate the quotidian forms of debate over ways to

theorize and understand what it means to be Black. This question – what does it mean to be black? – is both epistemological and existential in the face of racial terror that attaches violence to the being of blackness. Thinking along with Hartman and Hall, our dissertation will focus on the interstitial spaces between what is nominally described as “popular culture” and “politics” through an analysis of how sound is taken up in black political deliberation. Richard Iton writes further on this in his text *In Search of the Black Fantastic*:

We might also think here of the struggles to establish and maintain space for substantive, open-ended deliberative activity, including, but not limited to... the black music band; diaspora sensibilities and opportunities; black counterpublics and soul architectures in general; and (conceptual) space within language itself... Our political choices and options are grounded in and saturated with affect. Or, put differently, the contrasting visions considered here can be represented as contending conceptual narratives working the same affective spaces and territories: the love song as post- or apolitical pleasure, on the one hand (e.g., politics, arrangements/orchestrations, teleologies and rituals), and the love song as agonistic text, on the other (Iton, 36-7)

In exploring sound, song, and performance The essays in this dissertation will use each event as an object of study to investigate both how deliberative space was made impossible for black subjects but also how either the performer or collective took on the opportunity to contest varying meaning of blackness. In particular we are interested here in how Iton understands the song as a “agonistic text.” We will explore the meanings of songs and performance for how the

open up a multiplicity of meanings available for public debate instead of a set political ideology. In the same way the Watts rebellion infused Montague's phrase "Burn, baby, burn" with a multiplicity of meanings, our essays will be less interested in asserting an identity to a performance or sound and more interested in how each event allows a rethinking of a key critical concept. Our dissertation will use a methodology that focuses on resonance instead of systematic study: each chapter speaks to a different time and place, but each example resonates with how sound operates as a mediating entity for quotidian deliberations of blackness.

Part I will further explore the Watts rebellion to investigate how the practices of residents represented a politics of refusal against liberalism's demand for communication, inclusion, and subjectivity. The Watts rebellion happens at a key moment in the birth of television as popular medium. The LAPD are also using televisual technologies for the first time in their policing, using cameras on helicopters and other forms of televisual and communicative surveillance. While the Watts rebellion is far from the first race riot, it became a central event in news coverage, police surveillance, and academic study of crowd behavior. This chapter will analyze the confluence between surveillance and communications media. The chapter will also explore how the rebellions operated as an active resistance to communication, forming a politics of sound, relation, and care that affirms the non-communicable and poetic aspects of black antagonism in an active refusal of the confluence between communications technology, police power, and politics.

The Watts rebellion opens up a larger conversation on how the telecommunications industry uses Black sound and performance as a key object for the generation of profit. Part 2 will take the conceptual labor of Part 1 and bring it into the era of communicative capitalism. Part 2 focuses on post-1960s black music and performance that operate in the rising dominance

of telecommunications. Communicative capitalism names the conjoining of the telecommunications industry (radio, television, cinema, and the varying digital platforms) and financial speculation during late capitalism that blurs the boundaries between civil society and social surveillance. Black music figures as a prominent force in the rising profits and power of the telecommunications industries. My research identifies how black music is used as a sophisticated means for commodifying the participation, attention, and affect of the general public using digital interfaces. By centering the social predicaments and existential conditions that Black performers work through, my intellectual project explores black music as a key site to interrogate the shifting meanings of the political in our moment. In this way, blackness is more than its contemporary ubiquity; instead I argue that black sound and performance displays how black voice is a troubling presence for communicative capitalism and theories of political subjectivity in general.

The first chapter of Part 2 will be titled “The Politics of Obliteration or Naming the Problem Right: Parasitism in the Era of Communicative Capitalism” This chapter will analyze the reception of the “Harlem Shake” dance meme and song by Baauer. In particular, we are interested in the conversation around “cultural appropriation” the critics of the song raised. Even though there was much discussion of the song’s appropriation of the original Harlem Shake dance or drums from the musical genre of southern rap music, there was little conversation around Baauer’s decision to delete Azealia Banks remix from the platform *SoundCloud*. This chapter investigates this moment of so-called appropriation to historicize this telecommunications boom as an aspect of what Dr. Saidiya Hartman once called “the afterlife of property” and the theories of commodity, subjectivity, and property that racial slavery and anti-black racism produced. While operating in agreement of the critical force of those who named

Baauer's song appropriation, this essay will attempt to appraise the conceptual utility of "cultural appropriation" when naming the violence of anti-blackness operating here. This chapter will consider the debt certain critical terms have to the politics of property, even when criticizing the logic of commodification.

Thinking with this problem of property, the second chapter in this part will explore the popular discourse around Frank Ocean's so-called "coming out" moment. Analyzing his tumblr note as a performative moment, this chapter will think through the poetic phrase in this note: "spinning on blackness." The reception of Ocean's note reveals how the iconicity of the black body can be both denigrated in its relationship to a fungible black collective and also revered for its capacity to prove the progressive nature of the nation-state. Our chapter will analyze the dynamics of anti-black representation operating in this reception of his note as an "iconic moment," while also considering the ambivalent qualities of Ocean's varying refusals of representation and identification. We will consider here what the many ways blackness can be thought of its rhetorical relationship to a nominal humanity that spins around it.

The final chapter "Black Diamonds: Rihanna and a Performative Poetic of Dispossession" will conclude the dissertation considering the relationship between black performance, self-possession, and dispossession. Through Rihanna's televisual and sonic projects, this chapter will explore how black performance operates in a field saturated by surveillance. The language of performance tends to privilege the interior as a space of self-possession. Can black flesh be considered as something more than lack, absence, or abject? Using the work of Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and M. Nourbese Philip, we will read Rihanna's corpus as giving us a performative language for re-signifying the meaning of dispossession.

We will conclude the Dissertation with a consideration of what a focus on black sound can give us for thinking about a black politics of care for the flesh and collectives we make in the space of dispossession. These thoughts on the acoustics of suffering are not to displace the visual for the aural, but instead to theorize how they form and invigorate each other. Put another way, anti-blackness is a structure where (black) skin speaks for itself and the body it encompasses, even when the black's subjecthood is muted. Focusing on acoustics can offer a different sharpening of the cutting edge, a modality that allows us to tune into the unimaginable frequency of black thought. This is another way of saying that the acoustics of black sounding forces us to think of the impossibilities of harmony and the terrifying beauty of cacophony.

PART I

“BLACK ETHER: ON THE MANIFESTO OF THE WATTS UPRISING”

In the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion of 1965, Bayard Rustin argued that if you mapped the various actions and happenings of each day, there would be a path of burned buildings that led from Watts to the surrounding affluent communities in a direction pointing towards City Hall. What stopped the riots from reaching the surrounding neighborhoods or the Mayor’s office were the deployment of fourteen thousand members of the National Guard, a couple thousand arrests, and 34 deaths, mostly black residents of Watts at the hands of the police (Rustin, 1966). These numbers give some detail to the scale of the rebellion and the operation of state-sanctioned violence necessary to quell the activity. Rustin names his article “The Watts ‘Manifesto’ and the McCone Report” after the way the rebellion was “Viewed by many of the rioters themselves as their “manifesto,” the uprising of the Watts Negroes brought out in the open, as no other aspect of the Negro protest has done, the despair and hatred that continue to brew in the Northern ghettos despite the civil-rights legislation of recent years and the advent of ‘the war on poverty’” (Rustin, 1966).

Rustin wrote this piece in 1966 to refute the report released by The McCone Commission put together by then Governor of California, Edmund Brown. The commission was named after the chairman, John A McCone, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The commission was tasked with providing a study of the causes of the riot and provide actionable solutions in the face of these issues. The McCone Commission’s report titled *Violence in the City — An End or a Beginning?* begins from the perspective that what happened in Watts is a crisis that must be prevented from spreading any further. The report does not seek to simply describe the facts of the revolt, but seeks to use social science to figure out causation. The title issues the

Watts rebellion as a provocation: why did the rebellion happen in Watts and not other cities?

Will there be more rebellions or will we stop it at the supposed root cause?

The report argues that the cause of the “riot” are a minority of “disillusioned” and “frustrated” individuals motivated by certain structural pathologies of their community. In the first chapter, the commission writes that the majority of residents were not participants, but were negatively impacted by an anti-social group of mostly young black men caught in a “spiral of failure.” Responding to the fear that there was an organized group at the center of the riot, the report argues that there was no organization at all but “a formless, quite senseless, all but hopeless violent protest.” They are not a group with political demands or grievances, but are individuals that are lost in the tangle of institutional problems and deficiencies. “Spiral of failure” is a thematic phrase throughout the report that bridges their dual focus on structural causes and individual motivation. Segregation or exploitation are not listed in the report as cause or even a structural feature. Instead the report focuses on the family and the neighborhood as an institution that individuals learn *habits* of failure in. The spiral begins from birth within the black family that does not function like a normal family. For the McCone report, a normal family is described as a two-parent household with proper discipline that incentivizes children to become economically productive. The “negro family” provides incentives for unproductive activity due to unemployment, idleness, drug use, and a general lack of “dignity.” The report uses the “negro family” as a blameworthy rhetorical figure, simultaneously naturalizing the effects of segregation while passing off all blame and violence to the family itself. From the family to schools, the report finds that individual disillusionment is built in the constant interaction with these dysfunctional institutions. The report’s isolated individuals are a small portion of the community that choose to become a part of this formless, senseless mob because they are lost in this spiral,

dragging the rest of the community down with them. It is these groups and their decisions that are marked as *causes* that need to be changed.

While the report finds that most of these failures are present in other negro communities, it argues that what is unique to Watts is a dramatic increase in the Black population “from 75,000 in 1940 to 650,000 in 1965.” Along with the riff raft theory described above, the report also forwards a “naive migrant” stereotype that makes the narrative unique to California’s black population. The report goes on to say, “Much of the increase came through migration from Southern states and many arrive with the anticipation that this dynamic city would somehow spell the end of life’s endless problems.” The effects of segregation and racial capitalism are reduced to natural life problems. Thus, residents’ grievances are not proof of structural inequality as much as they are proof that the residents had too high of expectations. The hard crash to the floor of disappointment is the cause of disillusionment instead of exploitation and police violence.

Given their analysis, the McCone report suggests a series of policy proposals centered on three focus areas: employment, education, and funding for the police. They demand that the employment of black men and boys is the top priority because “idleness brings a harvest of distressing problems.” Idleness is such a problem that the report even proposes if the resident is on welfare, they should simply volunteer free work and treat the welfare payment as their check. Idleness of the failed patriarch is the root cause behind why black youth put their energy towards destruction instead of economically productive activities. While the paper talks about unemployment, it does not find that inequality is an insurmountable barrier to access to jobs. The report does not argue for how 50,000 jobs should be created, but instead posits that the primary

impediment to employment for black youth is their attitudes. The primary education and job training proposals are about behavior modification instead of skills training. The majority of spending suggested by the McCone report is for the police to build up its defense capabilities, but also form extensive community relations programming. The problem of police violence is reduced to a public relations issue, naturalizing difference and calling on the “black community” to take responsibility in building a better relationship.

For the McCone Commission, the issue of violence falls squarely at the feet of the crowds of youth who become “caught up in an insensate rage of destruction.” This “insensate rage” is how the uprising is described from the first section of the report “The Crisis: An Overview.” Far from simply an example of rhetoric getting away from them, the report repeats this “insensate” quality as fundamental for understanding and addressing the violence of the riot. Rustin points out that the effect of describing participants as acting without sense or reason performs at least two different problems. First, the report lays the groundwork for the law-and-order approach to emphasize that resources should go towards law enforcement instead of social programs. Second, this rhetoric mystifies that the actions of the various crowds show clear, calculated, and organized patterns of behavior. The rhetoric of criminality masks that much of the activity documented were of residents using the uprising to either steal items too expensive to buy or eliminate the ledgers of debt kept by the various stores serving the Watts community. For Rustin, these actions speak to a “manifesto” against deprivation, inequality, and police terror instead of a “mob” led by pathological instinct.

The McCone Commission is neither alone nor original in its description of crowds as necessarily irrational. Herbert Blumer wrote in a then-widely cited essay entitled “Collective

Behavior” that crowds “act on the basis of aroused impulse... the crowd is fickle, suggestible, and irresponsible” (Blumer, 180). For Blumer, crowds are different than individuals because they are “non-moral” and thus are not organized around a particular goal or viewpoint, but act simply on instinct and what can generate the most energy in the crowd. This “disorganized” quality makes crowds generally clumsy and incapable of accomplishing “high-level... components of social action” (Smelser, 72). Yet, for those who attribute senselessness to crowd behavior, this disorganization opens up the risk that crowds can be controlled by “agitators” through suggestion. The McCone Commission, as well as different political figures such as the Los Angeles Police Department’s Chief William Park or President Lyndon Johnson, believed that it was “agitators” (potentially communist) from outside California that radicalized the crowds. Gerald Horne, among other historians and social scientists, debunked this myth in *Fire this Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, proving that the rebellion takes place in the aftermath of red scare political repression that isolated black working-class populations from working class organizations in California. Yet, in spite of there being no evidence to back up the various pathology theories, the fantasy obtained political value in a context that viewed crowd behavior as necessarily irrational and prone to outside manipulation. What interests us here is how state investigations relates to, and diverges from, certain schools of social science research in their focus on *determining* the political subject of the riot.

This research on crowd behavior in sociology dovetails with the over saturation of media on the urban rebellions to consolidate a common sense of black crowd pathology. Kevin Mumford and Gerald Horne, in their more recent works on the Newark and Watts rebellions respectively, described this explosion of social science literature after the long hot summers as a “cottage industry” of riot studies. This rise in social science research into the rebellions yielded a

plethora of studies and polls that are still useful now, including essays that debunk the stereotype of crowd irrationality. Carl J Couch wrote in “Collective Behavior: An Examination of Some Stereotypes” that “[m]any discussions of crowd behavior have followed LeBon's lead and directed attention to delineating the "nature" of the behavior of members of crowds. Often the delineation focuses attention on either the primitive and/or pathological nature of the behavior. As a consequence, the significance of social relationships has been slight.” (Couch, 1968). Couch’s essay shows that crowds are no more or less prone to violence or suggestibility. More recently, Clark McPhail takes up Couch’s work of debunking theories of crowd irrationality. McPhail states that the stereotype of crowd irrationality lives on because “while Couch's classic paper is well known among specialists, it has been ignored in introductory sociology textbooks (Schweingruber and Wohlstein 2005). Thousands of introductory students each year continue to be introduced to the same stereotypes of the crowd and collective behavior that Couch repudiated with a critique substantiated by every piece of pertinent research in the intervening quarter century.” We see how this pathology of black crowd behavior plays out in the media reaction to recent urban rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore or the protests produced by the *Black Lives Matter* network. The social context that produced the bubble of interest in riot studies in the 1960s continues to churn out literature on crowds as necessarily irrational or senselessly destructive.

In “R Words: Refusing Research,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that left-leaning research must take note of the settler colonial context of the university to understand how the circulation of certain narratives can be co-opted for other purposes. In particular, social science research that focuses on harm or pathology of the oppressed traffic in settler knowledge production that desires to know the other as object. In the face of their criticism, Tuck and Yang

do not argue for the end of research. Instead they argue that *refusing* research is not simply or only a “no,” but is a no to certain types of research in order to generate new or alternative research methods that would be foreclosed before. The riot poses a series of problems for both political surveillance and social science research because black rioting generally affirms non-communication, secrecy, and a rejection of recognizable hierarchical leadership. This paper will explore this non-communicability as (1) a problem for thought instead of a problem to be extricated or resolved and (2) a politics of refusal of the general surveillance of black life.

This essay will think critically about the relationship between political communication, research, and the paradigm of policing through different schools of research’s reaction to, and figuring of, the Watts rebellion in their work. The rest of the essay will explore a few examples from the various happenings during the rebellion. These examples will explore in more detail the collective practices of how residents of the Watts rebellion both named and refused the call of communicative capitalism. The decade of the 1960s is both a time of political instability and the popularization of television and other televisual technologies of capture and surveillance giving rise to what theorists like Andrew Culp and Jodi Dean call communicative capitalism. Communicative capitalism will be used as a term to denote sites of indeterminacy between civil society and social surveillance. This chapter will consider the practices of the rebellion that refuse communication and use non-communication as technologies of self-defense, opacity, and care. We will end the chapter investigating how community politics is shaped in the wake of the rebellion and to ascertain how the afterlife of non-communication can be generative of new political repertoires of black radicalism.

How does one begin the story of the Watts riot, given its ubiquity and opacity? How can one see past the event horizon to discern the dense worlds occurring within the fold of its activity? If you spark the ether, it will blow. This is how the narrative on riots always begins the tale. The trope of riot's origin stories is enshrined in the FBI manual on riot prevention and control: "When irritations on both sides have become common, when the potential opponents are in close proximity, and when there is enough bad feeling, the ingredients are available." We will begin our analysis at the site of the supposed spark of the rebellion in order to dis-form the ease of how this type of narrative is repeated.

Rena Frye, her husband, and her two children migrated to southern California from Oklahoma, settling into the Watts community. Her two sons, Marquette and Ronald, were driving home after hanging out with friends on August 11, 1965. A highway patrolman, Lee Minikus, pulled Marquette and Ronald over and forced Marquette to perform several tests to prove his intoxication. A crowd of residents gathered around the arrest. Marquette decided to put on a show for the audience at the police officers' expense (this account is actually backed up by the police report, calling his performance "shucking and jiving"). They asked him his hair color and he responded, "black." They asked him his eye color, he said "black" and then finished by stating "I'm black all over and proud of it" (Orlando Sentinel, 1990). Rena emerged from the crowd to scold Marquette for drinking, but according to Marquette, and against the police's official story, this did not make him angry. During this verbal exchange, as the officer's story corroborates, they called for backup and when they arrived they proceeded to beat on Marquette and later Ronald. Their mother broke away and jumped on the back of one of the officers in defense of her son and was arrested (Orlando Sentinel, 1990).

As the crowd was getting tense, several residents heard two of the newly arrived cops say, “let’s get the hell out of here.” To this a resident, “Mrs. Nash,” responded that they should have never been there in the first place. According to the police Joyce Ann Gaines spit on one of the officers and the cops grabbed her by the arm and attempted to pull her into a car. According to both Gaines and the cops, the crowd also took hold of Gaines and a tug-of-war ensued (Cohen, 58). Fights were breaking out in several places on the street between the cops and the residents, including the ongoing brutalization of the Fryes. Joyce’s story is central because it was the fact that she was wearing a barber’s smock that led many residents, and the cops as well, to think she was pregnant even though she was not. Throughout the public testimony about the riots, one will find a consistent focus on the cops’ beating of a pregnant woman as the spark for the riot. After arresting several more residents, the collection of police vehicles attempted to organize a unified retreat hoping that leaving would disperse the crowd. As they pulled away, several of the screaming residents began to run after them, several threw rocks and bottles, and a chant began to develop – “Burn, Baby, Burn!” (Cohen, 63).

Nathaniel “Magnificent” Montague was a recently hired DJ for KGFJ in Los Angeles before the Watts riots broke out. Starting in 1963 in New York and moving around the country, the Magnificent Montague took his now infamous chant with him wherever he went. Starting his job just three months before the riots, his show played the popular R&B tracks of the time and whenever he played a record that really inspired him he would exclaim over top of the record – “Burn, Baby, Burn!” The catchphrase and his show caught on fast in Los Angeles, yet it would be foolish to cite this as the “spark” too. Instead, Montague points the way towards a re-thinking of the concept of a “spark.” Presciently in his biography, Montague states, “the words didn’t

make them burn. The words were *already there*. I just put together the melody” (Montague, 2009, xiii, emphasis mine).

The spark is not an origin point, but like melody, is an ethereal presence diffused through the crowd of black flesh acting against the law. For we cannot attribute the riot simply to the arrest of the Fryes or the arrest of Gaines or the first objects being thrown or even the bravado of young residents who decided to yell “Burn, Baby, Burn” amongst other things. That day was not the first time the police attacked a resident. The growth of the crowd watching the arrest of the Fryes speaks not simply to anticipation, but a knowledge of antagonism brewing in the community due to the systemic nature of police violence. The force of the riot was “already there” and the actions taken that day intensified the antagonism apparent in the community’s decision to watch the arrest happen, Marquette’s performance, and most poignantly in Rena’s decision to jump on the police’s back. This last act more than anything else placed the violence of the law into contention – was it resistance, agency, or a taking her life into her own hands? We could use these terms, but I think they undersell the force of her movement. What compelled her to attack the police, after first telling her son to comply, was, according to her words, a desire to protect that moved through her against her intentions to get her son to comply with the officers. This protection of bonds that could not, and would not, be recognized by the law are also bonds that are not recognized by the Frye family afterwards, except in the shadow of the telling when Rena admits to losing control. This force cannot register a presence, but its force made an impression. The riot, already present in the forming “mob,” intensified when Rena Frye jumped on the police officers back and refused to recognize, if only for a few moments, his world and its sense of order that grants him authority. Black life is not awaiting the spark of a

leader that will suggest to the crowd what to do, there is a general antagonism present because anti-black terror is present.

After the police cars left, the group of onlookers never moved too far away from the site of the Frye/Gaines arrest. The cops established a command center, yet they were never able to disperse them, even with their attempts to wedge into the group (Cohen, 72). This is because the group did not move as a singularly conjoined, drunken mob, but instead were numerous groups. The deputy police chief thought the riot was simply a “night for throwing rocks at a policeman... If we go away, they won’t have anything to yell at and they’ll probably go away” (Cohen, 72). This was a grand underestimation, for some of them were only there for the cops. Yet, the majority of the group had, in their actions, recognized the paradigm of policing was wider than simply the cops. Once the cops pulled back, they began to attack any and all people they thought represented anti-black authority – white newspaper reporters, photographers or any car with a white person in it. This continued until dawn, Thursday morning, where one unnamed rioter later remarked that the rioters knew they had jobs in the morning, but already were making plans to return Thursday (Bullock, 45).

The argumentative weakness of liberal framing of riots as the expression of unheard and improperly channeled frustrations is revealed in the ambivalent events that occur on Thursday. The Wednesday riot was front-page news, yet there was not a massive panic in the greater Los Angeles area. The city was not only segregated, but due to its sprawling size the majority of the city was completely unaffected. Things were decidedly different in Watts and the areas surrounding the neighborhood. The sense of panic that was absent in the morning would begin later that evening, when the LA County Human Relations Committee held a meeting in Athena Park to discourage further rioting. Many young black men spoke positively about the activities of

last night and also predicted “We’re not gonna fight down here no more, we’re gonna do it in the white man’s neighborhoods tonight” (CBS, 1965). The men were allowed to speak and when the meeting was adjourned, many on the committee felt that it was a success because it gave those who were “aggravated” a chance to vent. This is the mistake liberal theorists addressing riots have made – the thought that riots are means of expressing grievances when the political process will not hear them. This is not to say rioters do not have grievances – all of them do, from jobs, housing, food, and the simple desire to not catch hell on a daily basis. Yet, there was something else building that could not be quelled with a group venting session. Another meeting, a counter-meeting, this one at Will Rogers Park where many young black folks hung out, occurred. This meeting was radically different, with a different relationship to organization; a man who choose to be named Joe for the purposes of anonymity said:

"They say it wasn't organized -- but it was. Not in the regular sense. But the people met in the park and talked about what had happened and what they planned to do that night. A friend of mine plays the drums. I play the flute. We go to the park practically every day and play and drink a couple of beers. We did Thursday and people came and listened and I heard them talking [about doing another riot]." (Cohen, 90)

This force is not awaiting proper political channels to recognize them – it is a form of life in active refusal of that which refuses them. The black riots are where bifurcations of organized/disorganized, order/chaos, eros/thanatos all collapse into the black whole of an *enfleshed* creative destruction – a rhythm both interminable and immanent.

Thursday night began a new intensification and diversification of the riot. That night marked the beginning of a range of new tactics that would come to define the iconoclasm of the Watts riots including burning buildings and mass organized looting. Over 8,000 residents were out, split into thousands of different groups an explosive variety of things that cannot be simply collapsed into the iconic images of flames. And yet, from Thursday straight through Tuesday

(and even past then), Molotov cocktails and bombs were planted in fugitively planned efforts to destroy the buildings surrounding the residential neighborhood. There was a clear plan of attack: schools, libraries, and other types of public services (including the famous Watts Station the neighborhood is named after) were left virtually unscathed as well as the majority of black-owned businesses and even white-owned businesses that the residents felt treated them fairly (Rustin, 1969, 150). What was attacked? Food markets, liquor stores, clothing stores, department stores, and pawnshops. Yet it was not simply jealousy of “the white man” and his supposed life of luxury, as many reports and analysis concluded – instead all of these places were the centers of debt due to price gauging. Two residents under the pseudonyms Mike and Mel explain, “A lot of people owed them for the rest of their lives, see what I mean and they said we are going to destroy these records; they won't find no records so I won't owe them a damn thing...” (Bullock, 1969; 48).

And so they did destroy these buildings and their ledgers of ill-gotten debt. This strategy is not uncommon for a rebellion, for a large part of flipping over the social order is a complete erasure of debt – a hitting of the reset button (Graber, 2012; 48). Yet there is a more immediate source for their repertoire of actions, one intimated by one of the few black female voices one can find in the accounts of the Watts riots. Because the narrative of the riots centralized the alienated “young black male,” black women appear in the photographs yet very rarely appear in the narrative, especially if the narrative is talking about acts of physical violence (burning or beating) (Stone-Watt, 2007; 3-4). In the accounts of the riots black women’s voice do emerge, oftentimes hidden within a man’s interview or not allowed the space in the text to be fleshed out. And yet we know many of the different groups looting and burning were either filled or led by black women in the community. As the police, firefighters, and reporters surrounded the rioters,

a young black woman screamed out to them, "White man, you started all this the day you brought the first slave to this country" (Cohen, 1966; 124). Implicit in her words is also the history of slave rebellions this peculiar institution engendered, such as the Haitian revolution where "They burned San Domingo flat so that at the end of the war it was a charred desert" (James, 1989; 361). Her statement also brings with it the history of American slaves during the civil war that, in many places in the south such as South Carolina, looted and burned down the plantations of their former masters (Schwalm, 1997; 127). The purpose of the act was not simply for the acquisition of resources – though this would certainly be a good enough reason – but also "to vandaliz[e] every symbol within reach of the planter's authority, status, and power" (Schwalm, 1997; 178). This act of burning down the institutions of their debt, in both instances, was not simply a reset button, but was an act against the very idea of governance and the entire system of credit and valuation based on the seizure of their flesh (Moten and Harney, 2013; 67). Returning back to Watts, one wonders what would have happened if the National Guard had not come in the thousands to violently suppress the riot. As Bayard Rustin pointed out earlier, the path of flames was cutting straight toward city hall, perhaps to erase the largest ledger of social debt in Southern California (Rustin, 1969, 151).

The Los Angeles Police Department's strategy, in concert with the National Guard, under-fire and in the dark, stand at the precipice of the development of the contemporary police state. The cops' strategies against the riot and the discourse that formed around police modernization because of it positions the LAPD, in many ways, as the vanguard of the then-to-come prison industrial complex. The scope of this paper forces me to leave this discussion to be further explicated in another piece, but here we can sketch out a few thoughts. The police's strategy, from the first night all the way through the National Guard taking over, can be

simplified down to “containment.” Let the residents burn down Watts but everything must be done to limit the greater city’s exposure to the fluid flames. And yet in this strategy of containment, the paradigm of policing is revealed as *excess in-itself* instead of the attempt to order and control excess.

After partying with one of her girlfriends, Lonnye Cook drove home and approached the roadblock. Yet this term is romantic at best, for the “roadblock” was often made of overturned cars, trashcans, and rubble from burning buildings with cops stationed behind them. The police fired a shot, supposedly a warning, and Lonnye Cook attempted to speed away frightened by the National Guard. They then “riddled that car with bullets,” murdering Lonnye on August 17 (Cohen, 1966, 224-26).

Just like Lonnye Cook, whether residents participated in the burning/looting or remained on the sidelines, they remained open to an unrelenting violence, if only through proximity. A black man, nicknamed J.B., commented, “No, I didn’t throw any rocks. But I felt like it. I see the cause of the people who did. *I’m with them in spirit.*” (Cohen, 1966; 174, emphasis mine). In spite of not throwing rocks, this spiritual connection to the rhythm of the riots caused him and his wife to explore the curfew area. This exploration, I would argue, is actually a form of participation, for his enfolded black presence on the street constitutes a stateless emergency for the cops, as shown in the continuation of his story:

Friday night, I was standing in a phone booth watching. A little kid came by carrying a lamp he had taken of a store... suddenly, about five police cars stopped... one came up to the booth I was standing in. The cop hit me on the leg with his club. ‘Get out of here nigger,’ he yelled at me... Another cop ran up to the boy and hit him in the head with the butt of a shotgun. I ran out of the phone booth and grabbed the cop by the arm. I was trying to stop him from beating the boy. Two cops jumped on my back. Others struck

the boy with their clubs. They beat that little kid's face to a bloody pulp.

Unlike the many white voyeurs who came to Watts for entertainment and were *protected* by the cops, black voyeurs were always already considered participants and criminals. Was this all for the strategy of containment? Was the violence necessary to get him to follow the law? Or is it that the cops came in with the desire to instate “law and order” and got a little carried away? This logic would view the police's violence as excessive to their mission, thus clarifying a list of demands we could levy – better training, more centralized command, hierarchies of checks and balances, more peaceful techniques to police. Yet all of this would miss the forest for the trees of gratuitous violence: the force of the police is nothing else other than excess.

In these exchanges, the paradigm of policing is revealed in the *performance* of the cops to be as shallow as the trash the cops used to barricade the residents in. For in a schematic language the strategy of containment makes sense – keep the fire inside Watts. Yet, the performance of erecting indeterminate, short-term barriers to keep the residents hedged in revealed a (anti-)logic in excess of a simple conterminous relation between domination and hegemony. What was described earlier as “unrelenting violence” attempts to flip the narrative of chaos used to describe Watts. While the rioters are often described as senseless, we find that the police used the cover of the need to stop the riot to make Watts into a playground of terror. Residents are thrown on the ground and into cells simply for walking around their neighborhood. Other times the police murder folks for trying to get home or sitting on their porches. The violence was not excessive because it was structural — thus the police's enacted a structure of unrelenting violence as strategy instead of containment.

Cops used more than trash and debris as raw materials to hedge in the riots, they also attempted to enlist so-named black leaders. The cops would give the anointed leader a badge (to

distinguish them from the other blacks, presumably to demarcate the black “on their side” versus those on the side of the riot) and stand back while that person stepped into the diffused series of crowds. One example was Dick Gregory. Gregory was heckled by diffused crowds after he approached several times asking the men to get the “women and children” off the street. As Gregory went back towards the cops, fire was exchanged between the crowd and the police, leaving Gregory wounded. It is unclear if the cops tried to protect him, but Gregory’s first instinct was to run directly into the riot and try to clear the streets because he knew the cops were firing indiscriminately. As he was losing blood, a rioter who believed he had shot him came up to him and apologized. Something had shifted since the rioters had collectively chastised him, some wall had melted. Gregory would eventually make it to a hospital, but as he was being taken away a rioter was said to be heard screaming after him, “we’re going to burn again tonight.”

With these vignettes in mind, let us return back to Bayard Rustin’s essay on the Watts uprising. Rustin describes the problem of the McCone report as a fundamental failure to grasp the demands for collective social transformation embedded in the actions of the rebellion, what residents called their “manifesto.” The manifesto is a rebellion against the collective predicament of racial capitalism and anti-black violence, but this report can only recognize the rebellion as apolitical criminal activity in need of a salve (in the form of jobs) and order. The narrative of the report’s research focuses the lens of intervention on the residents of Watts themselves, proposing various solutions to fix them as individuals. Rustin goes through many of the proposals showing their specific inadequacies, but his overall critique is to switch the paradigmatic focus of the research from the individual residents to the political system segregation and inequality that structures Watts. Rustin writes further on this,

The Watts manifesto is a response to realities that the McCone Report is barely beginning to grasp. Like the liberal consensus which it embodies and reflects, the commission's imagination and political intelligence appear paralyzed by the hard facts of Negro deprivation it has unearthed, and it lacks the political will to demand that the vast resources of contemporary America be used to build a genuinely great society that will finally put an end to these deprivations. And what is most impractical and incredible of all is that we may very well continue to teach impoverished, segregated, and ignored Negroes that the only way they can get the ear of America is to rise up in violence.

Rustin describes a political system that is willfully negligent and thus purposefully damns black people. to a condition of deprivation from the fundamental resources afford people in the surrounding communities in Los Angeles. For Rustin, the rebellion is a revolt against this deprivation: looting for survival and righteous rage against the resources they are locked out of.

Sidestepping the nominal battle of scholars over how to name these events — riots or rebellion — the choice of “manifesto” by the residents, amplified by Rustin’s article, is an interesting, if not entirely ironic choice of words. The black riots are a sketch of this force of black life that is neither “pre-political” nor “apolitical,” but instead is both anti-political and thus, in an antagonistic sense to politics as such, fundamentally *infrapolitical*, or as Robin Kelley writes about black working-class politics, it is a politics that operates at a lower frequency. A riot is not the distillation of force into sharp demands. Instead, a riot is the infinite *proliferation* of demands and desires that coalesces around an *antagonistic rhythm*. This sense of rhythm is where social science becomes hazy, for it either attempts to translate rhythm into poll data for evaluating support or writes the residents off as lacking clarity and leadership. Against both of these trends, a riot must be understood foremost through the lens of *antagonism* and *sound*. One etymological source for riot is the Latin word *rugire* meaning “roar.” This root gives us another way to view riot against the “proper” forms of politics it is often compared to – instead of a declaration or a demand, it is instead a prolonged, intense cry expressing simultaneously pain,

pleasure, antagonism and exuberance. Instead of a declaration attempting to communicate specific harms to be redressed, a riot is a roar that reverberates with a spirit of *general antagonism* with the world. The political demands only arise after the riot has “ended” or, more to the point, its force has abated. The political demands are acts of translation that ratchet down the force of the riot from antagonism to conflict. A riot is not a sword, but a wave – it is the oceanic force of blackness that breaks everything, crushes everything, cleans everything, and takes everything from the world.

II

For almost a decade after the Watts rebellion, a festival happened to commemorate the event. In 1966 the Watts Summer Festival attracted 35,000 people to the event that was built from conflicting desires. This festival grew out of the aforementioned effort by certain residents during the rebellion to divert youth activity away from throwing bottles and towards dancing. These efforts were less about the residents and more about trying to convince police to leave the community under the auspices that it was being handled by community members. While these efforts largely failed during the rebellion because the police refused to leave. Initial supporters of the festival ranged from a Presbyterian self-help group and a Black Rhodes scholar from Watts to Maulana Karenga and the US organization. While the group that proposed the event to the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations declared itself anti-riot, many of the community members who helped to create the event decided to name the event “The Watts Burners Annual Festival.” (Tyler, 65). The first few years had little violence, but the LAPD declared the event a nuisance that idolized the riots: “we had a very disastrous celebration of the rebirth of Watts after the riots. Through Black Panther instigation, there were virtual volley lines

of shooting at policemen and policemen returning the fire of people shooting at them.” (Tyler, 65). The police’s relationship to the event would grow more hostile until they instigated a fight between them and residents during the 1968 festival leading to death of three people and injury of forty one (Tyler, 66). Participation in the festival declined after that year until eventually it would close down the operation in 1974 only to be revived for a short period in the 1980s.

The Watts Summer Festival shows a connection between rebellion and performance that this dissertation will seek to explore further. While the rebellions are a response to the police’s despotic power, Michael Mann allows for us to also see the rebellions as a political intervention against the police’s control of social life. The rebellions were an attempt to defend and potentially weaponize black social life. In this way, the rebellions not only name the problem of despotic power, but what he also discusses as infrastructural power. In “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results” Michael Mann distinguishes despotic power from infrastructural power in order to clarify a better theory of the relative autonomy of the state. Despotic power is the range of capacities the state elite are empowered with that are not negotiated by so-called “civil society” groups or non-state actors. Despotic power could be endless, exemplified in totalitarian formations where the state has grabbed authority over all governance and represses any competition. This is what is oftentimes figured in everyday conversations about the state as either the horrors of the past that democracy has vanquished or the chilling present of a shadow totalitarian order. Mann offers infrastructural power as a second form of state power, analytically distinct but not necessarily competitive. Infrastructural power is the capacity for the state to implement “logically political decisions” that penetrate throughout civil society. Infrastructural power can be figured in the state’s control over material infrastructure such as roads and canals. We can also see infrastructural power in the development

of literacy through the control of education, the guaranteeing of value of currency, or control over the means of communication. For Mann this analytical distinction is meant to help understand states as dynamic and contingent foundations, so some states may have weak despotic power, but strong infrastructural power and vice versa. William Novak uses this theory of infrastructural and despotic power to combat the myth of the weak American state, or the illusion of a past US federal government that was weak in the face of state and local governments. Instead, Novak argues the US state has preferred infrastructural over despotic power, or its capacity to distribute power and authority to lower entities and civil society.

Infrastructural power would also mean control over the rising importance of televisual and digital technologies, the means of distribution, circulation, and information. Communicative capitalism names the conjoining of the telecommunications industry (radio, television, cinema, and the varying digital platforms) and financial speculation during late capitalism that blurs the boundaries between civil society and social surveillance. This introduction argues for a different view than one that see "riots" as "the language of the unheard." Instead, this project explores how the rebellions operated as an active resistance to communication, forming a politics of sound, relation, and care that affirms the non-communicable and poetic aspects of black antagonism in an active refusal of the confluence between communications technology, police power, and politics. From this perspective, the rest of the dissertation will focus on post-1960s music because Black music figures as a prominent force in the rising profits and power of the telecommunications industries.

Adolph Reed offers a sharp critique of cultural politics and its effects that is important for our analysis going forward. Reed highlights the deficit of cultural politics in the face of the

state's crushing of union politics and the decline of leftist membership-based organizations. In "Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene" Reed criticizes the many faces of what he calls posture-driven politics, or a politics that either focuses on the postures taken by certain artist, celebrities, and organizations, diverting focus away from the material conditions for that posture's realization or the possibility of victory. The adjustment of political movement to the posture taken by an individual not only represents the neoliberal fetishization of the individual entrepreneur, it represents a market-driven cynicism that mystifies the collective politics necessary to take down racial capitalism. Reed's argument regarding the cynicism of the focus on posture is what is most useful. The focus on cultural hegemony structurally adjusts the issue from one of global capitalism to issues that can be resolved by pluralist integration or cultural recognition, where the marginalized can be included into the realm of capital as excess or transgressive commodity. The postcold war focus on cultural politics is a reduction of worker antagonism to an anti-political notion of culture that operates within modes of consumer and neoliberal choice oriented politics.

Richard Iton begins his text, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, with a generative critique of Reed's work. Iton posits the study of where popular culture and politics meet, agreeing with Reed that oftentimes the meeting point is marked by liberal appeals. Yet, the ambivalence of cultural politics marks a political struggle that should be studied even if latent with conservative tendencies. Iton and Reed are approaches that emphasize different points in an approach that looks to understand the contradictions of politics and culture in a context of racial capitalism. We can see this dynamic operating in how Iton describes the domestication of black radicalism via the red scare. In the varying of black antagonisms with the state, in order to make legible

political demands one would often have to foreclose an anti-colonial critique in favor of a domestic civil rights critique in order to be represented. Black action is not simply negated, but split off and structurally adjusted to domestic agonist. Black resistance that could connect with the larger sweep of decolonial and socialist revolutions of the time was met with internal policing by Black political spokespersons of American hegemony. In this situation, black resistance must make an argument for the productivity of its resistance to the agent of their oppression in order to gain any results.

This dissertation identifies how black music is used as a sophisticated means for commodifying the participation, attention, and affect of the general public. This project historicizes this telecommunications boom as an aspect of what Saidiya Hartman once called “the afterlife of property” and the theories of commodity, subjectivity, and property that racial slavery and anti-black racism produced. By centering the social predicaments and existential conditions that Black performers work through, my intellectual project explores black music as a key site to interrogate the shifting meanings of the political in our moment. In this way, blackness is more than its contemporary ubiquity; instead I argue that black sound and performance displays how black voice is a troubling presence for communicative capitalism and theories of political subjectivity in general.

PART 2

**“POLITICS OF OBLITERATION OR NAMING THE PROBLEM RIGHT:
PARASITISM IN THE ERA OF COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM”**

“Shimmy shake it, and keep it rolling
Rotate it, circle it, shift it and keep it going
Now you made it, and now they know it
Your shakes the favorite, and now they want it”
-Azealia Banks “Harlem Shake (Remix)”

Across disciplines in the humanities from Art History to Anthropology, cultural appropriation has become a critical term of debate. Appropriation is when a dominant group steals and profits from the cultural expressions of another group. Given the continued domination of global racial capitalism, the situations that can be described using the term “appropriation” seem to grow exponentially the more attention we spend looking for it. Despite the term’s ubiquity, appropriation has not escaped conceptual ambiguity. Who owns a culture? If intertextuality is at the heart of creating new products than what does it mean to steal a cultural object? How does one determine if a group is dominant over another? What happens when both groups are nominally oppressed, yet one cultural object is used by another? Critics have derided the term as an irrational denial of cultural hybridity and an example of divisive identity politics¹. This conversation has filtered out from the ivory tower to general conversations on popular culture, especially occurring on social media, to name a growing list of problems and contradictions from the reduction of cultures to racial costumes to the replacement of characters of different cultures by white American actors as cultural appropriation. In 2016, over one hundred thousand conversations on Facebook tagged the word appropriation (McCabe and Yanacek, 10). Music is a major site of contestation for the meaning and political effect of

¹ quoted in: *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* edited by Bruce H. Ziff, Pratima V. Rao. John B Mays, “Squabble over Carr: The Woman Muddies Critique of Her Paintings,” *Globe and Mail*, April 9, 1994, C5. Critique can also be found in Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2018.

appropriation. This essay will think through the utility of the concept of appropriation in naming the historical relationship between popular music and blackness by thinking through the reception of Baauer's "Harlem Shake" song in relationship to a deleted remix posted by Harlem rapper Azealia Banks.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WEB 2.0

A curious chapter of these battles over appropriation occurred when an instrumental song shot to number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart on the strength of plays on Youtube instead of radio airplay or single sales. Baauer first released a track named "Harlem Shake" on the digital streaming platform Soundcloud in the spring of 2012. The song was not Baauer's favorite, he described the song as goofy. The song was one of his experiments made in his bedroom as he attempted to pair electronic dance music (or EDM) with what he understood to be hip hop drums. "Harlem Shake" was conceived as a Dutch House song that he added drum patterns he learned from beats produced in Atlanta among other southern cities. He decided to add random samples to make the track further stand out, from the roar of a tiger to a sample of the rap group Plastic Little saying "do the Harlem Shake." The song became a viral hit as thousands of videos on Youtube dance to the instrumental "Harlem Shake." Baauer's "Harlem Shake" became the number one song in the country because of a change in Billboard's method of calculation that included Youtube plays for the first time in 2013. Diplo, a DJ and founder of Baauer's music

label Mad Decent, names Baauer's "Harlem Shake" as the single that saved their music label from financial ruin².

In 2017, Nielson, a global information and measurement company used for judging popularity in the music industry, would declare Hip Hop the most consumed genre in the United States³. In 2013 "Harlem Shake" was held up as an example of how Hip Hop became "the center of pop music."⁴ Along with Macklemore's "Thrift Shop," independently released rap songs by white artists found surprising success on the music industry's top charts that year. It is not a coincidence that 2013 was a turning point in how the industry would consider streaming in their measurements of popularity. Coordinated with digital fingerprinting algorithms developed by Google with information from other streaming platforms, Billboard calculates a certain number of streams as equivalent to singles or albums sold. ContentID, Google's algorithm for Youtube, is one of many that help to track how copyrighted material is used on streaming and video sites. After the algorithm sweeps through the site, copyright holders are allowed to tell Youtube what to do with the content it finds: whether to monetize, track or delete the videos using their material. In 2016, ContentID produced around \$2 billion for copyright holders⁵. Mad Decent signed a deal with both Youtube's ContentID and another global rights service, InDMusic, in 2012 in order to better monetize their internet activity. Baauer's "Harlem Shake" may be a goofy sounding song, but the timing of its release places the song right when the music industry was

² Billboard, "Harlem Shake: The Making and Monetizing of Baauer's Viral Hit. (2013, February 15). Retrieved from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1539277/harlem-shake-the-making-and-monetizing-of-baauers-viral-hit>

³ McIntyre, H. (2017, July 17). "Report: Hip-Hop/R&B Is The Dominant Genre In The U.S. For The First Time." Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2017/07/17/hip-hoprb-has-now-become-the-dominant-genre-in-the-u-s-for-the-first-time/#5cb270b25383>

⁴ New York Times "A Hip-Hop Moment, but Is It Authentic?" (2018, October 19). Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/20/arts/music/macklemores-thrift-shop-and-baauers-harlem-shake.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1361411724-vxny4f8AgxD6jxnSy9qYZQ&mtrref=en.wikipedia.org&mtrref=www.nytimes.com

⁵ Popper, B. (2016, July 13). YouTube to the music industry: here's the money. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2016/7/13/12165194/youtube-content-id-2-billion-paid>

consolidating the means of online distribution for monetizing its relationship to digital communications technology.

These means of distribution and circulation are a part of the transformation of “the internet” into what is described by popular and marketing discourses as “Web 2.0”. This transformation is typified by the growth and centralization of platforms or “online ‘cloud’-based software modules that act as portals to diverse kinds of information, with nested applications that aggregate content, often generated by ‘users’ themselves” (Hands, 1). Distinct from websites that organize a collection of related web pages, a platform can simultaneously be a collection of code that makes websites possible as well as “something of an operating system” as Mark Zuckerberg describes Facebook. In this way, platforms are more about enabling users to participate by producing content through their code, thus allowing software companies to form their own ecosystems of partners that are dependent on their product. Platforms are efficient means of collecting information by allowing users to give away their own content. Jodi Dean names the process of how “contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production and surveillance” as *communicative capitalism* (Dean, 3). By forming platforms that not only enable but encourage the participation of users to produce content, software companies produce large pools of data that can be monetized in creative ways.

COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM AND BILLBOARD

The ContentID algorithm by Google is one example of communicative capitalism in its capacity to monetize the activity of Youtube users. 2013 is a turning point because after years of negotiation with several platform software companies, Billboard changed its methods of calculating popularity to include the information generated by online participation. Billboard was interested in how “The likes, plays, stars and comments provide the trackable, actionable data on music habits which can then be used to generate other kinds of sellable data” (Morris and Powers, 106). This change in methods made the online discourse about music as important as radio airplay or single sales. This change also made remixes and video plays a part of the calculation of popularity, opening up a lane for new types of “hit songs.” Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, Joshua Green describe this new type of popular cultural object as “spreadable media,” referring “to the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 3). While Baauer’s single began as an underground house song, the song became popular in February of 2013 because of the song could be used as background music for other’s videos. This allowed for the song to be spread across millions of videos. The “Harlem Shake” became a hit according to Billboard’s changed methods when the song became a background for Youtube dance videos.

The single’s popularity was not the end of the story though. A song titled “Harlem Shake” attached to a dance sensation begged the question, what is the relationship to the original Harlem shake dance? The answer seems to be none whatsoever. The song’s title is a reference to its sampling of rap group Plastic Little on a song that only references the dance in relation to a fight the lead rapper engaged in. A video was recorded by Schlepp Films in 2013 that asked black residents of Harlem how they felt about the new viral song. Many laughed while others

described the song as a mockery of the dance⁶. The video came out in time to become a part of larger online conversations accusing Baauer of performing cultural appropriation. The argument on Baauer's cultural appropriation functioned on two levels. The first level was to name the condition of possibility for the song's popularity as a *de-contextualization* of Black culture. Baauer himself claims to not know anything about the dance and said Plastic Little's song just got stuck in his head⁷. Thus, the song unknowingly traffics in culture produced by Black people and names the object for its own profit and perceived originality. The second level is a general issue with the beat itself, which uses drum patterns perfected by Atlanta Hip Hop producers in the early 2000s. At the time, Baauer was named as a possible leading figure of electronic dance music's appropriation of the production style of southern rap music that named itself trap music. From the vantage point of the criticism, Baauer is another in a long line of white musicians that profit by imitating musical styles perfected in Black communities.

While one can draw a clear line of inspiration from southern rap music and the song's production style, one would be hard pressed to prove anything close to stealing. Baauer did have other issues with copyright infringement by not clearing the samples of the song. Both the samples from Plastic Little and reggaeton group Delgado were uncleared due to Baauer's ignorance of the legal implications of sampling. Eventually the samples would be cleared through undisclosed agreements with the record labels of these groups⁸. The issue with cultural appropriation is not necessarily a legal problem then, but an issue of power. Appropriation's etymology reveals a fundamentally active nature that separates this concept from "influence" or

⁶ Huffing Post, "Is the Harlem Shake Meme Cultural Appropriation?" (2013, May 4). Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/huda-hussan/harlem-shake-cultural-appropriation_b_2794424.html

⁷ Marlow Stern, "Meet Baauer, the Man Behind the Harlem Shake." (2013, February 18). Retrieved from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/meet-baauer-the-man-behind-the-harlem-shake>

⁸ Cubarrubia, R. (2013, 26). Diplo Clears 'Harlem Shake' Samples. Retrieved from <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/diplo-clears-harlem-shake-samples-66958/>

even “borrowing.” From the Latin verb *appropriare*, it translates into “to make one’s own”

Appropriation does not mean to be influenced, but to take something and claim ownership over it. The criticism cited above is less about the authenticity of Baauer as an individual than the relationship of plunder between America and Black people. Before going further in considering the criticism of Baauer’s appropriation, we will read through some of the history of this relationship of plunder.

THE PERFORMATIVE MIRAGE OF RACIAL BLACKNESS

The music of Black people has been circulated as a commodity for the enjoyment of non-black subjects since the time of racial slavery. An English writer commented in 1851 that “Negro melodies are hummed on the streets. Young men when they meet you and wish to appear comical, imitate the peculiar chuckle of the sable race.” (Radano, 206). Performance and enjoyment were central aspects of racial slavery. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman shows us across disparate, interlocking sites such as the coffle, the auction block, the slave quarters, and even the supposed areas of slave performance “outside” of the gaze of the master, that the performance of contentment and enjoyment were compulsory and produced through normalized violence. On the auction block, the value of slaves could fluctuate depending on their performance, so there was economic incentive in compelling slave contentment. This cannot discount the economy of pleasure generated from the very act of compelling the slave performance. It is this history written in blood that establishes a relationship between racial violence, spectatorship, and profit.

In 1830, at the crystallization of the minstrel show as a popular form, T.D. “Daddy” Rice performed dance moves he stole from slaves he watched, creating the song “Jumping Jim Crow.”

Blackface – and that song specifically – would arise again in the post-emancipation black codes known as Jim Crow. Rice popularized the burnt cork mask, red lips, and wide eyes but his career of performances shows how far blackface reaches into American and global culture. Rice was also called upon to play Uncle Tom, the infamous character in the pro-abolition novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in both Great Britain and America at key times in the global anti-slavery movement. As Robert Nowatzki wrote, “in many cases, however, [minstrelsy and abolitionism] borrowed characters, images, songs, rhetoric, conventions, and sentiments from each other.” (Nowatzki, 2). Blackface was a site for the reproduction of the global colorline, allowing a space for the elaboration and release of tensions, anxieties, and terror given the social proximity between groups ostensibly segregated. Beyond the terror of mimicry and stereotype, the gaze of the white working class exemplified by Jakes is entrenched in a larger social system of bound black performance⁹.

Minstrelsy was one aspect of the general economy of racial slavery, a global system of “destructive sensuality” that transforms the flesh of the slave into “being for captor” (Spillers, 206). For the captive, the flesh is not only forced to labor, but every movement is a struggle against the violence of ontological severance. The flesh becomes a “territory” for the captor and a site of general antagonism that operates almost fractally, repeating the antagonism at every scale of abstraction through a performativity of violence. This struggle is a part of the pleasure of this relation of terror, the slave’s scream is the music of this performative space of antagonism. The slave does not exchange an abstracted form of its work with the captor, the master, or captivity itself -- instead it is worked to death. Forced to march across continents, through the “door of no return,” jammed into holds, shuttled between lands, worlds, and positions -- every

⁹ For more information on blackface minstrelsy see Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Motion* and Eric Stanley, *Love and Theft*

step is the general antagonism of the flesh. This being stolen by the captor is the carnal being, the energy expended by the flesh -- the material essence of every movement and moment of the flesh's existence. This carnal being is the lowest common denominator of all work done by one's flesh, pure work instead of exchanged labor. Slavery is fundamentally a cannibalistic institution and its violence creates what Spillers calls a culture of seeing skin, making one's black skin a liability marked by the repetition of consumptive violence. Each lash, gash, cracked bone writes the generative rhetorical meanings of blackness in blood, Spillers calls this a "hieroglyphics of the flesh." The glyph is a carving. Captivity carves and marks the meaning of blackness onto the flesh, epidermalizing its meaning into our cultural seeing of dark skin as black flesh.

This does not mean that Black people are the dehumanized objects that the discourse of slave codes describes. This analysis comes by bracketing a discussion of blackness as identity in order to see it as a social relation. Hartman describes this further when she writes, "blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity: thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference" (Hartman, 57). Instead of viewing blackness as an identity owned by people marked as black, this heuristic allows for us to focus on blackness as a contested figuration produced in an active history of social struggle and violence. Hartman's analysis stresses the performativity of anti-black power -- the necessity to repeat the displays of gratuitous violence and the diffusion of this repetition throughout the social world, appearing in guises not immediately deemed terror. Hartman reveals the intimacy of terror -- the violence of anti-blackness is not only the violence of isolation, but the terror of touch and the "double bind" of relationality. Her analysis of power stresses the struggle inherent to the relation of domination founded through a globalized asymmetry of positions produced through terror and the anti-

productive/ repressive nature of its practices. Black peoples, cultures, and communities exist, yet the violence of anti-blackness “ indicates... existence without standing in the modern world system. To be black is to exist in exchange without being a party to exchange” (Wagner, 1).

Property sits at the heart of this conversation of racial capitalism and the bound performativity of Black bodies. The music of slaves was heard by the master class as a racial feeling, a different species of sound: “Negro music.” This music was viewed as inherently “negro” as a product of the physiological and cultural differences between Africans and Europeans. This created an interesting, if ignored, contradiction that Ronald Radano points out in the essay “The Sound of Racial Feeling”: “a property-form named “slave” was now in possession of its own property; it had created property where no property should have rightly existed.” (Radano, 129). Radano further argues that this allowed for slaves to use music as a ground for resistance because this racial view necessarily makes “Negro music” illegible for non-black people. As the racist thinking goes, black people are just naturally musical. This illegibility opened up space for the communication of messages through music they were allowed to perform during work. On the other hand, this allowed slave masters to use music as a disciplinary technique, whether to control the tempo of work or to give structured reprieves in the day to control dissent. As one master said about his allowance of free time, “Seek your enjoyment, niggers got to pleasure themselves someway” (Hartman, 49). In the general economy of anti-blackness pleasure and terror are not oppositional, but intertwined ambivalently.

The desire for “Negro music” is a desire for racial difference that must be performed as if it is natural. This tension between performance and essence is a contradictory dynamic at the heart of the “blackness” of black music. The slave, as the property of the master, now has a property they own – black music – that can only exist through the performance of a fiction. The

irrationality continues in that Black people are forced to own a property – “negro music” – that they must give away through performance. So instead of property as a thing owned, the property of black music only exists in being bound to give to others. Yet, when they perform this blackness that must appear natural, what is the blackness they are performing? It can be nothing more than a social fiction, even if the music and skill is real. The blackness of black music is a kind of performative mirage of racial difference. Thus, when black people perform there is, at least, a double layer: the actual music being performed and the property of “Negro music” they are giving away that they never actually owned. The act of consuming black culture absorbs this racial difference into a non-black self, thus ending its supposed racial difference. Wearing blackface is a site of freedom for the white working class, but only insofar as they lower the false barrier between their humanity and the blackness of others. Once consumed and digested, what becomes of this fictitious racial difference? This would be similar to eating a bite of food that disappears once it is in your mouth. You taste something but you never fill the hunger. The appetite for black culture then would seem to be ceaseless because the very act of consumption obliterates the difference desired, thus demanding ever more performances of a racial difference that must appear to be natural.

These contradictions created the conditions for profiting off of “Negro music.” Slave musicians were forced to perform for their masters and became additional sources of income when they were leased out to other houses for their parties. A market grew for the performance of “Negro music” at social gatherings. Industrious masters decided to seize on this market by forcing some slaves to train in music in order to profit off of their performance (Epstein, 382). This market in “Negro music” led to abstraction of black performativity into a fungible commodity of music capable of being advertised and reliably exchanged. This is an explicit

example of appropriation where the performance of racial blackness through music was taken and made the property of the master to be profited from. Yet, this example also expressed a fundamental issue with extending the idea of appropriation to the violence black people have endured. What we have called “appropriation” implies that black people owned their culture and the master stole it from them. Yet, when we let go of romantic terms our claim sounds like this: a piece of property owns a piece of property and was stolen by the citizen who owns them both. How does the owner of that commodity steal a commodity from his own property?

Appropriation implies a scandal, even if not necessarily a crime. Yet there is no scandal when the property of property is taken by the class of owners. It less stealing than *reclamation*: “Reclamation of racialized property becomes central to the constitution of white subjectivity” (Radano, 2006). Appropriation may be conceptually accurate insofar as it is necessarily limiting: there are more layers of violence happening when black performance is stolen. The terror of compulsion that eviscerates the possibility of consent and the obliteration of any claim to property are meta-conditions for the appropriation of the performance of slaves. The concept of appropriation mystifies the larger structure of black suffering happening when nonblack people “steal” black culture. While cultural appropriation is a critical term used in opposition to structural domination, the concept also relies onto the language of property and reifies the above mentioned contradictions and violence within the social relation of blackness and property. These notions of property – as well as the proper – are built on the historical project of making the being of black people radically open to violation and ownership. Appropriation’s conceptual dependence on property makes the term as problematic as it may be helpful for naming the anti-black plundering of black culture.

OBLITERATING BLACKNESS

While there was much online discussion about cultural appropriation and Baauer's song, the issue never became a scandal for the song's popularity. If one searches the words "harlem shake" on Google or Yahoo, the meme is the first page of entries. The criticism that many Black residents of Harlem raised has been proven right over time: whether by ignorance or intent to profit, Baauer's song has displaced the dance started by Harlemite Al B. Yet, it would be hard to say Baauer stole anything from Harlem other than its name. By many accounts, the Harlem shake originated from a resident named "Al B" in 1981, often done in a state of inebriation during halftime at basketball games played in Rucker Park. This dance would become so popular locally that it eventually bubbled into rap videos by Harlem rappers. The dance became nationally known with the G-Dep song "Let's Get It" in 2001. Even then, Al B was not involved in the music video, the origins of the dance already losing context. Baauer's "Harlem Shake" comes out over a decade after this G-Dep song. What does Baauer take from Harlem residents in making this song that samples a rap group randomly mentioning the dance? Instead of stealing the property of the community of Harlem, it would be more accurate to say his song erases this history and writes his own legacy on top. This becomes more clear if we focus on his relationship to a specific rapper from Harlem: Azealia Banks.

After the song becomes a hit, Banks posted a remix onto the streaming site SoundCloud with her rapping over the beat. Banks is known for her fast-talking rap style and willingness to rap and sing over house beats. The "Harlem Shake" beat proved to be a good sonic environment

for her style, quickly garnering positive reviews from the New York Times and Spin magazine¹⁰. Two days after the song was released it was removed on SoundCloud. Baauer and label boss Diplo asked SoundCloud to remove the song citing copyright infringement. According to Baauer and Azealia Banks, they had plans to release this remix at the end of 2012, before the song became a hit. This was a part of the label's strategy to encourage the remixing of Baauer's song to increase its spreadability across various circles of electronic dance music. Yet, once the song became a hit their "plans all changed... [they] decided to just release the song on it's own with no vocal version."¹¹ For some reason, the label determined the remix would somehow be detrimental to its popularity. Afterwards, they asked Banks to not release her remix but Banks decided to release her version against their wishes. This may make sense if Baauer's song was not being remixed by many other artists other than Banks. As our analysis of ContentID's role in the song's rise to popularity, unlike other hit songs the popularity of "Harlem Shake" is derived from the fact that it was remixed so many times. Remixes are a part of how the song makes money. So why was Banks' remix the only one taken off SoundCloud?

In this same interview Baauer describes Banks' remix as "so so" and undeserving of being released. Personal taste aside, Banks responded to this claim by citing the rumors of her remix being replaced by Juicy J instead. With some digging into this rumored remix that never made it to the light of day, the plan might have been to replace Banks with rapper Jim Jones instead. But this is not about Juicy J or Jim Jones -- this is about Baauer and the meaning of blackness to his ability to produce music. Even though Baauer has stated the song was made possible from his immersion in Hip Hop culture and he was even a fan of Azealia Banks,

¹⁰ Chris Martins "Azealia Banks Raps All Over Your Dumb 'Harlem Shake' Meme. (2015, March 31). Retrieved from <https://www.spin.com/2013/02/azealia-banks-harlem-shake-baauer-remix-rap/>

¹¹ Marlow Stern, "Meet Baauer, the Man Behind the Harlem Shake." (2013, February 18). Retrieved from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/meet-baauer-the-man-behind-the-harlem-shake>

something changed once the song became a hit for mostly white listeners during a rising trend of white-produced electronic dance music. While Banks remix could only help to bring more money their way through the streaming algorithms, there was something about the relationship between Banks embodied performance and their ideas of mainstream popularity that made them desire to put the song away after they sought the remix in the first place. For both Baauer and Diplo, black culture are loose, unowned resources of “cool” to be stretched, interpolated, and sequenced into a new product with their own names on top. Thus, the being of black culture (its claims to place and time) are obliterated so that he may write himself into existence over the cleared field. Saidiya Hartman writes, “The elasticity of blackness and its capacious affects enabled such flights and becomings... The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body to serve as the vehicle of self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment” (Hartman, 25). Baauer is not simply emblematic of an internet-age, post-genre music culture, but is instead an example par excellence of the white imagination using the black body as a vehicle for its own purposes.

In spite of the publicity around Baauer’s handling of Banks’ remix, the conflict was reduced to an interpersonal spat in the coverage of the situation. It cannot be doubted that some part of this appears to be personal because Diplo and Banks have had other issues before this song. What is surprising is in all the uproar and rage over the “Harlem Shake” meme and appropriation, Azealia Banks’ encounter with Baauer was utterly forgotten. I am interested in how the language of appropriation did not allow us to link the feelings of displacement by Harlem residents with the displacement of Banks’ track on streaming sites. This is not a critique of Black outrage against these acts we call appropriation. Contrary to the hurt feelings of white people, there is nothing wrong with black people's attempts to defend themselves in the face of

the parasitism of the modern world. In fact, black defense against parasitism should be more militant, but we have to name the problem right. Sometimes the wrong name for a problem is even worse than having no name at all.

The discourse of cultural appropriation focuses on culture as property, reducing a problem of political violence to an issue of interpersonal group differences. This discourse of appropriation fits neatly into a “race relations” paradigm that views the fundamental issue of racism as one of misunderstanding and prejudice and calls for tolerance and acceptance of difference as the solution. Blackness poses problems for the formulation of culture as the property of different races. Baauer may not be prejudice and may, in fact, have a high tolerance for racial difference. As our analysis in part II shows, the issue with the exploitation of “Negro Music” was not necessarily about intolerance toward racial difference, but the desire for it in a context where Black performances can be owned.

Black people exist in what Saidiya Hartman describes as the “afterlife of property” (Hartman, 13). Our personhood was first recognized and legally codified as property. Black people were the most desired commodities of the modern world — we were and remain enmeshed in the modern world’s concept of property. The ownership of black performance was a key part of the peculiar institution and was enjoyed and mimicked by white people of all classes. This romantic element of slavery has outlived the plantation as paradigm for anti-blackness. Black fun is still a compelled feature of our social life. Black people still smile under threat of force. We still perform for our survival. We innovate and create cultural forms under the longue duree of racial terror. Our culture is deemed property without consent. In this context then there can be no respect for black culture because there is no recognized right for black self-defense nor consent. The process of commodification empties cultural items and practices of their contextual

value, but for black people our context was always already devalued and the parasitic basis of capitalist value in-itself. Our context has historical been a state of racial terror where one's blackness denotes There is no past for us to appeal to for respect. As Denise Ferreira da Silva writes in "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞ / ∞ : On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value" that "blackness has no value; it is nothing... it functions as a nullification of the whole signifying order that sustains value in both its economic and ethical scenes." Our bodies are the treasure troves of the world. Black *consent* is fundamentally dishonored. Culture is just the word given for that which is stolen. This is what it means to have no recognized right of self defense. We are not simply being appropriated — black people are being obliterated.

This word is of interest for our analysis because obliteration points us to a layer of violence that precedes the scandal that appropriation names. Obliteration derives from the Latin word *obliteratus* meaning to cause to disappear, blot out, or efface. This phrase is abstracted from a Latin phrase *litteras scribere* meaning to "write across letters, strike out letters."¹² Obliteration not only names a process of writing something over top of another set of letters, but specifically points to the violence of this process, naming this form of writing over as an act of *disappearing* what was formerly there. To obliterate is not simply to write something into existence, but to link the existence of a word to the erasure of another. When outrage was felt over the Baauer's "Harlem Shake," it was about the way this new meme erased the history of the dance and the community that it was created in. This erasure precedes any form of stealing that Baauer may have performed with the song – this erasure is even involved in his statements about his own ignorance about the dance. As Barbara Applebaum writes, "White ignorance is a form of white knowledge" (Applebaum, 39). It is in Baauer's interest to not know anything about the

dance his title references. The reason that stealing from Black culture is not scandalous is because of this prior erasure of our being, of our claim to a culture that is not owned by the nation and the world. As quoted above, “Reclamation of racialized property becomes central to the constitution of white subjectivity” (Radano, 2006). Reclamation means it is not taking the culture of another, but is taking back what was considered the property of the world in the first place. This will to reclamation, instead of appropriation, depends on the *a priori* obliteration of Black people’s claim to culture as property. This reclamation is a writing over of our claim to a culture that should be respected.

This obliteration of our very being opens up black performance as a territory for white people and the greater society to live through. And when the obliterated person returns into view – when Banks protested Baauer’s plans – they must be vanquished and policed. More so than the sampling and displacement of the tradition of the Harlem Shake, it is in his relation to Azealia Banks that we find the quotidian example of violence that we should pay attention to and resist. Our rage should be directed at the modes of obliteration that connect “stealing” black culture to the violation of black performance. Instead of looking for the proper owners of culture, perhaps we can task ourselves with looking after those whose flesh is perpetually open to use, abuse, and obliteration. This is not to cede the ground to critique and resist the arrogance of this society that feels anything Black people produce is actually owned by them. Instead, to give up the word appropriation for obliteration is to turn our fight away from a demand to be included and towards the very idea of ownership itself.

While I hold no illusion that this essay can stop the popularity of using the term appropriation in debates about culture and plunder, the concept of obliteration may illuminate a different view on this topic. If we focus on the forms of black life and performance that have

been obliterated to make a certain cultural object possible, we might shift the grounds of the debate away from discussions of who owns culture and questions of identity and authenticity toward something else entirely. This something else might be a reorientation of our politics away from a search for propriety toward a form of looking after and beyond, into a new world, a new train of thought, and a new way of being in the world and relating to one another. Kara Keeling points us toward this form of “looking after” in the essay “Looking for M —: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future.” In this essay, Keeling describes how a person (written as M — in the essay) goes missing before they would have been deployed for war during the shooting of the documentary *The Aggressives*. Instead of performing the surveillance logic found in the documentary, Keeling ends this essay on this note:

Undisciplined and vulnerable, firmly rooted in our time, might we nevertheless feel, even without recognition, the rhythms of the poetry from a future in which M — might be? Might we allow those rhythms to move us to repel the quotidian violence through which we currently are defined without demanding of the future from which they come that it redeem our movements now or then? Might we look after M — now without waiting for the future in which M — might be to issue our present cries?

Keeling’s language points us to the subtle, but important difference between “looking for” and “looking after.” “Looking for” is tied to the politics of surveillance inherent to ideas of identity and property. It is important to remember that the central job of the police is the securing of property, including the property of Black beings. Appropriation’s conceptual dependence on the language of property forces us to police the borders of identity instead of naming the violation of

performance in the first place. Keeling's use of the phrase "looking after" points both to a politics of intimacy and affect while also drawing our attention to time: when can M—be? When can black people simply be without the terror of property? Instead of looking for the boundaries of racial property of Black people, we might ask ourselves what it would mean to look after our intimate being. This form of "looking after" that Kara Keeling points us to in the quotation might re-orient our demands for respect and protection towards a radical interrogation of the world built on disrespecting and violating black bodies. In that way, we can see the end of this world as the beginning of a world where we can be respected, where we can protect and be protected, and when we can truly be.

“SPINNING ON BLACKNESS”

"It is important to remember that blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity; thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle."
-Saidiya Hartman

“Whoever you are. Wherever you are... I’m starting to think we’re a lot alike. Human beings spinning on blackness. All wanting to be seen, touched, heard, paid attention to.”
-Frank Ocean

Performance is an elusive object, always on the move, signifying meanings against the technologies that assign meaning and value. In all of its etymological roots, performance is tied to an act of “doing” something to completion, to make, construct, or to bring about. Performance is not only in the present, but it is an object that continues to move, circulate, and run away from the very performance of writing, the technology of capture. Performance studies can thus be viewed as a violent endeavor, an attempt to capture that which is free, to bind within its pages that which is attempting to elude its grasp. But we may, pace Moten again, say that it is not simply that objects are possessed, but that the subject can be possessed by the dispossessed object. Thus, performance as an object transforms those who study it: “Just as performance is contingent, contested, hard to pin down, so too is its study” (Bial, 1). The performance is not simply an object, but a “co-subject” that moves alongside the movement of the studier of performance (Pollock, 1). It is this *subjectively* disorienting practice that is the challenge and the “rush” of studying performance (Bial, 2).

Black performance theory brings this concern with movement and disorientation to the study of black life by “offer[ing] a way to rethink performance theory... within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society” (Johnson, 446). The mobility

exuded by black performers in different arenas was not an expression of free play, but a struggle with incredibly repressive violence. The violent suppression of black mobility could be reflective of an ideological need for “black social death,” to use Orlando Patterson’s term coined in his magnum opus *Slavery and Social Death*. The “why” of slavery is perhaps outside the purview of this paper, but we can still say – alongside Jayna Brown’s arguments in her text *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and Shaping the Modern* – that the fact that the black body *moves* is a very serious matter to consider given the enormity of the violence that it gesticulates into, moves through, and emerges out of (Brown, 13). Against the methods of reading the body as a text, Brown theorizes the body as a three-dimensional object-of-analysis that is not simply “seen,” but moves on its own. Brown writes that bodies “can be commercialized, yet they are incapable of being owned. They are by definition public and collective, yet they can also be intensely private, articulations of a bodily interiority” (Brown, 15). Brown points us to the way that performance can be a heuristic for mediating between public systems that imposed meaning on the body and the way the body produces meaning for itself through movement.

This paper will explore this relationship between performance and publicity by investigating the discourse around Frank Ocean’s tumblr note of his first love. Hundreds of articles, thousands of words, millions of hits, shares, and retweets tried to locate the truth of Frank Ocean’s sexuality, yet all of these writings further buried him. The stir was first caused when writers began analyzing the first single, “Thinking About You,” that ambiguously referenced an unrequited love that provided him with a “new feel.” While nothing in this marks on the gender of his love, the proverbial witchhunt for his sexuality began nonetheless. Our analysis shares a suspicion E. Patrick Johnson’s that “performance may not fully account for the ontology of race,” specifically blackness (Johnson, 446). This “ontology of race” is not the

imposition of a metaphysical theory, but a particular understanding of essence that is neither essentialist nor anti-essentialist. This particular inhabitation of essence can be described as a “third term” that is not a synthesis of a dialectic, but a radical *desedimentation* of this “fixed entity” (Chandler, 353). This is in the service of trying to figure out the relationship between “self-possession” (the *subject of performance*) and “dispossession” (the *force of blackness*). From this we may ask further, can performance as a concept ever clarify what the ontology of blackness *is*? What does performance point us to as it may lead us away from this ontology? Can what performance point us to – in its elusive movements away from such an ontology – potentially outline the contours of what we may call a “political ontology” of blackness (Sexton, 13)? These questions will take us through an exploration of Butler’s concept of performativity and Hartman entanglement of “performance” and “performativity” so that we may re-audition Frank Ocean’s poetics of “humanity spinning on blackness” given to us in his tumblr post. In moving through these thoughts, this paper will hopefully perform a critical (dis)orientation into a new model of thinking about performance’s entanglement with the terror and pleasure of blackness.

On July 4, 2012 Frank Ocean released a post on tumblr detailing his first love affair a few summers ago with a man. The prose was broken up in a few paragraphs and was stylistically placed in a frame designed like the software application named TextEdit. The story occurred in the same news cycle as Anderson Cooper telling the world that he was gay, yet these two stories are different in their similarities. While both Ocean and Cooper released their story amidst a slew of rumors regarding their sexuality, the rumors had been following Cooper around for years prior. His place in the cultural scene was already solidified and he released his story under little structural duress. Ocean, on the other hand, was in the midst of the pop culture equivalent of a

manhunt. Ocean was a rising star and was in the process of releasing his debut album, the album that would make or break his career. Much of the noise began with him singing songs with ambiguous pronouns, most notably “Thinking About You” with Frank Ocean singing to a “he.” The noise grew to a fever pitch the closer we got to the album. Ocean was asked questions about it in many interviews and live shows. It became abundantly clear that unlike Anderson Cooper, Ocean could not simply wait until he wanted to release it. The original plan was to release the narrative of his first love in the liner notes to the album, but instead they choose to release it early through his Tumblr page.

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This choice to release the story early is the same kind of circumscribed conditions all acts of “black agency” occur under – it is the equivalent of saying a person chooses to run away from a rabid dog that is chasing them. Yet, Ocean flipped the media chase into his favor by performing with many eyes watching. Once he released his post, transformed an underground rising star into a household name almost overnight. Of course, there was a significant amount of

planning that went into this “overnight success.” The tumblr post was released at the same time as his debut on national television and the release of his first single for the radio. This is the double pressure of the black popstar, for not only is he playing with the fickle tastes of a mass media market, but he is also dealing with the known “gigantic sexualized repertoire” that pornotropes black flesh (Spillers, 77). Ocean’s narrative was hailed a success because it appealed to a supposedly “universal” storyline of unrequited love. Surely everyone – heterosexual or homosexual, white or black, (read: normal or deviant) – has loved someone that has used them and did not love them back. This is a tragedy as old as (heteronormative) time. Many journalists affirmed its choice to “stay above the groin,” thus proving that “homosexual” desire could achieve acceptance in the mainstream culture. Along these same lines, Ocean reacted angrily in an interview where the journalist was seeking to know more about the relationship and said:

I'm not a centerfold. I'm not trying to sell you sex. People should pay attention to that in the letter: I didn't need to label it for it to have impact. Because people realize everything that I say is so relatable, because when you're talking about romantic love, both sides in all scenarios feel the same shit. As a writer, as a creator, I'm giving you my experiences. But just take what I give you. You ain't got to pry beyond that. *I'm giving you what I feel like you can feel.* The other shit, you can't feel. You can't feel a box. You can't feel a label. Don't get caught up in that shit. There's so much something in life. Don't get caught up in the nothing. That shit is nothing, you know? It's nothing. Vanish the fear.¹³

The anger here is over two things – first the interviewer asking him to label his sexuality, but also the other implicit question, which was to get Frank to talk about the details he left out of his narrative. Here he makes a distinction between the “something in life” and the “shit [that] is nothing.” This “something” is the universally accepted concepts of love, affection, and romance while the “nothing” is the (hyper)sexuality of the centerfold, where what happens below the groin over-determines and crowds out everything else. Ocean can feel the “gigantic sexual”

¹³ The emphasis in this passage is mine. The rest of the interview can be found here, Eric Diep, “Frank Ocean Opens Up About His Tumblr Letter, Future Projects and More. (2012, November 20). Retrieved from <http://www.complex.com/music/2012/11/frank-ocean-opens-up-about-his-letter-on-tumblr>

storm of interests that swirls around his deviance, his queerness, his blackness. This is why he tells the interviewer quite poignantly, “I’m giving you what *I feel* you can feel.” You could also say Ocean is giving us what he feels we can handle and, perhaps most importantly, what he feels will not send us over the edge.

Ocean’s post then plays with publicity, walking a tight rope between confession and secrecy. Writing on various types of coming out narratives in the essay “On the Question of ‘Who’s Out in Hip Hop,’” C. Riley Snorton writes that Ocean’s post plays around with ambiguity more than we find in other acts of coming out. This ambiguity tethers itself to a certain universality as a “temporally marked space of suspension where blackness might be unmoored long enough to produce a moment of possibility” (Snorton, 293). Snorton points us to temporality as the central concern of Ocean’s post. The post focuses on youth, memory, and nostalgia in order to get us to not pay attention to “shit [that] is nothing.” Ocean uses time to produce a sense of possibility in love, a possibility “where colonial, postcolonial, and continuously anti-black social conditions could somehow give way to a capacity to find the status of the black compatible with the status of human.” (Snorton, 293).

In tying his performance to a universal humanism, Ocean hoped to disidentify from/with the abjected, queer sexuality. Jose Munoz defines this form of disidentification as “the management of an identity that has been ‘spoiled’ in the majoritarian public sphere” (Munoz, 185). Munoz writes from a perspective informed by Butler, one that attempts to theorize “the political force of performance and performativity by queers of all colors” (Munoz, xiv). Disidentification can be understood as a form of “citational politics,” where subjects infiltrate and remake the abject gaps within performativity. These acts of queer worldmaking are necessarily fleeting, yet they are also productive of a claim to mobility foreclosed upon with

identification with the reiterated norm. These queer worlds proliferate at the borders of, and encircle or enclose, the performative norm. Thus, we can complicate the normal reading of Ocean's aim in a few ways: (1) Ocean is not merely seeking out the universal, but is attempting to inhabit the zone of the abject produced by the normative reiteration of this norm. This disidentification is not exclusive from a certain form of identification, but is a complicated way of citing the norm with a queered performance. (2) This disidentification occurs through his rejection of labels, therefore attempting to remain free of the violent naming practices of the dominant order. Ocean's tactics can be understood through the larger frame of understanding performance as ultimately "eluding our grasp," as an affirmation of his "body in motion." Ocean's tactic is to attempt to remain free – and thus remain a "something" – in contradistinction to being fixed – transformed into a "nothing."

Munoz borrows from Judith Butler's theory of performativity and specifically her explication of the citationality of identity. Butler's work asks "after the conditions of [the subject's] emergence and operation," and to describe "the matrix through which all willing becomes possible" (Butler, 7). If the body only materializes through the reiteration and citation of the dominant norms, then this also implies that there are identities – possible becomings of the body – that are performatively *excluded*. This is to say that for Butler's formulation, the construction of the body is only possible in "a differential operation that produces the more and less human, the inhuman, the human unthinkable" (Butler, 8). These excluded positions of uninhabitability are, of course, inhabited by millions of abjected bodies. And this – these gaps in, as well as provided by, performativity – provide the room for a resistance to produce a radical breakdown in social constructions. The consolidation and sedimentation of these norms produces the possibility of a productive crisis that the subject can take advantage of through what Butler

calls “citational politics” (Butler, 10). Butler’s example is the re-appropriation of the term “queer” from the language of sexual pathology into a term of defiance and legitimacy. This radical form of “willing” operates within the matrix of performativity by performing a citation with a critical *difference*: the affirmation of the abject that is excluded from the norm. This makes it possible to produce a world “in which queer lives become legible, valuable, and worthy of support” (Butler, 21). This is the critical differentiation of performativity and performance. While performativity is the condition of possibility for the subject, performance is a particular form of theatricality that, in its citationality, sits in the zone of uninhabitability, the gap of the abject.

Thinking along with Butler, we may ask: Can we extend these forms of “citational politics” to the peculiar institution and the general condition of blackness? Saidiya Hartman provides a pessimistic outlook. Hartman begins her text with a (re)pression of a citation of the spectacle of violence against the slave. One could say that Hartman is attempting to sit her analysis in the “zone of uninhabitability” and abjection. If this is true, Hartman finds nothing but a greater intensification of wounding in the (re)citation of the spectacle of the “blood-stained gate.” For such a citation immures us to the pain of enslavement and perpetuates a belief that all violence (of consequence) to the black is, and must be, spectacular. Perhaps we could counter that Hartman’s focus on the “quotidian and mundane” forms of suffering is a form of citational politics to turn our gaze towards the formerly excluded. Yet, is the slave abject? Is the “position of the unthought,” to use Hartman’s phrase, the same as the “zone of uninhabitability”? Butler is as pessimistic as Hartman on this possibility, citing the ongoing re-appropriation of the term “nigger” as the foil to the successful re-appropriation of queer: "When and how does a term like "queer" become subject to an affirmative *resignification* for some when a term like "nigger,"

despite some recent efforts at reclamation, appears capable of only reinscribing its pain?" (Butler, 223). While Ocean wrote his tumblr post by citing and disidentifying with publicity, humanism, and universality to control how his narrative would be understood, Hartman and Butler raise serious concerns about the power of performativity. The next section thinks through the problems that blackness poses for a affirmative project of citational politics.

While we can criticize Ocean's move to find what Snorton calls a "temporarily marked space of suspension," in spite of the problems Ocean found a type of success in his humanistic appeal. Yet, just as our analysis above showed that "citational politics" only intensifies the anti-black violence, so too went this strategy of disidentification. First, Ocean's affirmation of the universal grammar of love and acceptance did not force the dominant order to reflect on its own heteronormativity. Instead, Ocean's performance becomes an opportunity for catharsis and self-congratulation – the dominant order can exclaim how far it has progressed. Nicole Fleetwood describes the important role that racial icons play in mediating the divide between the espoused values of American democracy and the clear shortcomings in its inequality: "The camera loves the black subject whose struggles for equality represent the possibilities of American democracy. Twentieth-century American visual archives abound with iconic images of larger-than-life and fixed black subjects in duress and achieving remarkable feats." (Fleetwood, 36). Ocean's story was declared a triumph on arrival, a proof of the progress of the nation to accept a figure such as him. Thus, the racial icon is used to both admit to the oppression of the past, but also the image of the icon consigns this oppression to the past. "Iconic images are emotional because they are born in conflict or confusion. Thus, we turn to the last and crucial function of the iconic image, which is that it encompasses a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis within the society, a deep problem that will already be coded into the picture." (Hariman and Lucaites, 36). The icon

represents a progressive future and a redemptive present. This is only possible due to Ocean's own repression of matters below the groin, a censorship that allows a nominal acceptance without controversy.

Second, this moment of national catharsis quickly produces the "black community" as a phantasmic foil. If the dominant order is allowed to be temporized by progress – it is allowed to grow, mature, and change – the black community (in its many guises, "the hip hop community," "African-Americans," "the Black church," etc) is frozen as a backwards culture or the last remaining space where homophobia is the paradigm. This claim is reiterated constantly in the discourse surrounding Ocean "coming out," constantly commending him for being brave especially because he is black or is a singer in the "hip hop community." *The Independent* reported that Frank Ocean's post was a "sea change" moment for Hip Hop, which they described as a "less tolerant community"¹⁴. In the coverage of Ocean's story, this description was relatively normal, with the Black community being cast as especially homophobic in comparison to the increasingly progressive nation.

Ocean's humanistic appeal is achieved through a disavowal of a projected and phantasmic blackness. We may describe Ocean's freedom – this illusion of control or his "self-possession" – false because what is allowed is also a disavowal of his own being. In attempting to repress the "nothing" below the groin, his performance of "coming out" swerved right back into it. This is displayed in the immediate reaction on twitter to his tumblr post that compared Frank Ocean to convicted child-molestor Jerry Sandusky¹⁵, which ran the infinite number of

¹⁴ Tim Walker, "Sexuality: Frank Ocean's coming out marks a sea change for hip-hop. (2013, February 25). Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/sexuality-frank-oceans-coming-out-marks-a-sea-change-for-hip-hop-7912689.html>

¹⁵ 25 of these tweets can be viewed here: Lincoln, K. (2012, July 12). People On Twitter Are Comparing Frank Ocean To Jerry Sandusky. Retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ktlincoln/people-on-twitter-are-comparing-frank-ocean-to-jer>

permutations from Sandusky raping Ocean as a child to Ocean breaking into prison to rape Sandusky to saying Ocean raped the children instead of Sandusky and much more. One tweet said that anyone that listens to Ocean's music is being raped – here the music itself is the mystical black phallus forcefully entering the hole. This is the double-bind of racial iconicity that Fleetwood writes about in her text *On Racial Icons*,

The verb to denigrate, with its Latin origins and roots in light/dark metaphors, means not only “to blacken” but also “to defame,” “to discredit.”⁵ To denigrate is a castigation in which darkness is associated with incivility, evil, mystery, and the subhuman... The racial icon as both a venerated and denigrated figure serves a resonating function as a visual embodiment of American history (Fleetwood, 8)

All of this is to say, Ocean's attempt to disavow the pornotropic force of (his own) black flesh was not merely a failure, but an intensification of such violence. Ocean's attempt to affirm his fluidity only spun him in a circle around the fixed, absent center of an always-already queered blackness (Nyong'o, 25).

Our use of blackness as a heuristic is not to view it as an identity. Returning to the epigraph, it is to view blackness as a figure at the center of a social struggle between different subjects. Saidiya Hartman describes a force conjuring a “primacy, quiddity, or materiality that exceeds the frame of” performance in the very act of uttering “black” or theorizing blackness through performance. This force is not supernatural, but is the product of a “human sequence written in blood”: the history of anti-black racial terror. While this history written in blood and flesh cannot be claimed as a new archival discovery, the familiarity of spectacles of anti-black terror is an animating problem and object of analysis for Hartman. For instance, she begins her first chapter with a letter written by John Rankin, an abolitionist, to his brother describing the staged spectacle of the slave suffering. Rankin describes watching these scenes of suffering and

attempting to bring the pain of the slave close by imagining himself and his family as slaves. Noting that this act of imagination ends in an outcry against the institution of slavery, Hartman reveals the ambivalence of this flight of empathy, “if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration...” Hartman highlights that this ambivalence does not necessarily negate his politics; instead it reveals that Rankin is employing the rhetorical move of empathic identification to answer an anxiety produced by the historic “denial of black sentience.” Yet, Rankin’s answer does not resist or subvert this denial, but “instantiates it” by re-marking the slave’s suffering as illegible and its body as a fungible “imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.”

Hartman’s analysis reveals how oppositional forces can be libidinally united around their shared capacity to obliterate the slave’s presence through the spectacularization of black pain. The politically competitive social worlds -- the plantation and the abolitionist’s family -- are both libidinally fed by the mundane staged suffering of the slave, albeit via very different dynamics. The capacity to fashion a self from the slave’s open vulnerability to terror engenders a diverse array of possibilities, revealing a “diffusion of terror” throughout the social worlds of nineteenth-century America. Slavery is a relation of domination over the black body diffused across a series of interlocking and contradictory social relations, operating through the oft-repeated spectacles and where “terror can hardly be discerned”. These quotidian relations of domination exceed the logic of a productive power relation that engender resistance, for “the operations of power appear more repressive than productive, and the attendant forms of subjection seem intent upon preventing the captive from gaining any measure of agency that is not met with punishment...”

The relation of domination cannot simply be reversed through individual play or resistance, for each individual act that falls outside the master's will is met with negating violence. Blackness, then, according to Hartman, names this social antagonism produced from the persistent and gratuitous repetition and display of this negating violence. The force that explodes from the word "black" is due to this historically broad and deep distribution of racial terror across the social tapestry.

Yet, Hartman is threading a very fine needle with this point. Hartman's analysis certainly aims to "cast doubts on the capaciousness of transgression" as a general rubric for analysis of the slave relation, yet she is not denying the existence of the long history of slave rebellion and resistance. Instead she is pressing against the hegemony of slave agency as a necessary trope for radical historiographies of slavery. Hartman achieves this by revealing that agency was not only, or simply, denied, but also played a key role in the performativity of racial terror. Instead of denying the gift of agency to the subjects of her analysis, Hartman reveals agency as a key weapon in the arsenal of the slave master.

While consent was not necessary for the slave relation, Hartman shows us across disparate, interlocking sites such as the coffle, the auction block, the slave quarters, and even the supposed areas of slave performance "outside" of the gaze of the master, that the performance of contentment and enjoyment were compulsory and produced through normalized violence. On the auction block, the value of slaves could fluctuate depending on their performance, so there was economic incentive in compelling slave contentment. This cannot discount the economy of pleasure generated from the compulsion of slave performance. Outside of the work gained from a slave, the normalization of violence was used to weaponize the agency of the body against the

slave to compel performances of contentment. In her groundbreaking text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry clarifies the weaponization of the body as making it “emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it. It is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain, mimetic of death...” This mimesis between pain and death is ontologized under the conditions of racial slavery where “the discursive constitution of blackness is the inescapable prison house of the flesh or the indelible drop of blood -- that is, the purportedly intractable and obdurate materiality of physiological difference.” Perhaps this prisonhouse can also be called a slaughterhouse, where racial slavery repeats the violence of its genesis, “a theft of the body -- a willful and violent... severing of the captive body from its motive will...” In this schema, anti-blackness is a system of gratuitous severing and cutting black flesh from “its active desire” echoing throughout the *longue duree* of the modern world. In an introduction to a special issue of *Black American Literature Forum*, written with Farah Jasmine Griffin, they describe this process of severing as organ-ization, “The ‘truth’ of the body becomes evidence used against us. Fragmented, de-formed, and organ-ized -- breasts, dicks, backs, hands, buttocks, and pussies are in circulation. The organ-ization of the body yields profits.”

Spillers describes this theft and organ-ization of the body as a reduction of the subject to “a thing, to being for the captor...” or flesh “seared, divided, ripped-apartness, and riveted to the ship’s hole...” This flesh, socially naked and reduced to a set of organs without a body, was an object to be transported wherever the transatlantic slave trade wished to shuttle them to. Spillers theorizes the flesh in distinction to the body, but Hartman makes a slight departure in her analysis, “Although I do not distinguish between the body and the flesh as liberated and captive

subject positions, I contend that the negation of the subject that results from such restricted recognition reinscribes the condition of social death.” For Hartman, the slave is a body/flesh dynamic -- person and property under the law -- to be sliced apart, used, abused, and discarded according to the whims of the master and nation.

In her third chapter, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” Hartman shows the dynamics for how agency were simultaneously denied and upheld under the law. Slaves were barred from consideration as victims of rape because they were not covered by common law, yet they could be held criminally responsible for self-defense against rape. In the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia*, Celia was convicted for the murder of Robert Newsome, her master that raped her everyday after he bought her. Across the archive Hartman finds the most compelling evidence of “slave agency” in these criminal records. Far from denying the “agency” of Celia though, Hartman attends to the nature of the response of Celia’s ethical act of self-defense. Criminalization is not simply a legitimization of the master’s violence, it is a technique of recognition that has a long afterlife in our present moment. The severing of motive will from the body does not eliminate that will or desire, it isolates or atomizes its force, repeating the originary violence of captivity. Hartman names this dynamic “shuttling,” “the black captive vanished in the chasm between object, criminal, pained body, and mortified flesh... culminat[ing] in a violent shuttling of the subject between varied conditions of harm, juggled between plantation and the state and dispersed across categories of property, injury, and punishment.” This shuttling or shipping repeats the violence of the trade on smaller and smaller scales: Celia’s flesh was ripped apart across oceans, across locales in the nation, across institutions, and even spread out across legal categories.

Lost in this chasm, we can only speculate or imagine what Celia felt or thought before she was murdered by the state. Hartman provides a reading of Celia's last defiant act that displays her complicated ideas of performance and agency. She does not attempt rhetorical flourishes or even speculate on the revolutionary quality of her act. Instead, Hartman describes Celia's act as attempting to erect a boundary, between what she declared as hers and the master's prerogative and violent pleasure. This "declaration of the limit" was an individual attempt to announce an antagonistic schema of pleasure, one where black flesh is not structurally beholden to the whims of the master. Her boundary was also not respected, and though she took out Newsome, Hartman does not celebrate. How could she? Only a telling of the story that unilaterally decides what events in Celia's life matter and chops off the rest could do that -- Celia deserves better though. Looking into the tomb of the archive demands we wrestle with the ongoing legacy of the violence that murdered Celia and still cuts off a collective black capacity to declare a limit to a violence that does not seek to police excess, but is itself excess.

Hartman's focus on a politics of delimitation points to the hardest pill to swallow in her text: that a global order of racial slavery cannot be properly redressed without a revolutionary event that would, at least, destroy the racist social order and abolish all vestiges of the slave relation. Her definition of "performing blackness" emphasizes that black performances cannot be as considered discrete self-possessed objects, but must be seen in their context: as enactments of a social antagonism whereby short-lived victories may shuttle a slave from one violent institution to another. Hartman's analysis demands for us to think through black performance outside the language of transgression, agency, and self-possession because the imperative to save black lives demands an "event of epic and revolutionary proportions" -- an event that obliterates the

language of anti-black liberalism that weaponized these terms against black flesh. What would it have taken for Celia to have the capacity to form a boundary Newsome would be bound to respect? Given the entanglement of black performance with economies of anti-black enjoyment, any collective black declaration of the limit would demand nothing less than the end of the world as we know it.

It is here that we can begin to disentangle the “subject of performance” from the (im)possibility of a black subject. It is not that Hartman views black people as literal empty vessels, but instead she finds that each time she attempts to theorize the interiority of the black slave she finds herself falling into a trap. The performativity of race as a naturalized concept is found not in the whip, but in the slave’s smiling face, its extravagant laughter, its boisterous song, and its jovial dance – the construction of race occurred in an empathetic gesture of trying to understand (through force) the interiority of the slave. It is here that we (dis)orient ourselves by taking a passionate detour through the spectacle of post-bellum lynching festivities. David Marriot, in his text *On Black Men*, describes in a lynching where a man named Claude Neal has his genitals cut off and is force-fed them before he is hung. Marriot writes,

The act of forcing a man to “fuck” himself to death with his own excised genitals, to feed and gorge himself on his own violating (violated) pleasure, may well have been hugely satisfying to those assembled—especially when the man got to confess his own (seeming) enjoyment. To hear him desire his own death—and so turn their terrible pleasure into his own violent wish—was to construct a vision of a castrated black man as one actively seeking the pleasures of castration. (10-11)

It is not simply the murder that is important, but the spectacle must erupt with pornotropic power. This can be viewed through two non-exclusive lens: (1) as the ultimate punishment, the heteronormative lynchmob will both destroy the potentialities for manhood endemic to the phallus and “punk” him in stuffing it into his mouth (2) in a recognition of the pornotroped black male flesh, it is recognized that he both does not have a phallus – the black man cannot enact the

father's law – but is also over-determined as the ultimate embodiment of the phallus. Thus, his flesh becomes the ultimate territory of the phallus and its sexual potential. The entire act becomes an interactive pornographic show, one where every inch of his skin including the materiality of his screams becomes the enfleshment of *sex*. It is not merely punishment then, but the festivities become the chance to play with the ultimate living sex toy. They can only get off if he is enjoying himself as much, if not more, than they are. They do not simply murder Neal, but they demand he enjoy the pleasure of the scene he is being subjected to. They are not concerned with Neal's actual pleasure, but instead they want him to enjoy *as they do*. Their fantasies of pleasure are projected into Neal and through intense force, these fantasies obtain object value in his screams of ecstasy. We may not want to call it this, but it is nothing other than an empathetic gesture. This is where the slippery slope of empathy inevitably ends: the terror of pornotropia. The flesh represents the pure surfacing of affectivity, sensation, and the felt dimensions of fantasy. The flesh precedes the narrative or identity formation of the body, it is instead the site of mediation for the exchange of feeling. The commodification of flesh then is not a dehumanization as much as it marks a site to mediate pleasure and terror: the pleasures of terror and the terror of pleasure.

Spillers' concept of the flesh as cultural vestibularity conceptually precedes the Butlerian concept of the body and performativity. And it is in the vestibule – what Hartman calls “the inescapable prisonhouse of the flesh” – where the black remains. Black existence slides back-and-forth between “sheer physical powerlessness” and a “general powerlessness” (Spillers, 67)¹⁶.

¹⁶ Fred Moten gave a three-day seminar at UC-Irvine titled “Just Friends” where he engaged the relationship between his work and the group of work that has been “united” under the neologism “Afro-Pessimism.” This relationship between “blackness” and “people raced as black” was also theorized earlier by Saidiya Hartman (mentioned earlier in the article) and is a part of a tradition of separating the ontological position of the black from the lived-experience that we can trace to W.E.B. Dubois question concerning blackness, “what does it mean to be problem” as well as Frantz Fanon's formulation of the “The Lived Experience of the Black.”

This poses a conundrum of theorizing black performance, for the terror of powerlessness always haunts any attempt to assert a legitimate claim for the black to propriety and property (most notably the black's own flesh). Even if preconsciously, black people have a memory or an understanding of the reductive violence that meets the flesh. Ocean's reason for repressing the fleshly aspects of his story reveal a desire to refuse how the commodifying gaze reduces black people to the raw vulnerability of the flesh. His weapon of choice against this commodifying gaze was the universality of a romantic melodrama. In a strange confluence, Ocean disidentifies with the enforced neuterbound by affirming a love story that refuses sexuality. In order to resist hypersexuality Ocean forces the narrative in the opposite direction.

Yet, the ambiguity of Ocean's narrative is its greatest strength, opening up very different ways to read its many parts. The epigraph of the essay is a particularly poetic section of the tumblr post which reads, "Whoever you are, Wherever you are... I'm starting to think we're a lot alike. Human beings spinning on blackness. All wanting to be seen, touched, heard, paid attention to."¹⁷ The narrative simultaneously addresses, in a stunning intimacy, its audience and its own status as performance. Yet it is this imagery, of human beings spinning on blackness that is the most arresting and interesting. These are touchstones of the human – the desire to be seen, touched, heard, and understood. These touchstones may be what we could call a general schema of the motor (ie the force that moves) that drives the narrative or dramatic strategy of humanism. Yet, like a possible energizing source for a motor, these tenets, and the bodies they move through, achieve their dynamism through a spinning around a fixed, absent center of blackness. Round and round it spins, revving up faster and faster, evading our grasp, contingent, fluid, and electrifying.

¹⁷ The entire narrative can be read here: frank ocean: Photo. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://frankocean.tumblr.com/image/26473798723>

One could say that this fixed center is actually the norm while the abject – the black, the queer, etc -- is the dynamism that spins around it, eluding its grasp. Yet, we have indexed two examples to help us re-think this dynamic that might problematize this joining of the black to the abject. First of all, the ungendering and neuterbounding of the slave is the condition of possibility for the abject's sexuality to emerge. In order for one to play with sexuality, one must actually *possess* sexuality – which is also to say you must possess a body. Both the normative body and the abjected body possess the potential for sexuality and this is produced in contradistinction to the flesh, which is ungendered and neuterbound. Through the circumstance of the flesh, Mrs. Flint's womanhood and abjected queer desires join together with Mr. Flint's heteronormative patriarchal power as the horizon of possibility for the self-possessed subject. Second, as displayed by Ocean's projected relation to a phastasmic "black community," all the fixed-ness of the norm are flung into the absent center of blackness. In this trajectory of spinning, the subject can discharge all static elements through these reiterated acts of disavowal. This absent center is Spillers' vestibule and Hartman's "prisonhouse of the flesh." This brings into clarity what the differentiation between blackness and people (de)raced as black is, for these bodies are those that inextricably bound to the absent center. That black bodies move is undoubtedly true, but the movements' relation to the world is the crisis. In order for the black to gain the illusion of freedom and self-possession, a double motion occurs: (1) the fixed-ness of blackness must be disavowed, as shown by Ocean's repression of the *nothingness of his raw sexuality*. (2) Such freedom becomes a monstrosity, an instance of frozen pathology and deviance, as displayed by the immediate comparison of Ocean to a child molester.

Echoing our epigraph from Hartman, Nicole Fleetwood defines blackness as that which "fills in space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and

being looked upon. [Blackness] fills in the void and is the void.” (Fleetwood, 5). A void is not necessarily absence, but is a space of emptiness, a space that just *is*. Instead of the comforts of an identity, a being of emptiness is not a lack, but the full terror of possibility, a space where anything is possible. Without a schema, a path, or a way, black life is lived in the terror of possibility and impossibility. Dionne Brand gives us a different way to think about this in her collection “Land to Light On.” The poem begins, “light passes through me lightless, sound soundless,” which reads much like a black hole (Brand, 12). One can never see a black hole, but only see how it distorts the constellations around it. Light cannot escape its gravity and sound cannot be heard in space. This a sense of place that language cannot describe – an anti-*geo* that cannot be *graphed* – and this poem affirms this ungeographic-ness, “I don’t want no fucking country here/ or there and all the way back, I don’t like it, none of it.” This is a political call of the void and from the void against any politics of integration or human community born from its dispossession: “I’m giving up on land to light on, and why not/ I can’t perfect my own shadow.” This is not a black theory seeking integration and recognition into a global community, but a disavowal of the world that disavows it for the sake of perfecting our own shadow. This is a black sense of place out its mind, just in time¹⁸. Thus, a radical black performance theory is not relief for the crisis – not an attempt to repair the irreparable – but is a methodology *in* crisis, *of* the crisis, and *for* crisis. All of this then may give us a better sense for why Ocean ends his narrative with this, “I feel like a free man. If I listen closely.. I can hear the sky falling too.”

So we have spun back to where we began, where we are stuck, and where we may call home, if we so orient our thoughts towards this impossible object of black performance. An

¹⁸ I am thinking here of the song “Out My Mind, Just In Time” that ends Erykah Badu’s stellar album “New Amerykah: Return of the Ankh.” Yet one might also bring to this conversation the album title the first installment, “4th world war,” that highlights the political urgency in her songs. This is music about the war between black subjects and the world.

object made impossible not because it evades our grasp, but because it is the nothing we know too well and too firmly (cannot) have. We cannot bear that what is in our hands is nothing other than our hands, *in the flesh*. What if we took the advice of Baby Suggs in *Beloved* and choose, in spite of the world, to love our hands, to love this fixed and immobile flesh? What if our schema for understanding performance was neither mobility nor movement, but captivity?

**“BLACK DIAMONDS: RIHANNA AND A PERFORMATIVE POETIC OF
DISPOSSESSION”**

“As a shadow cross mine,
What it takes to come alive”
-Rihanna “We Found Love”

“My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.”
-Hortense Spillers “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”

“Whatever luck or misfortune the Player has dealt to her, (the black female vocalist) is, in the
moment of performance, the primary subject of her own invention.”
-Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words”

Rihanna is a black female popstar, originally from Barbados, that has been on the scene since she was 16. She has grown up to be considered one of the pop “divas” of our generation, but this is not what concerns this paper, *per se*. Her rise to fame and infamy is not simply about hard work, for it is a narrative of *invention* and *experimentation*. There is an apparatus behind the making of a popstar that efficiently feeds her to a “gigantic sexual repertoire” (Spillers, 222). Where does the machinations and ravenous desire of the world end and Rihanna begin? This paper will argue that there is no way to determine that and, most importantly, that it is mystification for us to even try. We will explore the tension between how Spillers uses the word “invention” in her two most cited essays, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” and “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” How do we reconcile the world needing to invent the black female, yet the black female vocalist being able to be the “primary subject of her own invention.” The key to this tension is between the ontological argument Spillers is making in “Mama’s Baby” and her focus on the “moment of performance” in “Interstices.” This gap between ontology and performance is where this essay will theorize out of and into. We are not interested in filling or bridging this gap, but sitting inside of its tension in order to explicate the

“Questions existing,” as Rihanna put it¹⁹. This paper will listen to and read Rihanna as a theorist of this gap in the *practice* of her own poetry, what we will call a *poetics of dispossession*. We are interested in the “position of enunciation” in relation to her audience or, put differently, the performativity of a confrontation between “ego and world” that she practices *in the flesh* (Sexton, 93; Spillers, 165; Spillers, 228). This will not bridge the gap – heal the scar – but perhaps it will elucidate how if one ever finds subjectivity in black performances then, to remix Rihanna, one has found subjectivity in a hopeless place.

II

You're a shooting star I see
A vision of ecstasy
When you hold me, I'm alive
We're like diamonds in the sky
I knew that we'd become one right away, oh right away
At first sight I felt the energy of sun rays
I saw the life inside your eyes
-Rihanna “Diamonds”

Floating in diamonds, drowning in the water, hands floating, unable to clutch at anything. Sudden cut, Rihanna is running away from the light and the gaze, the camera, the apparatus of the pornotropia. Next cut, into rolling papers a hand pours shining jewels and she licks it shut. A message to be smoked and absorbed into her flesh and sinew, a place with no fixed address, no standing, her “being-for-the-captor.” Ghostly white smoke slowly seeps out of her mouth, up her nose, fills the screen, distorts the blackness, consciousness of the double. Screen suddenly goes dark and we are left with a black lacunae. The music drops on the music video for Rihanna’s single “Diamonds” and we are shown her face distorted by light. *Find light in the beautiful sea, I choose to be happy*. The first line of the song and her face, while miming the words, shows a sudden tweak of emotion. When she sings “I choose” her eyebrows lift in a mix of disbelief and

¹⁹ Rihanna. “Question Existing.” *Good Girl Gone Bad*. New York: Def Jam, 2007.

sarcasm. She sings “to be happy” and her eyes roll quickly, just a glimmer, not of resistance, but something closer to a wince than a wink. Intuitive perhaps, clairvoyant maybe, but to the video it remains inconsequential, a nothing. Nobody will get it, but she is, of course, singing to nobody.

Perhaps it was an apparition, a dream. “This door (of no return) is really the door of dreams... dreams from which one never wakes” (Brand). The music video’s sense of time is chaos, centered on Rihanna’s strange presence – an unemotional absence. Waves crash, horses gallop, apartments are destroyed, mobs fight, cities burn yet Rihanna rarely bats an eyelash at the destruction unfurling around her. The world appears to be ending, sometimes in forward-motion and other times in reverse-motion temporally, yet she always appears to be ambivalent. Floating and fleeting, her affect is these word’s etymological connection: shallow, but moving rapidly towards nothing, nowhere. “There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. As if the door [of no return] had set up its own reflection. Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between.” (Brand)

That Rihanna’s song is implicated in Brand’s description of the diaspora as dream is something Anthony Mandler, the director of the video, seems to have tapped into: “[the video] needed to feel like dream vignettes, like, when you wake up from a dream, you realize what you were dreaming about is not really what it was about, it was about something *else*.”²⁰ Yet, his universalization of one’s experiences of dreams is missing the centrality of the *middle passage*, a violence that haunts all black relations across the globe according to Brand, for black people never actually awake from the dream, we are forever trapped in our bodies. *Out our mind, just in*

²⁰ Montgomery, James. “Does Rihanna’s Director know something about Diamonds We Don’t?” MTV: November 15, 2012. <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1697489/rihanna-diamonds-music-video-director-secrets.jhtml>

*time*²¹. Even in a vision of non-linearity there is coherence to the chaos – the dream is temporalized, the disorder kept to the duration of the music video, and the world can awaken once the video fades to black. Yet Rihanna will remain floating in that ocean, “caught in the few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence” for the black (Brand).

The repetitiveness of the song’s refrain – repetitive saying she is alive – seems to fit this, as if Rihanna is attempting to convince *herself* that she is alive. The main criticism of the song has been that it feels like a broken record stuck skipping in a groove, which is simultaneously a mystification and precisely right. A mystification for it misses the little bits of difference in the song, little moments of nothingness that are *violently* reigned in by the *musical engineering apparatus*. This term is a riff on Frank Wilderson’s term “cinematic apparatus” to discuss the writers, director, and editors who put together the film versus the actors performing in his text *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (2010). For me I use this term to talk about the machinations behind recording performances inside the studio and putting it together into a coherent sound project usually geared for consumption on the radio and LP formats. This involves writers, producers, and engineers of several levels, the most significant being the engineering happening at the *masters* level, or the final mix for distribution. Much of the editing techniques I am criticizing here, how vocals lay over each other, how loud the bass is, transitions, etc happen at this stage. Studio wizard producers like Kanye West are involved in all steps, but the normal artist is very rarely involved in this final engineering stage where most of the political decisions about how a song sounds are made, Rihanna included. To discuss the “musical engineering apparatus” is to really discuss the larger world against the ego-formation of

²¹ Erykah Badu. “Out My Mind, Just In Time.” *New Amerykah: Return of the Ankh*. Detroit: Motown Records, 2008.

the performing artist, in effect it's the "business" of the music business, if we are to make a clear distinction, problematic as that clarity is.

The second time the bridge (the epigraph above) comes around on "Diamonds" Rihanna's voice soars high as she sings, "I saw the life inside of you!" Unlike the first time, she sings this line well into the chorus, her voice cracking and giving in. As her voice breaks away as if there is gravel in her throat, the chorus is engineered to overcome this incoherent moment and her pained voice slowly fades into nothingness. Her performance is a broken recording, with a proper recording slowly rising over it like a crutch for her subjectivity. This is why calling this song a broken record is exactly right, for her subjectivity is stuck in a groove, stuck in the doorway, lost at sea, murdered over and over again. Against this suffering, the song must labor to produce coherence – even a non-linear form of coherence – that will be inevitably *disrupted* by her incapacity, by a loss that cannot be named or sung – a loss *of* nothing *as* nothing.

My reading of Rihanna, so far, is in agreement with Spillers' claim that "[t]he singer is likely closer to the *poetry* of black female sexual experience" (Spillers, 165, emphasis mine). We will return to this concept of "poetry," but first let's elucidate Spillers argument on the black female blues singer to get to a more rigorous understanding of what she means here²². For Spillers her poetry is not in the words of her song per se, "but in the sense of dramatic confrontation between ego and world that the vocalist herself *embodies*" (emphasis mine). This conflict plays itself out, not in the life of the singer per se, but in her "relationship to a formal *object* – the song itself" (emphasis mine). This drama happens according to the Burkean

²² While there have been excellent analysis of the Black woman Blues Singer, most notably Angela Davis 1999 text *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. We focus on Spillers' 1984 essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" because she theorizes the Blues singer as exemplary of the relationship between black performativity and temporality.

pentad²³. In the absence of a narrative, this pentad is “compressed in the singer into a living body, insinuating itself through a material scene,” the performance of the song itself or “the motor behavior, the changes of countenance, the vocal dynamics, the calibration of gesture and nuance.” The performance of the song itself – the “fully conscious knowledge of her own resources” – in that *fleeting* moment, is an “unalterable” and “discrete... self-knowledge,” an “instance of *being-for-itself*” (emphasis mine). It is for this reason that “Black women have learned as much (probably more) that is positive about their sexuality through the practicing singer” such as Bessie Smith (Spillers, 166). This is in the face of a violence that has destroyed any resources to name the sexuality of the black female at the “first-order symbolic” level or “words that express the experience of a community in diachronic time... in subject identity.” (Spillers, 168). With this Spillers can conclude that the black female vocalist “is, in the *moment* of performance, the primary subject of her own invention. Her sexuality is precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and, often, the sheer pleasure she takes in her *powers*.” (Spillers, 167, emphasis mine).

The first tension to explore is the *discreteness* of the performance, which gets us to the heart of the “ontological edge” (Spillers, 166-67). In this way, there is tension between Spillers’ discussion of the black female as a “being-for-itself” here and her understanding of the black female as an ungendered “being for the captor” (Spillers, 206). Spillers writes, “their New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the *body* – a *willful* and violent... severing of the captive body from its motive will, its *active desire*” (Spillers, 206, emphasis on “active desire” is mine). This seems to be a potentially psycho-ontological argument of Fanonian proportions: that

²³ Burke’s pentad is dramatist version of the six basic reporter questions – who, what, when, where, how, and why: agent, act, scene, agency, and purpose (I attempted to go in an order that corresponds to the reporter questions generally)

the “willful and violent” theft of bodies transformed them into flesh, which permanently severed them from “its motive will, its active desire.” This is a change in the quality of being (black). “[T]his body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space.” Yet this *discrete* space, “this profound intimacy... is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses...the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerlessness.’” As Spillers will later say, “no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*” (Spillers, 208). That the term “general ‘powerlessness’” has scare quotes around it is already a warning to the claim we might want to make. Yet, the implication of such a phrase – and her later statement that black life happens “under the pressure of those events” – should not be underestimated.

Rihanna is not given a discrete space within the surveillance network that watches and produces rumors on the lives of Black popstars. When Rihanna goes on vacation or does not disclose who she is with, her body is written over with narratives the media is used to: of the addicted popstar that will eventually overdose. Many articles assume her death or assume her life is already a breathing pathology. This is the supposed tension: between an imposed powerlessness from without and profound intimacy of within. Spillers puts it in a way that connects with her concept of “pornotroping,” “the difference and *distance* between the way black women are seen in their sexual experience and the way that they see themselves are considerable” (Spillers, 187). Against the grain of this point we could read Kara Keeling’s argument that until the time of a “black future,” no matter how self-critical the discourse is, bringing the black (queer) body into view will always be determined by the optics of racial-sexual violence so that there is no distance between the two (Keeling, 93). However, Rihanna

seems to be calling for a different sort of critique, one that takes us past the bifurcation of without/within into the “profound intimacy” of the ontological cognitive schema.

Answering the call of this “profound intimacy” demands us to answer Spillers’ demand to “to go through gender to get to something wider” – this paper will proceed with a detour to deal with the problematic of “ungendering.” In the essays proceeding the presentation of “Interstices” – most notably “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” – Spillers has produced a lexicon of terms such as “ungendering” and “pornotroping”²⁴ that tread on and (re)produce a “dangerous ground.” This ground – “the historic conditions of African-American women” – is dangerous because if “female gender [is] an outcome of a certain political, sociocultural empowerment” then “dispossession [is] the *loss* of gender, or one of the chief elements in an altered reading of gender.” (Spillers, 2003, 223). For Spillers “gender and the arrangements of gender are both crucial and *evasive*” (emphasis added). Working through Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick describes these harrowing theoretical grounds as demonic, “a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future” or describe the past and present (McKittrick, xxv-xxvi). Uncertain, non-linear, evasive, and lost, these are the grounds we must excavate the black woman from – a harrowing task indeed. Yet, we have come to another crisis, perhaps secondary or ancillary to the first: why do we seek the black woman through the static and dangerous grounds? What do we hope to find and hope to be able to do with what we find when the static is cleared? In the wake of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” the field of black feminism has oscillated between two poles, one that seeks the recognition of black femininity in the world and another that seeks to analyze from the

²⁴ I am thinking here of Spillers saying that ““Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" was about bolstering myself, living to fight another day -- I became very good at being a *marksman and ducking*.” (Spillers, 2007, 301, emphasis mine).

impossibility of recognition of black femininity. This paper will seek to show how these positions are not incommensurable. The radicalness of black feminism is an issue of “both/and” as well as “neither/nor.” Reading Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds* and Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* – through “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” in order to better understand what the “loss of gender” means for a radical project of the black female speaks to the incommensurability I aim to engage. Specifically, we will analyze the continuities and disjunctures in how these texts deal with what has been described as a foundational narrative in the black feminist canon, Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Through analyzing Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent’s experiences in the garret – a space analyzed by Spillers, Hartman, and McKittrick – this paper will theorize black femininity as a void in the most radical sense, as a radically ungeographic ground, a nothing that is pregnant with the nowhere of the next world that this world cannot bear to recognize.

Described as “the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of true womanhood...” by Hazel Carby, Harriet Jacobs’ text *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has since found a troubled home in the American literary canon “courtesy of us late twentieth-century critics, with our own agendas, power, and career moves.” (Zafar, 2). That it has become required reading in high school and college syllabi is the outcome of the pioneering work from figures such as those mentioned before (Spillers and Carby), and many others including, and especially, the work of Valerie Smith. In her seminal essay, “Loopholes of Retreat,” Smith explicates Jacobs’ garret as a complex lens to understand the text and also provides a counter-narrative to patriarchal notions of freedom. Against the black male slave narratives that “mythologiz[e] rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility,” Jacobs’ journey of freedom takes her through multiple “small spaces” with the help of problematic allies

(Smith). Yet, Smith complicates a reading that centralizes “the slave woman’s sexual victimization and vulnerability,” for in the face of constraint and injury Jacobs wields “measure of power.” The garret is a prison-cell on the one hand, but gives her a triple sense of freedom: (1) she has escaped/”retreated” from the control of Flint (2) she has freed her children through a loophole in slave law and the seduction of Sands (3) through a (loop)hole in the garret she has gained “the power of the voyeur – the person who sees but remains unseen” (Smith). The garret is a metaphor for an interstitial subjectivity, a liminality enforced through surveillance. Rihanna’s performance finds itself in the afterlife of this system of holding captive subjectivity to the terror of surveillance. It is because of this that Jacobs/Brent would prefer this cramped status to the plantation. One wonders though, what is the endpoint of such a complication?

Spillers and McKittrick begin to answer this question in lifting a term that Valerie Smith used in an earlier version of her essay: “garreting” as a verb instead of “garret” as a noun²⁵. For McKittrick, garreting as a verb highlights that geography can be “workable” even when “produced in tandem with practices of domination” (McKittrick, 62). Much like Smith, this paradox resists the normative frame that has “*incorrectly* deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as ‘ungeographic’ and/or philosophically undeveloped” (McKittrick, xiii). In this way, Spillers, channeling Smith and Jacobs, has established a verb to understand black female slaves in the face of her status as “beached whales... awaiting *their* verb.” This verb, this subjectification, is waiting to be read between the lines, in “the last place they thought of.”

In this vein, Spillers writes further that Jacobs, “between the lines of her narrative, demarcates a sexuality that is *neuterbound*, because it represents an open vulnerability to a

²⁵ Valerie Smith used “garreting” as a verb in an earlier version of “Loopholes of Retreat” presented at a conference that Hortense Spillers was present for and then references in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” I have gleaned this from note 50 for chapter 3 in Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*.

gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male and/or female” (Spillers, 2003, 222, emphasis mine). The verb that Spillers finds between the lines is not resistance, but a being bound to be neutered. Spillers’ word choice is rich with meaning here. The first meaning can be connected to her argument that dispossession un genders the black female slave, that the slave is a neutered object in most records and ledgers (Spillers, 2003, 214-216). In the same parlance as Spillers used to describe the dominant order as murdering the black subject over and over again, we can take Spillers to be saying that in spite of the liberation of the black subject, she is *bound* to be neutered “over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise” (Spillers, 2003, 208). Indeed the fact that Black women are the fastest growing prison population in a mass incarceration system rightly described as “The New Jim Crow” by legal scholar Michelle Alexander, it seems the “gigantic sexualized repertoire” has “shown no movement” through time.

Another meaning that can be gleaned is of a different, but related, meaning of neuter, a definition in relationship to verbs. A neutered verb means one that is “neither active nor passive” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2009). This connects with the immediately preceding sentence Spillers writes, “Since the gendered female *exists* for the male, we might say that the ungendered female – in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential – might be *invaded/raided* by another male or female” (Spillers, 2003, 222, emphasis mine). The differentiation of verbs – “the gendered female exists” and the “ungendered female... might be invaded/raided” – becomes important here. The etymology of exist means “to come into being” or, if broken down further, then it means to stand out (ex is “out” and “sistere” is “take a stand”). The gendered female may come into being for the male, yet she still stands out from the *facticity* of the world for she is not an

“object amidst other objects” (Fanon, 82)²⁶. In contradistinction, the ungendered female is an object to be invaded, which etymologically means to “go into” and also denotes an occupation. Spillers collapsing of the term “slave” and “female” here speak to resistance to the claim that history as progressive. Ungendering is still a force of violence that affects us in the present. Both the gendered male and female “stand out” due to their ontological privilege to go into and occupy the ungendered slave. Yet we return to this definition of neuter that denotes neither a passive or active status to the verb: the slave neither wills (active) nor accepts (passive) this status. Instead the ungendered slave has no ontological resistance in the face of the gigantic sexualized repertoire of the world.

Saidiya Hartman provides an unheralded analysis of the problematic of agency for the ungendered slave in her text *Scenes of Subjection*, specifically chapter 3 “Seduction and the Ruses of Power.” Hartman argues similarly to McKittrick that *Incidents* provides “an opportunity to explore the meaning of consent from the perspective of the dispossessed and non-contractual subject” (Hartman, 103). Agency is not simply a term to be affirmed in the face of “duress, coercion, dispossession, manipulation, and constraint” but is the product of and reproductive force for such violence. It is the double-ness of agency – the *double-bind* of agency – that forms the impetus for Hartman’s analysis of Jacobs’ text. Hartman says it better, “the law’s selective recognition of slave humanity nullified the captive’s ability to give consent or act as agent and, at the same time, acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the slave but only as it assumed the form of criminality” (Hartman, 80).

It is within this double-bind that the rape of the ungendered slave becomes unimaginable, for the slave is simultaneously (1) a “being for the captor” and (2) a seductive body perpetually

²⁶ This reading owes a very large debt to Lewis Gordon’s work, primarily *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism, Existential Africana*, and his anthology *Existence in Black*.

asking to be invaded/raided (Spillers, 2003, 206). In this case the slave need not speak or be heard, her body speaks for itself. And if heard, the slave can only be heard as a criminal because the master's will is the being of the world itself.

So what can we make of *Incidents*, a narrative where the slave supposedly writes herself into being against obliteration? Hartman continues to point us to the problematic of seduction, "The crisis of seduction is *ameliorated* by the seductiveness of the narrative." (Hartman, 107, emphasis mine). Jacobs is telling the story of the slave mistress to a judgmental audience (white, northern women) whose "delicacy" is a euphemism for the violence of white morality. Thus, Jacobs purchases control over this audience through reducing the force of her critique – she gains power in powerlessness, which is the very crisis of seduction and ruse of power Hartman is explicating. The text then – with this simple fact, not even to mention the terror of the editorial process itself alluded to with the epigraph – is a cramped and constraining space of liminal agency, voyeuristic pleasure, and violent comportment. The text itself is a garret²⁷.

Yet, the energy that is depressed (if not repressed) by Jacobs and Childs cannot be held at bay, for it irrupts out of – or better yet *disrupts* – the text. Hartman insightfully points out the numerous ellipsis and dashes used to veil proceedings too terrible to relate and elucidates a point good enough to quote in full:

If one thinks of these dashes and elisions as literal and figurative cuts in the narrative, then they display and displace the searing wounds of the violated and mute body, a body that acts out its remembrances without the symbolic endowments to articulate its history of injury. The dashes, ellipsis, and circumlocutions hint at the excluded term by way of the bodies of the slave woman. The

²⁷ This is not a radical statement but has been a point of consensus among many black feminist critics dating back, at least, to Smith's "Loopholes of Retreat."

bodies of these women are textual enigmas to be interpreted by the reader since they are literally *pregnant with the secrets of slavery*.

(Hartman, 108, emphasis mine)

The text is a garret, but also the flesh of the ungendered slave that register a *hieroglyphics* of the “lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, and punctures” that have marked us *a priori* to the “cultural seeing of skin color” and the “brush of discourse” (Spillers, 2003, 207). Jacobs’ deliberate calculation has produced a seductive text that problematizes seduction itself – the double disrupts any singular reading. Yet, as Hartman warns, such deliberate calculation is “unable to effect an ‘event’” for the “same act both holds out the possibility of freedom and intensifies the burdens and constraints of enslavement” (Hartman, 109). Thus it is just as important to recognize Jacobs’ power as it is also important to note that such double-bound agency “can neither be sustained nor actualized because of the absence of a proper domain” (Hartman, 109).

If such a doubling cannot be an event, then McKittrick might be pointing the way towards a radical politics of the *event horizon*. In describing the paradox of the garret, McKittrick describes it as “dismal cell, her prison, and this *dark hole*” (McKittrick, 41, emphasis mine). My italics are to emphasize the centrality of blackness to how Jacobs herself describes the garret, “the air was stifling; the darkness total... this continued darkness was oppressive” (Jacobs, 128). Within this space she loses the ability to speak and her voice becomes inverted into the hallucinations in her head. She becomes unaware of time passage, is terrorized of dreams of the plantation, and her thoughts became “starless as the midnight darkness around [her]” (Jacobs, 141)²⁸. That this space was an oppressive dark hole, even if argued by Jacobs to be a better condition to slavery, is later compared by Jacobs to slavery itself as a “black pit” (Jacobs, 215). This is not a slippage or coincidence, but is a textual *disruption* where the temporality – the attempt to describe Jacobs’ narrative as a journey from slavery to freedom – breaks down into paradigmatic time. Spillers outlines that the world that operates on paradigmatic time “remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if time nor

²⁸ This seems to resonate with Dionne Brand here: “Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out into nothing; one senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space. One imagines people so stunned by their circumstances, so heartbroken as to refuse reality. Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space. That space is the measure of our ancestors' step through the door toward the ship. One is caught in the few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence.”- Dionne Brand; *A Map to the Door of No Return*

history... show no movement” (Spillers, 2003, 208). This is not slavery as an event, but a horizon where graphemes and phonemes become warped and language itself collapses into the singularity. That Jacobs loses her voice in the garret are within the same horizon of suffering as her screams being unheard on the plantation and her injury being veiled in the text – past the event horizon (black) sound becomes meaningless. The garret is not simply an attic, but is a metaphor for a black hole enfleshed by Jacobs’ text.

Connecting to this, Spillers is pointing us towards the fundamental violence of the middle passage as beginning *and* end (yet not an origin): “...their New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the *body* – a *willful* and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers, 2003, 206). The theft is material but also *ontological*, a severing of the body from its active desire, a warping of the quality of being. In the outcome “the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuvers, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.” This is the transformation of bodies into *flesh*, “Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies – some of them female... we regard this human and social *irreparability* as high crimes against the *flesh*” (Spillers, 2003, 206, emphasis of “irreparability” is mine). Through the quotidian (ledgers, value-charts, exchange, scientific experiments) and spectacular (the whip, the rope) the black was divided, ripped-apart, riveted, and “atomized” into flesh, “a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.” Neuterbound, ungendered, and ungeographic, the being of the black falls through the event horizon of the door of no return and is *spaghettified*²⁹, its very sub-atomic particles ripped apart ad infinitum.

Against this claim of “irreparability,” McKittrick focuses our attention to the “geographic possibility of the garret [that] can make and remake black femininity not simply as a garreted/marginal ‘way of being’ but as a geographic project that is respatializing and shifting the grounds of black womanhood” (McKittrick, 144). Where does this different geographic project come from? Using Marlene Philip’s piece “Dis Place – The Space Between” McKittrick writes, “the body is understood by Philip as a historically produced terrain through which a different story is told -- a geographic story produced from the last place they thought of, from the

²⁹ For a much better explication of spaghettification and blackness see Murillo, John; “Black Spaghetti or Spaghetti al Nero Di Seppia;” *The Feminist Wire*, October 8, 2012, <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/black-spaghetti-or-spaghetti-al-nero-di-seppia/>.

'place in between' the legs: the seemingly silenced and expendable black feminine body/parts and selves" (McKittrick, 44). A new geographic story exists within the void of the ungendered female slave, an impossible maternity is (re)produced in the "space between her legs" (Philip, 74). Yet this argument is not to affirm some sort of mystical black femininity, for Philip points us to the centrality of violence in this transformation in the quality of being, "...bodydeadbodiesmurderedbodiesimportedbredmutilatebodiessoldbodiesbroughtEuropentrafficinbodiesthattellingsomuchaboutthemanandwhichhelpingfueltheindustrialrevolutionsmanytimesoverandoverandoverthebodies..." The grammar, if one can use such a term for this, exhibits the significance of the violence of the middle passage. It is this *absolute* violence – a violence that is neither a verb nor a noun but is the *disintegration* of grammar – that produces "thesilenceof/thespacewithin/ the womb..." (Philip, 94). In this way the "space in between" is not simply a metaphor for the "sexual stuff" of black female slaves as Spillers put it, but instead is a heuristic for the ontology of ungendering. The space in-between is a void to be invaded/raided by the world indiscriminately. Paradoxically this space to be invaded is also to produce "new chattel" for the world. It is an infinitely inner-space to "repopulate the outer space" (Philip, 74). The ontology of ungendering is a travestied, impossible maternity – the outcome of relations of power and being.

This impossible maternity is at the heart of Spillers' critique of the Moynihan Report, a much celebrated and maligned paper faulting the black mother for the pathology of the black family. Moynihan's argues the black family is pathological because the history of slavery has empowered the black mother (due to its democratization of work) and castrated the black man to such a degree that the black father, even when not physically absent, is still absent mimetically (Spillers, 2003, 229). This view is a patriarchal vision "exacerbated" by slavery and its afterlife that "declare(s) mother right, by definition, a negating feature of human community" (Spillers, 2003, 227). Yet Spillers proves that any discourse on the black family always already treads on dangerous grounds because "the female, like the male, has been robbed of the parental right, the parental function" (Spillers, 2003, 224). In the face of the gender conflict being projected onto the screen of the black family, Spillers displays a powerful "no" that disrupts such a narrative. Neither the mother nor the father have any right to the child, yet the space in between her legs is still needed to (re)produce the outer space. Thus the black mother cannot be evacuated from view

in the same way as the black father. She is instead doubly-bound to be absent and present, passive and active, neuterbound and seductive, a “no” and a “thing.”

For this reason the repressed black mother returns as the monstrous black matriarch, a phantasmagoria representing a nightmare of a black upheaval of the social order: “the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated – the law of the mother” (Spillers, 2003, 228). This monstrosity, the female with the “potential to ‘name,’” is the terror of a seductive insurrection “with a field of gravitational attraction so intense that... once across the imaginary surface of the event horizon, the point of no return, one is crushed by its infinite density” (Sexton, 81). Yet, not getting ahead of ourselves, Spillers rightfully calls this fear a “fatal misunderstanding [that] assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong” (Spillers, 2003, 228). This form of ungendering *misnames* the black female as a powerful agent, which “is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child.” Yet this misnaming, if a fatal misunderstanding at the material level, might reveal something ontologically that McKittrick and Hartman (along with other thinkers such as Jared Sexton and Fred Moten) are tapping into.

Spillers’ call to black women operates along the same heuristic lines, for her being is both overexposed and wholly unseen. The terrifying black matriarch and the seductive black mistress represent a fundamental misnaming that renders the geography of the black female body as fundamentally “ungeographic.” This misnaming of the black is what McKittrick’s project labors against – she wants to show how “metaphors of the middle passage or the Atlantic Ocean are never simply symbolic renditions of placelessness and vanishing histories” but that black people are spatial actors and make meaning of space against spatio-temporal domination. In this way Spillers and McKittrick are certainly kindred, but with different inflections. In the face of this ontological misnaming Spillers final act to clear the static is to *claim* “the monstrosity (of a female with the *potential* to ‘name’), which her culture imposes in *blindness*” (Spillers, 2003, 229, emphasis mine). Instead of laboring against the misnaming in terms of trying to disprove it – to say *no* to the ontological *no* – Spillers is calling on us to, again, say *yes* to the *no*, the dispossessed female. Instead of inventing a new term, Spillers is demanding for us to desediment the soil, to claim the ground beneath our feet (Chandler, 352). This is a dangerous activity of course, for it is still not the power to name, but a *potential*, a “fateful gamble” (Spillers, 2003, 228). This is theory born of struggle, of pain and tears, of war and world, but also one that shines

a light – or better yet, casts a shadow – on the potential for *insurgence*. Therefore, against the grain of the aforementioned McKittrick argument, the respatialization of the black female is not in contradistinction to, but is only through an affirmation of a “garreted way of being.” It might be said that a black sense of place is not against but is in service of a radical sense of *placelessness*. In this way, Spillers is pointing us towards *claiming*, instead of resisting, the status of being ungeographic.

III

Returning to this concept of the Burkean pentad, I am interested in Spillers insight that these five parts are all condensed into a single “living body.” The two terms of particular interest are “agency” and “purpose.” The question of agency is about what *capacity* does an agent have to act. The purpose asks the critical question of *why* an agent acts, this is a question of desire and will. These two concepts, moreso than the other three, seem to be pointing our analysis towards a *verb* for the black female body. Spillers asserts in the beginning of “Interstices” that “black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their verb*” (Spillers, 153). For Spillers, the black female vocalist, as the living embodiment of this conflict with the sexual universe, is, in “ironic grace,” performing our way towards this verb. My question is, *how* are these two concepts of the pentad – agency and purpose, capacity and desire – condensed into the black female body and does this condensing foreclose the possibility of a verb for the black?

With Spillers’ call (and performance) to read the performance as a confrontation between “ego and world” in mind, Rihanna proves to be an interesting, if ironic, muse. With a pedestrian’s glance at the landscape of popular music, Rihanna’s hits are eccentric in that she

bypasses the normal pop song structure of gendered agonists (thirdperson/first person “He”/“She”) for a more general, paradigmatic struggle between “you” and “I.” While it is not abnormal for certain songs to phrase their conflicts in this way, the majority of Rihanna’s songs after her game-changing album “Good Girl Gone Bad” follow this structure of a general “you” and a specific “I.” This “you” can be read in many ways, so her songs become a screen for the projection of one’s agenda. We will talk more about the structure of projecting conflicts onto her body later on, but we can talk about this in a different sense. The “you” can be read, against the contextual grain of He/She heteronormative gender conflicts, as *the world*. That more critics don’t do this is strange, for Rihanna’s videos and interviews seem to be screaming for such an analysis. The song we have been focusing on, “Diamonds,” is another one of her songs with a paradigmatic struggle between a “you” and an “I,” between “the world” and “Rihanna.”

In the first verse/bridge of the song, Rihanna brings us into scene that has no bearing, just a being at sea. “[T]hese captives... were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all.” (Spilles, 214-15). It is in this first lyric that Rihanna brings the antagonism into view, repeating the words, *you and I... you and I...* There is a stunning materiality to how she says these words, you can literally hear the way “I” rolls up her throat and out her mouth, with a stark sense of desperation. *You’re a shooting star, I see*. Rihanna’s describing the “you” as a shooting star brings to mind many images, of European invaders as aliens, of the camera as an apparatus of light and shooting, or, as the music video is implying with images of her apartment being blown up in reverse, a bomb descending onto her shores. In this final scenario, the next line takes on a whole new meaning: *when you hold me, I’m alive*. A bomb that destroyed her world, that gave her a life in death, life as death, a “severing of the body... from its active desire.” A loving embrace, a destructive intent. This recalls Hartman’s anti-origin story for

slavery, that the sanctioning of the prison was a multiethnic coalition, “love was the language of dominion, and its offspring were men and women in chains” (Hartman, 2008, 94). *I knew that we’d become one right away* From “you” and “I” is born a violent symbiosis, an ontological parasitism that guarantees Rihanna’s death. But she knew it “right away.” This is not simply an imposition from without, this is the destruction of time and place, this is the psycho-ontological *condensing* into a being that was “culturally ‘unmade,’ thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness” (Spillers, 215). This is the grammar of suffering alluded to in the pentad, but one where the terms all begin to implode into each other. This is a new cognitive schema we have no map to navigate to or from, a course *unknown*:

Then what you call cognition, let alone a schema, is a set of dreams, a set of stories, that never come into being, that never coalesce. One is never in control in dreams, dreams take place. The dreamer is captive even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming. Captured in one’s own body, in one’s own thoughts, to be *out of possession* of one’s own mind, our cognitive schema is captivity (Brand, emphasis mine)

Brand’s thought demands a reconceptualization of what it means to have a “discrete and unalterable self-knowledge.” It becomes interesting to consider the etymological connection between “discrete” and “crisis.” Crisis is the combination of two latin roots, “crimen” meaning crime/judgment and “cernere” meaning to sift or separate. The crisis is the call to judgment by sifting and separating through “formal object(s)” (Spillers, 165). The production of the discrete is always a judgment made in the midst of a crisis – a forced sense of order in a world where “one is never in control.” The cognitive schema that Brand is (un)mapping is an altered state, a state of mind in a crisis that is out of her control. This is the importance of that aforementioned little moment of nothingness in the music video for “Diamonds,” to point out, albeit for a moment,

what a performativity of *dispossession* looks like. As she performs an affirmation of choice in the face of violence her eyebrow raises critically and she rolls her eyes, too quickly for the edit to get there. This is an action done from a being “captured in one’s own body... out of possession of one’s own mind.” This is the captive’s incapacity, this is dispossessed desire, this is the performance of a travestied unbecoming.

Another point of tension that gets to the heart of the conundrum of the ontological edge is what Spillers calls the “moment of performance”: how do we think the relation between agency and structure, performance and ontology, specifically in the “sexual universe?” On this issue, Oprah Winfrey’s interview of Rihanna might cast a shadow on the idea of “self invention” for the black female. The major issue of the interview was, of course, her relationship with Chris Brown, but that was not the most interesting. In a small section, Oprah discussed with Rihanna her sexual image. Oprah began by introducing her to what Esquire magazine wrote about her in their declaration of Rihanna as the sexiest woman alive. Esquire called her “the indisputable queen of carnal pop” and, more to the point, “the *essence* of fuck.”³⁰ This is an obvious and grotesque form of pornotroping, emptying her body of all meaning aside from hyper-sexual features. This hypersexualization is also an asexualization as Spillers reminds us, “it seems sexual experience among black people is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium in which the individual is suspended” (Spillers, 164). Rihanna’s reaction is supportive of Spillers’ claim that there is a gulf between how the world sees her and she sees herself, for she reacts with a shocked face, saying, “I don’t even know what

³⁰ Rihanna and Winfrey, Oprah. “Rihanna’s Sex Appeal and her Relationship to her Fans” *Oprah Magazine*. retrieved in November 2018 at: <http://www.oprah.com/own-oprahs-next-chapter/Rihanna-on-Being-Called-the-Sexiest-Woman-Alive-Video>

(being the essence of fuck) means... That's not my goal." The rest of the interview though adds texture to our discussion, so I will quote it in full:

Oprah: But when they named you sexiest woman alive, was that at least...

Rihanna: It was flattering. Inaccurate, but flattering. To say the least, I was excited, I thought it was cute.

Oprah: When did you get to be – or *how* did you get to be – so comfortable in your sexual skin

Rihanna: I had to fake it 'til I make it. That's what I had to do, I had to pretend I was comfortable, I really was not –

Oprah: You were not?

Rihanna: No, no way, no way... I felt I had to fake it, I had to just go for it.

Oprah: [Cuts to Oprah's face, which looks noticeably surprised]...

Rihanna: In Barbados we have a very sexual culture –

Oprah: You, sexiest woman alive? Hello, on the cover! You, the sexiest woman alive, was not comfortable? [editing cuts the video to a photo shoot of American flag covering her body as Oprah talks then cuts back to Rihanna's face]

Rihanna: No, but you have to, you have to, overcome certain things. And, you know, I'm 24, I can do that now, I can experiment and try to figure myself out now.

Rihanna's response is full of nuance that does not fit easily into a narrative of her hyper-sexualization or a counter-narrative of sexual empowerment. Rihanna consistently knocks down each of Oprah's attempts to narrativize her feelings into empowerment – she finds the designation of “sexiest woman alive” to be a “cute” title, not particularly empowering or meaningful. More to the point, her comfortability in her “sexual skin” is an affect of her “faking it.” That she is acting is not anything surprising because this is the potentiality for power in

performance, the *moment* one can take pleasure in their power to control the crowd. Yet, the *structure* of the conversation reveals a disjuncture between that narrative and what she is *not* saying. In the middle, Rihanna attempts to draw the history of Caribbean musical culture into the conversation, yet what she wants to say – either a disavowal or something more – is unknown for Oprah cuts across her, still shocked that she does not feel comfortable in her skin. As Oprah is prodding her, humorously with a bit of a vendetta, the editing violently interrupts the conversation. It is important to note, for the majority of the interview they will not edit to outside clips except in transition points between segments. In this part though, the editing seems to be laboring to aid Oprah’s argument. The clips shown are of the Esquire photo shoot, Rihanna in lingerie with the American flag draped over her face. Her gaze is distant, looking away, the flag obscuring her face. There is a knowing twinkle in her eyes and this is what we, critics and critical theorists, all spectators alike, are supposed to, and have, read as power in the face of structures of domination. In another shot, the flag is tied around her neck, looking like a well-tied noose. This is the double-bind of agency, a subjectivity in chains. Against Oprah’s prodding – and let us not act like the questioner does not have influence here – Rihanna becomes hesitant, she stutters around the “certain things” she had to overcome to fake being comfortable. Why does she “have to” overcome these things? Is this just performance anxiety or is it something else?

In closing this part of the interview, Rihanna makes an argument about age and maturity. Now that she is older and more experienced she can “experiment and try to figure [herself] out now.” Perhaps the difference between Rihanna and Ma Rainey is age. Perhaps Rihanna was too young to properly handle the machinations of the popular music industry that have exponentially grown since Rainey’s time. For many reasons this is too vulgar of a reading: (1) that assumes we can actually know *anything* about Robyn Rihanna Fenty (her state of mind, her maturity, etc),

which both Spillers and Rihanna herself have warned is both impossible and not desirable; (2) that line of thought perpetuates the sort of moralism that disciplines black female bodies, that demands they make “better choices” in the face of structures consuming their bodies (3) finally this perpetuates a form of nostalgia that objectifies the past and uses Ma Rainey as a fungible entity to discipline Rihanna and other young black popstars like her. We can do better than this. Rihanna’s performance demands better as well.

How Spillers might call her a “subject of her own invention,” Rihanna has instead described herself as an “experiment.” The connection between these two words is obvious, but also complicated. How many experiments until one becomes an invention? How many failures equal success? Yet, in both of these cases there is an implied capacity to mold and shape her body as she sees fit. Whether one is a final product or still forming, it is conceded that the black female body is an object for the invention of her subjecthood. What is this capacity for the black female popsinger to come into a self-consciousness about her body in a stifling field of consumption and a captive cognitive schema? Without exploring further into how Rihanna has come into a fuller self-consciousness, Oprah steers the conversation to another subject and inadvertently crashes back into this topic. The next topic is about her fans, who Rihanna has claimed as a vitalizing force in the face of the loneliness of being a popstar. Similarly, on “Love Without Tragedy – Mother Mary” Rihanna sings, *I’m from the left side of an island/ Never knew this many people would even know my name*. Rihanna sings this as a response to the moral judgments of “Mother Mary” and “Mister Jesus” that want her “to change... [and] be a queen.” The audience has captured her. *As time flies, way above me/ for you I’ve cried seas deep/ Oh Glory, the praise carried me*. The praise carried her across the sea of her own tears, as time and history show now movement. As Brand and Spillers both pointed out, the sea is where black

people were, and remain, culturally *unmade*. Yet this image, of the sea as a pool of black tears, points us to a different heuristic – instead of Spillers’ terms of a “discrete [and] unalterable self-knowledge,” one can glean from Rihanna a subjectivity of secretion and fragility. The image from the aforementioned music video comes to mind, her body floating in the water, tears filling up the sea and the sea gently disintegrating her body – Rihanna slipping between life and death with no ground in sight. Yet, we are not too far out of step with Spillers, for this is why she is pointing us to a “moment of performance” instead of a grand drama. The epic narrative cannot exist for the black female *in the flesh*. Rihanna is pointing us to floating in the fleeting moment, *I’ll be your star, you keep directing me. Let’s make the best scene they’ve ever seen. Let’s capture the moment*. The “you” is still the audience – still her ego confronting the world – but this is not a passive audience, her performance is being directed by their force. This is not an audience of the oppressed, this is audience of/as the world. Her performance is not discrete, but coerced. In the moment, her self-knowledge is “invaded/raided” by the “gigantic sexualized repertoire” of the world (Spillers, 222). The fleeting moment turns into a sea of time that passes above her as she floats, barely below the surface, her death is a process of living. *‘Cause even forever ain’t forever, I swear by the moment*. The tension is building in the song. The moment is not forever, it is timelessness. Death not as event, but an event horizon.

The song ends on a note that we might tag as “the terror of call-and-response.” Rihanna continues to sing, *As long as we got each other, I’ll die in the moment. I’m prepared to die in the moment*. Rihanna’s song juxtaposes two nouns here, “we” and “I.” The “we” is the condensing of the world and her consciousness, the performed symbiosis alluded to by Spillers’ pentad and expanded by Rihanna and Dionne Brand. This song reveals that this condensing of the ego and the world does not eliminate the antagonism. Recognition and subjectivity infect her, sever her

active desire from an *anoriginal* state, and she is *burdened* with freedom and self-invention³¹. This means that her pained expression might be a secretion – *cried tears sea deep* – but it is also an absorption – *I knew we’d become one right away*. There is not a safe space from within or without. The theft of the bodies and anoriginal transformation into flesh is a change in the *quality* of being. The audience as director displays the tyranny of democracy or the democratization of tyranny: the audience as a lynch mob. Her body out in the open, fragile with the American flag wrapped around her neck, the warmth from the audience’s ravenous desire keeping her alive, *Oh glory, the praise carried me*. With this insight, we might remix Spillers’ conclusion about the black female vocalist: *she is, in the moment of performance, the primary object of the world’s intentions*. Her fleeting moment – her timeless floating in the sea – is her death, not her power. Yet it is only her that will die, *as long we got each other, I’ll die in the moment*. The song ends with these lines repeated over and over again, stuck in the groove, time showing no movement until the quiet comes.

IV

“Who am I living for?
Is this my limit?
Can I endure some more?
Chances are given. Question existing...
-Rihanna “Question Existing”

Rihanna recorded this song at a critical juncture in her career, between her status as burgeoning pop princess and her current status as a “diva.” This was the second to last song on her multi-platinum album “Good Girl Gone Bad,” her break-out album in 2007. This song is in a long tradition of pop artists doing a cathartic form of navel-gazing, a chance to whine about their fame. For Rihanna though, this was the start of something that she has held onto. The songs I

³¹ I am in debt here to two very complicated ideas, Fred Moten’s idea of “anoriginality” as an appositional concept to origins explored in *In the Break* and Saidiya Hartman’s explication of the burdened individuality of the post-emancipation freedman in the second half of *Scenes of Subjection*.

have been analyzing are off her most recent album, “Unapologetic,” released in 2012. Starting with this song, “Question Existing,” a large amount of her hits have centered on her relationship to the media and the world. After news got out that Chris Brown had beat her, her music has turned its critical eye towards the meaning of her performance and the machinations around her consuming such performances. This is not to argue that Rihanna is doing something purposefully revolutionary, but it is as her ego has confronted the world that she has produced unique *poetics* of the “black female sexual experience.” Or perhaps *encounter* is a better word than experience here. Rihanna sings further in “Question Existing,” *I put in work, did more than called upon, more than deserved. When it was all over did I wind up hurt? Yes. But it taught me before a decision ask this question first.* Pain is the precursor to the question, the anoriginal condition for this style of confrontation with the world. The chorus of the song is a series of questions tethered to a hook – the phrase *Question existing* – that allows the chorus to be played repetitively, but fluidly. The repetition can be used in many different ways, but in this particular song the chorus just repeats over and over again with no change in intonation, no building or releasing of tension, and no sense of conclusion. The question is the end. Even when Rihanna breaks into the middle with a monologue, it ends on a note of pessimism: no way to trust anyone, no one to love or be friends with. The song ends with the hook phrase, not relieving the tension, but displaying the timelessness of *questions existing*. The experience of the encounter produces nothing but questions.

The repetitiveness of the chorus might also suggest something else: the lived experience of the black popstar is one of *endurance*, of pain, of being constantly pushed to the limit and then questioning one’s *existence* in the face of a gigantic sexual repertoire. If this is true, then the title of Rihanna’s song “Diamonds” might be more suggestive than was previously thought. I am

thinking here of the process for making synthetic diamonds, taking black graphite and adding intense pressure and heat to it. Anvils repeatedly squeezing down on the graphite as electricity is shot through it. This is a mimicry of the natural process for making diamonds from carbon dioxide buried deep in the earth. This brings a different meaning to the line she sings on “Diamonds” – *When you hold me, I’m alive. We’re like diamonds in the sky.* When the world squeezes her tight, when the love becomes electrified by its passions, she can become a diamond. What this diamond really is though is an *unbecoming*, an *ungendering*, and being *culturally unmade*. The second way for making synthetic diamonds – taking an already existing diamond and zapping it with microwaved gas until carbon atoms rain down and produce a sheet of diamonds – gives us a brutal way of looking at the music business, of black diamonds like Jay Z producing other black diamonds, like Rihanna. This is not an affirmative process, but the reproduction and accumulation of objects through ever-more efficient means. In this light, Rihanna asked a paradigmatic question, *Who am I living for? Is this my Limit? Can I endure some more?* Bodies pushed to their limits yet still being burdened with questions of endurance, self-invention, and laziness. The black popstar is a black diamond. This is not music as resistance or creating a positive self-consciousness or even infrapolitics. This is the afterlife of slavery.

To begin concluding, we will focus on one song from “Rated R” titled “Fire Bomb.” It is the seventh song on the album, immediately following the song “Russian Roulette.” This is important to mention because “Fire Bomb” seems to sonically and thematically follow. “Russian Roulette” stages a tense encounter between Rihanna and a figure of power where she must play the game for her own life, but the song ends with her pulling the trigger and you hear gun shoot a bullet. Its placement outside the narrative of the song places it in a space of ambivalence, both inside and outside the time-space of the album. Immediately following this, Firebomb begins

with Rihanna singing, “Gunfire left a hole/ In the tank/ Losing gasoline.” Rihanna has staged her death not as her demise, but as a non-event in her relation with the law. This is death as a dangerous way of living – a life in death, or what some might call a social death. Her death is neither origin nor end, but represents a horizon of civility and sociality. She is on the run from and towards something in the song, with “Fire” on her trail. She does not wish it away, but merely wants it to arrive on time for her “to get where she’s going.” The fire will mean her death, but she wants it to arrive so she can use it – her death – for the purposes of creative destruction:

Seems cold
But baby no
Doesnt have to be
Microwaving our medal tragedy
Watching it burn and
Its beautiful and its blue
And its pitiful
When its through
Its the other half of me

I didnt do it
You lit the match for me
Now were flying
From the blast, baby
Thats the thing

Where we’re going
We dont need no breaks
Cant wait to see your face
When your front windows break
And I come crashing through

The lovers need to clear the road
Oh, oh, oh
Cause this thing is ready to blow
Oh, oh, oh

I just wanna set you on fire
So I wont have to burn alone

Then youll know where
Im coming from
Fire bomb
Fire bomb

Baby we were killing them
They couldnt handle the millionth degree
We were criminals
As we were burning
The world called the police
Fire department, ambulance
You can call me crazy cause I believe
The only move for me and you
Is to go out blazing

If we listen closely to the edges of the song, we can hear near-indiscernible layers of sound that play underneath the projection of Rihanna’s vocal presence and overtop of or within the instrumental. Underneath, and in concert with, Rihanna’s singing voice is another layer of Rihanna performing the same words in a quiet, raspy speaking voice. This is an unusual layering technique, one that produces a depth to the voice. Yet this is also a doubling of the voice into a magnified presence and dark underside, producing what Spillers in reference to psychoanalysis might call “the split subject.” In this case, each part – each different vocal track – does not constitute a whole, but instead a fragmentary performing subject, a broken circle doubled and refracted.

This brings us to a question of the narrative of the song, who does Rihanna want to set on fire? This fracturing of the voice mirrors the ambiguity of pronouns in the song. There are *at least* three distinct figures, an “I,” a “you,” and a “they.” The song’s narrative seems to imply that the “you” is an estranged lover – her “baby” – that she is seeking some vendetta against, which would seem to be an obvious reference to Chris Brown. Yet, the introduction of a “they” – a third-person outside perspective – throws the coherence of this narrative into crisis. Speaking to her “baby” she sings, “Baby we were killing them/ They couldn’t handle the millionth degree.” Suddenly the “I” and “You” that were supposedly at odds become a “we,” that are joined together as enflamed subjects. The “they” – the outside gaze – becomes the antagonists that could not handle the heat of their being and subsequently called the police. Or should we say, pace Jared Sexton’s intervention in “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” in the face of subjects ontologically criminalized, the “they” is deputized into the police. This returns us to our

first question, who initially shot Rihanna and jumpstarted the plot of the song? Suddenly, the song is not consumed with dramatizing a lover's quarrel but is actually enclosed by an unnameable violence, one that both constitutes the narrative and the very capacity, or incapacity, for Rihanna's voice to come into being. In this way the "they" could be the police who took the photograph, the media who disseminated and repeated the violation, or even the recording engineering apparatus that tears apart Rihanna's voice to make the coherent whole of the song.

The song can thus be heard, through Spillers' suggestive methodology in "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," as a "dramatic confrontation between ego and world that the female vocalist herself embodies" (Spillers, 165). Rihanna is shattered by a violence that cannot be named. Yet, a banal narrative is erected to obscure the antagonism by the overdetermining myths etched into her flesh. Each vocal track a fragment of the shattered being, a shattering that cannot be traced to a single source except to say it is *the world in-itself* that breaks her apart in order for it to come together. Yet, Rihanna does not call for an end to the breaking, an end to the flames that consume her. Instead she sings that she cannot "wait to see your face/ when your front windows break/ and [she] come[s] crashing through." She wishes to shatter the glass house of subjectivity with her shattered being, her own flesh. And what will happen when she breaks through? If her being has been lit on fire, the hope expressed in the song is that her being will act as a "fire bomb" and consume the world around her in flames. What a pessimistic hope! This is not a call to live in the world. This is not a prayer to be made whole again. This is not agency or survival in the face of great odds, but instead is using one's defeat, one's death, as the catalyst for a creative destruction. This is not performance of the body, but pace Spillers' critical distinction, this is performance *in the flesh*, in the "would-be, fateful gamble" in the face of sure pulverization.

From the rubble and ash Rihanna gives us, perhaps we can produce a way to re-imagine reparations. Demands for reparations for slavery have been made as early as 1787. Among reparations scholars, there are broad differences in political ideologies, ways of calculating loss and injury, methodologies for achieving reparations, and who should be held responsible. Yet, in the massive literature on Reparations that has developed in recent years, we can say a tentative consensus has been reached around two stress points (Curry, 2). First is that reparations can and should mend the damage done to black people because of slavery and subsequent segregation. The second stress point is that if America pays what it owes to black folk, then this will produce

a more equal democracy and a better America. We can add to this last point that many scholars agree that even discussing reparations can produce a better democracy. For Roy L Brooks, in his book *Atonement and Forgiveness*, reparations would mark a turn in the moral center of the country, ensuring not only a healing of the past but the production of a better future (Brooks, 15).

Rihanna has provided us the tools to break with this model. First is the impossibility of repair. Repairing implies a past plenitude, as in a broken clock is repaired back to working status. This should raise the question, to what status is the black to be repaired to? What time period was good for black people? The suffering of the black is not one of loss, but of never having had (Marriott, xxi). How does one repair the status of truly having nothing, not as the absence of “something,” but in excess of it. Nothing as an ontological status. If we listen in excess to the narrative strategies that form it, Rihanna might point us to way of hearing and understanding what nothing *is*. Rihanna’s song begins both “after” and “in” the break, the violence that forms the narrative of the song. She has been shot, she is leaking fluids, and she is ready to explode. Yet she does not seek to repair the damage. Instead she demands for the world to understand her, not through “respect” but a sacrifice of one’s claim to life. This is what I hear when she sings, “I just want to set you on fire/ so I won’t have to burn alone/ Then you’ll know where I’m coming from.” This is to say, reparations should not be about a dollar amount or healing broken individuals back to productivity. And most of all, reparations should not be in service of redeeming the United States of America. Reparations is not about giving those who have nothing something or even everything. Reparations can be, and should be, about demanding the world to *become nothing*. We can now return back to the epigraph from Lewis Gordon, a blackened world is produced in making the world pay the costs of blackness. Not in some capitalist sense of payment, but instead demanding the world to *be* black or blackened, which is to say for the world to end (and begin anew) just as slavery did to black people long ago.

If we continue with this thought, we might end up where we started: with the imagery of riots or the Haitian revolution. We might imagine scorched fields and creative destruction without consideration of productivity, labor, and even the truncated definitions of “the political.” And in this act of imagining, perhaps we might wallow in the depths of a paradigmatic question and a new way of thinking of an old concept: are reparations the cooling waters to quench the thirst for justice within the world or can they be the scorching flames to clear the field for a radical inhabitation of nowhere as nobodies for nothing?

"CONCLUSION"

Each of these chapters – from the Watts rebellion to Azealia Banks’ clapback to Frank Ocean’s refusal to come out to Rihanna’s poetic of dispossession – explored events of black sound that demanded one to see the antagonism between blackness and social surveillance. This antagonism does not signify a boundary between, but the violent force of mediation. Blackness is centrally important to the history of social surveillance and the media industries. Antagonism arises due to the confrontational and negating nature of relations of domination, yet the force of antagonism can charge bodies and collectivities differently, depending on context. Fred Moten opens up his first book, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, with a declaration that blackness is proof that “objects can and do resist.” Moten theorizes this resistance as an extension of Cedric Robinson’s thought that black studies is the critique of western modernity -- blackness is an extended movement of that “specific upheaval.” Yet this resistance is not only to be found in the explicit radicalism of maroon communities and slave rebellions, Moten locates the resistance of the object in the supposed paradox of the speaking commodity. In *Capital*, vol. 1, Karl Marx writes, “So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange value in a pearl or a diamond.” Yet, Moten responds that the capacity for the slave to speak cuts against this example, for it proves that the commodity can generate value in excess of the process of exchange. This capacity to generate value not determined by capitalist exchange is the incessant previousness that black radicalism must defend against the imposition of slavery’s violence. For Moten, dispossession is not the lack of self-possession, it represents the troubling force “objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed -- infused, deformed -- by the object it possesses.” This substance escapes Marx’s analysis and is even openly mocked, yet for

Moten the force of black sociality exists as a generally dishonored field expelled from the fold of proper political relations, including proper radical politics.

Moten's theorization of black sociality also comes from an engagement with, among many other thinkers, the work of Hannah Arendt and the ripples of her work in others. Specifically, Moten is laboring against Arendt's distinction between the political and the social found in her chapter "The Social Question" in *On Revolution*. In discussing the French Revolution, Arendt makes a distinction between the field of politics and the politics of bodily necessity initiated by the poor masses of France. For Arendt, the turn towards terror in the French Revolution occurred once the hegemonic demand of the revolution turned to the needs of the starving masses. Here political action can be thought of existing on two different levels for Arendt: the space of "acting in concert" with one another, which is present wherever one must act with others and thus must wield power and persuasion. The other is the common world of public spheres, political institutions, and civil society. These spaces can only be political once there is a decisive distinction made between public and private interests. Where necessity rules politics, civility and cooperation become impossible and the possibility for a public sphere collapses into the tyranny of the social mass. The field of the social is the realm of private interests, bodily necessity, and ethnic and identitarian solidarity. This distinction between political and social realms resonates with Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* for Moten: social death, the dynamics of Trans-Atlantic slave trade, is "the political field that would surround" blackness, holding it captive (Moten, "Mysticism of the Flesh). Though Moten disagrees with Arendt's criticism of the social as hindering revolutionary potential, Moten does not merely reject the binary, but flips it to affirm black sociality as that which is "relegated to the supposedly undifferentiated mass or blob of the social, which is, in any case, where and what blackness

chooses to stay." What then does this tell us of the blackness of "black music," or beyond music *black sounding*.

What would it mean to think of black sound paradigmatically? That is, what would it mean to think of black sound without resort to the tropes of agency and resistance or without the framework of consent and action and event? What would it mean to think of sound as expressed from the flesh that cannot accrue property, including ownership over its own utterances, who cannot even twerk without a white person ready to take the motion and make millions off the genius of black motion? What would it mean to think of sound as expressed from the scandals of subjectivity, the most wretched creatures on earth, the producers of value that are radical zero points of non-value? What would it mean to think of black sound from the bodies snatched, who exist in a vortex where it is not merely paranoia that engenders a thought about the possibility of losing their mother and music all at once?

The blackness of sound – which is to say the blackness of flesh — would then be a secret that refuses us as we are seduced by the possibility of feeling it. The blackness of sound and music is not the substance or resistance of the subject — it is a secret. It can be more than a secret, but something will remain in black sound that refuses legibility, that dispossess all attempts to possess it. The blackness of black sound remains an irreducible mystery, the song of black flesh refused and refusing. It is never a resolution, it is the force of the problem screamed by problem-people. It is never an answer or a statement, it is the interminably infinite force of the question waiting to be heard on its own terms. The blackness of music is not human, it is the secret of the antagonism that it bears in excess of anything that can be listened to or felt in this world. The force is the question, the rhythm is the secret.

In Watts, residents refused the meeting created by politicians to meet at different parks like Leimert Park, and have meetings in secret. Secrecy is not an absence or a lack, secrecy is an answer to the demand for legibility. The residents of Watts had a politics, but a part of that politics was a refusal of legibility and political legitimacy. A part of the performative power of rebellion is the belief in a power made impossible by the bounded realm we may name “politics.” When Baauer makes money off of Harlemites and erases the existence of Banks’ remix, what is violated is not the cultural property of a community, but a history of bonds and performances Baauer is guilty of attempting to make impossible again. The bonds shared between them are powerful but cannot be properly registered as property. They remain the secret of property, a secret that Banks refused to give up or give away. When Ocean tells a journalist hungry for the secrets of his relationship that he has given them all they need to know, he is affirming the power of refusing enforced publicity. The blackness of the secret is different from privacy for it is not about the relegation of certain activities to a protected realm, it is instead the defense of flesh against enforced publicity.

This thoughts opens our analysis to another time, another black singer, a legend, another song that ends in suicide. “A Song for You”, covered by Donny Hathaway in 1971.

You taught me precious secrets
Of a true love while holding nothing
You came out in front when I was hiding
But now I'm so much better
And if my words don't come together
Listen to the melody
'Cuz my love is in there hiding

I love you in a place
Where there's no space or time

In this song, Hathaway gives new voice and takes new meaning from the words credited to Leon Russell. Against the act of secrecy, the willed act of concealing or lying, or the condition of

opacity and unintelligibility, we see the force of the secret that Hathaway holds as *precious* is revealed not in withholding, but in the affirmation of one's publicity. Here we can say there is no public for the black, certainly no public sphere, but only the compulsion toward publicity — the never-ending drafting of black flesh into view of the gaze. The secret, the black secret, the secret of blackness, is revealed as an ontological condition — one born in publicity and coercion, not in the illusion of privacy and exception and some hidden and unaffected interiority. The black secret is out in the open, right here in the flesh of our feet, hips, and fingertips.

The ontological and spiritual force of the secret can be thought of as a paradigmatic re-schematization of how we view black music. Instead of thinking of music thought as the force that rises from some space of freedom and autonomy outside the system of capital and power that attempts to capture all parts of our body for labor and profit, we can consider it as the expression of the secret of black life, the secret of the blackness of life, of a life lived at the horizons of death, where life and death are no long separable and bordered entities, where flesh is stolen, where what is most precious is broken but never broke, lost but never a loss because we had nothing to lose in the first place (Marriott, 222-223). How can we hold most precious that which can be destroyed so easily, how can we love that which is refused love and refuses love, what's love got to do with it, how will nothing ever love nothing again? (Moten and Harney, 141; Turner, 1984; Wilderson, 177)

Precious fading to black, fading to death, the force of an impossible love, impossible bonds passed on in and through death, the undeniable mark of abjection and the spark of an impossible black present, a present life in death, a present death in life, a present living in the wake of a non-event impossible for us to imagine from this distance — and yet we do, in the secret of the rhythm of their spirits we still feel moving through us. This is the secret that lies

beyond the trope of resistance and will and self-mastery and agency, the secret that refuses the world that refuses it. The name written a hundred times is a secret held dear and we, the audience, should ethically call for its defense and refuse its legibility. A secret this performance defends against the narrative of the play that refuses its existence and non-meaning.

Black love, sounding an ordinary note that cares, a single note, a simple note, can only happen in a place where there's no space and time — outside this world, outside this time, at the ends of world and time, yet not waiting for us in the past and not awaiting us in some mythic future, right here with us, right here on the tips of ears and tongues, a secret.

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