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RIVERSIDE

Blackness and the Queer Epistememes of White Emotional Economies

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Aaron Brown

September 2022

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The Dissertation of Aaron Brown is approved:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Blackness and the Queer Epistemes of White Emotional Economies

by

Aaron Brown

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, September 2022  
Dr. David Lloyd, Chairperson

“Blackness and the Queer Epistemes of White Sexual Economies” argues that the interplay between performances of mastery and the enjoyment of property under slavery installed a paradigm within white homosocial discourses that derive pleasure from the proprietary conditions of enslavement. Put simply, I identify the sexual abuses of white, queer, slaveholding men as often-overlooked contributions to gay male social and sexual formations in the United States. To bear out this claim, my project traces an evidentiary archive of white queer sexual abuse from nineteenth-century literary and legal materials to twentieth-century memoirs, novels, and court cases, analyzing texts. I’m developing a theory to make legible the existence of Black enslaved people whose lives are obscured to protect queer American life from knowledge of its genealogy in the practices of antebellum slavery. The proprietorial bindings of enslavement contribute to the petri dish of queer sexual discourse the necessary ideological fragments needed to buttress

functioning economies that hold stock in clandestine racialized corporeal markets. I use “clandestine” to note the illegibility of existing archival materials holding these non-normative sexual economies in the 19th and 20th century, and to highlight ways in which failing to identify these moments plainly undermines efforts to fully understand the history of contemporary queer sexual discourses.

## Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Ch. 1: Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative and the Dismembering of Black Autobiographical Subjectivity</u>	16
<u>Ch. 2: The Issue of <i>Relating</i> in Richard Bruce Nugent's Gentleman Jigger</u>	49
<u>Ch. 3: Morrison's Beloved and Queering the Screw Whitey Movement</u>	79
<u>Ch. 4: The Televisuality of Black Queer Death in the Aftermath of Dahmer</u>	107
<u>Notes</u>	144
<u>Bibliography</u>	150

## Introduction

On July 22, 1991, at 11:30 p.m., officers of the Milwaukee Police Department encountered Tracy Edwards, barely clothed with a handcuff on one wrist. Edwards led the police back to an apartment at 924 North 25th Street in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Its owner/occupant, Jeffrey Dahmer, would later confess to sexually assaulting, murdering, dismembering, and the bodies of seventeen men. The majority of Dahmer's seventeen victims, whom he called "love slaves," were black men. Dahmer would be charged with 16 counts of murder, carrying several life sentences. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman writes, "sexuality is a central dimension of the power exercised over and against the slave population...". This quote would be published only five years after Jeffrey L. Dahmer expressed that his fantasies with "love slaves" required his "total control" over his victims, most of whom were African American, and that killing them was a result of that being "the only way to keep them." My work dwells in the timeline connecting these two instances, the antebellum time of enslavement and that of contemporary white queer erotic practices.

For my dissertation, I intend to unearth a genealogy of white same-sex sexual violence against Black men, specifically focusing on queer men or those engaging in sex acts with other men, from the late eighteenth century to the present within literary, legal, and historical archives. Scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Sharon Holland, and E. Patrick Johnson have written on how the racial quotidian, particularly within the study of sexuality, localizes expressions of racially charged modes of sexual abuse within an economy of enjoyment. However, disentangling the ways that queer sex acts have



actively created paradigms that continue to develop Antebellum scripts generates insights into the evolution of such practices in ways that not only connect these to plantation life but that also track how they transformed to better serve white supremacist economies of enjoyment since slavery. I'm developing a theory to make legible the existence of Black enslaved people whose lives are obscured in an attempt to protect queer American life from knowledge of its genealogy in the practices of antebellum slavery.

My approach is grounded in the careful re-reading of literary texts in tandem with my archival documentation of occluded practices of queer sexual enjoyment of black bodies. While the exercise of close reading informs the interdisciplinarity of my work, interrogating the "unnameability" of homoerotic scenes of violence forces me outside the domain of 19th-century literary criticism. Thus, I have not only engaged with canonical literary texts as entry points to my project, but I've also read nontraditional texts such as court documents, census data, and case files in ways informed by the disciplinary methodologies of the historian in order to contextualize the charge of my work. Consequently, this project also critically examines facets of archival research practices that not only foreclose the ability to engage this history in literary studies (or the humanities, at large) but also in sociology, criminal justice, and other social sciences interested in the public policy or in the legalities of race and taboo (queer, same-sex, fetish) cultures from American chattel slavery to now.

My methodology incorporates practices of close reading, contextual analysis, and cultural analysis informed by approaches found in texts such as *Scenes of Subjection* by Saidiya Hartman, *Rethinking Rufus* by Thomas A. Foster, and *The Delectable Negro* by

Vincent Woodard. The materials obscured within archives of American chattel slavery highlight a gap in the humanities and social sciences that underscores the socio-political response to the sexual abuse of black queer men from the Antebellum period to the present. The proprietorial bindings of enslavement contribute to the petri dish of queer sexual discourse the necessary ideological fragments needed to buttress functioning economies that hold stock in clandestine racialized corporeal markets. I use “clandestine” to note the illegibility of existing archival materials holding these non-normative sexual economies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and to highlight ways in which failing to identify these moments plainly undermines efforts to fully understand the history of contemporary queer sexual discourses. Whether to maintain the sense of injury of white queerness or to securitize the perimeters of Queer Studies, debates on the “appropriate” use of the term queer in relation to the 19th-century contexts disavow this form of sexual abuse found in the archive and (despite evidence of its occurrence) renders it illegible. White queer forms of sexual abuse practiced by white slaveholding men instilled into queer sexual discourses a metric of pleasure that is directly linked to the economies of enjoyment within plantation life. These sexual gestures make up the enterprises within these economies of enjoyment that depend on the consumption and circulation of sexualized black bodies to be the lifeblood of, as Edward Baptist writes, “a complex of inseparable fetishes.”

In an effort to build a scaffolding for my research, I have spent the last few years compiling primary sources with several faculty research mentors who specialize in physical and digital archives spanning from the early American period to the late

twentieth century. In order to examine the racialized corporeal markets that are driving these white queer sexual economies, I have to contend with an Antebellum rubric of pleasure and enjoyment. This portion of the historical work of my project is informed by the theoretical guidance of Saidiya Hartman. In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Hartman writes:

Antebellum formations of pleasure, even those of the North, need to be considered in relation to the affective dimensions of chattel slavery since enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body and the subjection of the captive, the diversions engendered by the dispossession of the enslaved, or the fantasies launched by the myriad uses of the black body. (26)

In my work, I understand the conditions of pleasure and enjoyment as multifaceted expressions of mastery that seek to recreate the homoerotic possibilities of slave performance (Hartman 43). The texts that I've compiled in the field of history explore the erotic life of white mastery. The African American historiographies that I've read examine how the forced display of sexual submission, the performative gestures of white sexual ownership, and the demand placed upon the enslaved for submission to forced sexual acts are established and built into the ontology of white homoerotic desire. The field of African American History allows me to ground this charge in archival texts and historiographies through which I analyze the social (and sexual) nuances of mastery. I ground the social and affective dynamics of sexual ownership in the historicization of mastery theorized in Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul* (1999). Johnson writes:

These slaves, then, embodied a type of public recognition--a type of honor--that could be beaten out of their backs. In buying them, slave-holders boasted that their own mastery would inhabit their slaves' every action. Their slaves would be extensions of themselves, the actions of the enslaved indistinguishable from the will of the enslavers. Slave breaking was a technology of the soul. Buying slaves to break them represented a fantasy of mastery embodied in the public subjugation of another or private omnipotence transmuted into public reputation. (107)

The “technology” of slave-breaking as a method to underscore the extent of access to and ownership over the enslaved body not only emphasizes the present nature of the “fantasy of mastery” (Johnson 107) but is also inextricably linked to the sexual charge of racialized corporeal markets. In a psychoanalytic turn, a better understanding of the emphasis on the melding of these inner and outer worlds, or “private omnipotence transmuted into public reputation” (Johnson 107), allows for a deeper historical analysis of the sexually charged affective stakes of ownership. Stakes that, for the sake of both social and sexual economies, blur the delineations made between what it meant publicly to have complete bodily access to enslaved bodies of the same gender versus the opposite, suggesting that mastery is not devoid of homoeroticism. I invoke Vincent Woodard’s definition of homoerotic in *The Delectable Negro*--- “[implying] same-sex arousal and draw[ing] attention to those political, social and libidinal forces that shape desire ...” (14)---to specify and delineate a separate set of internal negotiations during the same-sex sexual abuse (or the erogenous mapping) of Black male bodies. Since enslaved

Black bodies “embodied registers of the indomitability of [their owner’s] will” (Johnson 107), the sexual charge of the public displays of mastery (including ones of a homoerotic nature) is inevitably bound to the history of white queer sexual discourse. This will be the groundwork that informs my readings of the nineteenth and twentieth-century texts.

Using my historical analysis as a foundation, I will be critically examining erotogenic spectacles of blackness that share aesthetic and affective components of the public displays of mastery under slavery. This section of my project looks at the social and literary evolution of homoerotic forms of white mastery through the late twentieth century. The growing presence of a more widely recognized queer literary canon and its production of affective language and sexual literacies still remain connected to an understanding of pleasure that cannot be severed from the ontological life of American chattel slavery. Thus, despite the emerging critiques of a strictly heteronormative regime within American literature, homoerotic renderings of blackness within the white literary imaginary are mined for an understanding of pleasure that is directly linked to Hartman’s notion of an economy of enjoyment (Hartman 26). In an effort to continue developing Hartman’s theory of the economies of pleasure and enjoyment, I will be interrogating these economies not as interchangeable affective establishments but as a single economy of enjoyment that, in an Althusserian sense, is deeply invested in the production of pleasure (Althusser 86). The investments that American literature makes in this economy of enjoyment allow it to monetize the pornotropic black spectacle yielding pleasurable dividends (Spillers 206). The literary investments of this economy of enjoyment and its reproduction of erotogenic black spectacles for pleasure leave a paper trail that is

connected to American chattel slavery based on its defining proprietorial characteristics. Since the reproduction of erotogenic spectacles of blackness is needed to attain pleasure, this economic model can be examined over several literary periods. Additionally, tracking the queer appraisal of these erotogenic black spectacles allows me to make legible the Antebellum value attributed to pleasure within white queer sexual economies down to the present. My work seeks to make interventions in literary and cultural studies around blackness and sexuality. Additionally, the intention of this project is to also reconsider the colonial historicization of American queer life and pleasure within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

To contextualize the trouble of both the archive and the acquisition of materials that are categorically determined to address my hypothesis, I must establish what I feel is one of the primary reasons why this genealogy is difficult to recover in the archive. That reason is tethered to a morally bankrupt metonymic and syntactical capacity for white affective lexicons that are ill-equipped in rendering meaning for black bodies due to the consumptive, proprietorial conditions of blackness within white emotional economies. As a result, the material produced by previously enslaved authors must succumb to the parameters of that emotionality anticipated by (white) American literary traditions and employ a method of authoring embodied feelings of pain and suffering that exist in excess of white emotional economies. I borrow the term emotional economies from Paula Ioanide's *The Emotional Politics of Racism* (2015), where she writes, "...emotions function much like economies; they have a mechanism of circulation, accumulation,

expression, and exchange that gives them social currency, cultural legibility, and political power” (2). This analysis of the racialization of articulation in narrative and autobiographical form lends me a theoretical scaffolding from which to legitimize the contextual objects and language situated in archival materials not commonly dressed for analysis in terms of racialized non-normative sexual abuses.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I’ll be examining the difficulty of articulating how pain feels for black people and how the striving to do so creates ruptures within the ontological afterlife of enslavement. Using the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) as a starting point, I explore the interworking of a racialized legacy of articulation, one that requires the black body to be torn into figurative (and sometimes literal) pieces for the pain experienced by black bodies to be nominally comprehended. Theoretically influenced by the work of *The Body in Pain* by Elaine Scarry, the charge in this chapter hinges on Scarry’s assertion that “[pain] achieves in part through its unshareability” (4). The parameters from which the black subject might obtain the conviction of an authorial voice within the genre becomes, for black subjects, a process of dismemberment. The painful tearing apart of black life represents nothing more than the value of commodified black bodies within a white emotional economic schema that is inscribed onto American literary traditions. In this chapter, I argue that black pain and memory act as an entry-point to being and a methodology of self-making. This avenue of self-making is indicated by the measures involved in the articulation, re-articulation, or omission of one’s own narrative. I invoke the terms articulation, re-articulation, and omission as plot points within Black oral and literary traditions that

marry canonical autobiographical forms of authorship to the conceptual mythos of black feeling that is obscured within white emotional economies.

American chattel slavery gave way to new configurations of pleasure through the logistical frameworks employed for the success of fetish markets as well as those mappings applied directly to the flesh that highlight areas on the black body that most accumulate value within white sexual economies. Consequently, the evolving black-white homosocial relations in the early twentieth were informed by a vested interest in the mapping of black bodies. Gestures toward relationality and pleasure at the threshold of an exciting new literary and art movement, the Harlem Renaissance, were only loosely disguised utterances of a mastery that still set out to find a “fancy” that would be the most valuable within a white economy of enjoyment.

Even under a shifting political landscape with Progressive Era politics and a burgeoning black art and literary movement in New York, early twentieth-century racial and economic tension from a not-too-distant Antebellum life created an adversarial current that threw the terms of relatability and likeness into flux. A push to ignite an idea of “community” within absconding queer sexual cultures reflected new kinds of social currencies available in growing urban landscapes. The search for alternative definitions of relating and relationality that had an aesthetic likeness to the new world meant that Antebellum terms and practices needed a makeover to contend with the changing conditions of ownership.

The second chapter of my dissertation examines the aesthetic shift of Antebellum social workings during the Harlem Renaissance. In this chapter, I unfurl layers of



sociality that are caught in the tensions between a performance of mastery initially shaped in a slaveholding society and the new flashy benevolent cosmopolitan life. Those clandestine homosocial fetish markets were under a cultural transformation. By the beginning of the century, white gay men had established geographies and networks that rivaled even those of their heterosexual counterparts. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, historian George Chauncey writes that “[gay men] participated in an extensive sexual underground that by the beginning of the century included well-known cruising areas in the city’s parks and streets, gay bathhouse, and saloons with back rooms” (1). The homoerotic tenets of an Antebellum white economy of enjoyment, whose measure of pleasure depended on the matriculation of enslaved black bodies, were now imbricated into the newly flourishing gay districts. The racialization of pleasure and the white queer sexual discourse conceived through the sexual abuse of black bodies under enslavement created a blueprint from which to construct geographies of white queer pleasure thereafter. Similarly, in the recycled racial assemblages of plantation life, black bodies still carried the memory of benevolent, paternalistic white men.

Richard Bruce Nugent, a Black, openly queer, Harlem Renaissance author, wrote in his novel *Gentlemen Jigger* moments of hesitation that actively resisted consumption facilitated by the valences of relationality from his white colleagues, queer or otherwise. I argue that the circumstances of relationality in *Gentlemen Jigger*, a realist novel that tells the origins of the famed Niggerati Manor, bespeaks the reality of black queer bodies consumed in the interest of the succession of a Euro-centered world above the surface.

The main character in Nugent's *Gentlemen Jigger*, Stuart, though heavily critiqued for his role as a provocateur, dismisses the visible racial violence of the inequitable advancement of white individuals seeking to gain capital from the momentum of the Harlem Renaissance Movement. The apparent discomfort crafted by Nugent in these contentious moments between Stuart and the well-meaning white character, Leslie Prentice, appears as an intricate re-articulation of a Fanonian chorus of assimilation. As we move through these exchanges, we could consider the performance as a potential rehearsal for Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Despite the performative gesturing done by these white characters, within the text, they are situated more like paternal colonial agents awaiting Stuart, who, as Fanon writes, "endeavor[s] to seek admittance to the white sanctuary from within" (33). We first meet Leslie and Bum in the fourth chapter of *Gentleman Jigger*, entering what would eventually be a meeting ground for black artists and thinkers at the time. The entrance of these white characters into this sphere is mediated by the insistence on their value within the space. The unwanted solicitation of whiteness in this space exercises a slave-owning gesture that claims indispensable access to Black bodies capable of accruing capital.

Despite the changing politics of a fast-changing urban landscape in the North, racial ideologies engendered in the new cosmopolitan times meant, for many, the need to re-imagine a schema for relating that was conscious of deep-seated Antebellum ideologies and the savvy of a newly reconstructed economy of enjoyment. Influenced by contemporary theorizations on relating found in the work of Jose Muñoz and Tavia Nyong'o, this chapter analyzes the dialectics of relating cultivated by black writers

during the Harlem Renaissance. These re-imaginings of relating are constructed and are also consumed by a necessity of relationality demanded by a white bourgeois stake in social and sexual capital. I use both “consume” and “construct” to identify the existence of an Antebellum ethos around the fungibility of black bodies that is dressed in the blanketing rallying cry of Progressive Era white liberal politics. I am interested in recovering the subjugated knowledge around hesitations that queer Harlem Renaissance writers had towards opportunistic white individuals establishing relationships with black artists and writers during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The development of a more covert measure for (or means to) ensuring the futurity of white pleasure, although aligned with slaveholding ethics at its core, fundamentally changed the aesthetic of mastery to meet the social savvy of a newly reconstructed economy of enjoyment. This newly formed aesthetic of mastery meant that, socially, the previous terms used to identify dangerous slaveholding characteristics of whiteness were now categorically distinct (in its evolution) from black-white relations during the Harlem Renaissance. The two-fold project of modernizing Antebellum economies of enjoyment both undermines efforts toward naming the existence of this system and abstracts what were once conventional understandings of the culture of white mastery, leaving black bodies, especially black queer bodies, to suffer without any real articulable frame of reference. As a result, hybrid methodologies in historical recovery were incorporated into the narrative performance of the literature of writers such as Toni Morrison.

In March of 2012, Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning literary icon Toni Morrison was interviewed by *Interview Magazine*, an American pop culture magazine. During this

interview, Morrison told stories of her prolific and groundbreaking career, discussing the socio-political shifts prompted by a period in her work, as well as in the work of other African American literary figures, that she calls “the ‘screw whitey’ movement.”

Morrison states, “One of the aggressive themes of the ‘screw whitey’ movement was ‘black is beautiful’ (Interview Magazine). My third chapter is, in part, interested in thinking about the place of *Beloved* within this chronology that Morrison is gesturing to and the resonance of a “screw whitey” epistemology present within the novel.

Morrisonian scholars and academics have encountered the dynamic narratological and socio-historical tenures of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. In this chapter, I argue that the ‘screw whitey’ movement informs an even further nuanced socio-historical reckoning within *Beloved* that attempts to redress the archival absence of non-normative configurations of desire and that is linked to Morrison’s meditation on enslavement and carcerality within the novel. I invoke the term screwed as a theoretical apparatus to frame the unearthing of intersectional and transdisciplinary methods of historical recovery that Morrison situated around Paul D’s enslavement and subsequent containment confinement in *Beloved*. Consequently, this chapter, in its attempts to think through Morrison’s archival project, also critiques the heteronormative scrutiny barring the novel and the historian from naming, with any institutional authority, the ability to historicize the interplay between white self-making and the homoerotic desire embedded in the containment of black life.

In this chapter, I wrestle with the socio-historical messiness of being screwed, contending with the metonymic and synecdochical quagmire around the license to

pinpoint homoerotic moments of racial violence within the narrative of Paul D in *Beloved*. In *Extravagant Abjection*, Darieck Scott critiques the “natural” heteronormative inferences made within *Beloved* that constitute the framing around the violations of Paul D in the chain. While I do agree, in part, with the charge of Scott’s critique that pinpoints how the representational politics of liberalist interpretations of Morrison’s work seem to bypass the nuances and complexities of her historical project, I think that we would be remiss not to engage Morrison’s project as one that employs the methods of the historian and invests in interventions that can be made in the narrative performance of the novel. In *Henry Box Brown and Economies of Narrative Performance*, Janet Neary invokes the term fugitive performance to “[draw] attention to the fugitive meanings within those performances, those aspects that contest, complicate or are in excess of the editorial, theatrical, and political constraints that were the performances’ condition of production” (133). I assert that the socio-historical interventions being made in *Beloved*, through its fugitive performance, exist in the contextual gestures of the novel. In *You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet*, Dennis Childs argues that in *Beloved*, Morrison expresses what he calls the Middle Passage carceral model, “a paradigm of racial capitalist internment and violence that necessitates a shifting of white-subject-centered penal historiography” (274). The historical mapping that Childs is pinpointing within the fugitive performance of *Beloved*, coupled with the homoerotic scenes of racial violence that Scott is critiquing, underscores the conceptual messiness of a screwed epistemology. Morrison’s interdisciplinary methodology that critiques readings of the historical archives and invokes fugitive performance within the space of the novel emphasizes the charge of the ‘screw whitey’

movements that Morrison recalls in the *Interview Magazine* interview in 2012. Morrison insists on the recovery of sequestered narratives of black people whose lives were matriculated into the self-making of white sexual identity.

In my final chapter, I bear out the charge of my hypothesis by examining the ways that the public fabricates a rationale (or renders a cause) in the narrative about the cannibal-serial murderer Jeffrey L. Dahmer. I have chosen this case because the details of the murders themselves can be localized within a history of white-supremacist violence and the media frenzy around the case itself reveals the tendrils of Antebellum affective and sexual paradigms underscoring how and what stories are being told about Dahmer. In this chapter, I examine two television broadcasts to examine the ways in which Dahmer's victims are further exploited in the debate that sought to identify a cause for Dahmer's killing spree. Although television studies are mostly taken up in the sociological study, particularly news- and talk-related programming, closely examining how these broadcasts participate in the narrativization of Jeffrey Dahmer allows us to place the televisual narratives into historical context through identifying the social and emotional paradigms that were produced from emotional economies established through the various forms of abuse under American chattel slavery. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the situatedness of these murders within a longer legacy of white sexual violence and to reveal the ploy that obscures the ongoing evolution of these sexual paradigms.

## Chapter 1: Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and the Dismembering of Black Autobiographical Subjectivity

The difficulty of articulating how pain feels for black people creates ruptures within the ontological afterlife of enslavement. The parameters from which one might obtain the conviction of an authorial voice within the genre of autobiography become, for black subjects, a process of painfully dismembering the chronology of one's own narrative to accomplish some conventional features of the genre. This occurs as not only a byproduct of the commodification of slave narratives but also as an indication of the failure of any affective language to render an accurate articulation of the inner worlds of enslaved black peoples. The tearing apart of black life within this contentious literary sphere represents nothing more than the value of fungible black bodies within a white emotional economic schema inscribed onto white literary traditions.

I regard the intertextuality of the gestures within slave narratives as not only representative of the canonical forms ushering in larger bastions of African American and abolitionist texts and genre forms, but as theorizations from the writers themselves. As a black scholar, I invent ways to emotionally contend with sites of violence within these narratives that my being, although separated by time (and also somehow not), recognizes through its own burrowed histories. Ones that were not written five generations ago, but that are affirmed in the persistence of life in my body. This mode or practice of *contending* while encountering the un/familiarity of sites of violence in slave narratives like *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is a visceral methodology that I believe is shared across temporal boundaries. A practice that, as Equiano writes of

the memory of his sister, “has been always riveted in [the] heart, from which neither time nor fortune have been able to remove [it]...” (51).

Here, I am not suggesting that *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is, for all intents and purposes, solely invested in theorizations of race and power. Instead, I am examining how Equiano, through his own internal process of continuing to live and emotionally contend with life, makes interventions in the paradigms that literary traditions impose onto slave narratives to interpret the affective inner worlds of enslaved black people. For many, Equiano’s textual gestures facilitate a re/introduction to the histories carried in the body, and to the un/familiarity of processing the traumas of enslavement, a visceral methodology shared between Equiano and the black reader. The processing of pain that is present in the writing of enslaved people is recognizable to the black reader whose body carries the histories of this trauma. Also, the connections fostered between the black reader and Equiano through his textual gestures prompts the ontological ruptures that undo the comfortable “normalcy” of textual analysis within that genre of autobiography that drives our understanding of black affective inner worlds within literature.

In this chapter, I look to Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* to interrogate the hermeneutics of conventional epistemological approaches to slave narrative form within the genre of autobiography, and the racialist categorization therein, that prevent us from exploring the deeper, more nuanced registers of a dynamic dialectic of feeling from enslaved black authors. I encounter black pain and memory as an entry-point to being that constitutes a black autobiographical subjectivity



whose curation of feeling within a limited white literary imaginary audit the classifying features of autobiography that are invested in the success of white emotional economies. How does a Euro-centered affective framework determine the limits of our analysis when examining black pain and suffering? Here, I am arguing that an affective attunement to the classifying distinctions of *autobiography* also introduces us to a paradigm that predetermines what constitutes a palatable observation of black memory through literary analysis. Equiano's narrative gives us the possibility to examine *black autobiographical subjectivity*--through a dismembering of the self, the autobiographical form, and an articulation of feeling-- as a form of black life writing that extends beyond the racialized affective contexture of autobiographical form that grants white authors the subjective and referential conditions to gain entrance into the genre. It is through Equiano's textual performance that we should, in our analysis of black life writing, frame our approaches to black autobiographical literature that *appears* in some ways to participate in the conventions of the genre.

The evolution of what we now conceptualize as the genre of black or African American autobiography is contained by the broader literary genre of autobiography through the purchase of the same proprietary logic that prompts the distinguishing qualities of early black life-writing, establishing the boundary between autobiography and African American autobiography, as well as distinguishing slave narrative forms from other autobiographies within that category. In *To Tell a Free Story*, William L. Andrews writes that in the first half-century of "Afro-American" autobiography, the literary category was distinguished within the genre of autobiography by its rhetorical

aims to build a case for the humanity of the enslaved, a strategy often employed through establishing a likeness between themselves and white readers. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Equiano's reluctant acquiescence to these aims in the beginning of the narrative to avoid "the imputation of vanity" highlights the challenge of relaying the terrors of enslavement to white readers while also contending with the expectation of making an intervention in how the white literary imaginary conceptualizes his humanity, and, thus, his pain.

In the opening remarks of Equiano's narrative, he attempts to intercept preconceived, racist reading practices within genre by identifying the white slaveholding lens through which the claims of vanity and inauthenticity are produced.

Equiano writes:

People generally think those memoirs only worthy to be read or remembered which abound in great or striking events, those, in short, which in a high degree excite either admiration or pity; all others they consign to contempt and oblivion. it is therefore, I confess, not a little hazardous in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public, especially when I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant. (33)

Equiano's attempt to make an intervention in the reading of his narrative underscores how the expectations impressed upon his *autobiographical intent* certainly effect the invagination of the *other* within the genre of autobiography (59). The charge of Derrida's *The Law of Genre*, and the specific critique taken up in his notion of the *genre-clause*, provide an apparatus from which we can locate the tendrils between histories of race and

the *other*, but it does not offer a method of analysis that is not bound to the slaveholding logics of the genre. However, Equiano's *intervening*, and that of those slave narratives whose opening remarks attempt to disrupt a racialist gaze, presents a phenomenological snag in Jacques Derrida's critique of genre that assumes that the *other*, rendered as a byproduct of the procedures of an axiom of purity, is constituted and thus understood precisely because of its opposition to the dominant, legible boundaries of *genre*. Put differently, the constitution of the *other* within the genre of autobiography does not denote the procurement of a praxis, or even acknowledge a method of engaging outside of a paradigm established by the hegemonic processes of the genre itself. The forms of containment (i.e., the demarcation of the *other* in the genre of autobiography) that are sanctioned by the inception of the *genre-clause* leaves the black author strained between the pull of a phenomenological conceptualization of the *other* and an ontological interpretation of the enslaved black subject. In other words, black autobiographers are caught in tension between two modes of containment that are tethered to ideals of ownership and mastery pursuant to the enslavement of black life. So, as is the case with Equiano's narrative, black autobiographers are forced to make interventions even as they are being torn apart. Equiano inherits the expectation of making an exceptional intervention at moments of tearing in order to offer even an approximate rendering of the emotional registers of his life. The genre of autobiography employs a benevolent Antebellum strategy that claims possession of the interventions of black authors in the genre by casting their intentions as willful strides in the advancement of tradition.

It is precisely through the invocation of Equiano's *intervention* that it becomes troubling to determine the entry of black autobiographical texts within the genre of autobiography. One reason being directly related to the ways that the genre of autobiography produces the confinement of black autobiography in its adoption of what Derrida calls, "the genre clause" (65). Another reason why it seems unnerving to suggest a pathway for black autobiographers to gain entrance into the genre is because they inherit the expectation of what I call an *exceptional intervention*, in order to be afforded the opportunity to be read as anything other than property. It is through Equiano's opening remarks and critiques of the white literary imaginary that his intervention even establishes him as the *other* in the procedures of Derrida's notion of the *genre-clause*. The assumed humanistic component of the non-belonging *other* bypasses the psychological faculties of the slaveholding logics that understand the conditions of blackness to be a reflection of its own grandeur, not as its opposite.

The expectation of an *exceptional intervention* is an extortionist protocol of whiteness that coerces black people into developing a theory that is exceptional in its potential, along with its critiques, to be commodified within the white literary imaginary. Put simply, black autobiographers are forced to make an intervention that is so irrefutable that it cannot be disputed or undermined by any other measure except through claims of inauthenticity. Then, these narratives are considered to be an addendum to the conventions of the genre that purports to *own* the features of black life-writing. The sphere of autobiography criticism itself historicizes the beginning of African American autobiography as an effort to "prove that they qualified as the moral, spiritual, or

intellectual peers of white” (Andrews 2). The implication underscoring the notion that black life-writing begins (and is wholly invested) in undoing its proximity to property suggests that the category itself, and its ability to critique its features, are predicated on enslavement as a catalyst, suggesting that the validity of this literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was inextricably linked to white emotional economies.

Arguing that it emerges as a prominent literary genre by way of the Romantic Movement in the nineteenth century, early scholars of *autobiography* began isolating characteristics of the genre whose classification overwhelmingly relied on an ability to *relate* to the narrator. In *The Autobiography*, late nineteenth-century literary scholar Anna Robeson Burr makes one of the earliest arguments for the *autobiographic intention* of a narrative within the genre, claiming that the private histories of self-revelations maintain an intent of *friendship*, a feature of *autobiography* that grants its distinction from genres like biography and historical fiction.

Burr’s conceptualization of the “friendly autobiographer” may be that which indicates not only larger popular trends of Romantic literature, but also a greater focus on the value of the author. In her classification of the genre of the autobiography and its canonization of texts, Burr even suggests that “all literary records are of unequal value, and while they are being sifted, they must also be judged” (Burr 4). Authors of earlier slave narratives were tasked with contending with the tumultuous and often life-threatening conditions of producing their texts, as well as the mediation of slaveholding logics that made it almost impossible to gain entrance into the genre of autobiography. Many narratives were so entangled in pro- and anti-slavery polemics that slave narratives

were often relegated to a caste of literature that is more invested in examining the social, economic, and political implications of slaving industries.

In order to comply with the broader moral (and often religious) appeal to white abolitionist sentiment in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century autobiographical texts, many slave narratives were forced to contend with thematic styles and motifs that, as quoted in the Boston *Chronotype* regarding abolitionist thought, “go right to the hearts of men” (qtd. in Andrews 5). This sentiment is often articulated in the earlier portions of many slave narratives that stake a claim to the aforementioned propositions, distinguishing slave narratives from the broader genre of autobiography due to its existential and expository truth-claims about the institution of American chattel slavery. We encounter this almost immediately in Olaudah Equiano’s narrative as he articulates his struggle articulating his narrative due to an inability to establish a truly dynamic likeness of this text within the genre because of the “misfortune that what is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed” (33).

Some literary historians are skeptical of the authenticity of segments of slave narratives that expound on the moral or religious ethics of the narrator as proof of the capacious nature of the enslaved’s vision of freedom for themselves and others. In Marion W. Starling’s *The Slave Narrative*, she calls into question the opening note, “To The Reader,” that appears at the beginning of Briton Hammon’s narrative, *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon...*, recorded and published in 1760. Starling claims that “it seems likely that the pious note of this opening and overwhelmingly pious closing page are interpolations of Hammon’s scribe,

as the body of the narrative is not at all in this tone” (52). Despite the actual issues regarding the mediation of slave narratives during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, I would argue that to make an assumption regarding the inauthentic “tone” of “To The Reader” passages and opening notes forecloses an ability to consider how these strategic gestures highlight the genre’s investment in white emotional economies.

Additionally, dismissing these contentious moments also almost certainly presents a flaw in the way that we might consider Du Bois’s *theory of double-consciousness*. Assuming that enslaved black authors were not strategically participating in the conventions of the form, particularly those that were also under the threat of recapture or being exploited by the extortionist methods of some white abolitionist publications in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in many ways contradicts the charge of subjugated knowledge that Du Bois argues in *The Souls of Black Folk* existed among enslaved black peoples. To acknowledge the capacity that black subjects have to “see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world,” is to understand that the black autobiographer also sees themselves “through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that look on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 9). In *To Tell A Free Story*, Williams avers the charge of double-consciousness in the production of slave narratives through an acute awareness that black autobiographers had of the white emotional faculties addressed by this form that requires the piety of an apologetic preface or “To the Reader” note. Andrews writes:

Many narrators who said they were unequal to the task that writing put before them became eloquent in the admission of their supposed literary ineptitude. Their

modest prefaces and apologies for their poverty of expression were a traditional rhetorical ploy, looking back to ancient judicial oratory in which such self-effacing talk was intended to dispose judges favorably. The black autobiographer was similarly on trial and thus proposed, as a rule, to concentrate his supposedly feeble literary skills on a plain marshalling of the facts of his or her life. (9)

It is these gestures within the genre that should, in our analysis of black life writing, help frame our approaches to black autobiographical texts that appear in some ways to participate in the conventions of the genre. Re-reading these passages allows for a more abundant understanding of black knowledge production in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that is not bogged down by a dichotomous literary axiom with regard to the slave narrative form that assumes that any agency on behalf of enslaved black autobiographers is either wholly complicit or completely vindictive. Equiano, like many others, cultivated an alternative subjectivity through the performance of the narrative that is both acutely aware of the emotional landscape of the white literary imaginary and exceeds the rigid parameters of the genre of autobiography in an effort to articulate their pain.

In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, our first encounter with Equiano is facilitated by a meditation of the tension--that is, the ontological rending of the moments before tearing--that he brings focus to as he enters the threshold of *autobiography* as a racialized subject. Equiano writes:

I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity; nor is this the only disadvantage under which they labor: it is also their misfortune that what is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed, and



what is obvious we are apt to turn from with disgust, and to charge the writer with impertinence.

Equiano's extrapolation on the tension that arises from attempting to articulate one's narrative not only underscore a Du Boisian phenomenon within the configuration of slave narrative form, it also dually functions as a modest disclaimer to the narrative and a scathing critique of the genre. Disassembling Anna Robeson Burr's classification of key characteristics of the genre (that would be published over a century later), Equiano presents a flaw in the hermeneutics of autobiography as whole. Marion W. Starling, Frances S. Foster, and William L. Andrews all contend that the wider consumption of slave narratives relied on a tropological appeal, typically through religious self-realization or quest motifs. However, Equiano pinpoints the failure of *relating* that occurs, as Burr writes, and that maintains a negligible value while simultaneously condemning the rarity and excitement of "the scandalous memoir, written for an ulterior purpose, apart from any revelation of human life" (13). The very first proposition presented to us in Equiano's narrative reluctantly (almost begrudgingly) makes claims for its authenticity while also highlighting the inherent failures of the measures that purport to classify autobiographical text.

*Scenes of Subjection* by Saidiya Hartmans and *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison, two texts that inform the lion's share of this inquiry, make clear to me the investments that Antebellum slaveholding logics have in retaining ownership over the affective discourse of, and response to, analysis regarding slave narrative. This is not to suggest that there is an alternative comprehensible framework that would locate the

parameters from which black people speak about their pain. In addition to my argument's contention with the academic essay format itself, doing so would be an oversimplification of an irreducible aspect of black life. Instead, this chapter interrogates a racialized interpersonal insistence upon black people articulating something as complex as their pain within the rigid, racialized parameters of the genre of autobiography.

The dismembering of black autobiographical subjectivity emphasizes the lexical and social paradigms that make it nearly impossible for black bodies to fully arrive at the metonymic threshold of their pain through the use of language. Dually, this emphatic expression also identifies the failure of white literary and critical traditions in their interpretations and cultural understandings of black life. In a proprietary sense, there seems to be no space for black bodies to capture moments of pain unless they are used as rhetorical tools that codify the affective landscape for whiteness. It seems that, despite the cursory understanding of pain in the United States, whiteness evacuates or displaces its own frame of reference for the sake of commodifying the black body as an affective device. Put another way, aspects of black suffering can be figuratively used to hyperbolize discomfort or pain for others, but when black people transcribe the details of their own pain, not one appears to have a frame of reference to understand what they are talking about.

The *de facto* production of white meaning-making, derived from the analogic value of black suffering, imbues the black subject with an associative property that, in and of itself, forecloses the possibility for black bodies to articulate the depths of their pain. Moreover, due to the teleological shifts within autobiographical form that are

sanctioned through enslavement, the genre inherits the affective language garnered through the corporeal violence of slave regimes beginning as early as the eighteenth century. As emphasized within autobiography theory, the genre of autobiography gains institutional authority through its proximity to an axis of referentiality or subjectivity. In *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, Kenneth Mostern writes:

“Referentiality” refers to the question of whether autobiography is to be understood as representing, or as nonrepresentational with regard to, a real world external to the text. “Subjectivity” refers to discussions of the position of the speaking subject, the “I” (or, in those few cases with “I”, the point of view) which narrates the autobiographical text. (28)

If the distinguishing features of the genre of autobiography are given authority through the representative tenets of the external world or the subjecthood of the narrator, then the black subject cannot be rendered an autobiographical subjectivity because its subjugation through slavery is both a world- and self-building technology of whiteness. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese writes that oppressive master-slave dynamic codified an antagonistic relationship that “[is] so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feeling without reference to the other” (3). The black autobiographical subjectivity will always be tasked with disassembling (and/or dissembling) itself within *autobiography* because whiteness requires the degradation of the black subject to shape its own subjectivity.

Consequently, the degradation of blackness not only becomes imbedded in the constitution of the genre of autobiography, it is also ratified (and often rewarded) through

a history of literary critique of slave narratives that is emboldened through the reification of the racialized parameter of the genre. Despite its clear intertextual distinctions and conflict with the classifying features, black autobiography remains bound to the literary tradition of *autobiography* precisely because the genre begins to distinguish itself within English and American literary traditions during the transatlantic slave trade.

Subsequently, the proprietary conditions of slaveholding logics become a mediating factor in the classification and authentication of slave narratives. Unprovoked empirical efforts that interrogate the “authenticity” of slave narratives of documented previously enslaved authors like Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Mary Prince, and James Williams often employ the operative facets of racialized erasure within the colonial archive to solidify claims of falsehood. Then, the demarcation of these claims become widely regarded practices that exemplify the parameters of the genre. For example, Vincent Carretta’s *Equiano, the African*, which is one of the most widely known texts in the scholarship on Equiano, almost certainly does not engage in any consideration of W.E.B. Dubois’s *theory of double-consciousness* which could offer critical re-readings of Equiano’s letters that consider how the life-threatening risks associated with publishing slave narratives may inform the content. However, because Carretta’s claims locate characteristics of Equiano’s narrative that exceed the racialized parameters of the genre, our engagement with the affective possibilities present in Equiano’s will always be required to contend with the possibility of erasure. My aim in providing this example here is not to become embroiled in the racialized debate regarding the “authenticity” of Equiano’s narrative. However, it is worth noting how conventions of the genre (and its

canonized theoretical or historical approach to black autobiography) has a history of using black bodies as referential tools to ratify its distinguishing features.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison's theorization of the *use* of black bodies as fungible commodities in the white literary imaginary pinpoints some coordinates that localize the tension between the phenomenological and the ontological. Morrison writes:

These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness...(33).

Here, the strain of the polarized engagement lies within what Morrison identifies as "the shadow" that is companion to whiteness. Although my own theorization of the *use* of black bodies does not take up Morrison's theorization completely (due to the genre distinctions that lie in the varied methods of containment between the novel and the autobiography), *Playing in the Dark* does provide us with an apparatus from which we can examine the affective stakes in the purchase of containing the demarcated *other* within the genre of autobiography.

The image of *impenetrable whiteness* that Morrison identifies within American literature relies on a vocabulary crafted from the space of black suffering. Here, I am gesturing toward the physical space, or lack thereof, where *visceral silences* occur in the archive of chattel slavery. I use the term *visceral silence* to attend to those tactile

moments between blows to the black body wherein affective data is gathered and consolidated by the white master, mister, overseers, children and more. The affective charge of white mastery underscores the constant threat of physical violence and fetishes prompting various forms of abuse, and it conditions (if not directly contributes to) the ability for whiteness to construct an affective lexicon from which the white literary imaginary can subsist. The consumptive faculties of these acts of violence involve not only a documentation of the present fears and agonies experienced by enslaved black bodies, but an affective lexicon invested in examining the semantics of mastery. The fascination in developing such language resides within the *pleasures* of plantation life that Saidiya Hartman highlights in *Scenes of Subjection*.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman emphasizes the *economies of enjoyment* that underscore the white fascination with the physical torturing of black enslaved subjects (26). Hartman writes, “Antebellum formations of pleasure, even those of the North, need to be considered in relation to the affective dimensions of chattel slavery since enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the black body...” (26). Hartman’s theorization of *enjoyment* under slavery as a methodology that is employed to facilitate the production of other additional affective discourses for whiteness that are not just invested in the pleasures of enjoyment. White affective vocabularies also derive meaning from the metonymic spaces within and around the tortured black body. The enjoyment of such torture also grants whiteness a spectacle from which it can develop a reference for its own pain. Put simply, whiteness sees metonymic possibility in the visceral silences during moments of black agony. As a result, moments of agony experienced by black

subjects are commodified and used for the development of a vocabulary that describes pain for others. In this way, *enjoyment* inhabits both a sense of pleasure through the denigration of black life and in the fruition of commodified expository language from which whiteness can author its own figurative degree of pain.

Insisting on articulating what pain feels like demands an effort that all at once attempts to subdue the unnamable polymorphism of trauma and pain for black people. The empirical, evidence-based convictions of *articulation* demand black bodies to localize the description of their pain within a white paradigm. By this measure, the execution of verbalizing how pain feels for black bodies is parlayed into a cataclysmic oscillation of meaning, one that forces black people to generate supplementary language or textual gestures from peripheral paradoxical spaces to identify linkages between different scenarios to present the opportunity for, at least, an opaque visual representation of the site of pain. Put differently, black people (whether in the white literary or social imaginary) have to jump through metonymic hoops to even begin to express how their suffering feels. However, the possibility for the pain to be understood as a feeling that surpasses the white individualistic, property-based sector does not arrive when black suffering is vaguely configured in the distance, or on the periphery.

The use of the periphery is especially highlighted in the fifth chapter of Equiano's narrative shortly after being sold to Robert King in Montserrat. The anguish that Equiano suffers from his fears, personified as *fate*, and his constant turmoil are often contextualized through comparisons that he makes between the cruelty of his owner to

that of others that he encounters. In one account describes witnessing the torture of a man named, Emanuel Sankey. He writes:

While I was in Montserrat I knew a Negro man, named Emanuel Sankey, who endeavored to escape from his miserable bondage, by concealing himself on board of a London ship: but fate did not favor the poor oppressed man; for, being discovered when the vessel was under sail, he was delivered up again to his master. This *Christian master* immediately pinned the wretch down to the ground at each wrist and ankle, and then took some sticks of sealing wax, and lighted them, and dropped it all over his back. (95)

These dissonant analogies, deployed in an attempt to figure the calculus of black feeling into the racist white gaze, violently demands the production of associations that never (as close as they may seem) actually establish a dynamic likeness needed to accurately relay the visceral experience of black pain. Although Emanuel Sankey's body in the periphery does grant the reader a visual description of the kinds of torture prompting Equiano's turmoil, Emanuel's body does not fully encompass the array of fears invoked when witnessing or experiencing the corporeal violence of performances of white mastery. However, this is the closest that Equiano can get to an articulation of his fear in this moment of the text. It is in these moments that the visceral methodology embedded in the text is really unfurled to the black reader. It is in the closeness of Emanuel; despite being separated by time. It is recognizing how the meaning being made through the periphery—through Emanuel—is still closer to an accurate rendering of fear than contemporaneous affective language.



Some scholars argue that black authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth century suffered so greatly from an inability to describe the degree of their suffering under slavery that “black narrators doubted their white reader’s ability to translate the words necessary to a full rendering of their experiences and feelings...questioned whether whites even wanted a thorough account of the truth of slavery” (Andrews 9). The precarity of almost coercively needing to aver the viability of an analytic falsehood to the white racialist gaze (Neary 131) within the genre, what I call an *uncertain association*, insists on reinforcing the affective exploitation of black bodies in order to even conceptualize a scenario wherein the racial violence inflicted upon them is considered unjust as opposed to just mundane.

The dismemberment of the black self—facilitated by the split between the foci and the periphery--to excavate the depths of feeling and pain, exists as a polytemporal facet of black knowledge production, or “an imperfect sketch,” as Equiano writes (33). The practice of dismembering black bodies under enslavement as an affective display of mastery places the severing of the black author into historical context. The mutilated black bodies in the periphery—through a metonymic interjection of memories that are often carrying the weight of various traumas—serve as demonstrative evidence in the retelling of black life that is demanded by the conditions of the literary genre of autobiography, when these are enforced through the ramifications of the critique of authenticity. In order for the affective life of Equiano to even be considered, he is forced to show the genre the bodies that he remembers.

The practice of making the black body into parts, as a primary function of white meaning-making, establishes a theoretical praxis that allows black bodies to punctuate the white gaze with images that combat melancholic disregard towards black suffering. This imposition of the gaze is facilitated by utilizing what Janet Neary writes is the “similar recognition of the iconicity of the black body and visual savvy” (Neary 131). By dismembering the *self*, a Lacanian turn that repurposes the charge of *the mirror stages*, through the replication of a white formulaic affective process, the black body is inserted into the world-making processes of the white literary imaginary. The discomfort that haunts white literary world-making in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature becomes apparent when the commodified space between black narrator (or orator) and their past is taken up to articulate the tragedy of their present wholeness, or the retelling.

The process of cultivating an alternative autobiographical subjectivity, separate from the white imaginary, to articulate pain is a process that is not only haunted by the trauma of enslavement, but is also in perpetual crisis because the genre of autobiography demands a teleological tethering between the visceral experiences of agony and white meaning-making. In an effort to make various moments of anguish legible within his narrative, Equiano exercises a type of embodied narrative methexis (Muñoz 564) that requires the white literary imaginary to take part in augmenting an insufficient lexicon to describe his pain. The overwriting of the white gaze as a tool of augmentation is employed as a sort of textual disidentification that “is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (Muñoz 5).

Perhaps in an effort to pivot away from how we understand Muñoz's *disidentifications* in the modern minoritarian sense, we can think through this process of overwriting the gaze in a way that embodies the flesh, the blood, and *the felt* of black life under slavery. The affective moments of failure focalized during these *uncertain associations* are attempts to *articulate* feelings that are not given meaning "within" white emotional economies, but that are made legible because these economies subsist on forms of violence that prompt the need for *uncertain associations*. Whiteness so deeply depends on haphazard displays of dominance that it continues inflicting the forms of violence that prompt the very reckoning that it seeks to avoid. Separate from (and perhaps illegible to) white literary imaginaries, black autobiographical subjectivity derives meaning through a metonymic deployment of approximal sites of violence whose anachronistic use in the text is employed as a method to fully explicate concurring violence, through what I've previously named *uncertain associations*.

The signposting of cut, broken, or dismembered black bodies to grasp the incommensurable experiences of pain, employs a method of articulation that fails perfectly into a paradigmatic space of meaning-making. The use of these dismembered parts in Equiano's narrative is not intended to reconstruct already severed pieces of black bodies within the text. Instead, the *uncertain associations* invoked in Equiano's narrative reassembles the unmendable parts of black bodies and establishes a link between the author, the physical body, and the other dismembered bodies to *articulate* feeling pain. The phenomenological strand that connects Equiano (in the present moment) to his pain (felt presently from before) and other sites of trauma (felt presently *and* before) is, in and

of itself, an indication of the way that black autobiographical subjectivity is dismembered within the white literary imaginary.

In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, intermittent moments of self-identification during moments of crisis are tethered together through peripheral sites of violence. These moments are used to better orient the reader to the emotional landscape of Equiano's circumstances. However, the textuality of his writing and other black autobiographical texts during this period carries the burden of appeasing the wants of white abolitionism. The fetishistic yearning of "the poor negro" in the new literary wave in eighteenth-century white sentimentalism found the tragedy of Equiano's abuses to be a useful coordinate for black suffering under enslavement. The widely recognized, tragically mutilated, and horribly dejected negro made an already commodified body tailor-made for the personalized, individualist interest of the genre in the late eighteenth century.

The commodification of black life within white abolitionist sentiment in the eighteenth and nineteenth century resulted in a skewed scholarly discourse that dismisses the racialized parameter of the genre of *autobiography* altogether. Consequently, heeding the racist empirical demands placed upon articulating black pain in this genre also placed Equiano's narrative in what Lisa Lowe calls in *Intimacy of Four Continents* a "structural paradox" (50). Lowe claims that Equiano's narrative "produces a structural paradox in which its elevation as a paradigm for liberal freedom has often involved the burial of the more complex currents of the transatlantic world on which that freedom rests" (50). Given the exploitative nature of the circulation of texts by enslaved people, often

demanding the authoring of their narrative for their freedom, we must also note that the *paradox* that Lowe is highlighting is also inextricably linked to institutional constructions of black subjects that, free or not, are still tethered to fungible and monolithic perceptions of black life that are informed by the proprietorial conditions of enslavement. In her article, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Hortense Spillers argues that an assumption of sameness risks supplying liberalist institutional discourses with a body of objectifiable black subjects that “can, in effect, grasp community in the palm of the hand as a smoothed over globular complex” (Spillers 103). The black subject bound to the textual apparatuses that convert the textures of black life into an “idea-object” (Spillers 81) cannot exist wholly within the literary arena without having to, repeatedly, be torn apart whether or not they are free or canonized.

The charge of Lisa Lowe’s assertion about the white liberalist stake in Equiano’s narrative, though addressing the spectacularizing of a singular black subject read as a collective, still overlooks the racialized proprietary underpinnings of the text within the genre of autobiography. Furthermore, the autobiographical text requires an articulation of *feeling* to even be considered a *slave narrative*, a form which is also often not given the same merit as white authored autobiographies within the genre, if included at all. The evidentiary claims of the genre of autobiography that require an “authentic” account of the moments of crisis in Equiano’s narrative will not ever be achieved because there is no language that would ever produce an *accurate* account of any enslaved black experience during slavery. The notion that this literary genre within a racialized literary tradition could effectively capture *accurately* any moments of crisis on behalf of enslaved people

by using an affective lexicon derived from white emotional economies is informed by a reductive view of the traumas of enslavement.

Solely critiquing the use of the autobiographical text as a tactic within a white liberalist regime still forecloses the ability to read the connections it makes between various sites of violence under enslavement. This places the black body within a paradigm that is only concerned with the condition of the object, the text itself. Additionally, conflating the genre-based interpolations of the text with how we understand the conventions of the autobiographical form implies, in part, that Equiano willingly engaged in the racialized labor of articulation and suggests that he rerouted all sentiment involved in the enslavement of his body through the aesthetic form of canonical, white-authored texts simply for the sake of gaining traction inside a white literary tradition. Equiano's narrative performance through the invocation of *uncertain associations* far exceeds the boundaries of conventional autobiographical form like so many other slave narratives (Neary 131).

The recurring act of separating the black subject from themselves to externally proctor the articulation of their pain carries a visceral charge shared in the theorization of the haptic in Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons*. The haptic means the "capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, [and] for you to feel the feeling you" (Harney & Moten 98). *Hapticality*, a term coined in *The Undercommons*, functions within the staging of an uncertain association as a mechanism that, despite the comparative failure of the textual gesture itself, allows Equiano to relay what kinds of moments are needed within a given formula to even be able to approximate the feeling he

is experiencing (Harney & Moten 98). However, as these links are made within the frame of the text, a separate kind of self-identification is happening simultaneously. In between the insurrection of these two sites as variables, the dismemberment of the black subject, or fear of such, highlights the interconnected haptics of black life. The grief towards the impending loss of a whole self to the collection, or the white affective value of its compiled pieces, concurrently produces a discourse that collapses the space in between a white liberalist configuration of the racialized individualistic “I” and its corresponding racialized multitude. The collapsing of space in-between the “I” and the multitude happens as a result of the ceaseless cycles of dismemberment that place the wholeness of the black subject in a constant state of being, if it is not already, torn apart. So, it would be an oversight to not only assume the contentious monolithic sameness of black enslaved groupings but also to assume that rhetoric of likeness in white slaveholding benevolence is a sentiment shared among ex-slaves. Equiano explicitly names, almost immediately in the first chapter of his narrative, the challenges this narrative will encounter that is distinct from white authors. Equiano writes:

I believe there are few events in my life which have not happened to many; it is true the incidents of it are numerous, and did I consider myself an European, I might say my sufferings were great; but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favorite of heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life. (33)

The psychoanalytic functionality of a Lacanian “I” does not tend to race as an apparatus inculcating subjecthood in the maturation of power. Additionally, it fails to consider how

this maturation of power is instituted by the racialized affective embodiment of a whole white subject. Due to the black body's exploitation as an accouterment to a white subject's wholeness, it continuously remains in pieces. Additionally, the *haptics* of black life prevents a singular black subject's pieces from being sorted out of a compiled group because they remain in motion. Here, I want to indicate that these racialized dismembered parts move precisely because of the kinetic potential of hapticality as an affective force that moves through black people. The black subject, despite or due to its dismemberment, possesses the ability to connect in a way that transcends a white affective paradigm that needs wholeness to understand an embodied feeling. The movement within the small spaces in between the pieces prevents the separation of the *I* and the multitude from ever being realized because the method required to articulate the feeling of their circumstances in a white public sphere continuously dismembers them.

In Equiano's narrative, we encounter several places within the text where the fugitive performance of the narrative's uncertain associations illustrates the racial economy of articulation within the genre of autobiography (particularly regarding slave narratives) and the concurrent production of black autobiographical subjectivity. Although these instances frequently happen throughout Equiano's narrative, this essay focuses on one particular exchange within this text that I find to be most poignant in examining *uncertain associations* and the interconnected haptics of black life at the site of dismemberment.



In the latter half of the fifth chapter of Equiano's narrative, after being sold to Mr. Robert King, despite Equiano having been "as happy as the condition of slavery [could] admit" (Equiano 95), high bids for his purchase managed to alter whatever amount of solace he was able to procure. The surmounting feeling of terror he experienced through surrounding news of the treatment of other enslaved people is reflected in the text as interspersed vignettes of dismemberment. Utilizing various encounters with fragmented black bodies to facilitate a thorough meditation on his fear, Equiano gives the sights he encounters or hears about a metonymic quality that does the affective labor of adding a dimension of depth to explain how he feels. In this way, Equiano's fugitive performance exceeds literary genre-based boundaries because Equiano's memory within the text demands more from language than that form can hold. The application of an uncertain association as a proctor, despite the literal distance between Equiano and those he saw being maimed, prevents the foreclosure of the embodiment of what he felt.

The textual gesture suggesting the invocation of this kind of association appears during an exchange Equiano has with a slaveowner in the fifth chapter. Equiano encounters a slaveowner indicated as "Mr. D——," [sic] in Robert Allison's first edition of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (94). Following a failed escape attempt by an enslaved man, Mr. D—— uses the dismembered black subject to carry the affective weight of his expression of dominance. Equiano writes:

One Mr. D—— told me that he sold 41,000 negroes, and that he once cut off a negro-mans's leg for running away—I asked him, if the man had died in the operation? How he, as a Christian, could answer for the horrid act before God?

And he told me, answering was a thing of another world; what he thought and did were policy. I told him that the Christian doctrine taught us to do unto others as we would that others should do unto us. He then said that his scheme had the desired effect---it cured that man and some others of running away. (94)

Including Mr. D——’s apathetic response to removing the leg of one of his slaves as an indication of the magnitude of his fear, Equiano places the affective weight of this moment on the *structural paradox* within the liberalist paradigm of autobiography. Applying pressure to the scaffolding of the racialized *structural paradox* of autobiography, Equiano situates the feeling of his fear within the haptic of a moment that must be prompted and illustrated through the text. Of course, doing so does not encapsulate the feeling inculcated in this memory unless induced through practicality, but it does connect the reader to the image of an enslaved man having his leg severed and the moment of fear Equiano expresses earlier in the text. This decision actually does more than just overwrite the white racist gaze imposed on the text; it supersedes an initial white abolitionist response of envisioning “the poor negro” (Saillant 303). An additional note made by Equiano through the crafting of this moment is the production of a white process of expressing how one feels through disassembling the black whole into pieces. The assertion made in light of Mr. D——’s insistence on the justification of his action via “policy” (Equiano 94) further indicates the instrumentalization of black dismembered parts.

The cultivation of the white affect of domination results in the dismembering of the racialized subject that can be mapped onto the conception of Lacan’s *mirror stage*.

The mirror stage, a psychological stage whose process of identification is primarily concerned with the “disposition of the image of one’s own body” (Lacan 77). Lacan writes:

...the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation---and, for the subject caught in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an “orthopedic” form of its totality---and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego’s audits. (77)

The constitution of the fragmented body into a whole self relies on the shattering of the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* (or inner and outer worlds) as the subject “assume an image.” A racial theory or praxis does not accompany Lacan’s conception of the *mirror stage*, whose meaning changes if the conditions of one’s *self* are inextricably linked to crafting the image onto systems of power. In a footnote in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, he considers that the objecthood of “the Other” (Fanon 139) prevents black bodies from accessing a Lacanian “dialectic of identification” (Fanon 139). A similar point is also implied in Spiller’s charge about the tenets of assumption (Spillers 103). Through the conception of the *I*, the mirror stages not only overlook the heterogeneity of *othered* bodies but how racial violence determines the codification of the whole, even at the *infans* stage (Lacan 76).

Critiquing Lacan's failure to index race, Fanon writes, "For the white man, however, 'the Other' is perceived as a bodily image, absolutely as the non-ego, i.e., the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. For the black man we have demonstrated that the historical and economic realities must be taken into account" (Fanon 139). Tangential to Fanon's conception of the black subject as the representation of a "bodily image" within Lacan's conception of the *mirror stages*, I aver that the denigration of the black body is figured into the constitution of the image of the white subject (the reflected image in Lacan's *mirror stage*). Additionally, the black body is simultaneously exploited while the *white I* is still in a primordial form instituted by paranoia in jeopardizing the "maturation of power" (Lacan 76). A power that is not realized unless the distance between the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* is shattered.

Race is indexed within the process of identification for the white subject before they encounter the mirror. The conditioning of a white subject for the procurement of power is in the concealment of the fragmented body. The conditions of preparedness for the white subject to assume the image, much like the typical child-rearing practices of white slaveholders, requires the completion of a kind of apprenticeship to learn how to fulfill the role of the white-dominant subject (McCurdy 11). Historian John G. McCurdy writes in *Gentlemen and Soldiers* that the usual course for young men was to leave home to "...begin an apprenticeship or work as a servant in husbandry, and [become] a dependent of a master who housed, fed, and disciplined him" (qtd. in Foster 11). The dependency on the master, different from a slavemaster, from the white apprentices, was linked to a sense of "manliness" that was presumably obtained at the end of the

apprenticeship. McCurdy writes that the notions of manhood in early America were predicated on one's ability to obtain power over other people and assets. He remarks, "A man was defined by his economic independence as well as his ability to assert control over dependents" (11). Failure to learn how to manage the power obtained at the concealment of the image potentially inhibits the white "social I" from exercising power to the extent of their white counterparts. This, of course, does not surmount the conditions of the racialized other, but it does hinder the white subject's ability to take full advantage of the systems of power.

Any proximity to the black body, particularly one that would cause the *Umwelt's* (or outer world's) social interaction with the white subject to even marginally deviate from the optimal association with power, would prevent the "ideal" white image. The immediate shock of the social deviation from what is expected and fear of being likened to a black subject---a literary method often employed by white abolitionists ---places the inner world of the single white subject, liberal or otherwise, in crisis. As a response to the social deviation of social expectations of the outer world, the white subject abides by the "policy" (Equiano 94), which, as seen in Equiano's narrative---and as indicated in the racialized tenets of articulation---requires the dismembering of the black subject into pieces. The value of these pieces exists in the lasting impact of racial differentiation presented in the manifestation of the whole. Due to the insistence on racial superiority as an adhesive needed to bind the outer and inner worlds of the white subject, any time the conditions of the social changes prevent the consummation between the *Umwelt* and

*Innenwelt*, the white subject perceives themselves to be in crisis because of their inability to possess power.

During Equiano's exchange with Mr. D——, the "policy" that required Mr. D—— to sever the leg of his slave, for him, was a response to the distance being created between his ideal and his surrounding environment, conditions of the *Umwelt* and the *Innenwelt*. It is also at the moment that Mr. D—— states that the explanation for his reaction is "a thing for another world" (Equiano 94) that the text, quite literally, transcends the autobiography in its conventional form. By the terms of Lacan's understanding of the *Innenwelt*, we can infer that Mr. D——'s response gestures to the distance between the inner and outer, and his affective process to express how powerful he feels. Furthermore, the refusal of expressing the justification of his actions---as a slave owner in the presence of an enslaved black subject with absolutely no power, regardless of the cruel nature of the reason---reinforces the urgency of asserting racial superiority in the outer to satisfy the "dialectic of identification" within the *Innenwelt*. This response, read as presented, illustrates the objecthood of the black subject within the inner and the outer white worlds. With the mirror as an apparatus to both conceal pieces of the fragmented white subject and to gage its proximity to the dismembered parts of black subjectivity, the severed pieces of black bodies serve a synecdochic purpose within Equiano's text---and within the greater conception of the mirror stages---as an indication of the white subject's anticipation of the social domination imbrued throughout the formation of the *I*. Equiano's employment of this exchange with Mr. D----- establishes a correlation between how he configures the insistence of Mr. D-----'s ideal *I* and the

exceptional intervention of the *uncertain associations* required to meet the conditions of the genre of autobiography. Mr. D-----'s ideal *I* is configured as his slave is dismembered, and the racialized parameters of the genre of autobiography are reified in both Equiano's struggle to articulate his pain and in the deployment of an intervention that affords him the ability to offer his approximal understanding of it. Thus, Equiano is dismembered by the splits between his recollection of the events, the distinguishing features of the genre, and the intervention needed in order to even make his pain legible.

The subterfuge of this seemingly benevolent genre is built into classifying features that rely as much on the containment of black life as on the conditions needed to distinguish itself from fiction. The aspects of Equiano's narrative that canonizes the text within the genre of autobiography are often linked to the ways in which this text extends the trajectory of the genre as opposed to opening new lines of inquiry in the inner worlds of black life. The coercion that underlies the expectation of making an intervention is a threat that suggests that what cannot be explained cannot exist. An insistence to authenticate the material reality of slavery (and anti-blackness more broadly) requires the black author, if not already literally dismembered, to separate from themselves to explain to a white imaginary the extent of their pain without any guarantees. Yet, more pain is felt each time one must encounter a peripheral site of violence to attempt to articulate the feeling of constantly being undone by the terrors of slavery. In this narrative, Equiano shares his undoing and there are no words to describe that.

## Chapter 2: The Issue of *Relating* in Richard Bruce Nugent's *Gentleman Jigger*

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes, “Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story...” (3). I initially encountered this introductory synopsis of *pain* in Scarry’s text skeptically, perhaps even resentfully. The purchase that many literary genres take in the proprietary, slaveholding logics actively obscure the affective cosmologies of descent of the American chattel slave. My skepticism towards the variability of this framework, at first, seemed to arise from what felt like a bypassing of historically documented features of enslavement that grants whiteness its affective features. My resentment, accompanying this skepticism, felt more nebulous. Something both present in the historical paradigms that I’m excavating as well as a social contention that I felt with the parameters of what for Scarry would constitute a story. Nervous that my resentment to what would otherwise seem like a dexterous framework to explore pain was only the animation of my own cynicism, I recoiled (or recanted) from what I envision is a deviation from what would be a scholarly (and governable) critique of this text.

While contending with the affective and intellectual contingencies of my resentment, I was doing work on the famed “Niggeratti Castle” in Harlem, NY. My interest in the site of the notoriously famed manor was to consider it a form of matriculation in the burgeoning homosocial cartographies that overlap what were previously slave markets. While reading *Gentleman Jigger*, the novel by Richard Bruce Nugent, openly queer writer-artist and member of the acclaimed Niggeratti Castle, I encountered a unique, quite palpable, social dynamic in the narratology of the novel. The



satirical, realist novel's own history is quite complex. The date of the novel's composition isn't recorded but it is estimated to have been written somewhere between 1928 and 1933 according to the manuscript's primary editor, Thomas H. Wirth. Though remaining unpublished until 2002, *Gentleman Jigger* (audaciously borrowed from an old racist ditty) provided an ambitious and unglamorous portrait reflective of the lives of black artists and writers, sparking discourses with the black imaginary in the early twentieth century. Remarking on the novel's daringness in the foreword to Da Capo's third printing of the novel, Pulitzer Prize winning biographer Arnold Rampersad writes:

The principal characters in *Gentleman Jigger*, however discontented they may be, take life as they find it. They speak their mind without much inhibition. They do not feel guilty about their pleasures, even as they know that some of these pleasures are frowned upon or even loathed by society as a whole. Their dialogue, spontaneous in its impact, gives us, to my mind, an unrivaled picture of life among the creative literary elements of the black world. Nugent achieves this effect in large part because he wrote accurately and uninhibitedly about what he knew firsthand. (ix)

The uninhibited reflection of Nugent's life, outside of a more formal measure of resistance whose aims more acutely reflect the first half-century of black life writing, reimagines the sociality of life writing not as a vehicle for transformation but as a rupture that prioritizes the wholeness of black affective cosmologies. Being unafraid to meet the violence of inarticulability with genuine, unfiltered emotion whose priority is simply an acknowledgment of harm (without being tasked to inform) is at the core of my

disposition to Scarry's formulations about pain. Additionally, the not so hidden mosaic of this realist novelist, in and of itself, elaborates on an already effervescent, "notorious" tone of the novel that aptly untethers the anticipated social scripts that are carried down from its paternalistic Antebellum predecessors.

My own frustration with Scarry's ruminations on pain are related to the affective and social trappings of contextualizing pain, a practice of navigating the space of rupture itself when confronting violence or insult and reacting to it in a way that is in most alignment with the human. The retrieval of the human in the immediate response to the social restraints of discussing the varied and varying intimate and taboo violences under American chattel as queer bodies is a life-affirming dialectic of being that is not (for many reasons) reflected in the discussion of the aims within black literary genres. How might we begin to historicize registers of affective, confrontational *reaction* as a mode of retrieving the self--a mode of re-historicizing? How might Nugent's reaction--my reactions--when contending with the racialized restraints of language and the impossibility of equanimity in the face of violence be considered just human as opposed to a form of resistance or refusal to be consumed?

Richard Bruce Nugent's *Gentlemen Jigger*, in particular its rendering of the social tensions between black and white queer figures, not only presents a rupture that prompts a shifting of social paradigms embedded in the discourse of *race* in the United States, scholarly or otherwise. The subjugated and obscured history of social rupturing--that is, the ways that the history is constructed or dismissed through a degree of comfort for the historian--not only highlights the qualms of methodizing articulation, but also warrants a

conversation about augmenting highlighting the social and affective deficit of racialized parameters of telling a story of pain. Terrorized by the fresh (and ongoing) hauntings of enslavement, the Progressive Era politics that mark a bright new cosmopolitan landscape also reflected an emotional deficit from centuries of torture as much as it does the purchase of new social scripts and burgeoning urban landscapes. The landscape itself is built on top of traumas embedded in the logistics of the slave trade.

The social, affective, and theoretical choreographies required for black institutional participation in generous engagements with the racialized sexual memory of the colonial archive are as invested in the machinations of what Walter Johnson calls “slave-breaking” as the archive itself. In Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul* writes:

These slaves, then, embodied a type of public recognition--a type of honor--that could be beaten out of their backs. In buying them, slave-holders boasted that their own mastery would inhabit their slaves’ every action. Their slaves would be extensions of themselves, the actions of the enslaved indistinguishable from the will of the enslavers. Slave breaking was a technology of the soul. (107)

The teleological dexterity demanded to unearth what is ever present--that is to unveil the truth but to not “call a spade, a spade” as folks say--impresses upon the black scholar the aims of a not-so-distant Antebellum past. The subterfuge of racialized narratological rules of engagement for scholarship that queries the sexual paradigms imbedded in the enjoyment of mastery vehemently highlights the urgent necessity of a shift in the procedural conventions of (often empirical) historiographical approaches to the sexual histories of American chattel slavey. Perhaps even more urgent is the erasure of affective

cosmologies crafted by enslaved black peoples whose internal struggles, and survivalist negotiations, whilst contending with same-sex forms of sexual abuse from white masters (condemned in the public sphere of the white Antebellum world) are sequestered in the proverbial closets of the archive. The methodological, social, and emotional dilemma of doing this work is that to participate in the unearthing of racialized, sexual histories under American chattel slavery is, despite the knowledge of psychological harms of its aims, to force black scholars to endure a reprise of “slave-breaking”.

The social and theoretical ramifications of traversing the white-centered, disciplinary and epistemological trappings of the erotogenic racialized bevy of theories with the intention to envelope an ongoing (and growing) set of sexual paradigms, behaviors, dialogues, and attitudes that are working in tandem with contemporary corporeal markets for blackness to create a near impossible epistemological mine field to navigate because of the social and theoretical repercussions of implicating white scholarship within economies of enjoyment (Hartman 27). In turn, black scholars whose theoretical interventions have provided a threshold for us to continue recovering narratives of black people buried in the archive become pigeonholed and bogged down by restraints culled out of the very assumption that these people sparking the black imaginary are, for all intents and purposes, there to provide a one-size-fits-all approach through the trauma-ridden methodologies that they themselves struggled to endure. Many readings of Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* evade ways that a reading of the scene of terror is as much an issue of academic insistence as it is an indication of a vital nursery of a new set of modes of affective terror to be consumed by its beneficiaries for

their delectation. For white thinkers, indulging the impulse to remove themselves from an institution or university sanction--that is almost always the vessel hosting the aforementioned nursery--is to situate oneself exactly in the historical disposition that Hartman unearths not for the sake of your transformation, but to recover black bodies whose humanity is so trivial to whiteness that their bodies are buried (literally and categorically) underneath materials that do not reflect the grandeur of white mastery--that is, underneath shame. In the introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman asked, “[S]uppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one’s suffering but rather of intensifying it?” (5). This quote has echoed through the corridors of the labyrinth in which I find the narratives of enslaved people whose bodies cannot even be afforded the ability to be taken up in white rudimentary ploys of recognition because to retrieve them is to unearth a truth that is too overwhelming for academicians to hold even hundreds of years past the date on a white slaveholding gravestone. Well...what happens when the abuse of enslaved black bodies is tied up in shame? What infrastructures exist for black people to speak about the world-building tenets of white shame? Finally, and core to this examination of the affective registers of *recovery*, how do we contend with the emotional fallout that black people experience while aware of how white people, methods, and institutions are sequestering their lives for the sake of hiding their own shame.

The barriers stifling the recovery of non-normative, same-sex, or queer forms of sexual abuse under American chattel slavery are not only ensnared in the questions of institutional access but also undeniably tethered to Antebellum sensibilities that refuse to

engage the private lives of slavers. Prioritizing the perception of individuals through the racialized methodological subterfuge of academic comfort participates in the very same proprietorial logics that are demanding a formal recognition of white theories (despite their epistemological distance from conversations of race and colonialism) to gain the license to excavate the stories black people. In her chapter titled, “Reading the Specter of Racialized Gender in Eighteenth-Century Bridgetown, Barbados,” in the edited collection, *Sexuality and Slavery* (ed. Ramey Berry & Harris), Marisa Fuentes writes, “Historical methods demand that one adhere to the logics, descriptions, and actions of the actors represented in archival documents” (50). The kinds of foreclosures that happen as a result of white, palatable, empirical, evidence-based protocols of historical recovery projects relegates the duty of maintaining, as Morrison calls it, “images of impenetrable whiteness” (33) on the backs of black people. What happens when knowing what happened is not enough? How can we account for the particular negotiations that accompany the turmoil of inarticulability? What are the emotional repercussions of its fallout?

I am interested in not just thinking about the barriers that contain the lives of black people in white shame (particular that regarding same-sex abuse in earlier times period), but also thinking about how black people in the early 20th century are encountering the limits of their affective worlds as they attempt to move through life bound to secrets that are burying the lives of those before them. Although this analysis may incur critique because of the very fragments of black life that are available for this kind of analysis, or maybe even because this exploration does not result in the image of

black resilience that is often highly regarded (and exploited) in academia. However, it does the work of retrieving the humanity of black life by not simply prioritizing methods of retrieval or selfhood that are the most palatable or comfortable for broader audiences. Adopting a framework that fully examines the humanity of black people cannot rely solely on inspiring, favorable, heart-warming variables of black life. Suggesting that, for all intents and purposes, that the most consumable aspects of black life are those that coaxed transformation is actually not a new phenomenon and is tethered to tropes used by pro- and anti-slavery constituents well before and throughout the nineteenth century. There must also be space to acknowledge the limits and ends of black patience, kindness, openness as methodological pathways to historicize and bring life not so much to the representation of the value of black bodies as task items, but as to how these people were navigating the world around them. These demands to understand the fullness of black life not as a catalyst for the social, sexual, emotional, or ethical development of whiteness. I am pushing against an insistence on historiographical strategies and theorizations of black historicization that incorporate white comfort as a required narratological protocol in order to craft a legible image of black life. The alchemizing of black pain into a historical assortment of representative subgenres to read when someone wants to feel touched or emboldened or brave or resilient, or whatever flavor of emotion can be purchased, consumed and regurgitated, is a tradition passed down by slaveholding society buried with the doilies and handkerchiefs they passed amongst each other when recounting “gripping” tales of the last insurrection they saw. We must think of black emotionality outside of the immediate regimen of white emotional economies that boast

about their own lore by either praising their restraint in the face of black resistance, or their temperance in their self-invested discourses of containment and “representation”.

Comfort has been masquerading in the colonial archive as an evidence-based imperative for identifying aspects of black life that do not translate to the particular scripts of white slaveholding society. So much is lost when disregarding the affective worlds of black people whose measures of protection were neither kind nor respectable, people who did not give a damn about the ethical development of whiteness or the potential of coalition (that posed clear threats to their safety). Particularly, for black queer people, the double bind of being condemned and labeled as the “evidence” of soul-breaking technologies of enslavement by many, while they also endured the toils of the afterlife of fetish and taboo markets not openly discussed that were now mapped into the cosmopolitan landscapes in which they lived as artists, writers, and thinkers. This chapter examines the aesthetic shift of Antebellum social workings during the nascent era of a growing art and literary movement, The Harlem Renaissance. In this chapter, I unfurl layers of sociality that are caught in the tensions between a performance of mastery in a slaveholding society and the new flashy benevolent cosmopolitan life, and the just-below-the-surface outrage bleeding into volitions of a new social schema. Even under a shifting political landscape with Progressive Era politics and a burgeoning art and literary movement in New York (The Harlem Renaissance), early twentieth-century racial and economic tension from a not-too-distant Antebellum life created an adversarial current that threw the terms of relatability and likeness into flux. A push to ignite an idea of “community” within absconding queer sexual cultures reflected new kinds of social



currencies available in growing urban landscapes. The search for alternative definitions of relating and relationality that had an aesthetic likeness to the new world meant that Antebellum terms and practices needed a makeover to contend with the changing conditions of ownership. Those clandestine homosocial fetish markets were under a cultural transformation. By the beginning of the century, white gay men had established geographies and networks that rival even those of their heterosexual counterparts. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, historian George Chauncey writes that “[gay men] participated in an extensive sexual underground that by the beginning of the century included well-known cruising areas in the city’s parks and streets, gay bathhouse, and saloons with back rooms” (1). The homoerotic tenets of an Antebellum white economy of enjoyment, whose measure of pleasure depended on the matriculation of enslaved black bodies, were now imbricated into the newly flourishing gay districts. The racialization of pleasure and the white queer sexual discourse conceived through the sexual abuse of black bodies under enslavement created a blueprint from which to construct geographies of white queer pleasure thereafter. Similarly, in the recycled racial assemblages of plantation life, black bodies still carried the memory of a benevolent, paternalistic white man.

Richard Bruce Nugent, a Black, openly queer, Harlem Renaissance author, wrote into his novel *Gentlemen Jigger*, moments of hesitation that actively resisted consumption facilitated by the valences of relationality from his white colleagues, queer or otherwise. I argue that the circumstances of relationality in *Gentlemen Jigger*, a realist novel that tells the origins of the famed Niggerati Manor, bespeaks the reality of black

queer bodies consumed in the interest of the succession of a liberal, Euro-centered world above the surface. The main character in Nugent's *Gentlemen Jigger*, Stuartt, though heavily critiqued for his role as a provocateur, refuses to assuage the visible racial violence of the inequitable advancement of white individuals seeking to gain capital from the momentum of the Harlem Renaissance Movement. The entrance of these white characters into this sphere is mediated by their insistence of their value within the space. The unwanted solicitation of whiteness in this space exercises a slave-owning gesture that lays claim to an indispensable access to Black bodies capable of accruing capital.

Despite the changing politics of a fast-changing urban landscape in the North, racial ideologies engendered in the new cosmopolitan times meant, for many, the need to re-imagine a schema for relating that was conscious of deep-seated Antebellum ideologies and the savvy of a newly reconstructed economy of enjoyment. These re-imaginings of relating are constructed and are also consumed by a necessity of relationality demanded by a white bourgeois stake in social and sexual capital. I use both "consume" and "construct" to identify the existence of an Antebellum ethos around the fungibility of black bodies that is dressed in the blanketing rallying cry of Progressive Era white liberal politics. I am interested in recovering the subjugated knowledges secreted in the hesitations that queer Harlem Renaissance writers had towards opportunistic white individuals establishing relationships with black artists and writers during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The development of a more covert measure of ensuring the futurity of white pleasure, although aligned with slaveholding ethics at its core, fundamentally changed the aesthetic of mastery to meet the social savvy of a newly

reconstructed economy of enjoyment. This newly formed aesthetic of mastery meant that, socially, the previous terms used to identify the dangerous slaveholding characteristics of whiteness were now categorically distinct (in their evolution) from black-white relations during the Harlem Renaissance. The two-fold project of modernizing Antebellum economies of enjoyment both undermines efforts toward naming the existence of this system and abstracts what were once conventional understandings of the culture of white mastery, leaving black bodies, especially black queer bodies, to suffer without any real articulable frame of reference.

Here, I suggest that the sites, where conversations around relationality by queer scholars of color have produced a more complex layering of difference within the field, have also been consumed and utilized by queer, Euro-centered discourse to create a sound foundation to protect what exists at the surface, not to address or acknowledge the material realities that exist below. Additionally, the quotidian *use* of black bodies creates a revisionist reading of history that excludes the discourse of queer individuals of color that expressed any hesitation to being in relation with their queer white counterparts on the basis of their sexuality alone. The subjugated coded language around such hesitations to relationality on the basis of sexual orientation, prior to field discussions beginning in the later part of the twentieth century, are realized in the literary work of some Black writers in the early twentieth century.

Nugent is particular in the way that he builds this hyper-reflective world in *Gentleman Jigger*. The provocative and scathingly crafted description of whites gravitating around, as Nugent writes, “the Empire-State Africa,” (19) set the tone of the

precarious social negotiations of the times while not foreclosing the histories prompting the reticence that the character Stuartt (representing Nugent himself) manifests. Even minor introductions of white elites and socialites buzzing around Harlem are cacophonously brought into focus through Nugent's scathing wit. In fact, these tensions are revealed to us in the third chapter of *Gentleman Jigger* as we are introduced to "Harlem" as a backdrop in this realist novel.

In the third chapter, "Harlem," we meet Stuartt Brennan being escorted to an outing by his friend Tony (who is said to be Langston Hughes). Upon arriving, Stuartt is immediately thrust into introductions with the inhabitants of this burgeoning social sphere. Among the individuals attending this lunch, the narrator seems to have a keen perception of the one by the name of Serge Von Vertner, who is believed to be writer Carl Van Vechten. Nugent writes:

Serge Von Vertner, the big white discoverer of High-Harlem, wrote perfect, neurotic, precious books spiced with the gayest sophisticisms. He stared with undressing blue eyes from a red face deceptively moronic. Stuartt had been very disappointed by his first glimpse of Parnassus. (20)

This incredibly scathing remark on a barely disguised characterization of Carl Van Vechten follows the commercially successful scandal of Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven*, a book haphazardly chronicling the lives of young black New Yorkers. Van Vechten's novel received noteworthy critiques from many black writers and artists who condemned Van Vechten's novel for its gross exploitation of the work of black people in the Harlem Renaissance. In volume II of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Dubois wrote:

Carl Van Vechten's 'Nigger Heaven' is a blow in the face. It is an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white. First, as to its title: my objection is based on no provincial dislike of the nickname. 'Nigger' is an English word of wide use and definite connotation. But the phrase, 'Nigger Heaven', as applied to Harlem is a misnomer. 'Nigger Heaven' does not mean, as Van Vechten once or twice intimates (page 15,199) a haven for Negroes--a city of refuge for dark and tired soulless; it means in common parlance, a nasty, sordid corner into which black folk are herded, and yet a place which they in crass ignorance are fools enough to enjoy. Harlem is no such place as that, and no one know this better than Carl Van Vechten (80)

Carl Van Vechten's presence among the literati of the Harlem Renaissance carried remnants of the surveillance of slave traders and the debonair threatening of masters that deemed themselves benevolent by comparison to those with different fetishes. However, Van Vechten had an insatiable interest in the collective of black intellectuals in Harlem that fueled the projections gaining critical acclaim in *Nigger Heaven*. During the recording of his oral history at Columbia University in 1960 on his life in Harlem, Van Vechten remarked that he was "violently interested in Negroes...violently because it was almost an addiction" (Keller 7). Van Vechten's meandering through Harlem to satisfy his thirst for consuming the black imaginative ecologies mapped throughout this period exists in tandem with (although geographically separate from) the performances of mastery in marketplaces in the archive. Van Vechten's aspirations to make himself into a more thrilling and dynamic version of himself through a projection of himself in the

Harlem Renaissance illuminate Saidiya Hartman's assertion regarding the pleasures of enjoyment and fungibility of the black body as a commodified object in *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman writes:

The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal sense, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave--that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity--and by the extensive capacities of property--that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons. Put differently, the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of the other's feelings, ideas, desires, and values... (21)

The world that Van Vechten crafts in *Nigger Heaven* from the thrill of encountering individuals he found peculiar and intriguing because of their ability to spark discourse was as much a reflection of the commodification of the objectified black bodies for the writing of *Nigger Heaven*, as it was an emphatic mode of containment and surveillance of blackness--a social paradigm inherits from its slaveholding predecessors. Many people that resided in Harlem knew Van Vechten for having a reputation of being, "a dandy, as a dilettante, [and] a writer of frivolous novels" (Keller 8). Despite Van Vechten's reputation of being a dilettante living comfortably, and benefiting greatly from being a white face in the Harlem Renaissance, it is rare that one may encounter a history of black people's negotiations as they encounter figures like Van Vechten as they navigated a tense, yet shifting, political landscape. Furthermore, the distrust, disdain, rejection, and

even financial exploitation (although never to the extent that black life is exploited) of these white hovering faces is rarely, if ever, discussed.

In thinking about ways to historicize black affective cosmologies differently during this period, I encountered an interested capillary between Saidiya Hartman's intervention on the "paradox of seduction" in *Scenes of Subjection* and her meditation on the precarity of waywardness in *Wayward Lives* years later that helps me locate a praxis for accounting for the feelings and negotiations of black people dealing with people like Carl Van Vechten. In *Scenes*, Hartman discusses the trapping of the varied and fraught parameters from which one may be understood as willfully providing consent. Under the proprietary pretense of enslavement and further exacerbated in the understandings of the right to "enjoy" one's property, these parameters (especially when read from the purview of slave masters in the colonial archive) are even more inane. In this interrogation of quotidian terms often used to narrativize stories of black enslaved women, Hartman breaks new ground by offering a query grounded in the negotiations of enslaved black women when faced with the certainty of abuse. The framings that constitute the image of the enslaved black woman forego the necessarily present ruminations on life when the recourse for not participating in the performances of mastery and torture is death.

Hartman writes:

The opportunity for nonconsent is required to establish consent, for consent is meaningless if refusal is not an option. Nonetheless, the very effort to demonstrate consent reveals its impossibility if consent is understood as a voluntary agreement free from constraint or compulsion or as unimpinged by relation of power and

dominance. After all, if desperations, recklessness, and hopelessness determine “choosing one’s lover,” absolute distinctions between compulsion and assent cannot be sustained. Yielding to another or giving one’s self is no less subject to constraint, though it is certainly different from and preferable to being forced to submit. Consent is unseemly in a context in which the very notion of subjectivity is predicated upon the negation of will (111).

The trajectory of what Hartman is locating here can also be followed into a myriad of social relations that grow out of the Harlem Renaissance that actually does more to highlight the ways that black people are contending with the cosmopolitanization of the plantation system. The surveillance of blackness continues as an operative facet of extended Antebellum affective economies. This becomes vehemently clear in the case of Carl Van Vechten. The possibility to deter him in a substantive way is not possible because of the means to access that is granted to him through whiteness. Given the immediate dangers of lynching and policing at this time, the possibility of keeping a conniving white man out of black folk’s business was near to impossible. However, much like the methods that Hartman interrogates in *Scenes* that overwrite the internal negotiations of black women when confronted with the non-choice of submission, literary traditions account for white figures (even if their distaste for blackness is present in the literature itself) as widely accepted, or as “productively controversial,” in black intellectual space with no accounting for the inability to refuse exploitation, commodification, or overt physical violence.



The various tenets of the kinds of access that are granted to whiteness cannot be explored unless the whole body, its physical and emotional being, is accounted for in the historicization of a period. This includes moments when deliberate choices are made for the self through negotiations with figures like Van Vechten whose use as a potential conniving sponsor offered some recompense for the inevitable exploits that would occur (i.e. *Nigger Heaven*). It is perhaps even more essential that this standpoint approach exist as the core of historicizing black queer people throughout these periods because their varying negotiations are compounded by the dismissals and refusal of black and white communities, and the unimagined calculations that accompany encounters with people like Van Vechten who are also privy to the particular vulnerabilities of black openly queer writers artist of the Harlem Renaissance who are often less (if at all) protected by coalitions against white supremacy. However, in the ability to recognize and re-write the social drama of a refashioned mastery, it's dually important to imagine methods of historicizing that account for the performances of black bodies constrained to this paradox, and the ways that their gestures also exist within a genealogy as well no matter how uncomfortable these gestures are to white people.

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman begins with a meditation on the *possibilities of waywardness*. This meditation on the deeply complex histories of resistance, rebellion, and refusal, and the traditions and pathways crafted from them, operates from a framework that includes both the subjugated knowledges held in the space of resistance, rebellion, reckoning, and waywardness, and the mechanisms of these

gestures that self-actualized the kinds of radical modes of freedom that we yearn to grasp.

Hartman writes:

Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man, or the police. The errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a place better than here. The social poesis that sustains the dispossessed. Waywards: the unregulated movement of drifting and wandering; sojourns without a fixed destination, ambulatory possibility, interminable migrations, rush and flight, black locomotion; the everyday struggle to live free. The attempt to elude capture by never settling. Not the master's tools, but the ex-slave's fugitive gestures, her traveling shoes. Waywardness articulates the paradox of cramped creation, the entanglement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity. Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse (227).

Hartman's invocation of *wayward* offers not only a way to move beyond a representational politics embedded in the historicization of black life, but also a method that has the potential to actually recover history that has been buried precisely because of the ways that black people have resisted and refused. It is the possibility that *waywardness* has to shift our understanding of the day-to-day lives of black people because to acknowledge (in however small a way) the negotiations inside of the "paradox of being cramped" (227) means that we get a fuller picture black life, black humanity. The invocation of *wayward* as a modality and the interrogation of historicizing consent brought into focus the capillaries making up the foundation of my query in this chapter.

How do we, in our effort to account for the specific black affective cosmologies and the response to the emotional deficit of Antebellum beneficiaries, consider *unpleasantness* in these social entanglements. I use *unpleasant* as a marker for the performance of these social encounters as a way to think about the simultaneity of contending with the non-existence of choice regarding one's surveillance or exploitation and the response to such that is evidently coarse or spiteful, but also careful and eloquent. Put simply, I think that the slick, caustic wit of black people--those willing to shake the table--allows us to think about the trajectory of the negotiations that Hartman discusses in *Scenes of Subjection* into the early twentieth century and at differing intersections of black life. To think about the ways that black writers and thinkers like Nugent and Hughes react to the uninhibited reach of whiteness. Choosing not to engage, if they must, with a smile on their face and adding labor to the procurement of enjoyment through commodification and consumption.

The introduction to Carl Van Vechten in *Gentlemen Jigger* is illustrated quite closely to the recollection of the introduction that Nugent would note later in an interview. Bruce states:

One of the reasons [Langston] introduced me to Carl Van Vechten was that Carl Van Vechten could be helpful to me. I knew that when he introduced me. I knew it wasn't just that he [Langston] was interested and intrigued and amused that I thought Carl was a white monkey. Langston, as I have said before, was one the most generous people in the world. He helped everybody [who] could be helped (Wirth 226).

Histories such as these, the kinds of negotiations held among black queer people wanting to live out their lives in the best ways possible, are ones that asks us to think about the internal negotiations of black in response to, not constitutive of, the rebranding of mastery. This also opens up the possibility of considering how many functional relationships exist among the social cartographies of this period. Of course, it would be quite difficult to uncover all of them or even to suggest that a person's motivations were transactional, but we should consider the possibility that "friendliness," stinging or not, was a transactional performance to survive and manage under the looming threats of the time. It is the acute awareness of the white appetite for blackness that makes the dynamic between Stuartt and the white characters in *Gentleman Jigger* so compelling.

We meet the character Leslie Prentiss in the fourth chapter of *Gentleman Jigger* alongside his friend Bum Borjolfson. His immediate introduction, similar to Serge Von Vertner, was a snapshot of his presence in Harlem as a white person. At this point in the novel, Stuartt has moved in with Rusty (a characterization of Wallace Thurman) in Harlem at what is noted in the book, and known formally in real life as, "The Niggerati Castle." Interestingly, this part of the novel chronicles the beginning of what would eventually be the critically acclaimed journal, *FIRE!* (it is titled "The Current" in *Gentleman Jigger*). There is, to my knowledge, no record of Nugent revealing the identity of the character of Leslie Prentiss. However, the mystery of the identity of this individual (and the clear ways that he was coaxed to pay things and do favors) provides a reasonable justification for not relieving that information. Nugent writes:

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in! Oh, hello Leslie.” [said Rusty]

Leslie Prentiss was an anemic-seeming, vague though good-looking, young white man. He had hair-colored hair and eye-colored eyes and a faint flush and would never be remembered in a crowd, unless the crowd was in Harlem or China or some other dark-peopled place. He greeted Rusty warmly. In addressing Stuartt, he was a little disapproving--as disapproving as he dared show. After all, this was Harlem and these people were sensitive. It was a delicate problem all around. (35)

This description of Leslie Prentiss sets the tone for what will be a consistent tension for Stuartt during the rest of their interactions in the novel. The pointed remark about Leslie's appearance and motives seem to situate Leslie as a representation of many white charlatans orbiting the Harlem Renaissance at the time. The characterization of Leslie as both a hypervisible white man and a sorely underwhelming, almost unrecognizable presence in this novel highlights the affective genealogies that exist in the theoretical quagmire between Hartman's *Scenes on Subjection* and *Wayward Lives*. Stuartt's response to Leslie's presence is the result of both the contention of being unable to avoid Leslie or others like him--there were many excited by the spectacle of blackness in this space--and the refusal to participate in the niceties of commodification that were prompt through a certain level of decorum. Even within this brief introduction, Nugent frequently punctuates the conversation with the cacophonous dynamic of this relationship. Nugent continues:

Stuartt smiled up at Mr. Borjolfson. One could not truthfully say that the way he ignored Leslie was rude. Leslie just was not there as far as Stuartt was concerned.

“Glad to meet you. But I can’t say all that each time I want to speak to you. Too much like smorgasbord. What’s the rest of your name?” [said Stuartt]

Mr. Borjolfson’s [sic] blushed. But he didn’t look as though he was going to be really uncomfortable. He already looked more at ease than Leslie.

“Bum. You might as well call me ‘Bum’. All my friends do. I go by it at school...”

“That’s better, Bum.”

Stuartt eyed him up and down, very much after the manner an artist does when interviewing a prospective model. He turned and smiled innocently at Leslie.

“Where do you find such nice friends, Leslie? And with such becoming blushes, too! I hadn’t thought a blush was possible in Harlem.”

Leslie blushed and looked at the blushing Borjolfson. Stuartt always made Leslie feel inadequate somehow--as though Stuartt felt superior and was too polite to show it. That was pure nonsense, though. How could such a thing be?

[Rusty injected,] “Don’t mind Stuartt, Bum. He takes delight in embarrassing people. Its a defense mechanism, no matter how badly it creaks.” (36)

The question of how Stuartt could manage to evoke feelings of inadequacy from Leslie, a white interlocutor invested in the thrill and spectacle of blackness in Harlem, is a rupture that is constituted by *unpleasantness* as a mode of self-making. Stuartt’s autonomy in this

moment places the terms of a long-held expectation of decorum from black people into flux, making it difficult to *enjoy* him as a commodifiable object. The semantics of a politic of likeness in the early twentieth century, birthed from the rhetorical aims of nineteenth century abolitionist literature, are placed into *flux* by the insistence of the commodification of blackness from white economies of enjoyment and, dually, the unrelenting discomfort of an *unpleasant* (less enjoyable) black subject that refuses to “give themselves” freely or to entertain any idea of a consensual agreement at all. Making it painfully clear that, despite it being virtually impossible to remove oneself as a spectacle for whiteness, the forms of pleasure garnered from the fantasy of seduction would not be achieved. Put simply, if Stuartt was going to have to deal with being a thrill or spectacle for whites like Leslie, he wasn’t going to do it with a smile on his face and he was going to leave with something.

The narrative that Nugent has woven in this particular scene demarcates any premonitions that suggests that the performative accouterments of white paternalism, overt or subtle, seek to affirm black intelligibility on mere principle alone. Throughout the course of *Gentlemen Jigger*, Leslie’s social status is almost completely dependent on his reputation for traversing communities of color, and the paternalistic showmanship he possesses in the interest of enjoyment does more to illuminate Leslie’s inability to make a name for himself without employing the hierarchy of *race* that, as a function of white supremacy, grant him status in spaces where he is in proximity to black people. The aspiration that characters like Leslie and Serge (Carl Van Vechten) have to accrue a social standing among others is not unlike those of slave owners with less capital and

property whose sense of inadequacy (in comparison to their wealthier counterparts) often resulted in forms of consumption and abuse. In *Soul by Soul*, Walter Johnson argues that the purchase and public use of slaves--or the public performances of mastery--all contributed to the theater of fetishes inside of slave markets in the nineteenth century, and that white people were deeply invested in the optics of these performances for the sake of their social standing and the possibility of who they could be. Johnson writes:

As they narrated their upward progress through the slave market, slaveholders small and large were constructing themselves out of slaves. Whether slave buyers figured their independence as coming of age or coming into their own, as investment, necessity, or benevolence, it was embodied in slaves. And as slaveholders moved upward through the social hierarchy, they gained access to ever more rarified fantasies of what it meant to be a white man and a slaveholder in the antebellum South. (88)

The affective registers of what whiteness *could be* through the exploitation of blackness is the lifeblood of white emotional economies, and the palpable feeling that makes the gestures of friendship and *relating* so difficult to deal with. What Bruce is underscoring in the unpleasantness of Stuartt is not the resistive, transformative, refusal that we write onto black people in the archive. The *unpleasantness* of Stuartt is a part of the subjugated discourses that black people are having about the ways in which their bodies are commodified and exploited. It is a human response to the slaveholding logics of *relating* and *likeness* whose fruition is predicated on the impossibility to refuse (Hartman #). Making it difficult to be enjoyed offers Stuartt the ability to select a different option by



proxy of *unpleasantness*. Without rendering himself a less than respectable artist-writer, which is a quality valuable to (and enjoyed by) Leslie, Stuartt makes possible for himself the opportunity to decide if recompense is possible for the labor of being consumed and, if it is not, how he might decide to respond to this discomfort and affirm himself in the moment as a human being.

In the ninth chapter of *Gentleman Jigger*, we encounter a unique example of the machinations of unpleasantness as Leslie shows up at a social gathering of the Niggerati Castle's members in Stuartt and Rusty's apartment. Unlike our first encounter with Leslie, Stuartt announces his arrival calling him a, "real living John Brown," (104). Stuartt, brandishing Leslie's own anxiety about his perception in a room full of black people, then states: "'Just in time to take us to dinner, Leslie. Don't say no. I'll show you pretty pictures'" (104). It would be the responsibility of Leslie and Bill, a white lover of Stuartt's, to foot the bill for dinner. Leslie obliges and begins fingering through the set of pictures given to him while Stuartt takes a tally of the number of people whom Leslie would be accommodating. It reads:

"That's three-fifty apiece. A small price to pay for the concentrated wit and charm of the white man's burden [said Stuartt]."

"All right Stuartt," Leslie answered. "I suppose that makes me one of the Niggerati also."

"No, darling--" Stuartt began.

"No, Leslie," Rusty interrupted. "You are the perfect Negrotarian. We wouldn't spoil you for the world."

Leslie looked uncomfortable.

“Don’t worry, Leslie. Rusty is just teasing. Although you would belong to a Kiwanis Club if you knew where to find one. You’re too blondly, solidly, blindly American not to.” Stuartt laughed. “Too bad you are not a Southerner. You’d be a Ku Klux.”

Leslie was indignant. “You’re unfair, Stuartt. I *like* Negroes. I think they are as good as any other--”

“And feel superior liking us, Leslie. We understand. In fact, we sympathize, as long as you help Bill pay for our dinner.” (105)

The charge of Stuartt’s assertion that Leslie feels superior *for* liking them brings into focus the self-making involved in the enjoyment of property that grants whiteness the ability to fantasize its potential. Leslie becomes more than a vague-looking white man with “hair-colored hair and eye-colored eyes” against the backdrop of Harlem. He and Serge are afforded a type of uniqueness that is branded by their “willingness” to contend with the uncontained and wayward nature of black people bold enough to constitute a subjectivity that is less enjoyable than the subjugation anticipated by white emotional economies. The characterization of Leslie not only as interpreted and understood through the black characters in the text, but also in the deliberate gestures in the narratological tenors of *Gentleman Jigger* provides a unique case study for the “theory of double consciousness” in W.E.B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk*. The possibility that *unpleasantness* affords Stuartt and his friends at this moment is constitutive of the kind of awareness that Dubois localizes in *Souls of Black Folks*. It is not just that Stuartt found it

appropriate to demand a kind of reparation from Leslie, he unearthed the exploits of the paternalism and consumption underlying many of the social meanderings of white socialites hovering around Harlem. Richard Bruce Nugent crafts instances between Stuartt and Leslie that are distant because of what Hartman calls in *Scenes of Subjection* “deliberate calculations,” that provide a set of terms for the commodification of blackness, something that does not exist as plainly in much literature from the Harlem Renaissance.

Stuartt turns what was often understood as a mundane protocol of whiteness into a transaction with terms that determine what the process of being consumed would look like for both parties involved. The persistence of this social transaction undermines the operative tenets of an white economy of enjoyment that was cultivated not only through performances of mastery, but also in the ease of access that whites assumed/enjoyed. The constant collisions of Stuartt and Leslie’s relationship does not create awkward moments just because Stuartt is mean; it is uncomfortable for Leslie because Stuartt is not *easily accessible*. It is this difficulty that allows Stuartt to demand things from Leslie, whether it is money or simply to leave. For Stuartt (and others) to insist on terms by not being *enjoyable*, they lay claim to their lives as autonomous beings--they refuse to reenact the niceties of Antebellum life. Also, by prioritizing their natural aversion towards this kind of pandering, they affirm the living affective cosmologies of black people that would otherwise be written as palatable, static, docile, *friendly*, caricatures instead of dynamic and complex human beings. Human beings that because of their *unpleasantness*, whether

in fiction or within historiographies, become obscured, declassified, or erased in the study of the black life in the United States.

Such understudied moments of *unpleasantness* disclose histories of black life, particularly of black queer life, that would provide a fuller, less abstracted, picture of the day-to-day experiences of black people. What histories exist inside the dynamic human experience of unpleasantness? In what ways do we continue to endorse the operative tenets of white emotional economies through the projections that we make for the sake of our comfort? Richard Bruce Nugent's window into the famed Niggerati Castle interrogates the conventions of narrative and prompts us to consider what is lost in the faculties of enjoyment that we cling so closely to when writing history. Perhaps the reason why this novel was not published earlier is due to Nugent's own contention with tenors of the genre and comfort. Maybe the methodological strain of making his present experiences resulted in the seven versions of the manuscripts that existed before being published in its entirety by Da Capo Press in 2002. Despite the failures of genre and methods that makes the retelling of life in a realist novel difficult, *Gentleman Jigger* offers a praxis for recovering histories of black life that are not condemned by the emotional economies informing the readings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century archives. The narratological ebbs and flows of *Gentleman Jigger*, rupturing the boundaries between fact and fiction through moments that *hit close to home*, are situated in a longer trajectory of black queer affective cosmologies that localizes whitesupremacist insistence on retrieving its own humanity in the face of refurbished plantation system that deemed the most comfortable of them respectable. Consequently,

through prioritizing the comforts of whiteness underlining the social and theoretical approaches to the archive, *Gentleman Jigger* exists within a tradition, including later texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (as we'll see in the following chapter), that recovers histories that not only include sites of black people being *unpleasant* in the face of racial violence, but also broach conversation about particular histories of tabooed sexual violences that are, in and of themselves, *unpleasant*. However, despite the skepticism and hesitancy of such histories, the project of tending to the particular non-normative or "queered" negotiation of black people, including those who experienced same-sex sexual abuse, makes it possible to unearth the lives of black people whose lives were cast as secrets to be buried with the white people that owned, contained, or consumed them.

### Chapter 3: Morrison's *Beloved* and Queering the Screw Whitey Movement

In March of 2012, Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning literary icon Toni Morrison was interviewed by *Interview Magazine*, an American pop culture magazine. During this interview, Morrison told stories of her prolific and groundbreaking career, discussing the socio-political shifts prompted by a period in her work, as well as in the work of other African American literary figures, that she calls “the ‘screw whitey’ movement,” seemingly alluding to the Black Arts Movement (and perhaps the black knowledge production of writers and artist in the post-Blacks art period).<sup>1</sup> Morrison stated:

Anyway, after I finished *The Bluest Eye*, I had sent it out to a number of people, and I got mostly postcards saying, “We pass.” But I got one letter--somebody took it seriously and wrote a rejection letter. The editor was a woman. She said something nice about the language. And then she said, “But it has no beginning, it has no middle, and it has no end.” And I just thought, she’s wrong. But the thrill was having done it. And then [writer] Claude Brown recommended somebody to me at Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. But this was back in the day of the “screw whitey” books. One of the aggressive themes of the “screw whitey” movement was “black is beautiful.” I just thought, “What is that about? Who are they talking to? Me? You’re going to tell me I’m beautiful?” And I thought, “Wait a minute, before the guys get on the my-beautiful-black-queen wagon, let me tell you what it used to be like before you started that!” [*laughs*] You know, what racism does is create self-loathing, and it hurts. It can ruin you. (*Interview Magazine*)

I am fascinated by the implications made in the questions that Morrison recalls asking herself when confronted by the political stakes of the phrase, “black is beautiful.” The questions that Morrison broaches regarding the theme’s aims and what audience it intended to reach prompts, even now, a serious re-examination of the priorities of such an outward-facing sentiment of black life. The sentiment can be located in the genealogy of the aims of black life writing beginning as early as the eighteenth century, so its prevalence is not new or abstract by the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> However, Morrison interrogates the integrity of the theme’s operative tenets and representational politics opposite the reception of her novel, *The Bluest Eye*. As a follow-up, the interviewer asks Morrison how her novel was received by the black community, and if some felt that the novel was antithetical to the “black is beautiful” motif championed by many writers and artists during that time. Morrison responded:

Yeah, they hated it. The nicest thing I ever heard wasn’t from a critic, it was from a student who said, “I like *The Bluest Eye*, but I was really mad at you for writing it.” And I said, “Why?” And she said, “Because now they will know.” But most of them were dismissive. I thought that in that milieu, nobody was going to read this. (*Interview Magazine*)

Morrison’s novels have broken conventional narratological approaches to fiction as well as methodological avenues for historiography. Embedded in the textual gestures of her works exists a much needed, although unnerving, illumination of histories marred in the disciplinary critique and the polemics of representational politics. It seems that the cumbersome burden of what *they* will not appear in Morrison’s work in so much as to

help articulate a broader and more dynamic rendering of black life. However, in addition to the various paradigm shifts prompted by Morrison's work, novels like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* seem to, for some, complicate the political agenda of "black is beautiful" because of the less desirable optics of the black struggle. The retrieval of "what it used to be like" before seems to highlight a gap in the aims of black socio-political formations happening in the mid-twentieth century.

This chapter is, in part, interested in examining the ways that *Beloved* distinguishes itself from the aims of the not-so-distant Black Arts Movement because of the risks it takes in the kinds of historical themes it recovers. Mirroring the ambition of black women post-Black Arts writers, the intertextual performances in *Beloved*, specifically in the way Morrison recovers and highlights male same-gender abuse creates theoretical and historiographical possibility in a study of abuse under enslavement that is not completely absorbed in the objectification of the pierced flesh. I argue that the 'screw whitey' movement informs an even further nuanced socio-historical reckoning within *Beloved* that attempts to redress the heteronormative presumption that presupposes the archival absence of the same-gender abuse of black enslaved men. Morrison's meditation on enslavement and carcerality within the novel throws heteronormative tenets of the "black is beautiful" motif into flux. I invoke the term *screwed* as a theoretical apparatus to frame the unearthing of intersectional and transdisciplinary methods of historical recovery that Morrison situated around Paul D's enslavement and following containment in *Beloved*. Consequently, this chapter, in its attempts to think through Morrison's archival project, also critiques the heteronormative scrutiny barring the *novel* and the



historian from naming, with any institutional authority, the ability to historicize the interplay between white self-making and the homoerotic desire imbedded in the containment of black life.

I wrestle with the ontological messiness of being *screwed* as a condition of blackness and non-normativity in the historical archive that either reconfigures or forecloses demonstrative evidence of white, male same-gender abuse. The trouble of identifying the scenes of same-gender sexual abuse (or forms of sexual abuse that are homoerotic in nature) is, in part, due to the adoptions of slaveholding logics in the reading of scenes of violence. The classification of sexual violence from white slaveowners in the archive has been, in large part, identified through performances of mastery that “effectively” illustrate the satisfaction of owners through the *use* of their property and how this *enjoyment* is connected to their status within Antebellum society. In *Scenes of Subjection*, the urgency to consider the “affective dimensions of chattel slavery” broke ground for scholars who consider the affective innerworlds of black people as an integral part of historical recovery (Hartman 26). However, the overlapping political aims of historical recovery over the course of the twentieth century and the aesthetic themes of the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement create their own complications around the parameters of crafting historical narrative from the nineteenth century. Strategies of shifting Antebellum paradigms through the motifs like “black is beautiful” take purchase in the stock of white visual and emotional economies that are also male-centered and heteronormative in nature. Since same-gender sexual behaviors have been condemned in much of American history, recovering histories of

same-gender sexual abuse is almost impossible because of the presumptions made about the sex acts themselves. Many scholars cannot wrap their head around the fulfillment of non-heteronormative desires through the sexual abuse of the enslaved people being a part of the *enjoyment* of property. Dually, because of the ways that the *enjoyment* of property troubles gender roles--due to the ways that sexually violent acts are gendered--to distinguish the experiences between white owners and the enslaved, it seems that the recovery of abuses that complicates the conceptualization of black masculinity that combat Antebellum narratives about black enslaved men because an imagining of enslaved black men being sexually abused by their white owner destabilizes the image of black manhood that is being pushed into the political consciousness of of the United States in the 1960s.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

Contemporary Morrisonian scholars have queried the metonymic and synecdochical quagmire around the license to use “queer” as a description of the sites of sexual violence within the narratology of Paul D in *Beloved*. In *Extravagant Abjection*, Darieck Scott critiques the “natural” heteronormative inferences made within *Beloved* that constitute the framing around the violations of Paul D in the chain. While I do agree, in part, with the charge of Scott’s critique that pinpoints how the representational politics of liberalist interpretations of Morrison’s work seem to bypass the nuances and complexities of her historical project, I think that we would be remiss not to engage Morrison’s project as one that employs the methods of the historian and invests in interventions that can be made in the narrative performance of the *novel*. In *Henry Box Brown and Economies of Narrative Performance*, Janet Neary invokes the term *fugitive*

performance to “[draw] attention to the fugitive meanings within those performances, those aspects that contest, complicate, or are in excess of the editorial, theatrical, and political constraints that were the performances’ condition of production” (133). In *You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet*, Dennis Childs argues that in *Beloved* Morrison expresses what he calls the *Middle Passage carceral model*, “a paradigm of racial capitalist internment and violence that necessitates a shifting of white-subject-centered penal historiography” (274). The historical mapping that Childs is pinpointing within the fugitive performance of *Beloved*, coupled with the homoerotic scenes of racial violence that Scott is critiquing, underscores the conceptual messiness of a screwed epistemology. The historical intervention made in the crafting of *Beloved* through its *fugitive performance*, reveals to its audience the stakes of unearthing all histories of sexual violence. Morrison sparks the black literary imagination through her interrogation of the socio-historical machinations of white economies of enjoyment in *Beloved*. Additionally, she offers an avenue to examine the ways that *enjoyment* and strategies to preserve black masculinity have shaped responses to histories of violence that troubles heteronormative speculations about plantation life.<sup>5</sup>

Under American chattel slavery, white slaveowning men relied on the subjugation of black bodies to confirm the reality of gendered and sexual identity formations. In tandem to the proprietary demarcation of the slave body, the slaveowners also had license to continuously redesign contemporary understandings of *normative* through forms of abuse that emphasized the extent of their mastery through abuses that existed in the inbetween of *public* and private, the corporeal visual markets of the auction block or

marketplace. Being able to apply their own terms to the procedure of how one might *enjoy* their property further complicates the methodologies available to scholars seeking to make legible various forms of sexual abuse and how we explain them within that period. The arduous task of figuring, and refiguring, the ever-changing coordinates of both *normative* and *non-normative* valences of queer meaning-making and knowing under enslavement fails because black bodies are subsumed in a slave status, eradicating the possibility of consent altogether.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, there is no epistemological standpoint that considers the inability for enslaved people to name what happened behind closed doors, highlighting a hierarchical undercurrent within approaches to the archive that disproportionately scrutinizes the stories of black people. Without a serious consideration for the strategic opportunities that slavemasters had away from public view to explore their own fetishes, we become willful participants in the facades that they themselves may have fabricated to prevent the public from witnessing sex acts that would be condemnable.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, but taking purchase in the idea that all white slaveowners were white, straight, and writing down all of their sexual proclivities (or doing them in public), as scholars, we become a part of the population of people that fell for the same outward-facing heteronormative charade that others fell for in the nineteenth century. How is it that we are presently participating in the same scheme set up by white slaveowning men who were sexually abuse enslaved black men? *Beloved* not only makes narratological and historical interventions in the recovery of black life in the historical archive, it also highlights Morrison's attention to the way in which this novel sparks a series of questions within various fields to points to

the methodological limits of comfort when recovering narratives of black life in the archive.

Thus, the possibility of same-gender abuses that would be visually and aesthetically understood as queer becomes illegible because of the precarity of enslaved gendered and sexual identities whose terms are most prominently articulated in their abuse. An *ungendering*, as theorized in Spillers' *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, rehearses an overdetermined codifying and undoing of enslaved identity that, in addition to obscuring the heritability of race, allows white perpetrators of abuse to remain fleeting in their contributions to contemporary queer discourses (224). Enslaved bodies do not possess *individuality* (Robinson 229), which would be required to name the difference in how gender and sexuality are employed in the space of same-gender abuse inflicted on them by their master. Sites of same-gender abuse in the archive of American chattel slavery are often distinguished from the homoerotic nature of the sex act itself because all enslaved bodies already exist as undefined, ungendered, and by the terms of enslavement itself, in a normative positionality as property that makes the sexual violence they experience appear "normal" within the study of slavery. It is not only the melancholy attitude towards evidence of sexual abuse in the archive that is unnerving, it is that forms of sexual abuse that do not seem to be as commodifiable within academic disciplines (or capable of garnering critical acclaim because it unsettles or discomforts) are often foreclosed. This echoes the same political models that would condemn the work of Morrison in the Black Arts (and post-Black Arts) period.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman situates “the perpetual condition of ravishment” (51) imposed on the enslaved body as constitutive of a fixed social condition, one that, in being subjected to such constant violence, is *normative*. Hartman writes:

Pain is a normative condition that encompasses the legal subjectivity of the enslaved that is constructed along the lines of injury and punishment, the violation and suffering inextricably enmeshed with the pleasures of minstrelsy and melodrama, the operation of power on black bodies, and the life of property in which the full enjoyment of the slave as thing supersedes the admittedly tentative recognition of slave humanity and permits the intemperate uses of chattel. (51)

The overarching overdetermination of slave lives as frequent victims of violence, though generative, overlooks a separate set of negotiations that enslaved bodies are confronted with if their master takes interest in any form of homoerotic abuse. The ‘normativity’ of their pain cast upon them due to frequent violence denotes a kind of totalization that separates the enslaved from *particularity*, signaling a likeness to a sense of *universality* among the enslaved that, as Ferguson writes in *Aberrations in Black*, “exists in opposition to the intersecting particularities that account for material existence...” (12). The normative positioning of pain, as an addendum to the subjectivity of the enslaved body, manifests as a hairline fracture that exposes the limits of the terms *normative* and *non-normative* across disciplines. The constant violence experienced by enslaved black bodies, designated as *things*, constitutes the perimeters of both *normalization* and *normativity*. This fracture appears most evidently in the way that *normativity screws* black bodies by foreclosing the particularity of specific kinds of internal negotiations had

by enslaved individuals enduring same-gender abuse, or by foreclosing the possibility of any kind of white same-gender abuse being acknowledged to have any effect on racialized non-normative gendered or sexual formations in their entirety. Enslaved bodies cannot be individuated and, thus lack the humanity to have their abuse named more precisely outside of their already complex subjectivity. The liminality of their bodies, due to the inbetween-ness of their subjectivity, reinforces their subjugation because the access to the humanity required for a queer reading of the *non-normativity* of their abuses (and for their separate same-gender negotiations to be realized) is still unattainable. This allows a history of white same-gender abuse to continue, and be refashioned under the veil of self-authorship, because it can operate freely in the space where the status of black bodies is stagnant. Additionally, any reality of white same-gender abuse becomes subsumed in the harsh regularity of racial violence whose remedy is sought out through humanizing, or locating, the black body but that never redresses the white hodge-podge of same-gender desire and racial degradation. These black *screwed* subjectivities, ones whose bodies become an irrevocable stain, functions as both an inevitable truth and a historical pattern. One that, like most unremovable stains, tarnishes a claim to “injury”—“a physical wound or psychic harm” (Reed 51) —proposed by a white queer imaginary that is sentimentalized in the ethos of a political system that bears the weight of a revisionist history of white non-heteronormative figures.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, along with cultivating multiple ways in which ex-slaves deal with the *haptics*— “the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you...” (Harney & Moten 98) —of grief in the afterlife of

enslavement, asks her readers to consider how *sex* and *desire* are negotiated by the black characters in this novel. Morrison's work around the characters' intention to forget (a pursuit that is fraught among ex-slaves), highlights the ways in which the afterlife of slavery's "economies of enjoyment" is imparted into the shared intimacies between the characters throughout the novel, who seek to piece together self-authored gender and sexual identities. This is especially true for the character of Paul D, whose tumultuous cultivation of a gendered and sexual identity is produced through "a lack of common time" (Nyong'o 95), an attunement to time that Tavia Nyong'o terms *blackpolytemporality* (95). Paul D's production of his own manhood gleams through a refracted lens that, despite his intention to both forget his past as a slave and recall moments of manliness, always directs his ambition to reconcile his notions of a gendered or sexual performance of masculinity to sites that further articulate his subjugation or reinforce his *ungendering* (Spillers 224). Although *normative* within the scope of the frequent violence inflicted upon enslaved bodies, Paul D's experience of homoerotic charges— "[implying] same-gender arousal and draw[ing] attention to those political, social and libidinal forces that shape desire ..." (Woodard 14)—are linked to both sexual abuse and the way that their desires are satiated through the spectacle of the battered black body.

We encounter two instances in *Beloved* where the narrative of Paul D underscores the screwedness of recovering and articulating historically situated sites of same-gender abuse. The first, and perhaps most apparent, moment occurs at the site of Paul D's sexual abuse during his imprisonment in a chain-gang in chapter 10 of "Part 1." It begins with



Paul D's journey to Virginia in a coffle after attempting to kill Brandywine, the slave owner that purchased him from Schoolteacher (106). The elucidation of the language used by Morrison when illustrating the constraints of slave life, and conditions of their labor, suggests a type of rendering of the bodies in the chain-gang with, "Each man bent and wait[ing]" (Morrison 107). The narration of the chain-gang itself suggests the production of homoeroticism that is derived from the choreography at the site of the men fastening their chains. The narration reads:

All forty-six men woke to rifle shot. All forty-six. Three whitemen walked along the trench unlocking the doors one by one. No one stepped through. When the last lock was opened, the three returned and lifted the bars, one by one. And one by one the blackmen emerged--promptly and without the poke of a rifle butt if, like Paul D, they had just arrived. When all forty-six were standing in a line in the trench, another rifle shot signaled the climb out and up to the ground above, where one thousand feet of the best hand-forged chain in Georgia stretched. Each man bent and waited. The first man picked up the end and threaded it through the loop on his leg iron. He stood up then, and, shuffling a little, brought the chain tip to the next prisoner, who did likewise. As the chain was passed on and each man stood in the other's place, the line of men turned around, facing the boxes they had come out of. Not one spoke to the other. At least not with words. The eyes had to tell what there was to tell: "Help me this mornin; 's [sic] bad"; "I'm a make it"; "New man"; "Steady now steady." (127)

The spectacle of repeated movements in the coffle suggests, if not completely asserts, the homoerotic desires woven into the subjugation of the black body. The recurring moment of these black men who, inserting a chain into the hole of their shackles, then “brought the chain tip to the next prisoner, who did likewise” (Morrison 107) fashions the propensity (and reality) of their sexual abuse into a rehearsal that foreshadows the ensuing sexual abuse under the guise of a kind of coerced seduction. This coerced seduction is facilitated by the progression of the phallic chain, a racial and sexual marker linked to the subjectivity of the men in the coffle, that is as unescapable as the desire of the onlooking white men. The spectacle of these men bending and inserting this chain into an orifice denotes the charge of the forced racialized homoerotic performance, wherein to be bounded is the result of a seduction that is facilitated by performance of a submission of the flesh. The forced tantalization of this bounded act of submission that is only realized at the moment in which the black body penetrates itself with the tools of its oppression. The penetration of the chain, a symbol of Paul D’s racial subjection and an extension of himself as an object to be *enjoyed*, codifies the willful projection of this seduction through the repetition in the offering of a black self-penetrating orifice.

The forced movement within the scene complicates the terms of captivity whose adherence is only realized in the tantalization of the body as it binds itself. Put differently, the racialization of the black men in the coffle depends on a performance of *fastening* that explicitly highlights their susceptibility of being *dominated* by a top whose racial status is solidified not only through penetration, but also by the number of bottoms readily available to them, and in the presentation of their hole as a willing and

eager receptacle. I hesitate to use the word *tease*, because it suggests some form of agency on behalf of the men subjected to racial violence, but it is appropriate in relation to how their bodies are presented to the white guards through the narration. As we progress through this scene, that presents the black orifice as a receptacle, we are confronted with, as Musser writes, “the racialized hierarchies that mark appetite [that] are brought into explicit conversation with the pleasure of penetrating another” (71). Morrison deploys a type of optic that illustrates the inseparability of race and homoeroticism in this moment wherein pleasure depends on a projection of agency in regarding an expression of sexual ferocity placed onto the black men.

The necessity of a fabricated *seduction* or enticement is akin to Hartman’s interrogation of the perception of enjoyment in the song of the slaves in the coffle described by George W. Featherstonhaugh (33). Hartman writes:

Foremost among these issues is the thorny status of pleasure, given such instrumental uses, the instability of agency when conspicuous displays of willfulness only serve to undermine the subject, and the perviousness of pain and pleasure at various sites of amusement, inclusive of slaves striking it smart on the auction block, the popular stage, and the breakdown performed in the quarter.

(33)

This quote, in relation to the scene in Morrison’s *Beloved*, attends to the forced tantalization of the black body that has to contend with the terms of its enslavement or boundedness under the threat of death. The narration deploys the projection of the sexual *bottom* onto the men in the coffle, as marker for racial hierarchy and pleasure: a term

Morrison plays on in other writing (*Sula*) that, sharing a colloquial rendering alongside its sexual queer invocation, “[was] a common nickname for black slave quarters...” (Stockton 68). It appears here not only as a praxis from which to understand the impending sexual abuse, but also to grasp and locate the gaze of the readership.

In this way, Morrison mirrors the template of many slave narratives published in the eighteenth and nineteenth century where the *gaze* of a white readership gains a type of sexual authority over how black bodies are depicted (Saillant 303). The narration of Paul D’s bondage in the coffle employs a type of iconicity of the black males present in many slave narratives and abolitionist writings. This method of writing is concerned with the arousal of white sexual discourses, except Morrison exceeds the perimeters of this template by excessively closing in on gestures of the black body that go beyond what is desired for sexual affect. As Musser avers in conversation with Spiller’s invocation of *pornotroping* (206), Morrison’s narrative strategy in *Beloved* illuminates the “affective areas of racialization” (Musser 9) that capture “the racialist gaze and surveillance economy of racial slavery” (Neary 133) in the gestures— “a bodily sign; an indication” (Neary 133)—of the characters in the novel.<sup>8</sup> The *movement* of Paul D’s hands, ones that “traveled” (Morrison 107), but that “would not hold his penis to urinate or a spoon to scoop lumps of the lima beans into his mouth” (Morrison 107), take part in a type of *gesturing*. Such *gesturing* in *Beloved* that supersedes the limits of the deployed *pornotropic* gaze at black bodies, inundates the erogenous capacity of the text with the overdetermination of what Neary calls “narrative performance” (131). Morrison evokes *narrative performance* in the gesturing of Paul D, as well as other characters, by

overwriting a pornographic white gaze through using “similar recognition of the iconicity of the black body and visual savvy” (Neary 131) and forcing readers to reckon with what Musser names the “excesses and opacities of the pornotrope,” (11) and the virtue of the gaze itself. In this way, Morrison asks her readers to gaze at the projection of white desire mapped onto black bodies, and when the readers are satisfied with the erogenous racialized optics of the scene and attempt to move to another, Morrison grasps us, forcing an extended gaze, to reckon with excessive simultaneities of the frequent pornotropic moments in the coffle.

The narrativization of these black men kneeling waiting for some unknown recourse from the guards positions them within the extended gaze Morrison is demanding. These men are spectacles, on their knees, subdued and subjected to the full domination of these guards. It reads:

Chain-up completed, they knelt down. The dew, more likely than not, was mist by then. Heavy sometimes and if the dogs were quiet and just breathing you could hear doves. Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of the guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none-or all.

“Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hungry, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here you go.”

Occasionally, a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves', as he stood before the man kneeling in the mist on his right. (127)

The rephrased question, performed as a titillating accoutrement for his own predation, illustrates a repeated pattern of sexual abuse foregrounding the cultivation of his sexual taste. In this scene, not only do we see another site of sexual abuse, but Morrison also depicts black bodies made to project a performance of their sexual degradation, even as black prisoners experiencing immediate tangible racial subjugation. These black men were being coerced under the threat of death to act as an interlocutor of pleasure not only through of the force of their physical bodies, but in pornographic potential as witness. Forced to participate in a form of erotic voyeurism, watching others being *screwed*, "listening to his [the guard's] soft grunts so like the doves, as he stood before the man kneeling in mist on his right," (127) by the guard's act of forced fellatio. This scene in *Beloved* offers to us a glimpse into sexual manifestation of the temporal recurrence of the white guard's sexual desires, both presently, and through his decisive acts articulated in the narration of the scene.

Morrison uses this lexicon failure in the novel to illustrate, despite its widely known adherence to fiction, the existence of same-gender abuse and differentiate it from being subsumed in the normativity or the normalcy of racial violence. We should also equally consider, separate from *excess* (Musser 9), the eroticism articulated in the violence of the gaze, specifically the homoeroticism expressed in the *gaze* of white men,

through the character dialogue and narration of *Beloved*. The critique of the racialist homoerotic gaze in *Beloved*, differing from the overdetermination of racially sexualized or erogenous scenes of violence, gestures towards the failures of terms through its descriptive movement of same-gender abuse, specifically. Morrison forages through the unnameability of the homoerotic violence inflicted upon Paul D expressing, intentionally or not, the failure to name the same-gender sexual violence outwardly and thus *fails* to consider the interiority of Paul D in that moment. The progression of the scene despite the resistance with the language, in this sense, is indicative of a type of “fugitive performance”:

...the narrative, oratorical, and theatrical performances of fugitives from slavery; [draws] attention to the fugitive meanings within those performances, those aspects that contest, complicate, or are in excess of the editorial, theatrical, and political constraints that were the performances’ conditions of production...

(Neary 131)

This textual performance, sharing similarities to the previous narrative performance, offers a way to assess the failure of the terms available to Morrison around same-gender abuse of bounded black bodies of the period in the novel. Where Morrison has been critiqued in relation to *Beloved* for the novel’s “retreat from what we call ‘graphic’ description” (Scott 133), there could actually be a textual gesture in and of itself, one that does not move away from the sites of graphic violence, but that queries the capacity for the novel, despite its suspension of disbelief, to name same-gender abuse inflicted onto black bodies. However, further in *Beloved*, Morrison captures a scene in Paul D’s past

that might be a scaffolding for addressing more extensively “the excesses and opacities of the pornotrope” (Musser 11) and the ways that the textual performance in *Beloved* that deals with homoeroticism explicates *excess* (Musser 11). Morrison utilizes the familiar iconicity (Neary 131) of the black body but does so while both illustrating the homoerotic gaze and extending possibilities of resistance in the *bottomhood* of Sixo after he and Paul D are recaptured by schoolteacher and a group of white men while trying to escape Sweet Home. The plan unfolds when Halle and Paul A, two of the five people involved in the escape, don’t show up to the meeting point and Sixo, Thirty-Mile woman, and Paul D are confronted by the posse. Thirty-mile woman, Sixo’s lover, escapes, but Sixo and Paul D are surrounded and tied up. A little later in the scene, the narrative gesture of the homoerotic valences in this particular moment begins by detailing the movements or actions of the peripheral settings, noting that “Paul D feels how dewy and inviting the grass is” (Morrison 225). The lubricating “invitation” of the wet grass into this moment functions as a preparedness of the bottom, similar to the presentation of the orifice mentioned earlier, but its actual appearance is deferred by the spectacle of Sixo and Paul D’s bound bodies. Amidst the dewyness, Sixo attempts to escape the men, grabbing the mouth of a rifle with one hand and swinging the stock. Sixo ends up breaking one of the white man’s ribs before being knocked out and tied to a tree at the waist (Morrison 225). At the moment that the two men are bound to the tree, Morrison localizes the spectacle of Sixo and Paul D’s bodies with that of other well-known slave narratives and abolitionist writings wherein the black body is bounded to a tree or post. Similar circumstances appear in the whipping of Madison Washington in Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic*



*Slave* and of Aunt Hester in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; and in the appearance of Luke in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. However, Morrison's depiction of a "waist-tied" (225) Sixo reinforces a before-mentioned moment of white domination that is tangled up in the tantalization of the enslaved black body. This moment categorizes the movements of a bound black subject with *bottomhood* (Musser 83). In *Sensual Excess*, Musser borrows the term *bottomhood* from Nyguen Tan Hoang who utilizes the term as a way to embrace "less valorized sides of multiple socio-cultural formations including femininity and being anally penetrated" (83). The presentation of the readily available black orifice, sensing the dewyness of the grass, and now, bound by the waist to a tree, orients the reader's gaze to the site of both men tied to a deep, unmovable phallus that is represented in the tree.

When Sixo attempts to fight off the white men with the rifle stock, presenting the extension of his phallus and assertion as a top resisting *bottomhood*, the racial and sexual markers of his subjugation must be reiterated through force without making contact with the phallus (the rifle stock) and risking *submission* to the black subject. After one of the white men is struck attempting to detain Sixo, the rest wait for the erection of Sixo's topness to subside before knocking him out. The rifle stock, as an extension of the untouchable black phallus in this white homoerotic invocation of domination, supersedes an eighteenth and nineteenth century depiction of the sympathetic "poor negro" (Saillant 303), docile and compliant in the purview of a white readership. Morrison's narrative performance, articulated in the gesture of Sixo swinging the rifle stock at the white men, focuses the racist gaze directly onto the extension of Sixo in a moment that depicts a

resistance to mundane formulaic conditions of the eroticized black body (Foster 448). In response, the situatedness of Sixo's subjectivity is forcibly relegated to the totality of the *bottom*, being overpowered by a display of white homoeroticism with his buttocks pressed against an immovable phallus.

When Sixo awakens, after being hit in the head with the stock of a rifle, a fire is in front of him. Then Morrison writes, "Schoolteacher has changed his mind: 'This one will never be suitable.' The song must've convinced him" (266), textually gesturing toward Sixo's unwilling submission to schoolteacher and the sexual optics that the text initially offers. As a result, despite schoolteacher's more pressing concerns about a financial loss in the disposal of a slave, he deems Sixo unsuitable (226), a decision in the text that is irrevocably tied up in Sixo's resistance to be bottom. However, as the white men begin to attempt to burn Sixo alive, Morrison crafts development of an alternative optic of *bottomhood* that tends to the term of Nguyen Tan Hoang's reimagining of bottom that embraces "femininity and being anally penetrated" (83). As the fire keeps failing, which in the scope of the entire scene functions as an indicator of the failure of the white projection of bottomhood onto Sixo, Morrison notes that "the whitemen are put out with themselves at not being prepared for this emergency" (266). The "emergency" written into the narration denotes inability to contain the self-authorship of Sixo's body that, through his situated *bottomhood* (Musser 84), is experiencing "submission and abjection" (84) simultaneously. The emergency of Sixo's subjectivity in this moment exists in his failed capacity to hold together the erotic projection facilitated by the gaze of the white men. Similarly, Morrison undoes the racialized caricature of his body in the economy of

the “white racialist gaze” (Neary 133) within the novel that surpasses the homoerotic desires in the visual of the moment.

The crisis of Sixo’s body is further exacerbated as he begins laughing as, “he feet are cooking [and] the cloth of his trousers smokes” (226). The narration reads:

The fire keeps failing and the whitemen are put out with themselves at not being prepared for this emergency. They came to capture, not kill. What they can manage is only enough for cooking hominy. Dry faggots are scarce and the grass is slick with dew.

By the light of the hominy fire Sixo Straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs. A rippling sound like Sethe’s sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater. His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes. He laughs. Something is funny. Paul D guesses what it is when Sixo interrupts his laughter to call out, “Seven-O! Seven-O!”

Smoky, stubborn fire. They shoot him to shut him up. Have to. (267)

The fire, an expression of dominance exerted by the white men in this scene, burns the cloth of Sixo trousers bringing the phallus he is forcibly bound to closer to his orifice. Sixo’s laughing is then followed by call out to his unborn child, having escaped inside the womb of Thirty-Mile Woman (226). His “song” (Morrison 226), at the moment that his abjected body is at its closest to the unmovable phallus, shifts the terms of his domination. The pleasure derived from the laughter of Sixo amidst his burning, separate from the “unsettling juxtaposition of the festive and unseen” (Hartman 33) noted in Hartman’s work, avers a moment that is similar to what Musser calls, “jouissance” in the

*narrative performance* (Neary 133) of Sixo. Morrison, through the moment of laughter and shouting in the racialized abjection of Sixo's *bottomhood* (Musser 84), exceeds the conditions of "phallic jouissance" (Musser 73) that is described by Musser as "a crisis of self-shattering and the destruction of the imaginary of coherence" (73). Sixo marks the moment of his "self-shattering" in the refusal to comply to the demand of docility, and through the assertion of his own extended phallus (the rifle) but redefines the moment of crisis by cultivating a moment of laughter and shouting at the epitome of his *bottoming*. It is at this moment where the laughter of his *bottomhood* (Musser 84), further emphasized by the knowledge of his family's evasion of schoolteacher, reforms the moment of the crisis with, perhaps, a pleasure of knowing. The assurance that Sixo had in knowing that his family was no longer in the hands of schoolteacher, despite the immediate violence of burning or objectification of his exposed genitals and buttocks, places the production of homoeroticism, the gaze imbedded within the text, and the abject body in excess of their conditions.

After the fire fails to seize Sixo's pleasure, as bottom, the narrator writes, "Smoky, stubborn fire. They shoot him to shut him up. Have to" (226). Sixo's death becomes, at the moment of laughter derived from the pleasure of knowing despite his abjection, the moment of his self-shattering. Morrison's care around the performance Sixo's "song", a consummation of his *bottomhood*, illustrates the anality of a site of violence whose penetration cannot override the interiority of the black subject. The production of desire orchestrated by the racist gaze of Sixo in this moment surpasses the limit of pornographic objectability of his body, which is disparaged at the moment that

the pleasure of his bottoming is expressed in opposition to white terror. The finality in the exertion of topness displayed by the white men, whose desire is not satiated by the song of Sixo despite the conditions of his body, point to an even further articulated phallogentric redress that cannot appeal to the pleasures of the bottom. The risk in Sixo's song presents to the white men an orifice, a *bottomhood*, that implores them to think through possibilities of flesh in relation to the erotics of their domination. In this way, Sixo's pleasure and the self-authorship of his subjectivity, not as a tropic docile and waiting bottom, "defy slaveowners' conception of black sexuality" (Lindsey and Johnson 190). Sixo's *bottomhood* denotes a kind of *likeness* (Saillant 319) to the homoerotic desires of the white men in this scene, who originally sought to experience pleasure from the production of terror. When Sixo's pleasure emphasized a *likeness* in the ability to derive pleasure, despite it being centrally located in the absconding of other black bodies, the racialist gaze turns from *bottomhood*, categorizing its gestures as a reason for emergency and, ultimately, its death. The white phallogentric moment of turning from the bottom evokes the narrative performance of a Sadeian turn, akin to the site Madame de Mistival's ejaculation at the moment of her assault by her daughter, Eugénie, Dolmancé, and Saint-Ange (Carter 128). Like Sixo's pleasure amidst his boundedness to an erected white phallus, "the implication of her orgasm," cannot be tolerated. Although differing in terms of the racial optics of a white sovereign subject, Madame de Mistival's moment of orgasm, facilitated by forced penetration by her daughter, ushers the invitation of her death (though she is not actually killed) because "[the] Mother must never be allowed to

come, and so to come alive” (Carter 128). At one point in the Sadeian narrative, the mother’s death is even wished upon her by her daughter (Carter 120).

The depiction of the mother in Marquis de Sade’s pornographic work, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, whose invocation of the bottom is implied in her position as the penetrable subject at the hands of her daughter, is posited as “a concrete denial of the idea of sexual pleasure since her sexuality has been placed at the service of reproductive function alone” (Carter 124). Sixo is similarly posited in his positioning as bottom, and thus, deemed undesirable in the scope of what Edward Baptist calls “a complex of inseparable fetishism” (1622) imbedded in the erotics of Sixo’s demise, where his only function as bottom is as sexual object in view of a white racist gaze. The production of white homoerotic desires through the gaze of the white posse is significant because of its elucidation of what Hartman calls the “the pleasures of self-augmentation” (21) in *Scenes of Subjection*:

The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave--that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity--and the extensive capacities of property--that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons. (21)

The *embodiment* that Hartman describes in the quote above speaks to an extended realm of possibility for white expressions of selfhood that is unconstrained because of how it attempts to *embody* black *being*. Here, embodiment of being can be figured in how

the polymorphic matter of sexual consumption is refigured in the false moment of crisis located in the expression of Sixo's *bottomhood*. The finality in the penetration of the bullet into Sixo's body, and the fabrication of emergency making possible to do so, functions as an augmentation of the white man who, through overriding any agency over Sixo's *bottomhood* in this moment, embodies Sixo's position of bottom to attain some form of pleasure. Additionally, the risk illustrated in Sixo's "song" depicts the agency of his creation of a separate sexual subjectivity. Sixo's *pleasure of knowing* and the possibility of facetiousness in his laughter indicates that, as Jennifer Morgan argues, "enslaved people best understood the theory and praxis of racial slavery" (2).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* exists within a tradition of black writing (particularly black life-writing) whose distinguishing features, although breaking convention within white literary genres, includes an embedded methodology to find the lives of black people who would otherwise remain obscured in the colonial archive. By the time that *Beloved* was published, Morrison had already endured the troubles of narrativizing aspects of black affective life that are not in alignment with the aesthetic aims of black political formations. Although difficult, Morrison underscores the urgency of utilizing intersectional methodological approaches in the recovery of historical narratives. The depiction of Paul D's sexual abuse, much like the aspirations of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, unveils affective dimensions of the trauma of enslavement in its afterlife. Additionally, and maybe equally as urgent, are aspects of Morrison's narrative performance that highlight the consequences of dismissing the affective dimensions of uncomfortable sites of abuse under slavery. The homoeroticism that Toni Morrison

localizes in the narratology of Paul D and Sixo prompts us to consider not only the living archive of male same-gender forms of abuse, but how further engagement with these forms of sexual abuse are instrumental in understanding the cultivation of white sexual discourse within Antebellum society as a whole. Undermining the racialized sexual paradigms embedded in white gay male sexual histories makes it virtually impossible to even to begin to explain the varied and complex measures taken to reclaim the ability to *enjoy* contained black bodies. The adverse response from political space, precisely those that are needed to bring awareness to all forms of racialized abuse, operates in tandem with white economies of enjoyment and gives them a better opportunity to lay claim to black bodies in the ways that Morrison highlights through her narrative performance in *Beloved*. Unfortunately, the charge of Morrison's socio-historical narrativization would not only prove to be a case study for the social and affective precarity of the public's perception of black queer men, but it would become a fully realized methodology pinpoint an a longer genealogy of the racial dimensions of white gay male abuse that we encounter by the late-twentieth century. The *screwedness* of Morrison's rendering of this form of abuse (and the epistemological standpoint of such) has an overwhelming presence within the space of the judicial court and the court of public opinion in the case examined in the final chapter of the dissertation, *State of Wisconsin v. Jeffrey L. Dahmer*. Morrison's historical intervention in *Beloved* becomes a lens from which we are able recognize the ways that the difficulty of articulating racialized same-gender sexual abuse operates in tandem with aims that make it hard to express why the slaveholding



characteristics of these murders is hard to explain, or is made impossible to place into historical context regarding histories of race in the United States.

#### **Chapter 4: The Televisuality of Black Queer Death in the Aftermath of Dahmer**

On July 22, 1991, at 11:30 p.m., officers of the Milwaukee Police Department encountered Tracy Edwards, barely clothed with a handcuff on one wrist. Edwards led the police back to an apartment at 924 North 25th Street in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the discovery of several dismembered body parts in the kitchen and living area led to the arrest of Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer, 31 (white). Dahmer would later confess to sexually assaulting, murdering, and dismembering seventeen men. Most of Dahmer's seventeen victims, whom he called "love slaves," were black men. Despite the majority of the victims being black gay men (or Black men engaging in some kind of homosocial activity), neither the courts nor the media were required to contend with blackness as an inextricable element in the fabrication of sexual power sought after in the Dahmer case. Instead, the verdict for both the court and the viewing public relied heavily on how these murders, or uses of power, were deviant or abnormal because of their homoerotic nature. The debates within and around the Dahmer case regarding morality, psychosis, gayness, and kink/fetish culture did not consider the possibility of strangulation, bondage, and drug injection being ones informed by racist ideologies. In fact, the overwhelming majority of questions taken up by academics when defining, surveying, or examining critical features in the often anthropological or sociological studies of serial killers are usually not in conversation with the aesthetics or modalities of violence that have been central in the formation of race in the United States. The teleological space between slave master (or Klu Klux Klan member) and serial killer functionally eradicates the institutional possibility of establishing continuity between the histories of violence that

constitutes the reservoir of documented and normalized behaviors and actions that, quite literally, overlap with the defining characteristics of a serial killer. The concurrent formation of a white sexual economy of enjoyment during American chattel slavery, one that informed laws around the property and the inheritability of race, set precedents for black bodily autonomy and use that obscure how this use is factored into gestures of mastery.

The case of *State of Wisconsin v. Jeffrey L. Dahmer*, preceded mostly by its life in popular culture, is perhaps known as one of the most gruesome serial murder cases in history. Competing and often contradictory narratives about this series of murders often cast almost every other aspect of Dahmer's life--his upbringing, sexual orientation, and mental state--as a culprit for what would ultimately be the killing of 17 men (of whom the majority were black queer men). The media circus surrounding Dahmer's violence would establish a legacy in popular culture that would long outlive Dahmer, who died in 1994 after an altercation with his cellmate. Narratives of the life of Dahmer would be disseminated in television, film, music, and social media. Not only do these narratives erase the lives of Dahmer victims--often deleting specific details of their lives--but they prioritize making their deaths more palatable for a national audience. Dahmer's media presence has mainly depended on casting him as a victim of circumstance and an accompanying hostage to the tragedy of these killings instead of a man acting of his own volition. The media frenzy around the aspects of Dahmer's development, perceived to be a core component in piecing together the causality of this case, plays an irrefutable role in the narrativization of Dahmer in film and media. The visual production of this case,

alongside the racist and homophobic tenets of the socio-political landscape, bypasses the racialized undercurrents of the murders themselves for the sake of the spectacle of Jeffrey Dahmer on television. Additionally, the cultivation of Dahmer's celebrity through the narratological ebbs and flows within various stories of his upbringing and struggles with his sexual orientation, and more, detaches Dahmer's violence from a long legacy of same-gender abuse reaching as far back as the Antebellum period. The same operative tenets of white mastery that sequestered histories of white male same-gender abuse from the public eye during the Antebellum period reveal the production of Jeffrey Dahmer as a stake in white comfort and the narrativization of Dahmer as a "character" in the tragedy of the case instead of a perpetrator.

In this chapter, I examine the affective conundrum of causality in the narrativization of the Dahmer case on television during the first two years after his arrest in July 1991. I am interested in disentangling the ways that the centering of cause in the depiction of Dahmer on television subscribes to the paradigms of white affective economies of enjoyment that ultimately shape the public's perception of what would eventually become one of the most famous (and widely consumed) pop cultural representations of a serial killer in the United States. I argue that the cultural discourse on (or around) Jeffrey Dahmer on television within the first two years of his arrest capitalized on the visual markets of black death and relied on the characteristics of various aspects of his personality in ways that would ultimately lead to the solidification of his celebrity status in the public domain. In this chapter, I will analyze two different treatments of the Dahmer case across two television broadcasts at the local and national

levels. The first broadcast was a ninety-minute live special of *The New Tri-Cable Tonight* (previously the Milwaukee Gay/Lesbian Cable Network) that aired on August 1, 1991. The live episode aired to allow the public to vent or share their opinions about the Dahmer Case by making live call-in available. The active audience participation in this broadcast reveals the tension within the competing narratives of the Dahmer case while also highlighting the tension among black and LGBTQ+ communities in establishing the social and political stakes of the deaths of these black queer men. Additionally, this would be one of the few televised public forums on the case held within its first few years.

The second broadcast is the courtroom footage of the live broadcast of *State of Wisconsin v. Jeffrey L. Dahmer*. On January 30, 1992, the trial of Jeffrey L. Dahmer aired on *WITI-TV* and *WDJT-TV*, two local Wisconsin stations, along with the national broadcast network *Court TV*. In an article published by the Washington Post a day before the live broadcast, senior producer of Court TV, Andy Regal, stated that “his network decided to broadcast the Dahmer trial after it became clear that the proceeding would provide a vehicle to examine the insanity defense and would involve more than a series of ‘horrific pictures’ of Dahmer’s mutilated victims” (Washington Post). This decision would be the opposite of *CNN*, which had decided not to broadcast the Dahmer trial. Steve Haworth, a *CNN* spokesman in Atlanta then, stated: “We don’t have the same sense of substantial national interest in the Dahmer trial” (Washington Post). *CNN*’s withdrawal from the opportunity to compete with then-rival *Court TV* for the national ratings of Dahmer’s arrangement seemed to illustrate *CNN*’s political meanderings. The production

of the trial involved auditory and visual mechanisms that flagged, altered, and even omitted statements and testimonies that producers considered obscene on both the local and national networks. The palatability of the trial was a significant consideration for networks looking to gain notoriety for the coverage of the case while also maintaining a substantial number of viewers. The mediating audiovisual components of the broadcast were not only indicative of stake in the palatability of the trial for viewing audiences but of the prioritization in the narrativizing Dahmer as a character within a tragedy of his own making.

### **The New Tri-Cable Tonight Broadcast, August 1991**

On August 1, 1991, The New Tri-Cable Tonight hosted a ninety-minute live episode that included telephone call-ins to vent and comment on the recent tragedy of the Dahmer case. The hosts, Michael Ross (black) and Michael Lisowski (white) sat on a small, circular stage in front of the bright neon The New Tri-Cable Tonight sign with a small coffee table that was covered in wires that connected to the telephone that would be used to take live calls. The men sat anxiously fidgeting with their pens for a few moments while gazing dismally off-stage. As the soft music faded, Ross quickly collected himself and began the broadcast:

Hello, Milwaukee. And welcome to a particular segment of Tri-Cable Tonight.

The “new” Tri-Cable. This evening we’re here to discuss the massacre in

Milwaukee. The tragedy that took place or that came to the realization was on

July 22, 1991. We're here to express our anger, shock, grief, fears, frustrations, blame, one at a time. You're free to scream, cry, speak whatever you like. For this is a safe haven. Everyone is free to voice their comments, and you may respond to those comments if you wish by calling us here tonight at "2-2-5-3-5-6-0". I am Michael Ross. Now, I would like to introduce you to my co-host, Mike Lisowski. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 00:22-1:39)

[The screen briefly cuts to black and fades back in]

Lisowski remarks:

This evening we'd like to, as Michael mentioned, make sure that everyone feels safe and secure in our sitting here. We also wanna let people know that this being a safe place, that any emotions that you're feeling, that any type of feeling that you have is legitimate. And there's nothing wrong with feeling those feelings or emotions. If you don't feel anything, if you feel numb, that's fine. If you feel angry, depressed, bitter, whatever, those feelings are alright. You don't have to feel guilty or shameful because you're feeling those. This is a natural human response to a tragedy that we've experienced here. Again, we would like to welcome those who are not able to meet with us tonight and invite you to call us at "225-3560". We already have the lines lit up, so we'll be getting those shortly. But we would like to get some reactions from our studio audience. Again, what we'd like to remind you all is to please try to keep your comments brief and to speak what's on your mind. We wanna emphasize that this is not a rumor-control program. This is not to talk about specific facts, or how they occurred, or

interpretations. This is basically a place for you to ventilate and to feel safe in expressing your feelings and your reactions to this whole tragic affair (“New Tri-Cable Tonight” 01:44-03:18).

This opportunity for ventilation on a national broadcast, an understudied participatory form of television, set a literal stage for the matriculation of emotions into the zeitgeist of the Dahmer case. The study of television, taken up overwhelmingly in sociological research, is still crafting historiographies that chronicle more interactive forms of television in the late-twentieth century. Fewer studies in the humanities take up specific questions around the affective landscape of television, mainly live call-in broadcasts on news networks, as opposed to the more widely written scripted television or reality TV series on entertainment networks. Addressing the affective cosmology of “tragedies” in breaking news or live journalism still remains to be unfolded in the study of television, especially as it continues to overlap with other forms of media within the broadcast itself. With live call-ins being a relatively new interactive phenomenon on television by the time the Dahmer case hit the airways, the latest trend on television collapsed the space between the public and mechanisms of videographic production, casting the audience as a self-realized player on the stage of the broadcast. Additionally, the relationship between the visible telephone on-screen as the interlocutor between the hosts, the live studio audience, and the feelings and opinions of a mysterious unseen caller establish terms that sociologists have commonly referenced to bring the narrative structure of television into flux.



There remains a dearth of scholarship on the mediation of blackness beyond the polemics of representational politics or the affective scripts that are (re)produced for the consumption of a viewing audience. In *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, John Thornton Caldwell coins the term televisuality as a signifier of “traits now common in television whereby programs intentionally engage the viewer with multiple and simultaneous layers of perceptual and discursive information, many times overwhelming him or her by combining visual, spatial, gestural, and iconic signals” (362). Although it is not common to consider the televisuality of news media as a feature that reproduces the Antebellum affective tenors mentioned in Hartman’s work, considering the varying discursive frameworks in the scripts of news media allows us to localize functions of narrative within the dissemination of information that is regarded as objective, neutral, and public service. Perhaps because the television is an apparatus that not only exists in the day-to-day lives of many Americans, but also reinforces the identitarian scripts that are further ratified in our engagements with realist television, the ways that we consume the racialized semiotics of televisual narrative within news media blurs the boundary between reality and fiction. I do not use fiction here to suggest that news media is necessarily untrue, although the integrity and merit of what is considered “true” have been in crisis for some time. I use fiction informally to denote the presence of things that are simply untrue. Television studies scholars often refer to the binary of “fiction vs. reality” to delineate different genres of television and to classify the stakes of various forms of videographic tools in the production of different kinds of television programming. However, the delineation of multiple television genres from each other

depends on a drama of categorization that is not forced to necessarily classify itself as reality or fiction.

The binary between what is determined to be “real” versus “fiction” depends largely on what feels real, often based on one’s own daily experiences. In *Screening the Los Angeles Riots*, television studies scholar Darnell Hunt writes:

...in contrast to scholars who distinguish between the television experience and lived experience - between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ - I do not conceptualize the two as mutually exclusive spheres. Television images confront us continually, during our waking hours and as we dream (cf. Ewen and Ewen 1992). Furthermore, these images routinely reference one another, creating a hypermediated world composed of signifiers that often seem more accurate than the signified (16).

The authority of realness, particularly as it pertains to news media and varying hybrid forms of news media birthed from it, is not wholly determined by a methodology that achieves some universal standard for authenticity even if the messages that have been relayed have been recognized within various intellectual communities (which I must contend are also not neutral agents in the production knowledge). The particular categorical boundaries that determine how narratives on television are formally and informally discussed are often strained due to the tension between the affective and lexical semantics of lived experience and scrutiny regarding the production of it. This becomes an issue of particular interest when race is an undeniable aspect of the televisual narratives produced within news media programs. Put simply, people believe what they want to think, which is more often than not something validating or feeling good. Dually,

the classification (and reception) of genres of literature or film that are regarded as “real” or “authentic” are also mediated by what feels real. The unraveling of the often gilded, “objective” separation between real and fiction becomes apparent in moments when engagement with television programs is prompted by affective or emotional want that holds precedence over more contemporary methods, often shaped by dominant ideologies, that determine credibility. In the case of the ninety-minute The New Tri-Cable Tonight special, the prominence of racialized emotional economies is highlighted through the contentious debates about how the public should feel, respond to, and hold accountable for Dahmer’s killings. Although the aims of The New Tri-Cable Tonight broadcast were initially to provide a safe space for the general public to process their personal feelings about the case, particularly for those stricken by grief and shock, what we see end up seeing is a tumultuous arena with competing narratives that work to either affirm or deny the validity of lived experiences. At some point in the broadcast, we move away from discussing the victims altogether as they get displaced by debates around gay equality, police ineptitude, and homophobia in black communities (specifically from white people).

The facilitators of this special also seemed to take different approaches in their attempt to encourage crosstalk dialogue while simultaneously alternating format from live audience engagement to live callers. Michael Lisowski had much movement on-screen and seemed to have more control over whom he was engaging and over the length of their response. Michael Ross, who manned the phonenumber, was much more precariously situated in the broadcast as he had much less power throughout the responses from the

anonymous call-in viewers, who were more willing to express racist and homophobic views regarding the Dahmer case. The disembodied presence of the callers also fundamentally changed how the studio audience engaged in conversation because of their willingness to argue with Michael Ross. The collapsing of the genre, televisual strategies, and efforts toward empathy during this special, even in its attempt to condemn Dahmer, still contribute to his celebrity and, perhaps, unintentionally augments his notoriety through moral and ethical arguments that hail and sensationalize Dahmer's violence as a way to avoid a discussion about race. Various moments during this broadcast illuminate the tension within the format of this multi-pronged approach to processing the Dahmer case. Each moment highlights the collapsing of the dichotomy of "real versus fiction" by an insistence on what does and does not feel true, which still prioritizes white emotional economies and forecloses discussion about the victims themselves.

The first response in the special was from a white man (who we'll call AUDIENCE MEMBER #1) in the studio audience. He remarked:

Hello, my name is [AUDIENCE MEMBER #1]. I serve with different gay organization here in Milwaukee. Throughout the gay community, we've been talking a lot. Just talking with different people. First and foremost, aside from the shock and horror of what's happened to these poor men and their families--the disgust of what the police have allowed to happen. Not just in specific cases, but to the gay and lesbian community at large for so long. It just keeps perpetuating itself. Although the current administration is not very exemplary in its conduct, I do have to say that chief Areola is doing the right thing in trying to rein it in under

control. Although at this time, he has no choice because the gay, lesbian, black, and impoverished community aren't just gonna take this crap anymore. The ball is in their court now. So, it's up to them. We'll be waiting. We're willing to work, not just with the gay and lesbian, and black communities, but any community group that wants to get involved. We gotta do because, as [speaker] said at the press conference the other day, if we don't come together, they're gonna pick us off one by one ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 05:14-06:31).

After the audience member takes his seat, Michael Lisowski responds:

Thank you, [audience member #1]. You mentioned that the police are sort of responsible for this. Do you believe that--or does anyone here differ [from this]--the police are the sole people responsible? That this tragedy could've been averted, or at least many more lives could've been saved had it not been for the police? Or is it Jeffrey Dahmer himself that we really have to blame? I think a lot of the times, we find ourselves projecting our feelings on someone else that we can get ahold of, like the police administration, since we have no power or control over Jeffrey Dahmer anymore ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 06:33-07:06)

The man recanted and affirmed that he was not outwardly condemning the police administration but that they had "screwed up" in a big way and that lives were lost because of it. This opening exchange for this special not only highlights the absence of the victims themselves but reveals how the perpetuation of that harm (via a lack of intervention from law enforcement) is foreclosed to avoid confronting the truth, something that had, at that point, already become public knowledge. Both of these

remarks, and the initiation of this conversation through white gay men in general, fall into the paradigmatic trappings of a model of empathy overwhelmingly determined by comfort. The very first comment of this special fails to acknowledge these murders as forms of racial violence and instead prompts a call-to-action based on the relationship between law enforcement and lesbian and gay communities--which, in this response, becomes a categorial distinction between anti-blackness in and of itself--completely possessing the narratives of Dahmer's victims to make a political statement. Then, in response, Lisowski further obscures this derailing comment by suggesting that the frustration directed at the negligence of law enforcement (which had, again, already been documented) may be misguided because Dahmer was ultimately the killer. These opening remarks quite literally displace the intention of naming what role race plays in this case's violence and law enforcement's indifference. Also, as a televised public broadcast, whose conversational format reads similarly to that of a public forum, the shifts in public discourse prompted by the preservation of comfort are ratified by notions of the fungibility of blackness that Hartman would theorize a few years following this discussion.

Additionally, the role of the "call-to-action" within this broadcast employs the shock of the deaths of these victims while also removing the actor from culpability. The comfort of not being implicated that underscores the "excitement" of finding a guilty party in a call-to-action still requires the use and dispensability of black bodies to bolster a particular politic. The impulse to present a call-to-action that does not also implicate the person speaking in the racial dynamics of the case is a pattern that continues throughout

the broadcast, disrupting the aims of the broadcast and overshadowing comments that might center the victims or acknowledge the role of race in the violence in this case.

The competing narratives of the Dahmer case presented in this broadcast, especially those that ratify the feelings of white audience members, present a complex set of issues for black participants in this program. As bodies that are already immediately mediated through systems of white supremacy (and the ways that it creates meaning in visual markets for white viewers), the black people in this broadcast are asked to participate as evidence of overgeneralized assumptions and as talking heads for the black community as whole instead of sharing their individual experience. Operating monolithic assumptions about black people results in the flattening that dismisses important nuances that affirm the varied experience among the black people in the United States, especially for black people that existed at the intersection of various marginalized communities. Such is the case for the second speaker in the studio audience, a black gay man (we will call him AUDIENCE MEMBER #2), who experienced frustration with white and black communities in Milwaukee, expressing that they both shared some responsibility in the failure to keep black queer people safe.

Lisowski asked the audience if someone would like to comment on a lost loved one or if they knew or were connected to any of the victims. After lamenting the death of four of the victims, including Curtis Straughter, a seventeen-year-old black teenager murdered by Dahmer in February of 1991, the man (AUDIENCE MEMBER #2) responded:

Well, I knew four victims. I wasn't very close with them but what upset me the most is that four people had been missing for up to two to three years, and I had heard nothing of that. There was a young lady by the name of [missing woman] who had been missing for a couple months and she was on the news constantly for two to three weeks, nonstop. There are about seventeen people who have been missing for up to three years, and I heard nothing of it. Absolutely nothing. And that really, really upsets me. I just think it's a tragedy. I just think it's an awful shame. Another thing I wanna say, and I'm not blaming anyone, but I'm really kind of disappointed in the reaction that I'm getting from the black gay community. They seem to be somewhat nonchalant or somewhat not really being involved as much in the situation as much as possible. And that is just my personal interpretation of what I'm feeling and what I'm seeing. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 08:55-09:59).

Then, Lisowski asks:

How would you base that? I mean, have you talked to people or seen things?  
("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 10:00-10:05).

The man (AUDIENCE MEMBER #2) replies:

Just by talking to people, I've invited up to thirty people to come to this tonight because this is a perfect opportunity for the black gay community to speak out. And out of the thirty people, I don't see one of them here. And that's just really-- I'm very disappointed in that. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 10:05-10:20).



This deeply complex set of concerns seemed to have spurred a more specific and condemning conversation about homophobia and the black communities in Milwaukee. The man's disappointment, although maybe framed harshly, was one that not only highlighted the crisis of black queer people in the city, who maybe could've also been struggling with grief or distrustful of the predominately white city, queer or otherwise. Suddenly, the aims of this television program appeared, some of which had already been overshadowed by centering whiteness (or a decentering of blackness) within the conversation. If it was already apparent to many viewers that competing narratives of the Dahmer case had shifted the conversation away from the victims, it would become undeniable in the later part of Lisowski's exchange with Audience Member #2. Despite his own critique regarding the misdirection of hostility, black communities (and Dahmer's black victims) became the fuel for a political demand, which named "homophobia" within black communities as an accompanying factor in the abduction and death of these black gay men.

Here, we see the machinations of a white emotional economy play out in real-time in tandem with televisual narratives that would sooner allow an entire grieving community of black people (not all of whom were homophobic) to be subsumed in racist, overdetermined, monolithic, stereotypes than to risk being implicated in the same white, fetishistic, corporeal markets that afforded Dahmer the opportunity to kill people in his apartment. The narrative shift, situating black people as the real culprits in Dahmer's murders, is prompted by Lisowski's response to Audience Member #2's remarks. Lisowski asks:

You think that there could be a concern that because of the culture and the background and the sense of community, and the smaller sense of community that the black gay community has, that coming on television like that could blow their cover? And make it more insecure for them at a time like this when people are looking at gay people or homosexuality in a less positive light? (“New Tri-Cable Tonight” 10:20-10:45).

Audience Member #2 responds:

I think that has a part of doing with it. But I think that a bigger part of it is just people’s mentality. Because regardless of what society thinks, there’s a major tragedy that happened in Milwaukee and we need to do something about it. We need to speak to it. And I don’t hear a lot of black gays speaking to it (“New Tri-Cable Tonight” 10:46-11:05).

Lisowski replies:

Do you think it’s difficult for the black community to address the issue of homosexuality in this? I mean, a lot of the victims were black and gay, but my impression is from reading the media or watching TV and reading the papers that it seems to be, for the much part, the black coalition groups are meeting and having their press conference, and then the gays have theirs separately. Then, there’s an article about the gay response, and then there’s an article about different community responses. And it seems that the two aren’t joining. Even though there are efforts underway to do that. And this rally on Monday will be something. But I’m just wondering if you kind of get that same sense for what

you're feeling on that as with the black non-gay community. If they're maybe afraid to address the issue, or to deal with the issue of homosexuality? ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 11:06-11:48)

The deeply complicated set of questions posed by Lisowski, in addition to derailing a conversation that was originally supposed to be about the victims of the Dahmer case, constitutes a complex and meticulous narrative labyrinth for this man who is now expected, as the price for participating in this discussion, to elaborate on a myriad of racialized, homophobic public discourses on live TV. The opportunity to process, vent, and grieve collectively has been bypassed for a dialogue that is unanswerable for any one black person. Consequently, at this moment, black people (both in the visual space of the broadcast and within the landscape of the white visceral imaginary) become tools for the narrativization of the Dahmer case in this special. An attempt to pathologize black people, quite literally, writes a new narrative about the Dahmer case that reframes a causality that erases a history of white supremacy that could provide context for Dahmer's desire to possess and enjoy these black men and offer a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of how black queer people are impacted by homophobia within their own communities (which varies widely). Audience Member #2 is literally coerced into a discussion about homophobia in his own community, which was not a part of his contribution to this conversation. Also, he is forced to undergo this conversation with the knowledge that his point of view, as now an object within the televisuality of this broadcast, would not only be attributed to an entire community that he cannot speak for but that it is also to be cajoled out of him for the appeasement of a white viewership

attempting to decontextualize histories of white supremacy from which they and Dahmer benefit. Soon after, various commenters took the opportunity to condemn “the black community,” which was 1) not the original intent of this broadcast and 2) would also involve condemning black queer people in that community as well. The emotional impact of this shift was felt throughout the rest of this broadcast. The audience member (Audience Member #3) that followed this shift addressed his comments to “the black community,” specifically.

The third speaker, a white man in the studio audience (who we’ll call AUDIENCE MEMBER #3), responds to the question posed by Michael Lisowski of whether or not the black community was afraid to address homosexuality which had been previously presented to a black gay man in the audience a few second before. Audience Member #3 responds:

As a Caucasian, here in this city, I’ve gotten reactions from black people on buses, and while waiting for buses, of anger directed toward me as a Caucasian because it was a white man who killed a number of men, most of whom were black. Obviously, Dahmer’s responsible. The police share some responsibility. And our entire society is, to some extent, responsible because no other country has so many serial murderers as ours. And if Dahmer’s crazy, maybe it’s because our overly competitive society drives him crazy. But I think that we’ve already touched indirectly on something that I’d like to address more deeply. Here, I address myself to the black people of Milwaukee. If you call a black gay man a punk, or a faggot, then you are driving him away. You are isolating him. You are

making him lonely and vulnerable to such men as Dahmer, and others that may be lurking out there. So, the next time that any of you straight, or profess to be straight, black men or women think about calling somebody punk or faggot, you remember those dead men. (“New Tri-Cable Tonight” 12:22-13:52)

It is no surprise that the deflection to a living legacy of white emotional and sexual economies would, even in an attempt to absolve itself, require the exploitation of black people (alive or not). This comment underscores an affective quagmire that black people experience in the in-between of white social economies, birthed from plantation systems, that operate separately but in tandem with one another. It is not that Audience Member #3 (or anyone else for that matter) cannot recognize the ways that histories of race offered Dahmer a template; it is that in recognizing that template, one must also confront the ways that these same sets of paradigms subtend their own affective and sexual realities. However, when white sexual and emotional economies are not “working” in tandem with one another--when sexual desire is not emotionally rewarding or comforting--then, black people, as fungible commodities within these social economies, are held liable because their use within the day-to-day procedures of white comfort, inspiration, desire, and more, is only to be enjoyed and should never be uncomfortable for any white person. The effort to preserve white comfort and enjoyment even while indicting the Antebellum paradigms that legibly informed the ways that Dahmer murdered and desired his victims characterizes discomfort as an error in the production of enjoyment as opposed to recognizing that white affective and sexual economies are contingent upon undisrupted matriculation of blackness. Audience Member #3 struggled harder to be forthcoming

about the privileges shared between himself and Dahmer but found, almost cathartically, the language to fully condemn an entire community of people a week after Dahmer's arrest. This vilifying remark toward the black community of Milwaukee shifts this forum away from collective processing of tragedy to a court of public opinion wherein blackness (as with any other court) is held culpable for its own injury, situating black people as both the cause and condition for the violence that they experience.

Additionally, it invites a debate that creates a false equivalency between the legacies of white supremacist violence that invites Dahmer's violence and the racial violence whose interpolation of gender and sexuality continues to inform various interpretations of non-normativity among black communities, including the ways that white supremacy informs homophobia within black communities. Audience Member #3 effectively ignites a debate that requires the repurposing of Dahmer's victims over and over again as evidence stacked for the indictment or the absolution of a "homophobic" black community amongst the studio audience and the call-in participants.

After Audience Member #3 spoke, a black woman (Audience Member #4) stood up to comment on the condemning remarks. She begins:

Hi, Michael. I don't profess to speak for the black community. I can just speak for myself. The black community, obviously, is reacting to this incident in a totally different manner than the gay community. And I think you mentioned that you knew four of the people who were victims. The black community knew all of them. We've been touched in a totally different manner. And at this particular time, there's still a lot of grief going on. It is an imposition on the black

community to be told, once again, by the white community--whether it's the white gay or white anybody--how they should be reacting at a time like this. People are still grieving. I mean, the gay community has a different interest in this. The black community is being stung on many levels. Homophobia is one of them, but racism is very prevalent. And I think that grief that people are experiencing is much more in-depth than one would think [from] just having known one or two of the victims. There are some other people who you might wanna bring into this. Where are the people who are supporting domestic violence? There's a mandatory arrest for any type of domestic violence. Where are those people? Why aren't they coming forward to speak up? There are a number of other people who should take some of the responsibility for a situation like this. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 13:57-15:34)

Lisowski replies:

Thanks for that. Having phrased it the way I did with Larry, I hope--I didn't wanna come across as like, "Okay, let's put all the onus or burden on the black community." I hope it didn't come across that way. And if it did, I apologize. Just from your perspective, I see that what I might've said or insinuated made it look like they have to give a little more in a time of grieving. I think that your comments are well taken. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 15:35-15:56)

Audience Member #4 follows:

I think the racism that's being brought forth in this situation is very real. And to be a visible white gay man, particularly if you're blonde and blue-eyed, is not

conducive to bringing about peace. I mean, people will have to bring forth all those things. Bring forth years of racism that's been buried for fifty years [and] that now this kind of thing is being perpetuated on predominantly black people. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 15:57-16:27)

Lisowski follows with a question:

Do you feel kind of a double-bind here? I mean, with being black and with the rest of the [gay] community dealing with this grief and loss of different levels? ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 16:28-16:43)

She answers:

I don't think that there are words to describe how this affects me on any number of levels. You know, I look at those young men, and I see them as my son. Any one of them could've been my son, my neighbor, or my nephew. I mean, it just so happened that they were brought in, in this kind of way, but we could all be victims. I think that's the point. Their sexual preference isn't the primary concern here. It's that we can all be victims. And I think that is the point that we want to keep in focus. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 16:45-17:22)

Audience Member #4 gets to the crux of the issue of this televised, highly-contentious debate about the sexual identities of the victims and whether or not the black communities in Milwaukee are to blame articulation. Despite Lisowski's outward sympathetic display, the ask from him (and other white viewers) is to put this deeply racialized trauma into more palatable terms by the same process that exploits black life to make white people comfortable on a daily basis. The demand insistently imposed upon



black people within this broadcast to become a speaking-head for the community seeks to achieve one of two aims: 1) to make black queer death more comfortable or 2) to absolve whiteness of culpability by condemning black communities. Both are tied to a stake in the fruition of comfort within white affective and sexual economies. The demands disguised in seemingly harmless questions of clarification introduce inarticulable aspects of pain and trauma as a measure of importance in a “hear no evil” form of bypassing that forecloses the possibility of critically engaging histories of white supremacy at all. Then, since there “appears” to be no tangible terms for the trauma of intersecting forms of violence, such as with the Dahmer case, the black community is condemned as a whole for its inability to protect itself from or operate in tandem with systems of whiteness enacted through the same inarticulable violence.

Within the space of this broadcast, the sympathetic clarifying questions to articulate the pain and trauma of Dahmer serve as red herring for what is a quest for a more comfortable or palatable version of the identity politics at play in the method and longevity of Dahmer’s spree is ultimately. When this fails, as a last-ditch effort, the black community (which operates under the same cis-heteronormative structures as every other group in the United States) becomes a scapegoat and assumes almost the same level of culpability as Dahmer, making it difficult to explain the intersectional nuances of homophobia in black communities while also placing Dahmer’s actions into historical context inside of a legacy of white gay sexual abuse. Additionally, the added mediation of videographic tools used to produce television broadcasts (particularly for one that also

includes a live call-in) even further complicates the way that black affect is disseminated with or against the specific aims of the televisual narrative within the broadcast itself.

After Audience Member #4 takes her seat, we return to center stage, where Michael Ross begins taking calls from the phone line. Visually, we see a desk phone attached to thick cords sitting on the small, wooden coffee table in the middle of a carpeted circular stage. Michael Ross, an illegibly black gay man, sits alone on the stage next to the phone, awaiting the arrival of calls from the viewing audience. Michael begins:

I'm gonna go to the phone at this point. We have two calls. Callers, please hold.

We're going to the first call. [pause] You're on, go ahead, caller. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 17:28-17:40)

The viewing and studio audience listen in as the voice of an anonymous caller appears on the line (CALLER #1). Caller #1 begins speaking:

Yeah. I just wanted to express an opinion here on something that I heard about the gentleman that scolded all of the heterosexuals out in the [studio] audience.

Personally, I don't think that if somebody were to call someone a punk or a faggot, it is going to send them off on a killing spree. And I just think it was pretty shallow of him to say that. In my opinion, anybody that has taken a PSYCH101 course [knows that if] somebody calls somebody a name is not going to [send] them off on a killing spree. I think that was pretty ignorant of him to comment on that. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 17:42-18:19)

Ross clarifies the previous comment directed toward the black community from

Audience Member #3:

Sir, I'm sorry that you misunderstood his comment. He didn't say that if you called an individual a punk or a fag that it would send them off on a killing spree. He merely mentioned to the community that the next time you run into a black gay man, not to run him away or ostracize him by name-calling-- ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 18:20-18:45)

Caller #1 interrupts:

Why is it a black gay man? What about a white gay man? ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 18:46-18:49)

Ross replies:

I imagine that he means that for any male, but this particular tragedy happened to--the majority of those men were black, and the majority of them were gay. We're not here to judge any of them. But what he was saying to the community is that you have to open your hearts and open your arms and love these people for who they are because they're your children, your sisters, and brothers, your neighbors [as well as] the people who work for you, they live next door to you, your doctors, your lawyers. Gay people are everywhere, and we need to just stop focusing on people's sexuality and not worry about who they sleep with but where their hearts are. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 18:50-19:36)

Caller #1:

Well, you guys, from my observation, are definitely focusing on your own sexuality. Personally, I've never seen a heterosexual pride parade down in Wisconsin happening. So, you guys are definitely focusing on it. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 19:37-19:49)

Ross:

Well, heterosexuals don't need a pride parade--("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 19:50-19:51)

Caller #1:

Why? ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 19:51-19:52)

Ross:

But sir, that's not the issue here. Parades are not the issue here. Right. Today, we're here to discuss the tragedy in Milwaukee and the parade had absolutely nothing to do with that tragedy. ("New Tri-Cable Tonight" 19:52-20:10)

The incorporation of a disembodied, surveilling commenter incorporates new elements into the already present televisual narrative about the Dahmer case. The amorphous, looming presence of the anonymous caller adds another mediating layer to the affective and audiovisual parameters of the broadcast. The study of television has yet to really unpack the affective dimensions of unscripted programming through news- and talk-related media. The difficulty in localizing various tendencies of emotional economies within the space of television broadcast is that they are often overshadowed by televisual narratives that are produced for the comfort and palatability of the viewer. This, however, does not necessarily mean the programming itself elicits only positive feelings as it's being consumed. "Comfort" within the videographic capacities of television actually

alludes more to an ability to identify, or make sense of, visual narratives that are familiar and exist in the visceral reality of the viewer. In this way, the machinations of comfort within television operate in tandem with affective paradigms from white emotional economies, which prioritizes a conceptualization of enjoyment that is birthed from American chattel slavery (Hartman 27).

The soul-breaking technologies that aver the fungibility of black life are reproduced within the space of news- and talk-related broadcasts that chronicle the deaths of black people but are often difficult to locate because of competing televisual narrative strategies that are deeply invested in commercial consumption. Put differently, news- and talk-related television about black death, although tragic, must still be consumable, and the televisual strategies employed for this consumption distract us from the racial logic of the narrative itself because we can identify with it. However, the process of making television consumable means that specific choices must be made in order to localize aspects of the programming that makes it feel familiar to white audiences in both its visual and emotional capacities. Michael Ross's facilitation of the call-in line invites him to a kind of uncertainty that is deeply racialized and highlights a power differential between himself and Lisowski, who maintains much more control over his safety within this conversation about black gay death. The spectacle of Ross would be contained under even tighter constraints as his verbal responses, physical reactions, and emotional tolerance of these anonymous callers are constantly being surveilled by the viewing audience. Ross is subjected to an arena that he also becomes responsible for as he

attempts to center the victims while moderating debates that are seeking to assuage white viewers.

Currently, this particular hybrid form of broadcast is understudied in the humanities. My interest in critically examining a broadcast such as this one not only illuminates the trappings of articulation for black people but places affective stakes of racialized televisual narrative and media technologies into historical context. Although the evolution of these technologies and their application in the social and emotional spheres of whiteness contribute to the augmentation of the cosmology of white emotional economies in the United States. This broadcast highlights how the production of black people within televisual narratives operates under the same paradigms as were used to constitute new affective knowledge for Antebellum slaveholding society. The crisis-centered approach to this broadcast would be one of the only of its kind in the media sphere of the Dahmer case. The later broadcasts that are the product of the media circus following the arrest would prioritize the debate around the causality of Dahmer's killing spree and would constitute the majority of programming produced up until and including the live broadcast of the trial.

### **State of Wisconsin v. Jeffrey L. Dahmer Trial Broadcast, January 1992**

In the 1992 court proceedings of the *State of Wisconsin v. Jeffrey L. Dahmer*, the notorious cannibal-serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer plead not guilty by reason of insanity to 15 counts of murder over the course of almost a decade. The national broadcast of

Dahmer's trial would be aired live on January 30, 1992, on *WITI-TV* and *WDJT-TV*, two local Wisconsin stations, along with the national broadcast network *Court TV*. Ones that indicate the social and political perceptions of the sexual and racial minorities who stood out as victims within the optics of this case. Given the concurrent stigma surrounding the AIDS epidemic of the early 90s and the growing paranoia of the post-Vietnam crime scare, moving away from the Dahmer trial would be a move to separate CNN from the public response to the gruesome case and the stigma surrounding Black and LGBTQ communities at the time.

Despite *CNN's* hesitation, the national and local live broadcasts of Dahmer's trial would be covered nationally by *Court TV* and locally by two Milwaukee TV stations, *WITI-TV* (a CBS affiliate) and *WDJT-TV* (an independent that usually runs reruns and old movies). Prior to the live broadcast, questions around the positionality of Dahmer and his victims (most of whom were black) were frequent and unyielding. This televised event would be one that required a high level of production, demanding the hybrid racialized-heteronormative performance of an irretrievable white, queer serial murderer on a national stage. The televisuality (Caldwell 362) of Dahmer as a "palatable" queer figure would require the production of his own whiteness as a relational device to invite white viewers to consume the presentation of mutilated black bodies. The sculpting of Dahmer's televisuality (Caldwell 362) is a process from which we can index a separation in a liberalist overdetermination of a monolithic LGBTQ community to unearth broader participation in white supremacy through the production of the live broadcast of the Dahmer trial. The orchestration of Dahmer's televisual narrative also allows us to

identify the racialized paradoxical visual space of blackness in the courtroom and the ways in which those black affective realities extend beyond the latent racialized scripts of blackness anticipated by white viewers. The televisuality of Jeffrey Dahmer casts his white, queer, sexually deviant positionality as an agent to procure a tantalizing display of black death and mourning. The staging of his identity required situating his violence as a symptom of his deviant non-normative sexual abilities. Despite the condemnation of Dahmer's queerness within the hegemonic heteronormative imaginary, his overlapping privilege and marginal identity morphed into an exercise in, and display of, Dahmer's benevolent sexual prowess and the sympathy elicited by his (previously undiagnosed) mental trauma (which is also causally related to his sexual proclivities). The public negotiations around the consumption of Dahmer's narrative on television demanded a separation between Dahmer as a sympathetic figure and the acts themselves. This transmission of criminality within the arguments made by the defense relied on the same racialized affective gestures that dictated decisions made about the production of the trial itself. The already present discomforts of a conflicted white viewership are emphasized by a performance of white supremacy emblematic of the proprietary "economies of enjoyment" written in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. However, Dahmer's queerness provides a social evacuation of culpability in relation to existing structures of whiteness. His sexual identity shifts his violent acts into ones that can be viewed as separate from the legible enactments of racial violence by heterosexual white men. Additionally, Dahmer's murders are jettisoned into a sensationalized spectacle that is rendered unimaginable by white audiences because, even in the case of an unstable gay



white man, to admit the possibility that paradigmatic slaveholding registers persisting within white gay sexual histories could be a motivating factor in the killing of black men was unthinkable.

Despite the outward disdain for (and curiosity about) Dahmer's act, the receptivity of this arrangement depended largely on the sensibilities of the white viewership. In an effort to appeal to the senses of white viewers, some networks decided to consolidate the whole of Dahmer's trial into a recap that was to be replayed later in the evening. Departing from this preemptive move, Mark Zoromski, the senior WITI-TV producer, stated that the trial would be running in real-time, concurrently with another programming to give people "relief" from the trial, if needed, through an ability to retreat to another programming. Following a similar strategy, the *Washington Post* reported that "Court TV has a mechanism to delay its live signal for as long as 20 seconds to allow editing or removal of offensive material." This delay, while foreclosing any possibility of actually bearing witness to the violence that took place in Dahmer's Milwaukee apartment, also pinpoints a securitization that appeals to white, visual, emotional economies, recalling the charges against empathy invoked in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman argues that the legibility of black suffering by white people is predicated on a positioning of the white viscera and its phantasmal reproduction of black suffering. A fictive projection of black life that dually exists to depict an enticing portrayal of the slave performance. Hartman writes, "...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" (19). In a reverse-engineering of Hartman's assertion, the television networks superimpose her indictments of empathy by positioning their viewers as bodies incapable of enduring violence that they can't feasibly project themselves onto. Hartman continues: "...as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in instead" (20). In this way, the censoring or direct omission of the "obscene or gruesome" parts of Dahmer's trial (one that particularly identifies the violence against black life) seeks to protect a predominantly white audience from the violence that they would need to fictively assume to understand. This securitization of white emotional economies (Ionaide 2) through the invocation of an empathic white production marks the broadcaster's unavoidable employment of racism under the managerial containment of emotion. Despite its attempts to "play it safe" by omitting the "offensive material," it borrows variables from what Charles W. Mills calls an epistemology of ignorance that is mobilized specifically through what he identifies as white ignorance. (35) Mills employs the notion of ignorance to excavate the space of "false belief and the absence of true belief," pinpointing both the occlusion and disavowing of the reproduction of white supremacist gestures by white people (16). Mills writes, "The white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation" (19). Coinciding with Mill's assertion, *WITI-TV* producer, Zoromski writes, "People need to escape...[they] don't want to go to bed thinking about murder, blood, and guts, mutilation, sodomy" (*Washington Post*). The articulation of the fictive "need" to retreat from the broadcast reveals itself as the insulation that Mills is identifying. Zoromski also stated that "the local station does not have the capacity [for the twenty-

second delay like Court TV] and will put a red dot on the screen to warn viewers when the trial is expected to involve ‘graphic testimony’ (*Washington Post*). The turn away from Dahmer’s real narrative indexes a failing of empathy suggested by Hartman that, for the sake of its virtue as an apparatus of whiteness, refuses to acknowledge the production of the plantation system (potentially with the fear of being implicated). The impossible dialectic of Dahmer as a weakly secured vestibule for blatant white-supremacist gay sexual desire posits him as a rupture within the performed insulation of white ignorance. Put simply, Dahmer put everyone and everything into flux. In Lacanian terms, the avoidance of the legibility of the plantation within the space of the televised broadcast of the Dahmer trial both threatens white viewers to reckon with the illustration of their own likeness to the Dahmer’s victims or witness the jeopardization of the thinly veiled masking of day-to-day exercises of quotidian racism. The broadcast provides a stage for the defense to hold the public accountable for Dahmer’s violent act. Communities loosely affiliated with the arbitrary container of Dahmer’s surroundings are suddenly crafted and prepared into a cocktail that supposedly contains the ingredients of a serial murderer. LGBTQ, Racial, and mental health discourses become the predecessors to a condition that, primarily because of the sexual desire toward black men, fashions this blatant racial violence as a byproduct of external environmental pressures derivative of and sought out by the very people falling prey to Dahmer’s attacks. In an inverted move to attribute blame to the affiliated communities, we see that, as Mills writes, “sustaining white ignorance on the macro level is social-structuring rather than physico-biological, though it will, of course, operate through the physico-biological” (20).

The space of the television broadcast of the Dahmer trial depends on an equilibrium between an identification with and disavowing of Jeffrey Dahmer. The cacophonous relationship between these textures of insulation can be seen most clearly during the testimony of Tracy Edwards, Dahmer's only surviving victim. Edwards's testimony and the framing of his black body within the space of the televised broadcast became, for viewers, an opportunity to encounter the racial logic of Dahmer sympathetically through the indictment of Edwards's blackness on-screen. However, because of the particular charges of Dahmer's defense, the intended denigration of Edwards's black body inadvertently would localize the insulation of white ignorance and expose the membrane of intentionality layered across a phantasmal and fetishistic deployment of empathy. As a result, Edwards is propelled into an unseen liminal space that struggles to, in an Althusserian sense, interpolate Edwards's black body through an epistemology reliant on a "false belief" (Mills 3). Put simply, a stereotype cannot seamlessly be applied to Edwards's blackness without directly implicating whiteness, as opposed to more pervasive, micro-aggressive gestures. The red dot periodically placed above Edwards's head during his testimony is the only televisual barrier sanctioning white viewers to evacuate Dahmer through literally turning away or changing the channel. Additionally, Edwards is still denied a semblance of justice from his testimony. In fact, the suit against Dahmer's estate did not include the attempted murder charge pressed against Jeffrey Dahmer for his assault against Tracy Edwards, reifying Mills' invocation of ignorance through an "absence of true belief" (Mill 3). This turning away

from Dahmer, in addition to omitting the racialized violence he inflicted in real-time, also produced a longstanding affective turning from him well into the twenty-first century.

Casting Dahmer as the victim of the circumstances of his social life would be a narratological trend in the Dahmer case's representations for years to come, relegating the lost lives of the victims as narrative tools that would serve to further contextualize the mystery of the cannibal serial killer. Dahmer's violence so irrefutably exists within an Antebellum paradigm of white sexual economies that to insist on some otherworldly, amorphous entity compelling him into a psychosis that prompts his murders has become a sport for amusement or entertainment in the narrativization of the Jeffrey Dahmer case. To acknowledge that Dahmer's actions are not unique, inconsistent, or odd when placed opposite the thousands of documented forms of dismembered, cannibalized, and sexually abused black bodies throughout American history is to bring into focus a "desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness of the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment [that] is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery" (Hartman 21). The televisuality of the Dahmer case is a machination of white sexual and emotional economies that not only preserves its obscurity within the quotidian but also prevents us from acknowledging that desire within histories of racial violence in this country are not innately heteronormative in nature.

The Antebellum paradigm propagates new and evolving white affective and sexual discourses whose acts of violence reach far beyond the threshold of language that is accessible to black people. However, in the United States, the burden of proof and impressing upon white people the severity of white supremacy has been carried by black

people. An inability to articulate the punitive, fleshly violence would only become more intense when attempting to outline the internal negotiations of sexual violence. The larger historical conversation around the abuses of the slave master and the participation in slave breeding has overwhelmingly conceived a traditional cis-heteronormative figuration of violence that anachronistically applies contemporary notions of gender to the often ungendered and non-heteronormative forms of abuse under American chattel slavery. Across several disciplines, scholars and historians are required to inequitably present irrefutable evidence to confirm the continuing presence of historical forms of abuse whose affective and sexual resonances can be seen in murder cases as widely circulated as the trial of the *State of Wisconsin v. Jeffrey L. Dahmer* to the recent trial of the *State of California v. Edward P. Buck*. Black authors and scholars across several literary periods have contended with the trappings of language, affect, and genre to begin unpacking nuances and various racialized barriers inhibiting the construction of a broader history of white queer sexual abuse under slavery and its successors into the twenty-first century.

## Notes

### Chapter 1: Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and the Dismembering of Black Autobiographical Subjectivity

1. The widespread strategy of establishing a dynamic likeness between newly freed and enslaved black authors is highlighted in both the writing and the frontispiece often accompanying slave narrative.
2. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene D. Genovese writes, "Southern paternalism, like every other paternalism, had little to do with Ole Massa's ostensible benevolence, kindness, and good cheer. It grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation" (4).
3. In *The Law of Genre*, Jacques Derrida refers to *genre-clause* as, "...a clause stating at once the juridical utterance, the precedent-making designation and the law-text, but also the closure, the closing that excludes itself from what it includes (one could also speak of a floodgate [*"écluse"*] of genre)" (65).
4. See Burr, *The Autobiography*
5. See Starling. *The Slave Narrative*
6. See Carretta. *Equiano, the African*.
7. See Andrews. *To Tell a Free Story*, 9-11
8. See, "The Black Body Erotic and the Republican Body Politic, 1790-1820" by John Saillant in *Long Before Stonewall* edited by Thomas A. Foster

### Chapter 2: The Issue of *Relating* in Richard Bruce Nugent's *Gentleman Jigger*

1. John Saillant discusses the prevalence of the "poor negro" trope in eighteenth-century abolitionist literature in "The Black Body Erotic and the Republican Body Politic, 1790-1820" in *Long Before Stonewall* by Thomas A. Foster.
2. In the last chapter of *Rethinking Rufus*, historian Thomas A. Foster charges the homonormative empirical limitations of recovering histories of same-gender sexual abuse in the study of American chattel slavery. He writes, "The double standard that pervades academic history, whereby historical subjects are presumed heterosexual until overwhelming documentary evidence proves otherwise, holds sway in the literature of slavery" (86). In addition to the heteronormative tenors of historical scholarship, black queer and trans people also were writing about the

consequences of existing in opposition to the cultivation of a new black masculinist discourse to counter perceptions of same-gender abuse noted in narratives like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriett Jacobs.

3. What Foster is highlighting here is a tension between the erasure of history and the omission of it. The tension lies in the ultimate intention of each motive (one for the preservations of whiteness and the other for the preservation of masculinity) but still effectively render the histories of racialized same-sex abuse almost completely illegible because the archival methods regarding them are always condemned or dismissed as a result of the complimentary strategies of maintaining the grandier of whiteness by erasing condemnable same-sex acts and the perserving the manhood or masculinity of black man by omitting histories of same-sex abuse that might suggest that this form of masculinity is secondary to its white counterparts.
4. The editor of *Gentleman Jigger*, Thomas Wirth, and friend of Nugent and literary scholar, Arnold Rampersad have not included any information that might indicate who “Bill” was in the history of the Niggerati Castle. I imagine that not doing so was in consideration to Nugent if either of them knew at all. Since so many partial drafts of the novel existed before the culmination of the edition from De Capo Press, and since there are many records of white figures using their wealth and resources to buy their way into the momentum of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, it would be difficult to pinpoint a single person (even the character Stuartt in the novel calls both the white brother and sister sponsoring him “Bill”).

### Chapter 3: Morrison’s *Beloved* and Queering the Screw Whitey Movement

1. In the 2012 *Interview Magazine* interview with Toni Morrison, she coins the term “the screw whitey movement” to describe a precarious segment of time that seemed to span from the Black Arts Movement through the 80s in the post-Black Arts period. There is currently no other recorded account of this phrase being used to describe this literary and arts-based overlapping moment. However, considering the shifts in paradigms and the new intersectional conversation being birthed from writers like Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morriion, I believe that it is important to recognize the distinction knowledge socio-literary knowledge production happening within “the screw whitey” period. It seems that the invocation of the period itself proclaims to critique the limiting faculties of “period” as an indication of specific literary moment because it does not account for the difference in the trajectory of a literary tradition versus the scope of a literary period.
2. In *To Tell a Free Story*, William L. Andrews writes that in the first half-century of its inception black autobiographer distinguished itself within the white literary



genre of autobiography through its specific rhetorical aims. Andrews writes, “During the first half of this century of evolution, most Afro-American autobiography addressed itself, directly or indirectly, to the proof of two propositions: (1) that the slave was, as the inscription of a famous antislavery medallion put it, ‘a man and a brother’ to whites, especially to the white reader of slave narratives; and (2) that the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk” (1).

3. In *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (2019), historian Thomas A. Foster writes that new models of black manhood (and strategies to preserve them) were adopted among enslaved black men in the nineteenth century, particularly for those that were subject to forced reproduction and coerced marriages. Foster writes: “Enslaved men developed their own models of masculinity in the area of intimate relationships, highlighting the importance of personal intention and desires, strength and endurance in the face of penalties, and resistance against obstacles to realizing those relationships...For all men, the ability to develop family relations and to persist in maintaining marriage and family, in all their forms and despite physical and psychological barriers erected by enslavement, was a key component of manliness” (32). By the nineteenth century, the violation of manhood had become a focal point for discussion of bodily autonomy for all enslaved peoples, making the preservation of “manliness” a core component in the fight for freedom well into the twentieth century, despite U.S. patriarchal family formations being inextricably linked to white mastery and property. Unfortunately, despite the palatability of a male-led black political movement (insomuch that often organizing by black women were subject to a myriad of violence within and outside of black communities), histories of enslavement that would further jeopardize the public perception of black manhood that is placed at the helm of the Black Power movement (historically and contemporarily) have not been prioritized as crucial components of the histories of race, gender, or sexuality in the United States.
4. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002), historian Robin D. G. Kelley highlights the struggle of black women from black men within the Black Power movement while attempting to organize assemblies and speak about their experiences of both sexism and racism. Kelley writes, “Margaret Wright, an activist in the Los Angeles-based group Women Against Repression, was frequently told by male leaders in the Black Power movement that black women oppressed black men, that black women were domineering, that successful black women stripped black men of their manhood...Some women, like Gloria Richardson—leader of the Cambridge Non-Violent Action Movement who organized armed self-defense groups in her hometown of Cambridge, Maryland—were called ‘castrators’ by their fellow male activists. Black women in the movement did not accept sexism without a fight, but an aggressive patriarchal

culture became increasingly visible during the mid- to late 1960s" (142). Many efforts, despite their alignment with male-dominated aims toward freedom, were dismissed or outright condemned by many men and organizers. Literary figures like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, writers whose writing also involves various forms of historical analysis, would be of a part of the women who would receive terrible backlash in the 1970s and 80s for making the experiences of women, including the sexism and sexual abuse they experienced within their own communities, at the center of best-selling, critically-acclaimed novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *Beloved* (1987). Not only were these novels heavily critiqued by black male literary figures and activists, due to their unfiltered portrayal of misogynoir from black men, but also because of their insistence on recovering historical narratives or accounts of abuses that were not often discussed up until that point. For writers like Morrison, the priority was not to invest in the temporary preservation of survivalist, male-centered strategies toward freedom and human rights, it was to uplift the humanity of black people by including their histories in Black literary traditions. The history of backlash toward efforts of recovery that are perceived to diminish the manhood of black men is important to consider when considering why histories of male same-gender abuse are not only obscured within the archive of American chattel slavery, but also not considered as important component of plantation systems and white economies of enjoyment (Hartmen 26).

5. Religious-historian and ethicist Kelly Brown-Douglas makes a compelling point about the "body politic" of the Black church in the twentieth century that I believe is poignant observation for both the detrimental effects of imbedded the tenor of respectability politics in the core features of black liberation movements and the study of black life. Brown-Douglas rights, "The black community has not remained passive to white culture's sexualized narrative [about the black body]. It has produced its own narrative to counteract the presumption that black people are hyposexual. The first is a social-cultural narrative that urges black people to conform to a 'hyperproper' standard of sexual conduct. This standard is, for all intents and purposes, as aggressive in its attempt to *desexualize* black men and women as white culture is in its attempts to sexualize them... Given the heteronormative and patriarchal nature of white society, this standard of acceptability is not only white-biased, but also heterosexist and sexist" (55). Brown-Douglas's assertion underscores a "standard" whose reach in churches and social justice and academic institutions has prevented more dynamic reading of enslaved black people in the archive. Same-gender abuse, despite warranting new historical methods and approaches, impacts not only queer black people who experience the succession of non-normative Antebellum sexual paradigms but everyone. Reading black enslaved people as *people* requires use to consider not only the internal negotiations prompted by abuse that they themselves experienced, but also how those same negotiations are shaped by being witness to various forms of sexual abuse. Understanding same-gender abuse is directly

connected to better understanding the kinds of counteractive measures to reconstruct narratives of black masculinity and its broader implications of severity of corporeal violence under slavery.

6. Here, I'm noting two things in the debate of the asynchronous use of "queer" in the archive of American chattel slavery. The first thing that I attempt to bring into focus are the socio-historical implications embedded in the license and the authority required to asynchronously invoke the term "queer" as a descriptor for sexual abuse that would, in a contemporary context, be legible as homoerotic at least. The trickiness of insisting on a license to invoke language and its relationship to race presents a problem to black bodies whose own subjectivity is not disconnected from U.S. chattel slavery. The "trouble" of identifying this form of abuse seems to be tied to the status of enslaved peoples as property, therefore, not inheriting the ability to lay claim to themselves through actions that would suggest that they possessed ownership over their own body. My second point that I make here is to specifically highlight the impossibility of consent during these moments of abuse that are then obscured by not only the slave owner but through the paradigms informing the methods within archive theory that determine the authenticity of abuse under slavery. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman critically interrogates the issues in the presumptions made through past close readings of sexual abuse in the archive. Hartman writes: "The opportunity for nonconsent is required to establish consent, for consent is meaningless if refusal is not an option. Nonetheless, the very effort to demonstrate consent reveals its impossibility if consent is understood as a voluntary agreement free from constraint or compulsion or as unimpinged by relation of power and dominance. After all, if desperations, recklessness, and hopelessness determine "choosing one's lover," absolute distinctions between compulsion and assent cannot be sustained. Yielding to another or giving one's self is no less subject to constraint, though it is certainly different from and preferable to being forced to submit. Consent is unseemly in a context in which the very notion of subjectivity is predicated upon the negation of will" (111).
7. In "'The Cry of Sodom': Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," Richard Godbeer outlines the theocratic holdings within laws in colonial New England that would later shape and codify later public and judicial opinion on the topic of deviant or condemnable sexual acts. Specifically, statutes and laws around sodomy in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century provides a very solid reason to consider the repercussion of the discovery of same-gender abuse (i.e. shame, threat to status, legal penalty, etc.) as a factor in its obfuscation in the archive of slavery. Godbeer writes that ministers were careful to distinguish types of "sexual uncleanness" (Godbeer 263), being particularly descriptive about the types of condemnable acts according various biblical passages. The writing of Puritan minister Samuel Danforth, *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into* (1674), appears as a referential point in Godbeer's (1995) article, averring that

sodomitical acts were listed under one of four different types of sexual infringements, falling under the inclination towards “strange flesh” (Danforth 6). A few decades prior in a code drawn up by Clergyman John Cotton in *An Abstract of the Lawes of New England, as they are novv [now] established*. (1641), establishes the terms for which to assess sodomitical acts writing, “Vnnnaturall filthinesse to be punished with death, whether Sodomy, which is carnal fellowship of man with man, or woman with woman” (14).

8. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison describes the affective stakes that the white literary imaginary has in the performance of racial power within the space of the novel. Morrison writes: “These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black of Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness...” (33).”

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