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# Feral Creatures:
Domesticity, Empire, and the Humanist Imaginary

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Summer C. Sutton

June 2023

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Sherryl Vint, Chairperson
Dr. Traise Yamamoto
Dr. Mark Minch-de Leon
Dr. andré carrington

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The Dissertation of Summer C. Sutton is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is a dissertation about kinship, and specifically about how our current world can make it easy to overlook and undervalue our most sustaining connections. I'll do my best not to do that here, though, as this dissertation also notes, the depth of such kinships often resists words.

First off, thank you to Sherryl, who has believed in this project from its vaguest beginnings and made me feel welcome and wanted in academia ever since I was a nervous Master's student fangirling about her work over email. Throughout my entire tenure at Riverside, I have been amazed by how much time and care you give to your many students. You practice abundance every day and I'm grateful to have had such kindness and generosity as a model of how academic life should and can be. Thank you for always being willing to read my long, block-quote heavy drafts, even when you were being suffocated by administrative duties. You always met my work where it was and helped me realize its fullest potential. And thank you especially for continuing to support me as I balanced new motherhood with finishing this project. I'm aware that not every advisor would have provided the same level of care as I figured out how to navigate a career that so often prohibits other time commitments with a baby who likes to tear the

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## DEDICATION

To Angel, who showed me it was possible to be home and free at the same time.

and to Regina, the  feral creature.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Feral Creatures:
Empire, Domesticity, and the Humanist Imaginary

by

Summer C. Sutton

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2023
Dr. Sherryl Vint, Chairperson

"Feral Creatures" examines the domestic sphere as an onto-epistemological structure foundational to both the modern Western political sphere and its implicit racialization: the first zone in which we come to know the self in relation to Others. In this contention, I build on transnational feminist theorists who trace how the forms of selfhood and kinship embodied by the Western nuclear family enforce imperial forms of affect, relatedness, recognition, and justice. "Feral Creatures" thus complicates the second wave feminist critique of the domestic as primarily a forum of invisibilized labor, which implicitly posits a solution of ushering (white) women into an always already racialized workforce. In its place, I trace the imperial narrativization of domesticity as a space to be left behind as figuring an imaginary of homogenized Others as preindustrial

and nonproductive—hopelessly domestic— whose implications for racialized dispossession processes extend far beyond the walls of the family home.

To do so, I close read modern and contemporary Western literary representations of nuclear families striven by structural and interpersonal violences. I draw on texts whose character-systems foreground structurally Othered domestic subject positions, such as daughters, queer sons, and domestic workers. Narrative dispossession from an authoritative subject position allows such characters to retain an epistemological opacity that facilitates spectral, subversive imaginings and modes of relation: a strategically nontransparent onto-epistemological space of creative self-fashioning and interpersonal possibility I name ferality. My conceptualization of ferality builds on Black feminist theories of fugitivity, postcolonial theories of opacity, animal studies theories of the other-than-human, feminist theories of gender performativity, and queer theories of anti-relationality. The figure of ferality that emerges from such a diffuse genealogical heritage is necessarily shadowy but nonetheless has a story to tell. The ambiguity of its story revolves around its demand to recognize the violence of (mis)recognition. Meeting such a demand requires speaking a language both quieter and more forceful than a scream.

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## Introduction

## Feral Beginnings

A few years ago I was asked to pet sit a dog by the owner of a local animal rescue. The adoptive family was having difficulty finding a pet sitter while they went on vacation. The rescue specialized in "last call" canines—- dogs on the brink of euthanasia due to histories that made their ability to play the role of family pet fraught. Koda, the dog in question, had been a feral picked up by the owner when she saw him nearly get hit by a car on the highway. I hesitated at her description of him as a former feral. Like most people, I had some alarming notions of ferality: wild, unpredictable, hostile to human interaction. But, out of a sense of her desperation, I agreed to watch him for the weekend.

I needn't have worried. Koda spent the entire two days he was at my house in the crawl space behind my couch, excluding the few times I dragged him outside to pee. His owners had attached a lightweight leash to his collar since he had to be chronically budged from his various hiding spaces. He crouched low to the ground when he walked, tail tucked tightly between his legs. He did not attempt to engage with our other dogs, nor did he try to attack our cats, one of my initial concerns. He stayed behind the couch until his owners arrived on Monday to retrieve him.

As it turns out, feral dogs brought into human homes are more prone to playing dead or "pancaking" than attacking (Devoted Friends Animal Society). It's a survival strategy for a sudden entry into an unknown world, particularly one full of towering, pale creatures. The strategy worked as intended. Koda's visit was unremarkable and I quickly forgot about his brief appearance in my home. He was not even the main inspiration for

this project. However, looking back, my anxieties over Koda and their contrast to the reality of him foreshadowed many of the conceptual interventions the research for this project would bring me to. *Feral Creatures* grew out of an interest in the domestic sphere, both in the sense of its material realities and its role in various cultural imaginaries. Like many feminists, I began with a distrust of domesticity's historic role as a metonymy for femininity. I had an intuitive sense of domesticity as a form of discipline in the Foucauldian sense of internalized subservience; conjure images of 1950s housewives slowly going crazy as they dust the house and bake meatloaves for obtuse husbands. I intended to develop the concept of ferality to describe the strategies subjects historically relegated to banal domestic routines use to maintain a sort of ontological wildness and unpredictability. Like the stereotyped imaginaries that informed my theoretical distaste for domesticity, my initial imaginings as to what the ontological trappings of ferality would look like admittedly resembled the dismissive cultural framing of feminism as a movement initiated primarily by combative and hostile women, a collective of bra burners who can't find a man (Ahmed). I vaguely intuited the affect of ferality as a kin stance of aggressive anti-sociality that refuses the expectations of gendered domesticating mechanisms. I did not yet register the inherently domesticating nature of coding dissent from violence as itself a violence, a discursive structure of capture that informs many of the state mechanisms traced throughout this project and that has directly shaped the discursive histories creatures variously defined as ferals, exiles, aliens, strangers, or other exclusionary identity terms, find themselves haunted by (Agamben, Ahmed, Day).

I began to develop my framework of ferality from my interdisciplinary background in animal studies and feminist theory. The animal studies pursuit of forms of being and relating that press against the onto-epistemological confines of the human seemed to complement the second wave feminist deconstruction of the domestic sphere as a sociopolitical cage in ways that had rarely been pursued within the available literature. However, I also knew the dominant feminist critique of the domestic had a tendency to prioritize the perspective of middle-class white women, and that animal studies had similarly been under critique for neglecting the history of racial debasement that haunts modern studies of animality (hooks, Polish).

My early research focused on transnational feminist critiques of the domestic that gave weight to the complications of race, nationality, and class, as well as animal studies scholarship that understood the human as a specifically colonial technology of social hierarchization and stratification entangled with both intra-species and intra-human political crises (Alexander, Boisseron). Considering the historical ascription of race, gender, and animal taxonomy in tandem merged contemporary debates over the conceptual utility of identity politics with debates over nonhuman subjectivity forms and the exclusionary nature of political recognition and rights frameworks. I saw a common thread between the two critical arenas through their mutual expression of a subject's affective need for belonging and political need for recognition: the way in which social and personal identities provide a sense of home as well as legal pathways towards protection and affirmation. Identity and recognition politics also introduce the question of

discursive power and its diffuse manifestations in both politicized language forms like law and aestheticized language forms like literature.

My conceptualizations of domesticity and ferality, rather than honing in on the microscopics of modern household dynamics, broadened into a macroscopic interrogation of the modern Western politics of selfhood, relationality, and recognition Elizabeth Povinelli has proposed as the governance of the prior. By the governance of the prior Povinelli means an understanding of modern Western structures of recognition and justice as developed from and continually consolidating a settler colonial hierarchy of being that has so naturalized itself as *the* only way of being that its most basic onto-epistemological assumptions often escape critical illumination and interrogation. I similarly began to understand the domestic sphere as what feminist science studies scholar Michelle Murphy names an epistemic infrastructure, meaning how a given structure contributes to or hinders the parameters of what can be known within a particular sociohistorical milieu. While the domestic as a site of material and labor exploitation—the disciplining of bodies, to paint a broad stroke— had been excavated at length, I became interested in how the domestic disciplines individual and cultural imaginations in its historical function as the first site in which we come to know the self in relation to Others.

## The Aftermath of The Personal as Political: Who Became a Person and Who Became a Political Problem

The second wave feminist interrogation of the domestic was in part limited by its uncritical acceptance of the domestic sphere's perceived division from privileged sites of epistemological advancement, such as the political sphere and the white collar workforce

(Freidan). Second wave feminist criticism tended to frame the domestic as a zone of entrapment that withholds women from the forms of knowledge, freedom, and mobility assumed to be the rightful heritage of a contemporary Western political subject (Firestone). Within such a framework of investigation, the underlying structure of modern liberal subjectivity and the exclusionary logistics of its entitlements remain unexamined.

In contrast, the feminist of color intellectual genealogies that became the backbone of my project not only frame the domestic as an epistemologically *productive* site but also excavate the colonial nature of a white feminist distancing from the assumed entrapment of domestic subjectivity forms that are not only historically gendered through the patriarchal structure of the family— wives, daughters—- but also racialized through the logistical structure of owner and owned, servant and served. bell hooks' *ain't I a woman* traces the whitewashing of the US feminist movement in its focus on letting women into the workforce, pointing out that Black women's coerced labor has never correlated to political mobility or personal dignity; moreover, even given the feminist task of recognizing care work as worthy of recognition and compensation, Black women have historically taken on the domestic labor from which white women seek their freedom. hooks' analysis insists that the gendering of the domestic sphere and the inequitable labor structure it houses cannot be understood apart from the racialization of the social field of mobility as a whole. Hortense Spillers has likewise analyzed the nuclear family as a fundamental grammar of the US nation-state in the Lacanian structural sense, meaning that the implications of the nuclear family structure extend beyond the walls of the domestic home into the psychic structure of the public sphere.

For Spillers, white patriarchal relationality determines the subject-object power structure of the Western political field; recognition as a subject depends on the sociopolitical affirmation of one's kinship relations and access to the historical legitimation of one's family lineage and name. The fungibility of Black people as objects of the state rests on their perceived illegitimacy as mothers, fathers, and children. Within the resulting cultural imaginary, the sentimentalization of the white nuclear family props up the humanization of the white subject and its right to bodily integrity and an expansive sense of self while Black familial dysfunction justifies disproportionate susceptibility to contexts of material and sociopolitical instability and deprivation.

Black feminist analyses deconstruct domestic subjectivity as entangled with not only the gendered politics of work but also the racial politics of state recognition and dispossession. Indigenous feminist scholarship similarly positions the nuclear family structure as central to, rather than a secondary effect of, the consolidation of settler colonialism. Beth Piatote's Native feminist scholarship on settler colonial domesticity focuses on the significance of marriage and property laws to divesting Native communities, and especially Native women, of sovereignty over their lands and bodies; Piatote studies how both the legal inscription of the nuclear family and its romanticization in US film and literature enforce a settler colonial biopolitical regime through their encoding of Western forms of embodiment and affect. Elizabeth Povinelli's work on the imperial politics of love similarly traces how the modern liberal fixation on heterosexual romance and coupling works to provide an illusory space of freedom at the same time as the narrowness of marital property laws effectively acts as a form of mass

dispossession, particularly for queer and/or Indigenous subjects. Dian Million's work on the evolution of settler colonialism under transnational neoliberalism focuses on how the paternalistic logic of the nation-state informs the modern development of truth and reconciliation committees and their emphasis on forgiveness and healing as sentimentalized entry-points into the national family. Like hooks, she finds the second wave feminist deconstruction of the private-public binary inadequate; she argues that it not only ignores the specific concerns of women of color but also that its supposed deprivatization of the personal merely consolidated a therapeutic vision of the self conducive to state paternalism and discipline.

Feminist of color historiographies of the domestic move beyond a reified understanding of domestic inequity as solely encompassing housework and childcare towards an understanding of domesticity as enforcing a white masculinist philosophy of relatedness and entitlement that grounds modern Western political, judicial, and cultural spheres. A broadened transnational feminist framing of domesticity as an imperial epistemic infrastructure extends the feminist debate surrounding domestic labor into the politics of individualism and rights discourse that center the modern liberal humanist subject. Over the past few decades, the liberal humanist subject has become a common target of contemporary critical theory; posthumanism and the new materialisms in particular offer trenchant critiques of how liberal humanism and its enforcement of Western individualism, Cartesian dualism, and Lockean property relations continues to serve as the foundation of modern Western epistemologies (Weheliye). However, resulting assumptions about political liberation and decolonization tend to lean on

collectivist philosophies of subjectivity that assume subsumption into the social will address the sociopolitical equities correlated with the proprietary individuality of the liberal humanist subject (Deleuze and Guattari). The racial and colonial histories of modern Western domesticity and familialism offer a more complex perspective on the politics of individuality and relationality that can inform a robust formulation of decolonial subjectivity and collectivity.

Diasporic Black feminisms are particularly suspicious of an uncritical insistence on collectivity given how racial identity has operated to homogenize Black subjects. In her commentary on the work of Frantz Fanon, Spillers notes the contradictions embedded throughout his writing on colonized selfhood due to his simultaneous disillusionment with the professional field of psychiatry and the political terrain of Algeria (Spillers 387). She sees his turn to the psychoanalysis of race as an attempt to both move away from mental illness as individualized pathology and to understand state structures as consolidated out of psychic, as much as state, force. For her, where Fanon errs is in overlooking the dimension of the self that pre-exists its encounter with sociopolitical structures of racialization. She argues that the genealogy of Black intellectualism is fraught with a kin tendency to understand individuality as a luxury of whiteness and to restrict Black thought to a voice box for collective justice. Spillers argues that the consequences of that line of thinking have been to turn Black communities into sociological case studies and to overlook the instability of racialization as a contingent structure of white wish fulfillment that is never as effective as dreamed. Afro-Caribbean studies scholar Jacqui Alexander has similarly argued against the personal as political

formulation of second wave feminism, noting that the motto enforces a binary opposition between individual and community that neglects how an individual carries their community within them but is also not reducible to it (Alexander 262). In line with Spillers' observations, Alexander contends that the politicization of the personal by the dominant feminist movement has by and large led to the sociologization of women of color, and particularly those living in the Global South, as pieces of evidence for the violence of patriarchy while white women have not only retained access to the privacy and idiosyncrasy of the personal but also gained the self-congratulatory role of spokesperson for non-white women. Alexander's research into the paternalistic tourist culture of the contemporary Caribbean supports Million's observation that the deprivatization of the self mobilized by second wave feminism most often amounts to the further objectification of women and communities of color for the sake of white self-actualization.

Intimate with Spillers' and Alexander's criticisms of twentieth century Black intellectualism, Kevin Quashie locates in the history of Black American activism, particularly during the Civil Rights era, a tendency to glorify publicness, by which he means an embodied performance of political solidarity (Quashie 140). In place of dominant cultural depictions of Black political activism that foreground physical actions like riots and that affirm the white reduction of Blackness to unruly embodiment, Quashie offers a counter-history that focuses on the extensive periods of quiet reflection and study that informed the visions of activist groups like the Black Panthers. He argues for re-positioning interiority as not a renunciation or denial of the political but as inseparable

from diligent and transformative political engagement. He notes how a shift to interiority "can feel like a kind of heresy if the interior is thought of as apolitical or inexpressive, which it is not: one's inner life is raucous and full of expression, especially if we distinguish the term 'expressive' from the notion of public" (8). Quashie's framework reclaims from the compulsory publicness of the political the right to, and indeed necessity of, a withdrawal into the self in order to formulate dissent, agreement, or ambivalence about the workings of the public sphere.

Quashie's work on the racial politics of interiority also points to how the disciplinary function of the private-public binary is not only or even most immediately about privatization as a form of political invisibility. To the contrary, the forced publicness of Black subjectivity operates as a technology of homogenization and dispossession from complex and varied interiority that less silences voice than evacuates it. The racial politics of the private-public binary rather center around whether movement from the private to the public sphere facilitates a process of self-actualization via the performance and recognition of idiosyncratic selfhood or the reinforcement of one's subsumption into utilitarian subjectivity forms. The alternatively empowering or debilitating function of publicness in this sense is less about whether or not one is recognizable than on whose terms one is recognized. The narrative of the domestic sphere as a zone of entrapment and political immobility in turn obscures not only the political nature of domestic activity but also the immobilizing nature of traversing the public sphere for minoritized subjects.

## The Woman in the Attic: The Epistemic Infrastructure of White Feminist Victimhood

In her criticism of the imperial assumptions underlying second-wave feminism in the academy, Rey Chow argues that white feminist critics often implicitly rely on a narrative of captivity to justify the necessity and singularity of feminist thought within contemporary critical theory. She turns to the narrative structure of *Jane Eyre* (as well as its popularity as a textual object choice amongst feminist critics) to emblematize both how white feminism counter-intuitively uses victim subjectivity as a form of empowerment and how its use of victimhood depends upon a racialized process of denigrating and expelling Otherness. Her reading focuses on the entangled characterizations of Jane and Mr. Rochester's first wife, Bertha, a mixed race woman from the West Indies infamously housed in the attic. Building on Nancy Armstrong's intersectional feminist reading, she describes how,

> Jane's 'claim that 'this social order is bad, because it excludes me,' Armstrong writes, 'is perfectly compatible… with the claim that 'this social order is good insofar as it includes me.' This is because captivity, exclusion, and subordination— negative experiences that justify Jane's anger and protest as a social outcast— are, in the course of the narrative, converted by her diligence, honesty, courage, and endurance into the means of her empowerment, her final acceptance by the social order (Chow).

The second wave feminist captivity narrative has historically allowed white women to narrate a heroic tale of escaping patriarchal victimization that functionally entrenches the

disingenuous moralized individualism and combativeness of liberal humanist subjectivity. I would in turn argue that the imperial values Chow traces in second-wave feminism subtend much contemporary feminist and queer work that positions domesticity as a form of captivity its victims are entitled to escape. As with Jane's journey to freedom, the problem with such critiques is less that the domestic is not a zone of oppression, as indeed this project argues it very often can be, than that narratives of domestic captivity enforce its symbolic operation as a zone of racialized dispossession to be left behind by politically mobile actors. Feminist and queer framings of domesticity as captivity can in turn risk consolidating a liberal humanist conceptualization of the type of person with the capacity to facilitate political change and usher in futurity.

Lauren Berlant, for example, stands, and not without good reason, as one of the most prominent Western critics working at the intersection of contemporary feminist and queer theory. Her scholarly trilogy, *Anatomy of a National Fantasy*, (1991), *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, (1993) and *The Female Complaint,* (2008) provide a trenchant critique of the complex entanglements between the private and public spheres as they have historically been understood, with a focus on the political role of affect in both binding and undoing various publics. I take up her more recent work on neoliberal sentimentality in Chapter Five, but, for my purposes here, I'll focus on her work in *The Female Complaint*, which more directly focuses on the domestic and the question of female oppression.

*The Female Complaint* considers the history and relative efficacy of women's voice as a platform for political dissent. Berlant's analysis revolves around her

conceptualization of intimate publics, which she figures as a market-driven form of collectivity centered on the idea that being a woman is sufficient grounds for commonality and based in an affective sense of solidarity in patriarchal oppression that does not, for Berlant, translate into the sort of political activism that would actually inaugurate greater power for women. Berlant traces intimate publics in white female cultural productions that represent limited forms of gender trouble and female complaint while ultimately safely returning their protagonist to the patriarchal status quo. Her readings affirm Chow's insights about white female victimhood as less about political marginalization than about the affective satisfactions of martyrdom. Indeed, Berlant notes that, "as long as they have had a public sphere, bourgeois white women writers have mobilized fantasies of what black and working-class interiority based on suffering must feel like in order to find a language for their own more privileged suffering at the hands of other women, men, and callous institutions" (*The Female Complaint* 6). From the perspective of the domestic, I would also concur with Berlant that much of the contemporary cultures surrounding and marketing of feminized domestic identities, such as wife and mother, revolve around romanticized notions of sacrifice and a woe is me humor that attempts to make misery an affirming part of female identity and effectively disables critique of inequitable domestic labor conditions.

While Berlant aptly outlines the weaponization of domestic sentimentality and the anemia of white female resistance culture, her framing of the relationship between intimate publics and the political sphere reinforces exactly the sort of liberal humanist notion of the political Quashie and Chow dissect as dependent on its disavowed

racialization. She “[calls] women’s culture ‘juxtapolitical’ because, like most mass-mediated non-dominant communities, that of feminine realist-sentimentality thrives in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not” (x). Berlant relates the pseudo-political nature of women’s culture to both the forums in which it takes place—- commodity-driven cultural spaces like chick lit and Oprah—- and the feel good mundanity of its content as expressing struggles grounded in everydayness and relatability. Her imputation of women’s culture seems to rest on the assumption that to move from the feel-good space of Oprah viewership to the political realm would allow women to lodge an effective complaint against patriarchal imperialism. However, the implications of her arguments and particularly the language through which she expresses them consolidate an imperial masculinist vision of the political that always already bars feminized subjects. Intimate publics provide “a *sense* that there is a common emotional world available to those individuals who have been marked by the historical burden of being harshly treated in a generic way and who have more than survived social negativity by making an aesthetic and spiritual scene that generates *relief from the political*” (10). Their provision of relief from “the hard, cold world” of political activity which requires “active antagonism” (11) is evidence of their failure to rise to the rigorous standards of political participation.

Certainly, Berlant’s analysis captures the affective sense for much of the US public that the political sphere is an inaccessible realm of elites. But her continued contrast between the softness of intimate publics and the hardness of the political realm

on the symbolic level means much of her argument's force implicitly depends on gendered and racialized understandings of effective political voice that not only discount the epistemological value of affect and sociality but also attribute excessive emotionality and irrationality to the knowledge bases of feminized subjects. It reinscribes the value of an ontological hardness only certain bodies are ever read as successfully inhabiting. Even her amendment that working class and non-white writers who took solace in intimate publics and gave them the occasional critical edge depends on a figuration of political agency as exceptional individuality that reinforces the racialized connotation of an intimate public as a massified group of individuals content with the minor rewards and struggles of everyday living.

Indeed, Berlant's target, women's culture, which she does usefully bracket in quotes to mark its discursive instability, embodies the longer history of academic debates over the personal/political binary and its various mapping onto both culture/politics and women/men as red herrings for racialized dispossession processes that facilitate the field of knowledge-production in which Western intellectuals self-actualize. In her overview of second-wave feminist discourses, Chow discusses the debate provoked over the supposed feminization of mass culture, which tended to garner two responses: a championing of mass cultural forms and, by implicit association, women's capacity for cultural production, or an insistence that high art was just as much a woman's domain. For Chow, such debates failed precisely where they retained focus on the binary opposition between women/mass culture and man/high culture and thus evaded reckoning with the fluctuating and unstable symbolic field that entangles femininity, aesthetics, and political

power and that is underwritten by racialized judgments of value. She argues that, "both the attempts to demote and promote 'woman' remain ever unsatisfactory; it is as if, once the term is invoked– once 'woman' is made analytically viable– we are already, in spite of our ostensible efforts, moving in and into another realm of cultural relations that can no longer be confined to gender" (*The Protestant Ethnic*).

Building on Chow's analysis, we can read in the seeming redundancy of 'women's culture' a history of feminization not in the sense of women's oppression as subjects but a wider process of political delegitimization via symbolic segregation from imperial spheres of power. Here is also where readings of the domestic as a gendered sphere are insufficient without a concomitant decolonial analytic that does not merely nod to women of color as subject to intensified oppression but that deconstructs the history of domesticity as a technology of uneven individuation and massification that determines those whose lives are seen as defined by everyday survival and those who are seen as rising above the mundanity of everyday needs.

In his work on the racial politics of aesthetic representation, David Lloyd argues for an historically specific understanding of modern aesthetic judgment as grounded in the value system of Western imperialism and its ontologization of racialized subjects. He focuses especially on the teleological arc of personhood embedded in aesthetic philosophy similar to the arc of self-actualization I trace in the movement along the private public binary. He argues that

> Above all, representation regulates the distribution of racial identifications along a developmental trajectory: The Savage or Primitive and the Negro or Black remain

> on the threshold of an unrealized humanity, still subject to affect and to the force of nature, not yet capable of representation, not yet apt for freedom and civility [...] Thus, while aesthetic theory is usually taken to promote a 'liberal' or noncoercive relation to its objects, it is, in fact, structured through and through by a symbolically violent figure of the impassable threshold […] Racial figures haunt that threshold, marking the boundary between the subjects of civility and the undeveloped space of savagery and blackness (*Under Representation*).

Representation, and the concomitant capacity for disinterested aesthetic judgment, mark one's successful movement out of the realm of necessity associated with racialized abjection. The function of such a framework lies less in articulating a specific set of aesthetic values that would constitute good taste than in those it dispossesses from dominant cultural conversations through their association with a parochial particularism and propensity for emotionality, which Lloyd notes would tend to characterize those advocating for justice on the part of themselves or their communities. Lloyd develops his framework specifically through close readings of canonical classical and modern philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, Walter Benjamin, and Sigmund Freud. In our contemporary moment of globalization and heightened diversity speak, dominant art and culture institutions tend not only to discuss racial politics but to foreground them. Yet we can trace the dynamic of the aesthetic threshold in the very function of diversity as marking the civility of the institution whose predominantly white administrators and donors retain structural power over those whose presence provides their institution with its ethical sheen. We can also trace it in the continual disavowal of domesticity as what I

argue constitutes the other side of the aesthetic threshold: the racialized site of necessity the overcoming of which determines one's civility and concomitant assumption of a meaningful public voice.

**Reframing the Domestic Labor Debate**

The racialized underpinnings of domesticity whose origins Hartman and Spillers outline in the antebellum and Jim Crow landscapes now operate through the West's totalization over neoliberal global infrastructures and the avenues to humanist self-actualization they facilitate through voyeuristic cosmopolitanism, paternalistic interventionism, and faux outrage at the ethical crises engendered by the sociomaterial effects of both. From this angle, the innumerable NGOs and other various human rights organizations ostensibly created to address the uneven playing field of contemporary Western imperialism spring directly from the colonial logic of incorporation into national families and their posthoc paternal benevolence. Moreover, while dominant cultural imaginaries tends to foreground spectacular and masculinized images of the global reverberations of Western interventionism, such as Mexican drug cartels and Middle Eastern war lords, the feminized service industry and the transnational female heads of household it by and large employs are subject to not only some of the most debilitating labor conditions but also, in a psychosocial sense, serve as the lynchpin for the philanthropic expansiveness of Western consciousness through the background management of mundane infrastructural needs.

In her transnational feminist account of the neoliberal labor economy, Alexander describes the formation of a predominantly white, male, and upper-class corporate

workforce and its dependency on a feminized service workforce for the housekeeping of both their domestic homes and their corporate offices. She describes how,

> Members of this class require a household in which reproductive labor is paid labor. This labor is most often provided by the same class of immigrant women who perform service work at the bottom of the very firms this corporate class manages. It also requires relaxation, a clean environment, security, and protection. In other words, this class requires an extensive workforce– in local firms, in private households, and in business enterprises all over the world (101-102).

The widespread development of a transnational feminized service sector in *both* private and public sectors bespeaks the limits of a reversal of the private-public binary, in which women are ushered into the dignifying world of work and publicness, to both understanding and addressing feminization as a racializing technology and domesticity as a psychosocial as well as material space in which not only everyday needs are met but also, as Alexander points to, a sense of security and groundedness is reproduced for the masculinized agent. Such ontological grounding is assured by the disappearance of Otherness and disorder absorbed by the feminized agents of caretaking. And yet it is precisely within its absorption of difference that Alexander reads feminized labor under neoliberalism as the optimal grounds for a revolutionary consciousness that questions the very bases of social organization. Her proposition works against a vulgar Marxist conception of false consciousness that situates abject work conditions as an impediment to the intellectual work of political criticism. She argues that such a conception figures political thought and activity as supplemental to daily living, a luxury of free time, rather

than integral to the movements and experience of the everyday—something, per Quashie, carried within. Focusing on the rallying expression by C activists, 'no tenemos hambre de comida, tenemos hambre de justicia,' she argues that:

> A false opposition continues to circulate between the needs of survival and the demands of time, pitting individual survival against collective conscience. In such an opposition, there is presumably no time 'left over' for political activity. When women say, 'no tenemos hambre de comida, tenemos hambre de justicia,' they reconcile this fictive split between the struggle for survival and the search for justice. When dignity and daily bread are brought together so that justice overtakes the (not unimportant) struggle for wages, in contexts where they are miniscule to begin with, women give voice to a deeper, existential yearning: the desire to make themselves intelligible to themselves and to each another, to make domination transparent, and to practice new and different ways of being. In this process there is no opposition between the demands of survival and the needs of time. Rather, the very force of existential necessity propels the desire to know, the desire to make sense of existence. Theorizing, therefore, becomes an existential necessity (106).

Similar to Angela Carter's 'practical fantasies,' a concept I take up in Chapter Three, by bringing together 'existential' with 'necessity,' two terms often figured in opposition through the dominant view of white French existentialism as armchair philosophizing, Alexander refutes material deprivation as inimical to political articulation. To the contrary, she figures the sense of urgency and outrage felt in the midst of abject material

conditions as precisely what gives transnational feminist thought its critical and creative edge. Her reframing of hunger as both spiritual—- a yearning for intelligibility— and bodily both rejects Cartesian dualism and gestures towards the importance of understanding domesticity as both a material site of everyday reproduction and an ontological site that shapes the intelligibility and responsibility of the self in relation to Others.

## Feral Creatures and Characters

*Feral Creatures* names dissenting interiority within domestic spaces ferality. I choose the term feral to both evoke and trouble its connotations. Feral creatures like Koda inspire fear *as well as* the romanticization of a radical individuality that has historically been the domain of masculinity. In Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*, it is Tramp who proudly roams the streets, while Lady, as prim and proper as her name implies, stays at home with her pups. The historical tie between masculinity and ferality may seem materially-grounded given women's vulnerability to sexual assault on the streets; however, I would argue the association has less to do with the spatial organization of vulnerability than the discursive organization of who is tied to background against which the scruffy Tramps of the world draw their charming individuality.

My tracing of ferality tells a different story. As Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* makes clear, it is specifically Black women who occupy the outside spaces of Western structures of recognition while retaining the responsibility of replicating the epistemic and sociomaterial infrastructures that disavow their foundational role. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson names the Western cognitive dissonance surrounding Black femininity

‘plasticity.’ Like Lloyd, she traces the racializing schema of Western modernity in the pairing of Blackness with emotion and sensory/bodily experience and whiteness with the rationality and cognitive equilibrium necessary to set the terms of modern science and intellectual inquiry. However, she focuses on the complicating axis of gender as what situates Black maternity as the ultimate site of disorder and unknowability through how Black mothers occupy the paradoxical status of active subject, insofar as they serve as the productive site through which the racialized and gendered hierarchies of Western ontology emerge, and passive object, insofar as they are defined in those hierarchies by social dispossession and immobility. She argues that such a doubled positionality always already risks upending the divisions between object/subject, knower/known, property/owner, on which the relational structure of Western imperialism rests. More importantly for my purposes, she argues for the figuration of black maternity as a possible site for rescripting the perceived passivity of femininity and its concomitant entanglement with racialized dispossession:

> Here objecthood serves to feminize a womanhood considered to be of questionable feminine standing by way of placing her being *in* common under erasure; in other words, it genders black womanhood on the register of her object status only to dispossess her gender of the fullness of being (human) [...] I argue that rather than simply restore activity to matter or militate against the charge of passivity in the exclusive terms of defining agency by activity, an alteration of the object’s blackened gender status necessitates a transvaluation of the gendered symbolics of passivity and the inoperability of its sliding substitutions (116-117).

I take up Jackson's refiguration of passivity at greater length in Chapter One. But here I want to note how the transvaluation of passivity she proposes aligns with Quashie's rewriting of interiority from a space of insular reclusivity to a space of expansive potential in relation to the totalized social field. Moreover, Quashie's reinscription of interiority revolves around a renewed understanding of feminized traits whose political agency, by which we can loosely mean the capacity to enact structural change, is often dismissed for their assumed passivity: stillness, receptivity, caution.

*Feral Creatures* takes up the Black feminist reinscription of passivity and interiority to articulate an other than masculinist imperial conception of individuation and its realization through feral voice, witness, and dissent. Ferality here resides less in the physical act of striking out from home— though it can accompany that— than in a declining to exteriorize the self through the gendered and racialized taxonomic terms of community and individuality set by an imperial nation-state. Ferality as an ethical mode of being and worlding is additionally informed by Indigenous theorist Audra Simpson's politics of refusal in the face of colonial knowledge forms, afro-pessimism's suspicion of the cultures of optimism surrounding Western political participation, and queer anti-relationality's subversive stance towards heterodisciplinary frameworks of relationality, as discussed further in later chapters.

I use the term *creature* to encompass forms of being that precede and exceed the terms of liberal humanist subjectivity. Through literary case studies I in turn consider how the feral potentiality of creaturely being is domesticated through the expectations of character forms and tropes. My focus on literary characters within both domestic and

geopolitical spaces allows me to unpack the representational and racializing mechanics of domesticity as a form of becoming-background. I focus especially on feral daughters, but queer sons serve an equally important role in their feral relationship to toxic masculinity. Nonhuman animals crop up at the edges of each narrative studied, often as representatives of life ulterior to the hierarchical relationality of liberal humanism. Their largely symbolic role for the feral humans characters who serve as each chapter's protagonist may seem to replicate the epistemological violence of humanism under critique; however, I figure the metaphoric nature of nonhuman animals throughout this project through Glissant's framework of poetic relationality. A poetics of relation accepts as a given not only that nonhuman and human animals can never fully understand each other but also that no connection between two creatures, regardless of species, will ever be transparent. To see another creature as a metaphor is thus to accept the necessarily limited and biased nature of intersubjective perception and communication but also to mark the epistemological richness of Others in their dense potentiality. I reconfigure metaphoric nonhuman animality through Glissant specifically to counter the paranoid reading tendency within critical animal studies that shuts down any attempt at insight into nonhuman animal being as anthropocentric projection, which, as I discuss in Chapter One, romanticizes nonhuman animals and downplays the reality of and necessary accountability to human and nonhuman animal entanglement. I bookend the project with the two chapters most directly engaged with critical animal studies in order to showcase the cross-species and transnational implications of a decolonial worldview.

The decolonial potential of the feral in turn lies in its heightened state of witness. The act of witnessing illustrates the fallacy of equating interiority with political passivity. Witnessing requires a state of attention oriented towards intersubjective accountability. Effective witnessing precludes the state of perpetual activity and publicity incentivized by neoliberalism and its division of the public field into competing and commodified individualities. Witness is predicated instead on a withdrawal of the self from the public field of action—- a turning feral—- in order to reflect on the harms being facilitated within that field. To witness does not necessarily mean to follow through with reparative action but it does mean a refusal to not know. The feral creatures foregrounded throughout the following chapters grew up in domestic environments defined by intersubjective aggression and domination and both their hesitant relationship to publicness and their determination to bear witness are shaped by a desire to live otherwise weighted by the pain of having lived here.

Chapter One, "Feral Looks: Race, Animality, and Biopolitics in Claire Denis' *High Life"* close reads Claire Denis' 2018 sci-fi film, *High Life*, which follows a US space team of death-row inmates sent out from a doomed Earth to reproduce humanity. A strict regimen of reproductive control shapes the crew's mission and dynamics. Denis' earlier work in postcolonial cinema and character-system of death row inmates positions the film's critique alongside Black studies examinations of Western surveillance and criminalization processes, while her narrative focus on reproductive and sexual violence necessitates a turn to Black feminist thought on gender, sexuality, and nationhood. I further read the spectral appearance of dogs throughout the film alongside legal studies

scholarship on the co-development of punitive legislation directed at canine and Black subjects. The chapter thus establishes the project's interest in bringing together Black feminist deconstructions of the domestic and animal studies deconstructions of domestication.

Throughout *Feral Creatures*, dogs play a reoccurring role in their fraught status as mankind's 'best friend' and the most heavily legislated nonhuman animal within Western law. Dogs are a deeply romanticized companion animal equally known for an implicit capacity for violence. As many people fear dogs for their bite as love them for their cuddles, and the history of dog-human relationality is marred by their exploitation within fighting rings. Following postcolonial scholars like Giorgio Agamben, Colin Dayan, and Benedicte Boisseron, I position the Western history of defining dogs and their violence as emblematic of taxonomy as a racializing technology that essentializes affects and behaviors and invisibilizes the histories of dispossession that inform barbaric states like rage and civilized states like equanimity.

Chapter One's title, "Feral Looks" speaks to its interest in the potential for witness that forms when any action you take within a social field is doomed to be read against you but your consequent indifference to participating frees you up to reflect on the missteps of the one writing the terms. The protagonist of *High Life*, Monte's general apathy throughout the film coincides with the intense infatuation the lead scientist of the ship, Dr. Dibs feels for him and his own lifelong love of dogs. The daughter that results from Dibs' sexual assault of Monte accordingly grows into a feral creature who tries to make sense of how to shape a better future from a heritage of violence.

Chapter Two, “Absent Fathers: Discourse and/as Domestication in the Jim Crow Imaginary” considers the question of violent heritages through the infamously racialized inheritance structures of plantation slavery and the Jim Crow South. William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* serve as its textual case studies. Through *Absalom, Absalom*, I build on Agamben’s work on the ontology of Western law to consider how patriarchy structures not only the gendered power relations of the state and its realization through the nuclear family but also the racialized system of ontological spectacularization and spectralization in which certain lives prop up the reality of others (*State of Exception*). Faulkner’s sardonic mythologization of the Southern patriarch, Thomas Sutpen and the ghostly aura of irreality he attributes to both the second generation of Sutpens— most especially Sutpen’s niece and second wife, Rosa and his mixed-race grandson, Charles Bon— provides a familial model of Agamben’s deconstruction of political charisma. I focus especially on how Faulkner frames Sutpen’s infamous legacy as grounded in town gossip and family lore and thus highlights the centrality of discursivity to both the consolidation and instability of Western imperialism.

I then turn from Faulkner’s fatalistic portrayal of characters spectralized within the Western cultural imaginary to Toni Morrison’s Black feminist imagining of fugitive ferality amidst the structural dispossession of the Jim Crow era. The dedication to surprise of her titular protagonist, Sula upends the disciplinary moral standards of her hometown, Bottom and their insistence on legible femininity and motherhood. Morrison’s emphasis on the continued necropolitics of the post-emancipation US through Bottom’s history of dispossession in turn elucidates the town’s investment in cultivating

respectability; however, her gestures towards the stubborn creativity of fugitive worldviews that may appear crazy, morbid, immoral, or impossible, through characters like Sula and the mad Shadrack, questions the wisdom of a turn to civility in the face of the indifferent cruelty of a Jim Crow state. Moreover, her autobiographical introduction about writing as a single mother situates Sula's artistic bent alongside Alexis Pauline Gumbs' queer Black feminist framework of m(other)ing. Morrison thus provides a model of relationality outside of liberal humanism and its material grounding within familial inheritance structures.

Chapter Three, "Practical Fantasies: Fairy Tale Epistemologies in Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*" builds on Morrison's aligning of ferality with a creative imagination by turning to the life and work of Angela Carter. Through interviews, biographies, and critical scholarship, I consider how Carter turned to the fairy tale genre precisely to challenge its feminization as an avenue of social critique and radical imagining. I argue that the ambiguous morality of her fairy tale adaptations and their wayward daughter figures articulated a feral, intersectional feminist imagination that challenged the second-wave leanings of the dominant feminist voices of her time period. I further read her interest in fairy tale epistemologies through historiographic scholarship on traditional European fairy tales that traces how the fairy tale's central motifs of mixed families and dispossessed daughters evidence the widespread precarity of life and kinship under early capitalism, countering a view of the fairy tale's political implications as limited to female agency. Rather, fairy tales and their turn to the irrationality of magic

and animism in the face of impenetrable power structures model a decolonial epistemic infrastructure.

Having drawn out the decolonial underpinnings of fairy tale epistemologies through Carter's work, I turn to a contemporary feminist fairy tale adaptation: British-Nigerian writer, Helen Oyeyemi's 2011 novel, *White is for Witching*, which uses the fairy tale and its focus on the domestic to parallel the insular sociality of the white family home to Britain's segregation and misrepresentation of refugees. Under Oyeyemi's feral imagination, the Silver family home is an actual, living character, who uses the wives and daughters of the house as puppets to express its xenophobic worldview and its demand they stay at home and away from the people of color who increasingly populate their neighborhood and community. Oyeyemi's use of the feral animacy system of the fairy tale and its giving-voice to nonhuman animals and objects--- from birds to trees to houses--- allows her to showcase the active role of the nuclear family home in enforcing the racialized segregation practices of the state and the internalized policing mentalities of white Britons. On a formal level, the breakdowns in rational voice and turns to fabulation and poetics on the part of the home and the present-time daughter it targets, Miranda gesture towards Black feminist poetics as an onto-epistemological space of feral interiority that always already evades racialized and gendered state domestication processes. Black feminist ferality is also embodied on the thematic level by the Silver's Yoruban housekeeper, Sade and Miranda's best friend and British-Nigerian adoptee, Ore. Sade and Ore's limited appearances in the novel work against a politics of diverse representation by outlining the Silver women's self-centering

narratives of victimization as a form of discursive witchery from which the only escape is a refusal to go down the rabbit hole with them at all.

The second half of "Feral Creatures" centers contemporary debates in critical theory surrounding diversity and representation in its turn to autobiography and life writing. It thus also establishes the project's interest in the entanglement of and tension between individual and collective consciousnesses. Chapter Four, "Vocabularies of Escape: Testimony and Feral Fugitivity in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and Alexis Pauline Gumbs," close reads life writings of domestic violence alongside critical legal scholarship on state testimony in order to unpack the ways in which both the private-public binary and the question of truth have operated as red herrings within life writing and legal testimony reading publics to distract from questions of justice. It turns to Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* and Alexis Pauline Gumb's speculative poetry collection, *Spill* as texts by women of color explicitly concerned with the ethical quandaries surrounding life writing as a member of a strategically misrepresented community. Machado focuses on the historical invisibilization of queerness within archives of domestic abuse. By framing each chapter of her memoir and its critique of heteronormative reading practices as a different genre, she juxtaposes the categorization of voice alongside contemporary identity categories, recalling Chapter One's dissection of taxonomy as a racializing technology in its hierarchization of being. Moreover, in dispersing her testimony of her experience of domestic abuse in a queer relationship across different genres, she traverses feminized forms of voice, such as fairy tale, fantasy, and popular culture in order to illuminate their feral testimonial capacity in

relation to the state regulated voice of legal testimony. I propose that her generically restless approach to life writing as testimony serves as a protective form of fugitivity amidst the struggle for structural recognition and reparation.

My reading of *Spill* considers its kin approach to testimonial fugitivity but with a focus on Gumbs' turn to speculative poetics. I argue that *Spill*, as a speculative poetry collection ostensibly organized around an unnamed female protagonist's journey leaving her abusive husband, uses the ambiguously autobiographical narrative perspective of poetry to undo the private-public binary as the dominant lens through which the domestic is understood. I read Gumbs' formal choices alongside Hartman's theorization of Black feminist fugitivity and subsequent turn to speculative historiography in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Hartman's arguments against an identitarian approach to feminist theory and investment in unknowability illuminate Gumbs' decision to withhold her protagonist's name and to instead foreground the structural causes of domestic abuse within the Black American community, starting with the Middle Passage. And yet, her use of poetic metaphor to hold space for the idiosyncrasy of her protagonist's interiority— the self who exceeds the communities who shape it—- equally refuses the homogenization of Blackness and specifically Black kinship through histories of pain embodied most infamously by the Moynihan Report. Ultimately Machado and Gumbs inaugurate a mode of testimony grounded jointly in creativity and accountability as a way out of the bad faith facticity that structures Western testimony.

Chapter Five, "Utopia in Ruins: Queer Futurity and Exile in David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*" studies David Wojnarowicz's memoir *Close to the Knives: A*

*Memoir of Disintegration,* which recounts Wojnarowicz's experiences as a queer artist living through the AIDS crisis, including his own diagnosis and forced reckoning with a premature death facilitated by the 'pro-family' homophobia and personal responsibility rhetoric of the Reagan administration. Using Jose Muñoz's framework of queer utopia and its emphasis on melancholia, ambivalence, and the persistence of hope amidst despair, I consider how the restless affective tonality of Wojnarowicz's life writing, as well as the breathless pace of the stream of consciousness style through which he relays his mixed feelings, preserves a space of feral interiority apart from the humanist structures of legibility queer anti-relational scholars argue have been used to domesticate queerness. I expand on Muñoz's concept of queer utopia through queer historiographer Heather Love's concept of ruination, which attempts to move past the modern impulse to redeem the past through the future by an insistence on sitting with the sadness and loss strung throughout queer archives. I argue that Wojnarowicz's writing and the aesthetic approach to activism it embodies models a ruined utopianism, whose visions of improved life quality are directly informed by an awareness of the precarity of human life and the necessity of compassionate witness. Chapter Five thus establishes the project's interest in forms of utopian thought and futurity predicated on accountability to histories of violence.

Chapter Six, "Last Words: Globalization, Forced Diaspora, and Animal Language in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,*" moves from the necropolitics of the US nation-state to the necropolitics of contemporary globalization processes. I read the transnational and multigenerational perspective of Ocean Vuong's autobiographical

novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* through Sylvia Wynter's deconstruction of globalization and its creation of a universal human subject as a central technology of Western imperial domination. I consider how Vuong's choice to tell his family's story through autobiographical fiction performs a feral refusal of ontological transparency specifically informed by diasporic epistemologies and their understanding of a simultaneously mutable and Sacred self. I further position Vuong's primary background as a poet as evident through his metaphoric turns to nonhuman animality throughout *On Earth*. In line with Glissant's poetics and its focus on metaphor as a mode of relationality, Vuong's interest in nonhuman animality centers around the potential flashes of solidarity between forced diasporic human animals and hunted nonhuman animals and the consequent cross-species and antihumanist epistemologies that may emerge from their imagined encounters. I focus specifically on the debates surrounding nonhuman language under the contention that the bodily nature of nonhuman animal languages and their adaptability within conditions of threat counters a liberal humanist valuation of abstract language as a marker of intelligence and species superiority. Chapter Six thus rounds out the project's tracing of feral voice as a decolonial political mode by looking to languages of survival developed between creatures expected to remain silent.

As a whole, the characters traced throughout the following pages provide an alternative understanding of what it means to be feral. For these literary ferals, playing dead is not only a form of life but a form of language. To bear witness to their stories means resisting the impulse to drag them from behind the metaphorical couch and into a

narrative of redemption. Their stubborn commitment to hanging back instead asks us to reflect on the kinds of worlds we feel compelled to drag each other into.

# Chapter One

## Feral Looks: Race, Animality, and Biopolitics in Claire Denis' *High Life*

As animal studies scholar Susan McGugh notes, animal studies has often been considered a "bad object-choice" (McHugh) amongst humanities scholars. The delegitimization of animal studies within the humanities speaks to the liberal humanist investment in the human-animal boundary. On the one hand, a political subject defined by language and intellect. On the other, animals driven by survival who lack the ontological depth of self-consciousness. This chapter considers how the forms of discourse and knowledge historically believed to not only distinguish the human from the animal but also shape a humane moral consciousness are intimately tied to modern Western legal structures of racialized recognition and (in)justice. I trace the intimacies between the taxonomic categorization of animality and racialized regimes of visibility and legibility in order to argue for a poetics of feral opacity.

In his work on the abjection of animality throughout Western thought, biopolitical philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that a clear definition of human life is perpetually promised but continually deferred. He points to Aristotle's foundational division of life into multiple categories, such as nutrition and sensation, which work to support his valuation of the 'higher' life of the mind. Aristotle's hierarchy relies, however, on a taxonomic system of circular reasoning that evades the question of why certain forms of activity are prioritized over others, i.e. why the philosophic examination of life is defined by 'drives' or why the primary criteria for achieving a reasoned state of mind is the ability to exercise control over bodily impulse, rather than the ability to sense and satisfy

bodily needs (Agamben 14). In her work on the entanglement of animality and Blackness, Jackson similarly deconstructs Thomas Jefferson's rhetorical tendency to compare Black people to animals. In contrast to the common positioning of his anti-Black rhetoric as being facile racism, she argues that "what is crucial is that Jefferson defines black people as 'animal' not based on a direct correlation to nonhuman animals but on the specificity of black people's humanity, particularly with regard to black embodiment, sexuality, intelligence, and emotions: aesthetically displeasing form, bestial sexuality, and minor intelligence and feeling" (26). Both the indirectness and conceptual preoccupations of Jefferson's arguments mirrors the circularity and content of Aristotle's account of the human mind. In both cases, the human as a racializing and animalizing standard of being relies less on the clarity of what it is than the diverse and wide-reaching abjection of what it is not. Moreover, the human's supposedly defining tie to the abstract and rarefied space of the mind is dependent on a conceptual elusiveness whose function is to simultaneously mystify and justify the imperial power structure of Western humanism and its exploitative rendering of feminized, racialized, and animalized subjects as mere bodies.

Critical legal studies scholar Samara Esmeir likewise argues that the modern legal preoccupation with defining the humane treatment of animals functions primarily to enshrine a predominantly male and landowning class of legal guardians whose humane minds allow them to determine both the kinds of pain worthy of legal intervention as well as the kinds of bodies worthy of having their reports of pain taken seriously (119). The entangled histories of racial and anthropocentric infantilization within Western philosophy and law constitute the central concern of this chapter. However, in

considering animality and race as co-constituted, I may risk seeming to conflate Black histories of racial terror and nonhuman animal histories of humanist projection: conceptual missteps that haunt the public image of animal studies due to PETA's infamous comparison of industrialized farming to plantation slavery.[1] My approach to the intersection of critical race theory and animal studies in contrast follows intersectional animal studies scholar like Jackson and Benedicte Boisseron, who both argue that to avoid unpacking the connections between racial and animal abjection throughout modern Western history risks buying into the humanist Olympics of suffering that undermines the decolonial imagination by affirming recognition as human as the ultimate end goal (Jackson 18, Boisseron). Moreover, from a materialist perspective, McHugh notes that the emergence of animal studies within the academy coincides with "a time increasingly marked by mass killings [of human and nonhuman communities] on scales never before witnessed on our planet" (231). The entangled precarity of exploited human and nonhuman animal communities grounds her recent work's turn to Indigenous animal studies articulations of decolonial vitality and love amidst mass violence and death. Following scholars such as Jackson, McHugh, and Boisseron, as well as Anna Tsing, Tiffany Lethabo King, Joshua Bennett, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Daniel Heath Justice, and Mel Chen, I posit that the entangled biopolitical functions of race and animality mean that not only do the material consequences of imperialism extend to the debilitation of

[1] Such an equation both neglects the complex and distinct ways in which the sociopolitical foundations of plantation slavery continue to structure contemporary American life and the reality that a racialized labor regime is itself foundational to industrialized farming. Moreover, for Black Americans, the frequent readiness of white Americans to express outrage over spectacles of animal exploitation merely underlines their reluctance to address the pervasiveness of everyday anti-Black violence.

nonhuman life but also that animal studies theorizations of humanist violence are incomplete without critical race theory. This chapter brings together animal studies critiques of liberal humanism alongside Black studies scholarship on the racialization of Western law in order to develop a biopolitical heuristic of Blackness and animality. It close reads Claire Denis' 2019 film, *High Life*, which visualizes the operations of animality and Blackness as biopolitical technologies. Denis' specific focus on the sexual and reproductive politics of Western imperialism further necessitates a turn to Black feminist thought and its deconstruction of the biopolitics of Black maternity. I conclude by parsing the decolonial implications of a conceptual embrace of feral opacity in the face of the Western game of definitions and its many targets.

**Animal Instincts as Specters of Western Thought**

Animality necessarily haunts the foundations of Western philosophy through the latter's defining pursuit of what distinguishes the meaning of human life from nonhuman life. However, it is only within recent decades that animality has begun to be considered, if only in passing, as a conceptual tool of Western epistemological hegemony rather than an essential biological category. Agamben and Derrida are the two most prominent Western theorists to take up the epistemological politics of animality; their focus on the animal stems from their career-long interest in how the elusive nature of linguistic meaning can be used to strategically prop up otherwise unstable claims to power. They focus on the ways in which the reality of animality is inherently resistant to conceptualization within the available parameters of Western thought because of its alterity from human political discourse. At the beginning of *The Animal,* Derrida asserts

forcefully that, “nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized” (9). For Agamben, the significance of animal alterity lies in its resistance to the narrative domestication of historiography. He argues that the animal brings the human to the “fringe of ultrahistory” (21) that represents the dropping-off point of Western thought. Building on his earlier development of feral human figures such as the Roman wolf-man, Agamben understands the animal’s conceptual ferality as offering an intervention against humanist historiography and its teleogical ordering of spatiotemporal experience.

Derrida and Agamben’s theorizations of animal alterity offer an entry-point into my interest in the decolonial potential of the animal. My approach to animal studies relies on Derrida and Agamben’s understanding of animality as that which both disrupts and makes visible the humanist assumptions that underlie literary theory and historiography respectively. However, I rely on Jackson and Boisseron’s work on the intersections of Black studies and animal studies to complicate Agamben and Derrida’s investment in the utter Otherness of the animal that relies on the romanization of animal wildness I myself grappled with when first conceptualizing ferality. Jackson in contrast provides a more specific historiographic perspective of how nonhuman animals have not only practically lived and evolved alongside the human within multispecies habitats but also of the ways in which the onto-epistemological mechanisms that objectified and abjected nonhuman animals throughout the development of industrial capitalism evolved alongside Western imperialism, transatlantic slavery, and racial capitalism. To say that the animal brings us to the fringes of history may be compelling insofar as it means that animality as a concept

can allow us to think outside the rarefied space of Western historiography but also dangerous in how it risks erasing the very real ways nonhuman animals have served as witnesses, forced participants, and victims in human histories of racial degradation.

Jackson's biopolitical approach to animal studies centers on how the violence of human lies less in providing humanity a false illusion of mastery, as Agamben and Derrida theorize, than in how the human as a sociopolitical infrastructure sanctions the biopolitical differentiation of nonhuman and human animals as variously deserving of exposure to the state while presenting itself as the vanguard of human civilization. Jackson names this function of the entangled processes of animalization and racialization 'plasticity' and argues that its centrality to Western imperialism and racial capitalism is why any analysis of racial degradation that ignores the social history of animality is incomplete. Within Jackson's framework, the conceptual significance of plasticity lies in how

> "black(ened) people are not so much dehumanized as nonhumans or cast as liminal humans nor are black(ened) people framed as animal-like or machine-like but are cast as sub, supra, and human *simultaneously* [...] Thus the demand placed on black(ened) being is not that of serialized states nor that of the in-between nor partial states but a statelessness that collapses a distinction between the virtual and the actual, abstract potentiality and situated possibility, whereby the abstraction of Blackness is enfleshed via an ongoing process of wresting form from matter such that raciality's materialization is that of a dematerializing virtuality" (35).

In further contrast to Derrida and Agamben, for whom the human is assumed to gains its conceptual clarity from its contrast with the animal, however illusory that contrast may be, for Jackson, the utility of the human vis a vis its conceptual intimacy with race and animality stems from how it opens up a game of definitions in which Black subjects can be functionally treated as both human, to the extent that their incorporation into the polis serves the state, *and* as animal, to the extent that the state needs to justify their disproportional vulnerability to violence and premature death. The plasticity that gives the human-animal binary its semblance of stability has in turn historically formed through and needs to be defined by its embeddedness within the sociopolitical construction of Blackness, which operates to absorb the amorphous conceptual space between the human and the animal.

Boisseron makes a similar intervention in her re-reading of Derrida's famous cat anecdote, positioned as the impetus behind his writing of *The Animal.* In the original anecdote, Derrida describes his intense feeling of shame and self-consciousness when he notices his cat noticing him naked in his bathroom. He uses the intensity of his emotional reaction to ponder the mystery of the animal gaze. While meant to challenge Western philosophy's positioning of the animal as only dumb and reactionary, Derrida's figuration of his cat's gaze nonetheless presumes a universal human consciousness and its alien relation to animal perception. Boisseron in turn complicates such a perspective by situating Derrida's cat within the historicized structure of looking between the colonizer and the conquered. Building on Jean-Paul Sartre, Boisseron describes how, counter to the appearance of the slave and the house pet as the mute and passive witnesses within the

Western household, "the slave and the cat are not fully silent, as their mere presence in the bathroom or on the plantation is like a mirror projecting an image of the master that he or she would rather not see" (Boisseron 193). Boisseron's reading sheds light on how the silence of the slave and the housepet as surreptitious witnesses to the movements and corrupting influence of imperial power is different in character than the absence of communication: a silence that is weighted by subversive knowledge is much more capacious in effect and potentiality than the silence of lacking something to say. Here I would also point to Jackson's re-writing of animal receptivity as not passive in nature but fraught with the dynamism of interspecies bodily and environmental signals (Jackson 150). In his intervention against archival scholarship on transatlantic slavery, Stephen Best has similarly positioned the prominence of gossip and rumor within slave knowledge networks as linguistic forms of worlding that depend on the power of partial silences to keep the free world yet to come in sight and maintain a surreptitious politics of disinvestment from coloniality (120).

Jackson and Boisseron's work on the racial and colonial underpinnings of animal being is intimate with postcolonial scholarship on the nature of colonized voice within colonial structures of recognition, as made most visible by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's landmark essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* The distinct but kin decolonial potential of the animalized gaze lies in how it disrupts humanist assumptions about the forms of speech that signify meaning beyond the base mechanics of survival and the types of speakers whose voices signify intellectual consciousness rather than mere animal awareness. Moreover, because animality's presumed alterity spectralizes the reality of its structural

entanglement with human politics, animalized consciousness benefits from a subversive potential always-already overlooked: a potential I describe as feral in its conceptual opacity and commitment to witness. To parse out the types of feral gazes that evade humanist domestication, the remainder of this article turns to Claire Denis' *High Life* (2019), a post-apocalyptic space thriller that uses the world-estranging characteristics of the genre to visualize the forms of creaturely being and being together that the human and its historical baggage always-already obscures.

### ***High Life*: The Feral Gaze of Claire Denis**

Claire Denis represents a 'feral' filmmaker in the meaning articulated by animal studies theorist Mel Chen. For Chen, the feral denotes a promiscuous approach to archival research. Additionally, "the ambivalently homed feral figure also appears [in their work] as the sign of a biopolitical (nationalized) demand for population control" (19). Denis' feral directorial style can in turn be partly linked to her "ambivalently homed" childhood. She was born in France but raised in West Africa, where her father was stationed as a civil servant until she was fourteen. The colonial relations and anti-Black racism she witnessed during her childhood made a lasting impression, one she would use her artistic career to unpack. As a teen, she was particularly influenced by Franz Fanon; in an interview, she describes how, "when you are fourteen or fifteen and you read 'Les Damnes de la Terre,' and you've been raised in the midst of the African colonies, it shocks you. Really, that experience will stay with me for the rest of my life" (qtd. in Gregory). Fanon's influence is evident in Denis' cinematic focus on the way power is lived through the psycho-somatic manifestations of domination, particularly as

they manifest through aberrant sexualities and desires, often pushing the boundaries of what is considered artistic and philosophically interesting to put on screen versus pornographic.

Her 2001 vampire film, *Trouble Every Day,* follows the erotic journeys of vampires, overlaying the violent nature of their sexuality, their thirst for blood and human flesh, with the violence of domination that underlies the race, gender, and class relations---sexual and otherwise--- of contemporary French society. The human-vampire character system is variously empowered and disempowered by their job position (scientist vs. hotel maid), species belonging (human vs. vampire), race (white vs Black), and gender (male vs. female). The entangled acts of violence they perform to alternatively arouse and terrorize each other speak to critic Adrian Martin insight that, "in [Denis'] films, even after the colonists have moved on and the social structures have been reformed, post-coloniality is above all sense-memory of colonial violence, the strange, ever-reversible violence inscribed upon the bodies of both oppressor and oppressed" (*Ticket to ride*).

The film I will be using to analyze the racial underpinnings of animality, *High Life* follows a crew of death-row inmates forced into a government space experiment that makes them humanity's last hope for survival. It is conceptually similar to *Trouble Every Day* in how it uses the generic trappings of a popular sf/fantasy genre (in this case, the space film) to establish the filmic world's distance from reality and to help settle the viewer into a narrative that is otherwise quite unsettling. However, *High Life* is unique in Denis' oeuvre for its extended focus on animality. While pets make brief, if memorable,

appearances in several of Denis' other films, *High Life* sustains a thematic and narrative interest in animal being and behavior. Most obviously, the viewer learns through flashback that killing a friend for killing his dog landed the main character, Monte on death row as a child. In the present timeline of the space narrative, Monte uses the expression 'feeding the dog' to refer to the daily chore of submitting a report back to Earth in seeming reference to his haunted childhood. Additionally, towards the end of the film, Monte's ship comes across a ship of the same design (whereas Monte's ship is marked by a "9" on the side, the sibling ship is marked by a "7," indicating a series of kin space experiments) that turns out to be filled with half-starved dogs.

Through the appearance of canine life in relation to Monte's criminizalition and the prisoners' exploitation as science experiments, Denis links the film's interest in animal being to the biopolitical conditions that control human life on board. *High Life*'s positioning of its crew as death-row inmates situates Denis' conceptualization of animality besides Jackson's interrogation of the human as a biopolitical technology that performatively safeguards humanity from the dangers of bestiality while in actuality relegating animalized or Black(ened) persons to the violent will of the state. Though overlooked by most critics, the grounding of the film as a meditation on the structural necessity of anti-Black violence to colonial progress is also evident from the title. Denis drew the titular phrase from West African Black vernacular, in which 'high life' refers pejoratively to the wealthy and entitled lifestyle of white French colonists. Colonial violence pervades the background of the narrative world as well. The motivating factor behind the space mission is the total pollution and inhabitability of Earth, which the film

attributes to the inhumane values of the West in the same scene (a flashback conversation between two government officials) that criticizes the US government's decision to force already dehumanized prisoners into a government space mission.

The biopolitical dimensions of Denis' critique introduced by the shadowy appearances of animal being and the centering of the carceral state are brought together in the stated mission of the experiment to reproduce humanity. Even if it doesn't provoke abolitionist outrage, the logic behind the premise is still likely to befuddle the viewer. Why send those judged to be the most dangerous to produce humanity 2.0? One practical explanation could be that the spatial isolation of prison and its lack of access to outside air may have ironically resulted in the prisoners' minimal exposure to radiation pollution. Within the context of Denis' postcolonial critique, however, the decision to blast death-row inmates into space more immediately speaks to Jasbir K. Puar's insight that, under neoliberal regimes of necropolitics, the state often elects to perform an extended process of debilitation rather than execution. A strategy of debilitation allows them to both evade the burdensome charge of murder and extract the maximum value possible from bodies deemed expendable (Puar 79). Puar's framework mirrors Jackson's insight that the state relies on Blackness as a form of socio-material plasticity rather than total dehumanization. The entanglement of racialized violence and speculative value-extraction also offers a way into untangling the nexus of canine being, criminality, and reproductive violence at which *High Life* situates its critique.

In her study of imperialism and anthropocentrism, Boisseron uses the dog as a case study of their entanglement within Western law. She explores how attempts to define

the proper ownership and conduct of dogs within US law have evolved through an intimate relationship with slave and Jim Crow laws. Animal and critical legal studies scholar Colin Dayan has similarly found that the legal category of slave evolved alongside the legal category of animal within Jamaican slave codes, specifically as concerns rationales for correction and punishment (126). Building on Dayan, Boisseron attributes the Western legal obsession with legislating the proper ownership of dogs--- who can own them or to what extent owners should be expected to control their behavior--- to "the widely shared assumption that the canine species is a hybrid entity, neither completely domesticated, like cattle, nor fully wild, like wolves. Dayan shows that the uncategorizable status of the dog is based on the perceived tension between the dog's trainable nature and its propensity towards viciousness" (50). The dog's tie to Blackness within the legal imagination thus stems from how both Black subjects and dogs are perceived as having a liminal and unpredictable relation to violence. Boisseron evidences the intimacy of legislated canine and Black being through the parallel of the rise of anti-pitbull legislation and anti-Black 'tough on crime' policies throughout the 1970s and 80s, an entanglement particularly notable from a Agambenian perspective given how the pitbull is simultaneously the most stigmatized and most categorically imprecise dog breed (Boisseron 43). Dayan in turn offers the striking observation that "no country kills more dogs or imprisons more people than the United States" (218). She further dissects how, while dogs are the most popular nonhuman animal target of legal discourse, they are also the animals reliably granted the least protection post judicial exegesis (214). Dogs are thus brought into the law largely to either receive its

punishments or justify their exclusion from its rights; their discursive abjection both provides a model and builds on the legal disciplining of other dispossessed populations.

The entanglement of canine and Black legal categorization brings us to the significance of Denis' focus on dogs in a space film uniquely centered on carcerality. Dogs make their shadowy appearances in the film at two moments of violence and loss: Monte's childhood altercation and his encounter with the second ship. Both also occur at liminal moments within Monte's character development. First, his half-death: when is transformed from human to criminal in the eyes of the state. Second, a moment of potential death, when he boards the second ship and discovers a crew of starved, sickly dogs who were clearly also sent out on a doomed experiment by the US government. In the scene, Monte's daughter, Willow asks him if they can take a dog home as a pet, and he tells her no out of the knowledge that the dogs must be sickened by dangerous levels of radiation. In this moment, we might read a standoff between the pet dog and the maligned feral as they appear in the scientific imagination: on the one side, animalistic creatures domesticated by a system of human-controlled reproduction. On the other side, violent creatures, deformed past the point of redemption.

And yet, Monte's decision to leave the dogs behind doesn't so much rehabilitate him into the humanist worldview, which plasticized both him and the dogs into state experiment fodder, as it refutes scientific expectations for domesticated being. In her dissection of the cultural preoccupation with canine breed taxonomies, Boisseron turns to biologists Raymond Coppinger and Lorna Coppinger book-length study, *What Is a Dog*. She notes that they devote much of their time to proving that the "beautiful village dogs"

(qtd in Boisseron 133) found in metropolitan cities across the globe are not only behaviorally different but a distinct *breed* from the ‘truly’ feral stray dog. To the Coppingers, the difference lies in how “the village dog is a *domestic* animal--- in that he lives in a human environment to sustain himself--- but this canine is not domesticated in the sense of being subjected to a human-controlled reproduction,” making them “the archetypal dog responsible for its own breeding and genetic evolution” (132). From a postcolonial perspective, we could just as easily read the distinction between the lived reality of contemporary colonization--- in which the presence of Indigenous persons within a colonial regime is a publicity nightmare whom the state in turn frames as needy dependents--- and the romanticized imagining of pre-contact Indigenous peoples as one with nature, self-sufficient and free of the ‘advanced’ worries of civilization. The predominance of this species distinction within Western cultural imaginings of the different ‘types’ of Indigeous persons implicitly acknowledges the world-shattering brutality of colonization at the same time as it consolidates one of its central violences: rendering Indigenous subjectivity the tamed object of the Western moral imagination and its disingenuous disavowal of conquest. The illusory ability to subsist outside the state within a fantastical form of life and place would supposedly ensure state recognition while the requisite assertion of any claim to the stolen land and resources on which the state subsists is a failure of self-sufficiency. Monte and the dogs’ objectification as state research subjects additionally recalls Western science’s material foundations in the abduction of and experimentation on Indigenous and Black bodies (Snorton).

The disingenuous constructions of displaced feral and Indigenous communities as unable to attain a respectable degree of independence illustrates how the material flourishing and moral respectability of the 'independent' Western human is dependent on the symbolic and material labor of plasticized subjectivities. In her deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject's definitional centering within independence and self-ownership, Jackson similarly points to how the "speculative identity" of the Western human is intrinsically "haunted by a sovereignty it theoretically aimed to dethrone but ultimately only appropriates for itself" (143). The haunted nature of humanist subjectivity makes self-identification and coherence always-already a property relation vulnerable to dispossession.

Within Denis' feralized imagination, Monte rejects the totalization of his possible field of action by the Western moral imagination. He ultimately follows neither his state-decreed destiny as a bloodthirsty killer nor his possible narrative moral redemption as the savior of humanity. His decision to leave the dogs is based rather out of the desire to get out of the senseless cycle of colonial violence and to refuse the authority of claiming to know who deserves to die and who deserves to live, just as he is one of the few crewmembers on his own ship who refrains from murder while on board. He allows the dogs to die without attempting to either save them or to extract any form of useful information or resources from their ship, making clear his disinterest in the success of the government mission suggested earlier by his refusal to give Dr. Dibs his sperm. Monte's figuration throughout the film could thus be read through and alongside the

afro-pessimist suspicion towards futurity and the Indigenous politics of refusal articulated by Audra Simpson (Patterson, Simpson).

By underlying a post-apocalyptic space thriller with a critique of the human, *High Life* accordingly emphasizes the illogical and cruel dimensions of humanist worlding and its carceral and scientific offspring. After all, the point of the experiment is to reproduce life in spite of humanity's probable infertility due to radiation exposure. In pursuit of this already questionable goal, the prisoners are subjected to a strict regime of sperm-extraction for the men and attempted fertilization for the women. This is particularly violent for the women, who are expected to carry a baby they may not want, who, even if successfully conceived, may put them through a traumatizing miscarriage, die still-born, or kill both mother and child at birth. Moreover, it encourages the men on board to treat the women as objects defined by their reproductive and sexual capacities; at one point, one of the men, Ettore attempts to rape one of the women, Boyse, while she sleeps. She is saved only when several of the other prisoners restrain and beat him to death. The men are in turn subjected to sexual humiliation by the only and, consequently, lead scientist on board, Dr. Dibs (herself formerly on death row), who forces them to ejaculate into a cup on a daily basis while she stands nearby, maintaining a dismissive attitude upon collection, often by directly insulting them.

She also performs a feral and promiscuous sexuality largely responsible for the sexually-charged atmosphere of the ship. The male prisoners nickname her 'the witch' because of her long, black braid that she undoes in moments of seduction or sexual release. In perhaps the most commented upon scene of the film, the camera follows her in

an extended close-up as she goes to the bottom deck, which houses a masturbation chair. The prisoners' snide reactions to her descent imply that Dr. Boyse is its most frequent user. As she mounts the chair, the mis-en-scene centers on her naked back and flowing hair as she begins to ride up and down, her pale flesh foregrounded by the dark shadows of the background (Fig. 1). The animalistic motion of the shot, intermixed with the bizarre fact of a kinky masturbation chair housed on a government space ship, introduces a moment of what Tiffany King, following Audre Lorde, names erotic chaos, or the "measure between the beginnings of the sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," (144) adding a sensuous and undisciplined potentiality to the film's interest in the intersubjective nature of other-than-human subjectivity. Towards the end of the scene, the chair Dr. Dibs rides fantastically transforms into a wolf-like creature, explicitly connecting the portrayal of undisciplined sexuality to ferality. Moreover, the foregrounding of Dr. Dibs' white flesh against the Blackness of the background recalls Hortense Spillers' argument about the desubjectification of Black flesh under the reproductive regime of slavery with the difference that Dr. Dibs appears to be seeking out sexual desubjectification as a liberatory state rather than forced into fleshly existence as a commodity (206). Riley Snorton similarly elaborates on the overlooked queer potentiality of Spiller's ungendered flesh in his work on Black transitivity (56-57). The sheer muscularity of Dr. Dibs' back indeed queers traditional notions of domestic (white) womanhood.

Dr Dibs' paradoxical positioning as both the leader of the strict reproductive regime and as the most promiscuous crew member speaks to why for both Jackson and

Denis sexuality becomes a central lynchpin through which to expose the contradictions of biopolitical control structures and their attendant manipulation of animal and Black life as the primary source of the state's vitality. For Jackson in particular, the contradiction of the human simultaneously degrading the material circumstances of most creaturely lives at the same time as humanity is held up as the universal standard is evident in the social history of Black American maternity. She outlines how Black women have been subjected to both sexual hypervisibility insofar as they are the primary objects of white fantasizing and, practically, the reproducers of the nation's primary labor source, and social reproductive abjection insofar as their children have been disenfranchised by the state through anti miscegenation inheritance laws. Spillers famously underlines this point in positing the fracturing of Black American kinship systems by the legal and material realities of slavery as the primary biopolitical tool of US white supremacy (209). Differently but to similar purposes, for Jackson and her turn to animality, the social construction of Black female sexuality speaks to the logical impossibility of ascribing the stigma of passivity and muteness to subjects whose objectification plays an active and pivotal role in the reproduction of the polis. She describes how,

> "the object's nonbeing as a blackened status figures black womanhood as a superposition or the state occupying two distinct and seemingly contradictory human and object worlds simultaneously--- a predicament that underwrites both the separation of 'subject' and 'object' in Western ontological discourse and exposes the impossibility of consistently keeping these terms apart" (116).

Here we can return to Boisseron's re-reading of the animal gaze as one whose agency is contained precisely in the appearance of its absence, so that the animal's apparent inability to 'have' language continually re-affirms the human's superiority while giving the animal the power of the witness who may always choose to break their silence. Similarly, the 'open' secret of Black maternity as both necessary to the material wealth of the state and as a form of life disavowed as any legitimate concern is a structure of worlding whose tenability depends upon the reality of Black female passivity, a reality the state has itself constructed as a necessary if pernicious illusion.

*High Life* foregrounds the instability of the subject-*and*-object status of Black(ened) and animalized being through the sexual dynamics of the crew, which both underlie and give the lie to the attempted top-down control dynamics of the state experiment. All of the crimes--- the acts that have rendered the crew less than human in the eyes of the state--- that are made legible to the audience are either centered on a fractured kinship system or made legible through their fracturing effect: Monte's loss of his dog and murder of his friend (who could be read as his sister), Dr. Dibs' murder of her husband and children, and the unknown crime of Tchemy, who tells Monte that he only agreed to the experiment in order to redeem himself as a husband and father in the eyes of his wife. I read the familial nature of the crew's criminal legibility as representative of the impossibility of non-violent forms of kinship under a colonial state, in which the only state-recognized forms of family are hierarchical. For instance, Monte's relationship to his dog was likely seen as a childish over-attachment to a mere animal. Because the killing of his dog did not qualify as murder, as dogs are not legal rights-bearing subjects,

Monte had to take his loss and sense of injustice into his own hands. While neither shown nor told to the audience, Dr. Dibs' murder of her husband and children can most convincingly be read as an outburst of frustration against the restricted roles and expectations of motherhood and wifedom, particularly given that much of her performance in the film involves an increasingly unrestrained exploration of her sexuality.

Finally, fellow crewmember Tchemy's confession to Monte late in the film that he only gave in to the indignity of the state experiment out of a sense of duty to become more than a criminal in the eyes of his family speaks to the intrusion of the violent technology of the human into the emotional and psychological bonds of the family home, a space supposedly made 'private' in order to protect the well-being of the (white, male) political subject and their sense of an independently recognized self. Significantly, Tchemy is also the only crewmember not to die violently. Instead, he commits suicide by laying down in the garden on the ship, a beautiful and peaceful space in which the crew must tread carefully because of the radiation the plants carry from Earth. Tchemy's body is eventually completely incorporated into the ground, which can be read through the concept of porosity discussed later in this article (Fig. 2). Tchemy's death is also notable in conjunction with the earlier death of the only other Black crewmember, Elektra, who is not only the first to die but also the first woman to die of childbirth. While their brief narrative roles and early deaths could be read as taking part in the necropolitical disinvestment from Black life, Tchemy's joke at the news of Elektra's death that "even up here, the Black ones are the first to go" in reference to the film trope points to an

awareness on Denis' part of the ontological stakes of fictional life and death and a subsequent hesitancy to participate in the white figuration of and claim to know Black presences and futures.

The crew members were thus retroactively deemed inherently violent beings by the state by merit of their reactions to the state violence imposed upon their attempts to care and be cared for. The irony Denis exposes through the dynamics of the characters' subsequent lives on board centers on how the most debilitating violences trace back to the experiment's structures of being and knowing, while the most nourishing forms of relation and intimacy rub up against Western norms of moral and civil behavior but nonetheless end up ensuring the longevity of the crew. Most obviously, Monte's daughter, Willow, the only baby successfully carried to term, is the product of Dr. Dibs' willful perversion of experimental protocol. Throughout the film, Dr. Dibs displays a mild attraction towards Monte, made obvious in a Freudian way through her obsessive hounding after his sperm. After multiple refusals on his part, she rapes him in his sleep and collects the sperm as it drips from her vagina, later implanting it in Boyse, Willow's mother. Boyse and Monte had themselves exhibited a feral attraction to each other, their flirtation a mix of physical intimidation and sarcastic banter.

The prisoner-effected systems of social and biological reproduction speak to the unreliability of biopolitical reproductive control as articulated by Puar in her studies of neoliberal form of necropolitics. In her Foucauldian dissection of the intermixing of control and disciplinary modes of biopolitical governance within contemporary sexual and reproductive politics, Puar describes how control societies introduce new risks to

state hegemony insofar as, like the master who has hedged his bets on his slave's silence, they depend on a continual process of compliance on micro levels of perception, sensation, and behavior. Contemporary biopolitical states therefore continue to rely on the rough classification logics of a disciplinary society, most visible through identity politics, for the enclosure of possible forms of being and becoming. Puar explains further:

> "We can think of (sexual) identity, and identification itself, as a process involving an intensification of habituation. [...] This habituation of affective intensity to the frame of identity--- a relation of discipline to control, or in actuality, *disciplining control*--- entails a certain stoppage of where the body once was to reconcile where the body must go. It is also a habituation that demands certain politics and forecloses an inhabitation of others" (122).

We can see the disruptive potentiality of "this oscillation between disciplinary societies and control societies" (119) through the oscillation between violence and tenderness, desire and fear, compliance and refusal, that marks and determines the sexual and affective lives of the crew. Dr. Dibs rapes Monte--- a clear violation of his personal boundaries--- as an exploitation of her power but also out of her unforeseen, one could say feral, attraction to him. She implants Boyse with his sperm either out of a perverse desire to play God or to express dominance over Boyse, who doesn't want to be a mother, expresses sexual attraction towards Monte, and is (for good reason) particularly vitriolic to Dr. Dibs. After the rest of the crew die, Monte raises Willow from infanthood out of either a grudging sense of duty or a haunting loneliness, but their father-daughter relationship is equally riven by desire, the social history of familial norms, and the

mysterious and violent nature of Willow's conception. In an interview with Claire Denis on *High Life*, film critic Ray Pride focuses on the sexual physicality of Juliette Binoche and Robert Pattinson's performances of Dr. Dibs and Monte, as well as the thematic recurrence of fluid exchange--- semen, tears, blood--- throughout the film's visuals that he argues stands in for Denis' interest in intimacy. He describes how, "You have bodies meeting, there's a dance in your films, choreography of meeting. The proximity of bodies, the yearning for intimacy. 'High Life' felt withholding at first, but the dance comes closer, it's in the blood and then the violence, and the violations" (*Fluid Mechanic*). Denis' metaphoric conversion of fluid into intimacy also recalls Tiffany King's articulation of decolonial subjectivity as inherently porous in nature through the empirical openness of the surfaces most often considered to safely bound the self: skin, identity, national borders (140).

The fraught dance of intimacy and the reality of creaturely porousness, which at times results in psychological and/or physical violation, is foregrounded by Willow and Monte's relationship and its continual edging on the border of violation of both each other and larger social norms. In the opening scene of the film, Monte is introduced to the viewer through tender moments of fatherly care as he washes, dresses, and feeds Willow (Fig. 3). His whispered monologue to Willow, however, strikes a less comforting tone. As he puts their pee through the purifier device that provides the ship's water, he tells her, "Don't drink your own piss and don't eat your own shit. Even if it's recycled. Even if it doesn't look like piss or shit anymore. It's called a taboo. Taboo. Taaa-boooo." Willow's childhood represents a highly unstable opportunity for the reproduction of the human

world as previously known. She is the first and only baby born within the government reproduction experiment. There is a collection of home videos from Earth (one depicts a shot of 'traditional' Native American life) meant to educate her on the species of whom she will presumably be an extension.[2] However, due to the violent dynamics of the crew life, Monte is the only parental figure left alive for Willow to model and his ambivalence to the mission is established early on and connected to his lifelong exile from the state. Willow and Monte are also both especially emotionally and physically dependent on each other given their status as the only two beings within life years distance. Denis emphasizes the sociopolitical stakes of their father-daughter relation by raising the possibility of incest as a specter throughout the film. Willow insists on sleeping in the same twin-sized bed with Monte up into her adolescence, when Monte forcibly shoves her into a different bed due to his awareness of the impropriety of her age and burgeoning sexuality (it is at this point in the film that she gets her first period). Moreover, though Willow is ostensibly the biological child of Boyse and Monte, the older she gets, the more she bears a striking resemblance to Dr. Dibs: the two have near-identical thick, Black manes and fair complexions. She thus becomes a mystery of maternal parentage and a living reminder of Dr. Dibs's violation as well as her sexual energy.

In an essay on the thematics of incest in Black American literature, Spiller positions the relational and sexual prohibitions that structure the nuclear family unit as an "architectonics of domesticity" (233). She focuses particularly on the daughter as the fulcrum of the reproduction of patriarchal inheritance and authority. She reads the

[2] The clip is from Edward S. Curtis' 1914 documentary, *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, which purports to document the Kwakwaka'wakw people.

predominance of the father's desire for the daughter throughout the literary representations of incest as working to affirm patriarchal rule insofar as it consolidates the father as the promiscuous agent around whom the energy of possible sexual errancy coheres. The rarely figured desiring daughter in contrast risks total subversion of patriarchal governance through her rejection of her disavowed role as a commodity whose sexualization and dalliance outside of the family ensures simultaneous reproduction of the family line and the extension of familial resources. For Spillers, the figurative power of the father-desiring daughter resides in her revelation of an unsuccessfully domesticated feminine being that has served as the primary site of ontological prohibition under imperial patriarchy. She argues that, "if the family, on this historic occasion, describes, for all intents and purposes, a site of interdiction and denial, we could go so far as to say that the mark of incestuous desire an enactment--- a concentrated carnality--- speaks for its losses, confusions, and, above all else, its imposed abeyance of order and degree" (249). Willow's desire for Monte thus introduces the specter of disavowed sexuality and desire at the heart of family relations that I argue folds into the question of creaturely and plasticized subjectivity raised by Denis' deconstruction of the colonial state.

Non-coincidentally to my mind, Agamben introduces a parallel turn to sexuality in his ending reflections on other-than-human forms of being in *The Open: Man and Animal*. To do so, he builds on Walter Benjamin's writings on the nature of knowledge, history, and mysticism. This might seem an unusual companion choice for a text centered on biological studies of animal behavior, but for Agamben Benjamin's interest in the

mystical that which *is* but which can't be fully known *as such* provides a way to reformulate the study of life as a practice of intimacy and co-existence rather than mastery and domination. Agamben's analysis of Benjaminian mysticism's relevance to animal studies is worth quoting at length here:

> "Several of Benjamin's texts propose an entirely different image of the relationship between man and nature and between nature and history: an image in which the anthropological machine seems to be completely out of play. The first is the letter of December 9, 1923, to Ranf on the 'saved night.' [...] The 'saved night' is the name of this nature that has been given back to itself, whose character, according to another of Benjamin's fragments, is transience and whose rhythm is beatitude. The salvation that is at issue here does not concern something that has been lost and must be found again, something that has been forgotten and must be remembered; it concerns, rather, the lost and forgotten as such--- that is, something unsavable. The saved night is a relationship with something unsavable [...] The anthropological machine no longer articulates nature and man in order to produce the human through the suspension and capture of the inhuman. The machine is, so to speak, stopped; it is 'at a standstill,' and, in the reciprocal suspension of two terms, something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night" (81-83).

Though Benjamin's articulation of the saved night might read as mere philosophical pontificating, I read the final scene in *High Life* as an embodied representation of what a

philosophy of the saved night offers in place of the debilitated quality of contemporary necropolitical life. Benjamin positions the saved night as a conceptual form of spatio-temporality that intervenes against the Western cultural imagination by upsetting its governing boundaries between man, nature, and history. Significantly, for Benjamin, this necessitates refusing the promise of moral redemption: "The saved night is a relationship with something unsavable." The refusal of the Western savior complex re-orients one's relationship to knowledge and enlightenment in the sense of both the perceived potentiality and purpose of reaching for self-understanding and world-understanding: the self and its world are accepted as ultimately unknowable, "given back" to themselves as sources of mystery and continual reflection rather than intellectual penetration.

Re-orienting the desire to know and be known around spiritual relation and respect allows 'the human' and 'the animal' a way out of the game of definitions put in play by humanism and its obsession with biological hierarchies: a game in which things are defined and come to know themselves only insofar as they compare favorably or disfavorably to others. With this machine of the human "at a standstill," the night--- a time of reflection and rest as well as of mystery and a looming awareness of mortality--- is at once saved and unsaved. It is a way of living in which the terms of ruin and redemption no longer make sense, for the promise of moral redemption is seen for what it is: a form of violence that presumes the always-already sordid nature of the thing-in-itself and its need of a savior. The saved night is the moment in which human judgement as the

governing form of knowledge is suspended, making way for the onto-epistemological potential of feral opacity.

The last conversation between Monte and Willow brings to life both the stakes and possibilities of the saved night and its intrinsic ferality. In the final scene, the ship is approaching a black hole that will likely subsume it and its passengers. Willow, however, gets the unshakable intuition that the black hole is *so big* its density would be low enough to allow a couple of living beings to safely pass through. She tells Monte, "We should try it. I can feel it [...] I believe in this one." Though Monte insists that they will be killed by the hole's firewall, he goes along with her plan. The appearance of the black hole at the end of the film directly resonates with the saved night's embrace of epistemological uncertainty, as well as the Black studies deconstruction of Blackness as figuring the ominous presence of the unknown within the Western imagination (Warren, Morrison). As the two help each other don their spacesuits, preparing to board the small shuttle that will take them through the black hole, Willow mourns the fact that in leaving the ship, they will also be leaving all their records, all their history. Considered together, her dismissive attitude towards the 'scientific' improbability of coming out of the black hole alive combined with her regret over leaving behind the crew's official records embodies the difficult process of reckoning that accompanies political transformation. Sensing Monte's ambivalence, she tells him that even though the ship records mark him and his fellow crew as criminals, "you're heroes to me." Moving away from the human world necessarily entails a loss of former ways of being, knowing, and relating. Willow understands this for, more so than Monte, she knows the weight of being unknown as a

feral child who half-heartedly tried to attain the human standard through an epistemological inheritance that is ultimately illegible to her.[3] She foresees that losing official forms of recognition will not so much help to heal the violence contained within Monte's personal history as it may double his sense of social alienation, just as gaslighting does not so much help a person move past an experience of violation as it worsens their sense of shame and self-doubt through the violence of irrecognition.

Willow, however, also intuits that letting go of their official history is necessary to attaining a life qualitatively better than death. By telling Monte that he and his fellow crew members are heroes to her, she hints at their burgeoning opportunity to create a system of mutual recognition not governed by the moralistic eyes of the state. She in turn bugs Monte about "always [avoiding her] questions" about her own history. She asks him, inferrably for the upteenth time, "Do I look like my mother? Take a good look. My eyes. My hair. My nose. My mouth." Monte insists that none of her features resemble her biological mother, "not at all." I read his deceit as a caring withholding of knowledge about the multiple violences entangled with Willow's maternity: his rape by Dr. Dibs, Boyse's non-consensual surrogacy, and Boyse's subsequent decision to, like Dr. Dibs, become a murderer rather than remain a mother.

He instead tells her in a teasing tone, "you have rodent teeth. A little rat." She responds matter-of-factly, "Rats are incredibly intelligent animals," and continues, "Am I weird looking?" Monte looks her in the eyes and replies, "You're special. So different.

[3] Ironically, the meaningless of such propaganda to Willow speaks to how the government's intended pedagogy (i.e. sending a blurry film of an Indigenous community to educate future humans about the 'beginnings' of civilization) depends for its rhetorical efficacy on historically specific projections of meaning that are the pedagogical equivalent of Saturday cartoons to a person raised outside the grasp of Western hegemony.

You're like no one else, and I love that." His jest that she resembles a rodent, and her returning spar that "rats are incredibly intelligent animals," bring the film's biopolitical critique back to Jackson's twofold interest in the history of animality: its usefulness for understanding how racialization operates as the central technology of contemporary biopolitics *as well* as its ability to make visible ways of being and knowing that get outside of the hierarchical forms of relation and recognition offered by Western humanism. Monte's tease that Willow looks like nothing but a "little rat" speaks to his underlying sense of shame over his lifelong dehumanization as a death row criminal and the strange family origin story that would bastardize them in the eyes of the human world. Willow's counter that rats are in fact incredibly intelligent in turn brings the new structure of worlding offered by the black hole back into sight, a world in which the racializing optics of biopolitical governance do not yet dominate the social field. Monte's sincere statement--- one of his first throughout the film--- that, "You're special. So different. You're like no one else, and I love that," indicates his acceptance of Willow's proffered saved night state of being, in which recognition of the other is not dependent on inserting them into a pre-established hierarchy but on an awe-filled acceptance that they can never be fully known.

*High Life* uses the post-apocalyptic space genre to refute the totalization of contemporary political critique by the performatively moralistic humanist imagination. By overlaying the film's narrative centering on the carceral state with a thematic interest in canine ferality and domestication, Denis demonstrates the intimacy of animal studies and critical race critiques of Western humanism. Her narrative and visual focus on the

creaturely potential of criminalized modes of being enacts the re-valuation of feminized and racialized onto-epistemologies advocated for by L.H. Stallings in her archival work on Black sex artistry, which I take up more extensively in chapter three (16). Moreover, her framing of reproductive and sexual violence as central to the consolidation and replication of state power supports a Black feminist framing of Black maternity as the lynchpin for Western imperialism. By weaving through the interlocking uses of gender, animality, and race as necropolitical tools of debilitation, *High Life* not only deconstructs the human-animal binary but also shows how the humanist division between creaturely life and human consciousness consolidates an imperial state structure in which being and knowing are oriented around racialized and gendered processes of primitive accumulation. Her feral character-system resists the imperial relational structure expected of them; the fraught father-daughter relationship that emerges between Monte and Willow in turn models the sometimes wounding difficulties of coming together and coming apart amidst histories of violence, a decolonial process of accepting the necessarily imperfect nature of sustainable cohabitation Donna Haraway has famously named "staying with the trouble" (Haraway). For Denis' ferals, categorized as troublemakers by the state at the same time as they serve as its final chance at redemption, staying with the trouble means letting go of the false promise of a better future in favor of the unknown and unredeemable.

## Chapter Two

## Absent Fathers and Feral Daughters: Paternalism and Refusal in the Jim Crow Imaginary

The previous chapter considered the entanglement of race and animality as biopolitical systems of subjectification. In this chapter, I turn to the historical case study of the Jim Crow era to dissect the centrality of racialized and gendered reproductive logics to consolidating not only an imperial landscape but also an imperial mythology. I focus on the Jim Crow imaginary not to reinforce the hypervisibility of its racial violences but to consider how the simultaneous operations of spectacle and disavowal at the heart of its mythologization speak to the disciplinary mechanisms of biopolitical legibility the previous chapter began to unpack. Taking inspiration from Glissant's contention that "the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation," (65) I consider how the plantation's patriarchal relational structure, as well as its relegation of infrastructural maintenance to a spectralized network of laborers, emblematizes imperialism's dependency on the myth of a powerful patriarch always at risk of being dethroned by his feral daughters. As literary case studies, I turn to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) and Morrison's *Sula* (1973) for their critical deconstructions of race, gender, and paternalism in the antebellum and postbellum U.S. South.

To develop my decolonial readings of *Absalom, Absalom* and *Sula,* I employ the Many Souths model developed by postcolonial theorists, who use the foundational scholarship of Sylvia Wynter and Cedric Robinson, among others, to consider the

entanglement between Global North prosperity and Global South precarity (Byrd, Mbembe, Saldaña-Portillo). The Many Souths model aims not to redeem the US South from its inarguable heritage of white violence but to consider how the colonial imaginaries on display in its cultural prominence can and should be read as intimate with the continued reality of racialized precarity throughout the Global South. Jodi Byrd describes how, "the American South is now understood to be a microcosm of global and subaltern Souths shaped by diasporas, mapped by border crossings, and transformed through the networks and flows of racial capitalism and imperialism as much as informed by the rigidity of racial codes, exclusions, and violences" (609). The Many Souths model's focus on the networked flows of racialized accumulation allows me to theorize the direct relation between biopolitical domesticity in the Jim Crow South and the globalizing structures of imperial paternalism that shape contemporary neoliberalism. Glissant's understanding of the Plantation as a foundational imaginary of the modern West, as "not the product of a politics but the emanation of a fantasy," (67) informs my focus on Faulkner and Morrison's feral daughter characters' obsessions with writing and art as tools for carving a place both inside and outside of a plantation system designed to silence them.

In *Absalom, Absalom*, Faulkner deconstructs the mythological function of imperialism through his discursive fashioning of the colonial patriarch, Thomas Sutpen. Sutpen's foremost characterization as a patriarch foregrounds the domestic sphere as a primary site of biopolitical governance throughout the plantation era. His children's roles as conflicting and conflicted storytellers animate the feral excess that results from

subsequent generations both romanticizing and seeking to distance themselves from their questionable inheritance. Morrison's *Sula*, on the other hand, follows a small Black community attempting to survive a Jim Crow nation. As with Sutpen, the *Sula*'s titular protagonist is a notorious figure whom the town attempts to domesticate through shaming hearsay. However, in contrast to *Absalom, Absalom*, Morrison's novel structures her critique around the assumption that domestication, not ferality, is doomed to fail; the novel ends with Sula's poetics of refusal overtaking the town's muted performances of respectability. Reading *Absalom, Absalom* alongside *Sula* allows me to theorize the centrality of paternalism to imperial mythologization and the feral potential of Black feminist poetics.

### An Empire of Words: Discursive Paternity in *Absalom, Absalom*

*Absalom, Absalom* is the story of a man, Thomas Sutpen, who transforms his humble beginnings into a Southern legend of mythic and infamous proportions through an enthusiastic embrace of imperialism. Sutpen not only buys the plot of land on which he builds his family's plantation in Yoknapatawapha County--- the fictional county in which Faulkner set all of his novels--- from a dispossessed Native American community but also earns the investment money from his earlier involvement with plantation slavery

in the West Indies.[4] [5]During his time in the West Indies, he also successfully and violently helped suppress a slave rebellion.

However, Sutpen's fatal flaw *is* his sheer will to power. His need to climb the social ladder comes from a lack of a family lineage with which to justify his spectacular pursuit of wealth. Sutpen grew up in extreme poverty in West Virginia. The dehumanizing treatment he received from the wealthy family his parents worked for made the young Sutpen realize that the only way to be regarded with respect would be to change his social class through whatever means necessary. As a half-feral teenager, he abandoned his birth family and talked his way onto a cargo ship headed to the West Indies with the eventual aim of returning to the South as a rich man. In that, he was successful. The rest of his story gains the cultural staying power he hoped for, just not in the romantic way he envisioned.

Faulkner's positioning of Thomas Sutpen as the impetus or originary point of the narrative, as well as his titular reference to Absalom, the biblical son of David who rebelled against his father and was killed in battle for his rebellion, sets up the

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[4] Both Sutpen's retrospective self-mythologization as a respectable patriarch and Faulkner's fictional creation of Yoknapatawapha county gesture towards the centrality of discursivity and discursive violence to imperial territorialization as an unstable form of wording grounded in patriarchal recognition and relational systems. In his article, "Theft is Property! The recursive logic of dispossession," Robert Nichols argues that the modern European conceptualization of property, as well as contemporary critical deconstructions of dispossession, reinforce a social imaginary in which property is the pre-eminent determinant of selfhood, relationality, obligation, and justice. Nichols argues for an Indigenous critical lens that insists on the necessity of understanding social possibility as preceding the imperial naturalization of proprietary individualism and nationalism. Faulkner's emphasis on not only the material violences Sutpen's wealth develops from but also the contradictory narratives that are both inspired and revealed by his mythic rise to power affirm Nichols' insight that the property claims at the heart of European civilization are always already rendered unstable by their attempted naturalization of the unnatural violence of theft via teleological narratives of historical determinism whose world-making function elide the naturalness of property rights they attempt to presume.

[5]

entanglement of patriarchal control and state structures of imperialism evident throughout the novel's critique of Southern wealth. In his biopolitical historiography of Western state power*,* Agamben too locates the structural entanglement of the father's assumption of power over the family and the state's assumption of power over the polis. His historiography focuses on the dialectic between the classical Roman conception of *auctoritas*, or a commanding and directed power, and *potestas*, a more diffuse form of power spread throughout the polis, and their joint conceptual endurance into modern political theory. For Agamben, the dialectical relationship between the two and the resulting illusion that an incontestable right to power inheres in the very lifeblood of a political leader speaks to the structural importance of biopolitics to the fascist potentiality of modern governments. The simultaneous rationalization of a single figure's otherwise incomprehensible authority over others and the personification/humanization of political power facilitates the justification of the genocidal states of exception that bely modern governments' claim to a democratic ruling structure. As he argued earlier in *Homo Sacer,* only by understanding the naturalization of biopolitics and its politicization of life, "is it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with which this century's totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies" (122).

More to the immediate interests of this chapter, he analyzes how modern political theorists, in applying the classical concepts of *auctoritas* and *potestas* to twentieth century fascism, tend to readily "uphold the claim that *auctoritas* inheres immediately in

the living person of the *pater* or the *princeps*. What was clearly an ideology or a *fictio* [...] thus becomes a figure of law's immanence to life " (*State of Exception* 84). They attribute a modern leader's ability to claim total control to his charismatic personality traits, such as extraversion, creativity, and initiative, rather than the political structure that allows for the suspension of the judicial branch  and the assumption of unchecked power (ibid). As evident by the reference to *pater*, *State of Exception*'s linguistic historiography locates a specifically paternal dimension, one Agamben himself largely glosses over within his theorization of the state of exception, to the fetishized and largely illusory charisma of a commanding *auctor* treasured by classical and modern political theorists alike. He first describes how "*patres auctores fiunt* [the fathers are made auctors]" (77) was a common classical formula for expressing the activating authority of *auctoritas*. He then outlines "the *pater familias*" as the subject within structures of private law whom the power of *auctoritas* allowed to intervene "in order to confer *legal validity* on the act of a subject who *cannot independently* bring a legally valid act into being" (76, emphasis mine). Lastly, in his linguistic analyses in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which focuses on the relationship of written structures of testimony to the public erasure of state violence, he reflects on how

> "The modern meaning of the term 'author' appears relatively late. In Latin, *auctor* originally designates the person who intervenes in the case of a minor (or the person who, for whatever reason, does not have the capacity to posit a legally valid act), in order to grant him the valid title that he requires. Thus the tutor, uttering the formula *auctor fio*, furnishes the pupil with the 'authority' he lacks

> [...] In the same way, *auctoritas patrum* is the ratification that the senators-- thus called *patres auctores*-- bring to a popular resolution to make it valid and obligatory in all cases" (148).

Agamben's collective work on the development of modern biopolitics traces a centuries long discursive entanglement between paternalism, writing and authorship, institutionalized knowledge-production (the tutor and the pupil), and legal subjecthood. The figure of the *pater familias* obscures the potential power of the larger network of legally dependent subjects upon whom his own claim to authority within the legal realm of political action depends (a father is not a leader without a family to lead just as *auctoritas* can only validate itself through the larger network of *potestas*). For Agamben, the facilitating role of legal dependents is ignored in critical analyses of how political leaders gain and maintain power within modern political theory in favor of the notably weak explanatory power of intangible charisma. Moreover, just as Agamben argues the concatenation of hierarchical politics to biological life naturalizes the unnatural state of totalitarian rule, the concatenation of the patriarchal family to biological reproduction naturalizes violence towards women, children, and otherwise legally dependent or invisible subjects.

I draw on Agamben's work at length in order to establish the larger significance of *Absalom, Absalom*'s portrayal of discursivity, patriarchy, and imperialism as entangled biopolitical structures. After all, there is perhaps no writer who more clearly fictionalizes Agamben's biopolitical framework of modern politics than Faulker. *As I Lay Dying*'s portrayal of a poor Southern family carrying a decaying and increasingly biohazardous

corpse over a prohibitively expensive and geographically arduous journey in order to dignify their mother with a proper burial provides a rather on-the-nose visualization of the value theory of *Homo Sacer*. Moreover, Agamben's focus on the discursive dimension of biopower enables a deeper understanding of Faulkner's portrayal of Thomas Sutpen as attempting to cement his humanity, and implicitly his racial purity, largely through social mythmaking.

The narrative of *Absalom, Absalom* develops from the second-hand knowledge of Sutpen the primary narrator, Quentin, a young man from Yoknapatawpha County, receives from Rosa Sutpen, initially Sutpen's sister-in-law and later his second wife, and his father, who was told his own version of Sutpen's story by his father, a family friend. The novel ostensibly begins with Quentin's visit to Rosa shortly before he leaves for college. However, the majority of the novel 'takes place' in the discursive space of Quentin's later re-telling of the story to his Harvard roommate, Shreve, and their back-and-forth speculative additions to the narrative as they both try to outdo each other in demonstrating understanding of Sutpen's motivations. The layers of half-reliable narration and (mis)information spread through Rosa's, Quentin's, Quentin's father's, and Shreve's imaginings of Sutpen results in a tangled net of discursivity and questionable narrative authority typical of Faulkner's writing. Spillers focuses on how the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom* develops through the tensions between homoerotic one-upmanship, jealousy and fear-driven community gossip, interfamilial misunderstandings and vying loyalties, and Sutpen's neurotic and often delusional drive to re-stage his origin story. She argues that the resulting discursive structure

> "stages the problem of knowledge as a fiction and seems to decide that the former (at least what often passes for it) is riddled with instability; insofar as it is often concatenated from the imperfections of information, iron-clad conviction (frequently, nothing more than a soup, or pablum of prejudicial feeling), and the built-up authority of the duplicative paradigm, it is a phantasmal tissue of misperception, passed on and embellished from one generation of actors to the next, as though it were gospel, and in fact, in its repetitive engines, it assumes a gravitas virtually as weighty as Scripture" (351).

Spillers focuses on Faulkner's use of repetition with slight differences throughout the many tellings of Sutpen's story to consolidate the aura of Sutpen as a near-biblical figure. Her interest in repetition as an ideological technique for gathering authority within "what passes for" knowledge-production within the world of the novel recalls Agamben's deconstruction of *auctoritas* as built from discursive sleights of hand that displace the potential power of the public onto an arbitrary political figure retrospectively praised for his unique charisma.

The main hole in Sutpen's plan to ingratiate himself into Southern society is that it requires *visible effort* on his part. Faulkner describes how, in building the trappings of a respectable ~~life~~ Southern lifestyle--- a large and lucrative plantation, a wife from an established family, children to secure his legacy---, Sutpen

> "was like John L. Sullivan [a famous nineteenth century boxer] having taught himself painfully and tediously to do the schottische, having drilled himself and drilled himself in secret until he now believed it no longer necessary to count the

> music's beat, say. He may have believed that your grandfather or Judge Benbow might have done it a little more effortlessly than he, but he would not have believed that anyone could have beat him in knowing when to do it and how. And besides, it was in his face; that was where his power lay, your grandfather said: that anyone could look at him and say, Given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything" (35).

Ironically, Sutpen's bootstraps attitude becomes his main downfall in marketing himself as a respectable and formidable new addition to Yoknapatawapha County. To the citizens of the county, the obviousness of Sutpen's efforts to social climb and their continued reluctance to accept him force them to confront the fact that the hierarchical social structure of their world is dependent not on individual merit, as they like to tell themselves, but on safeguarding the replication of known family lineage. Rosa explains to Quentin that the town believes Sutpen targets her sister to marry "because our father knew who his father was in Tennessee and who his grandfather had been in Virginia and our neighbors and the people we lived among knew that we knew and we knew they knew we knew" (11). Sutpen's appearance disrupts the long train of knowingness that enfolds Yoknapatawapha society and protects it from a sullied bloodline. More importantly, his desperate efforts to accumulate wealth make visible the morally dubious acts of imperialism through which their families built their material security and reputation but which have since been obscured by generations of inheritance and cultural myths of white propriety.

In his strategic deconstruction of *auctoritas* and its revelation of state power as vacuous in origin, Agamben concludes that "what the 'ark' of power contains at its center is the state of exception--- but that is essentially an empty space, in which a human action with no relation to law stands before a norm with no relation to life" (86 *State of Exception*). Spillers similarly posits that, in his appearance in the novel only through the discourse of others, "'Sutpen' plays a comparable role in *Absalom* as the center that cannot be named [...] we can speak of Thomas Sutpen only as the fiction of a fiction" (363). And yet what appears to be most threatening about Sutpen is the way he operates within Southern society as a fiction that risks revealing a truth, a social outlier who comes to occupy the carefully held center and thus reveal its grounding--- the grounding of white Southern power--- as not racial ingenuity but theft and force. In this way, and certainly against his own political alignments, the brutality of Sutpen's rise forces the "reading practice that foregrounds an emphasis on genocide and slavery rather than coloniality and sovereignty," (King 59) that Tiffany Lethabo King argues for in her work at the intersection of Black and Indigenous feminisms. King argues that the genteel connotations of coloniality and sovereignty as concepts, despite their invocation by cultural theorists ostensibly critical of settler colonialism, obfuscate the brutality of conquest, her proposed term for Western processes of dispossession and territorialization. For similar reasons, the naked desperation of Sutpen's ambition and the recency of his participation in mass racialized violence explain why the town fears the representational implications of his rise to power and defensively decries his wealth as unclean despite the fact that it is built by the same methods of Indigenous dispossession and plantation

slavery used by all white Southern families. The obfuscating function of Western property inheritance as a system discursively grounded in a distant and blurry past of regrettable but largely irrelevant violences is particularly obvious in the contrast the town sets up between the ignominy of Sutpen's grasping after wealth and the moral rectitude of Rosa's father's careful maintenance of his wealth. Rosa describes how the town

> "watched in shocked amazement while [Sutpen] laid deliberate siege to the one man in the town with whom he could have had nothing in common, least of all, money [...] a man with a name for absolute and undeviating and even Puritan uprightness *in a country and time of lawless opportunity,* who neither drank nor gambled nor even hunted. In their surprise they forgot that Mr. Coldfield had a marriageable daughter. They did not consider the daughter at all. They did think of love in connection with Sutpen. They thought of ruthlessness rather than justice and of fear rather than respect, but not of pity or love" (32).

Although Rosa's father's Christian lifestyle does not logically negate his involvement with slavery and his family's occupation of stolen lands, it provides the moral shield of civilized behavior the town equates with a logical justification for racialized violence. One has no need to take advantage of 'lawless opportunity' if their ancestors did it for them; they can instead pursue the quieter but no less violent route of wealth maintenance. The long timespan of an imperial family lineage allows for the intergenerational performance and mythologization of moral goodness, intelligence, and economization that disavows the underlying reality of racialized dispossession and terror. The town's amnesia regarding its unclean origins extends Agamben's deconstruction of the

mythmaking culture surrounding modern political leaders to the mythmaking function of white supremacy.

The ungainliness of Sutpen's methods explains his ontological association throughout the novel with animality and Blackness, as well as his preoccupation with racial purity as the key to rescuing his reputation. Rosa explains how Sutpen becomes a "public enemy" (33) not when the town first watches him take the land from the Chickasaw tribe or when he brings down slave after slave to work it for him--- though they dislike him then, too--- but more specifically when he introduces himself to Rosa's father at church with the purpose of courting her sister, Ellen. She describes how "heretofore, until that Sunday when he came to church, if he misused or injured anybody, *it was only old Ikkemotubbe,* from whom he got his land" (ibid, emphasis mine). Previous to his entrance into Rosa's family, Sutpen was racialized and thus naturalized into the backdrop of Southern Otherness-- technically above his slaves and the Indigenous persons he buys his land from but still categorically distinct from white Southern society. In her research on the social histories of racialized mechanisms of inheritance and 'blood' ties, Indigenous feminist scholar Kim TallBear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) has found that, in the modern West, blood began to operate primarily as a cultural imaginary of race that allowed "for the state and for science to categorize and trade in human bodies and body parts," (48) rather than an epistemological tool for advancing the precision of genealogical science. Notions of how blood was transmitted between generations and how it connects different kin and racial groups were often confused with social notions of perceived impurity as well as political means of disinheriting subjects from state rights

and individual property. Though Sutpen is ostensibly white and eventually succeeds at marrying into a respectable Southern lineage, the nakedness of his desire to break into that lineage and the brutal means through which he does so risk revealing the open secret of Southern society as one continually formed and re-formed from racialized exploitation rather than the teleological progression of Western civilization. Disavowing Sutpen as impure at heart becomes how the town resolves their cognitive dissonance towards his racial origins while also revealing the mixed notions that surround their ideas about race as biologically immutable and yet alternatively tied to skin color and/or patterns of behavior and socialization.

The clearest moment of Sutpen's simultaneous racialization and animalization comes six years after he marries Ellen and she moves into his infamous plantation, framed within townlore as a figurative hell pit. On that night, Ellen, who is already aware of the rumors that Sutpen enjoys forcing his slaves to fight each other as a spectator sport, hears commotion in the stable. When she enters the stable, she expects to see "two of his wild Negroes fighting, naked, fighting not as white men fight, with rules and weapons, but as Negroes fight to hurt one another quick and bad," but finds

> "Not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another's eyes *as if they should not only have been the same color, but should have been covered with fur, too* [...] That's what Ellen saw: her husband and the father of her children standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist" (21).

Notably, Ellen first distinguishes between the way white men fight, "with rules and weapons" and the way Black men fight, "to hurt another quick and bad," illustrating the association between Blackness, animality, and potentiality for violence outlined by Boisseron and discussed in the previous chapter. Further, in Esmeir's work on the conceptual development of humaneness in relation to violence towards animalized subjects within modern Western law, she argues that the imperial distinction between the humane and the animal rested not on the extremity of the violence enacted but its perceived utility. Thus violence facilitated against dispossessed human populations and nonhuman animals alike was legally permissible after so-called modern labor and animal rights reform movements as long as it was useful, such as in the case of scientific animal experimentation and industrialization. Modern legal inscriptions of and prohibitions against violence rested on the power relation of useful to *whom;* the modern state disavowal of its dependency on mass violence additionally benefits from the spatial distancing of centers of violence against dispossessed subjects from propertied subjects. The horror of Sutpen's violence is its apparent irrationality or excessiveness *in Ellen's eyes* and its visible intermixing of racial boundaries. From a different viewpoint, Sutpen may have coerced his enslaved partner into the match but at least he is an equal participant, unlike the complete removal of the white plantation family from the brutalizing regime of labor required to maintain their plantation.

The figuration of the combat scene as a fist fight, rather than, say, a duel, also echoes the racialization of pit bulls and other 'fighting' breeds. Pit bulls, in their muscular physicality, inspire performative fear and moral outrage both when they come near more

respectable breeds and by their non-voluntary participation in fighting rings. Whether they are imagined to be the propagators of violence or its victims, their ontological association with physical brutality threatens the sanctified space of the public sphere. The otherwise implicit anti-Black politics of both the categorization of the pit bull breed and their popularity within fighting rings was made visible in the public trials of Michael Vick, in which case public outrage just as readily evoked by news reports of pit bull attacks was directed, in their supposed defense, at a popular Black football player primed by kin racialized associations with excessive physicality (Boisseron 53).[6]

The blurred boundaries between Blackness and animality within the imperial imaginary betray both the hypocrisy and mutability of the human as a standard of being defined by a disavowal of its structuring violences. When Ellen registers her husband as one of the half-naked fighters engaging in the sort of vicious fighting style she associates only with Black men, she thinks to herself that "they should not only have been the same color, but should have been covered with fur, too," configuring the Western imaginary of race as less genetic science than a white fantasy of half-human creatures who serve as the complement to the equally fantastical notion of white morality. That her horror is directed specifically at the fact that she is seeing not only "her husband […] standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist" but also "the father of her children" reinforces the centrality of the patriarch as the reproduction point of respectable whiteness, the

[6] In positing that anti-Blackness in part fueled the publicity of Michael Vick's trials, I do not mean to redeem his treatment of his dogs, which was indeed cruel, but rather argue that the eagerness with which the white American public condemned him and called for heavy sentencing speaks to a larger history of the disproportional criminalization and punishment of Black Americans that was, in Vick's case, likely further facilitated by the longstanding association within the white cultural imaginary between violent animality and Blackness.

supposed-to-be empty center that both holds and obscures the underlying reality of racial exploitation and carnage.

Later in the novel, the reader discovers that Sutpen's lineage is 'tainted' in the white supremacist sense not only from the behaviors he engages in that are coded as Black but also through an earlier courtship with a mixed-race woman, with whom he had a son, when he was in the West Indies. When Sutpen discovered that his soon-to-be bride, light-skinned enough to pass as white, was in fact mixed, he refused to marry her and disavowed their son, but agreed to pay for their quiet maintenance in New Orleans if they did not attempt to contact him in the States. The son, Charles Bon is raised by his mother to devote his life to avenging Sutpen's abandonment of her (it's not clear if Bon's aware that Sutpen is also his absent father). As a young man, he tracks down Sutpen's 'legitimate' son with Ellen, Henry and befriends him at college. Like the relationship between Quentin and Shreve, an unsubtle layer of homoeroticism sufuses the friendship. Henry takes him home for the holiday break, where he begins to court Judith, Henry's sister. Eventually Sutpen realizes who Bon is and what that means for his burgeoning relationship with his daughter. He tells Henry, who first refuses to believe him; only when he finds out that Bon is not only his half-brother but also part Black does he turn against the romance, furious that Bon would knowingly dirty Judith with his mixed origins. Henry hunts him down on horse and (presumably--- no one is ever sure) kills him.

As Spillers notes in her reading, it is in the Judith/Henry/Bon love triangle that the wayward desires and psychic energies forcibly suppressed within white Southern society most obviously find their release. Spillers relates the network of desires which traverses

the multiple generations of characters to Faulkner's use of repetition to capture the psychodynamics of being a speaking subject caught within the dense and often suffocating histories of the symbolic realm. She describes how, when Quentin speaks of Sutpen, it is as if "the words are not his; they are someone else's--- all the someone elses that fall under the father's and the generative order, which he wishes to reverse" (375). Here Spillers draws on the Lacanian paradigm of the Symbolic order as culturally embodied by the law of the father, which, as she also critiques in her writing on psychoanalysis, naturalizes a white, patriarchal social structure that is itself a modern construction and not a timeless, universal given of human consciousness. For Spillers' own approach to psychoanalysis, Quentin's sense of being trapped not even in *his own father*'s story but in the story of patriarchal domination embodied by Sutpen reflects "the monumental sense of loss and mourning [...] that the encounter with modernity has installed" (374). The grief installed by modern structures of conquest produces the urge to try to name and thus capture the sense of helplessness and violation whose totality escapes description. The reader sees this early on with Quentin's resigned acceptance of the fact that he, a young man about to go to college, must hear out the story of a neurotic and desperate old woman biologically unrelated to him. Faulkner describes how, for Quentin, when listening to Rosa tell Sutpen's story,

> "Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish [...] Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch [Sutpen and his men] overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing [...] creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the Be

> Sutpen's Hundred, like the oldentime Be Light. Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and people with garrulous outraged, baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson *who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost*, but *nevertheless having to be one for all that*, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as he was the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage" (5, emphasis mine).

In this moment, Quentin feels himself occupying Rosa's body as she tells Sutpen's story, creating "two separate Quentins." What binds Quentin and Rosa affectively is their inhabitation of a social territory replete with "garrulous outraged, baffled ghosts," whose imaginations and daily lives are effectively conquered not so much-- or not only-- by Sutpen but by the colonial modes of domination he so forcefully embodied out of the need to escape his originary social abjection. The family and discursive offspring of Sutpen (for if Quentin is not literally Sutpen's son he certainly comes to be a progeny of Sutpen's story) occupy a surreal affect of living in "old ghost-times" that is reflective of the irreality of Southern society with its disavowed background of past and present racialized violence. Rosa and Quentin speak "in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage" in the sense of occupying dependent positions and thus carrying the burden

of replicating the prevailing symbolic order--- the language of the father--- so that their words can only offer repetitions of the same story.

However, Spillers also locates in the body and voice swapping dynamics of the haunted *Absalom, Absalom* character system Faulkner's "sheer linguistic playfulness" (349) which displays how literature is always at once "a *generative* (progression) and *regenerative* (repetition/regression) field of signifying" (372). Here I shift from Spillers' focus on the field of queer desires traversed by Judith/Henry/Bon and then Quentin/Shreve towards a reading of the even queerer Aunt Rosa and her relationship to discursivity. If Sutpen is the obvious originary point of the narrative, then Aunt Rosa is the first amanuensis through which his story is delivered to the reader. Moreover, Rosa, as not only a daughter but the second daughter in an established Southern family, grows up with an even greater sense of futility than Quentin in his later role as her audience. Quentin's first impression of Rosa is of "an air Cassandralike and humorless and profoundly and sternly prophetic out of all proportion to the actual years even of a child who had never been young" (15). Rosa in turn introduces herself as

> "a child to whom out of the overheard talk of adults my own sister's and my sister's children's faces had come to be like the faces in an ogre-tale [...] yet to whom that sister must have to turn at the last when she lay dying, with one of the children vanished and doomed to be a murder and the other doomed to be a widow before she had even been a bride" (ibid).

Faulkner frequently invokes mythological and fantastical references when describing Rosa and her relationship to Sutpen. Rosa is raised to treat Ellen's marriage as if her

sister had vanished “not only out of the family and house but out of life too, into an edifice like Bluebeard’s” (47). Faulkner, primarily through Rosa but occasionally through other characters or omniscient narration, refers to Sutpen as an ogre: “some beast out of a tale to frighten children with” (127). Including the above reference by Quentin, Rosa is thrice referred to as the mythic Cassandra, a Grecian priestess cursed to utter true prophecies that no one would believe, in her positioning within the Sutpen family (47, 144). Faulkner’s mythological and folklorish imagery compound the sense of the Sutpen family as trapped in a timeless story doomed to endless generational recycling; the fairytale references, such as Bluebeard’s castle, invoke a specifically female sense of being cursed to a carousel cycle of male force, kidnapping, and sexual violation, while the mythological references invoke a hierarchical kinship structure ordered around neurotic and vengeful male gods.

I in turn read Rosa through Butler’s influential feminist re-interpretation of the mythic Antigone. A favorite of modern interpretation, Sophocle’s *Antigone* is the story of a sister in a prominent ancient Grecian family whose brother, Polynices, splits from his family when his brother, Eteocles refuses to share power, starts a civil war, and then dies in battle alongside Eteocles. Antigone’s uncle, King Creon refuses to give Polynices the funerary rites Eteocles is granted. When Antigone’s attempts to recover Polynice’s body in order to give him a proper burial against Creon’s orders, Creon has her buried alive in punishment. Though he later attempts to rescue her, he finds she has already hung herself in the tomb. There are many compelling resonances between the dysfunctional family dynamics in *Antigone* and *Absalom, Absalom*. To point out a few: the half-homoerotic,

half-incestuous struggle for power between Polynices and Eteocles; the eventual illegitimacy of Polynices in the eyes of the state and the family patriarch; Polynice's decision to risk death rather than remain unrecognized; the way it ultimately falls on the women of the family to keep alive both the family story and the family line. Unsurprisingly, Western theory often turns to *Antigone* in order to contemplate the politics of kinship. In *Antigone's Claim*, however, Butler intervenes against the post hoc tendency of prominent critics, such as Hegel, Lacan, and Levi-Strauss, to use motivated readings of *Antigone* as evidence for structuralist (and thus essentialist) frameworks of human politics, identity, and kinship.

Butler's deconstruction of how structuralist readings of *Antigone* naturalize heteropatriarchal structures of relation through a naive faith in the transparency of language and culture pairs usefully with Agamben's critique of the falsely charismatic face of discursive power. She discusses how male critics point to the seeming futility of Antigone's battle against state and familial structures of authority to reflect on the immutability and origin of those structures. In contrast, she reads the provocative discursivity of Antigone--- the way she forces Creon into an emasculating verbal debate with her over the nature of his authority *and* the way the play itself has been granted canonical importance within Western literature--- as quite literally speaking to the instability of patriarchal political structures and the discursive imaginaries that prop them up. She further laments how Antigone "exposes the socially contingent character of kinship, only to become the repeated occasion in the critical literature for a rewriting of that contingency as immutable necessity" (6). We can see a similar operation at work in

both *Absalom, Absalom* and the canonization of Faulkner in how he writes discursively unstable and deeply queer families in order to upset the widespread naturalization of unnatural imperial relational structures only to be placed on classroom syllabi as evidencing the intrinsic bigotry of rural Southern life. Indeed, the canon itself speaks to the myth-making dimension of imperial discursivity insofar as canonical authors are granted an unquestioned auctoritas that works to homogenize the idiosyncratic voices and histories that inform their work into a mere buttress for the epistemological authority of Western civilization.

Butler further points to how the depth of Antigone's love for Polynices lends itself to an incestuous reading that has been refused by critics; in contrast, the structural relation of brother and sister and inferred absence of sexual desire is read as evidence of Levi-Strauss' incest prohibition. She in turn speculates about how,

> "we are told that the rule of prohibiting incest is universal, but Levi-Strauss acknowledges that it does not always 'work.' What he does not pursue, however, is the question, *what forms does its nonworking take?* Moreover, when the prohibition appears to work, does it have to sustain and manage *a specter of its nonworking* in order to proceed" (17, emphasis mine).

For Butler's reading of *Antigone*, as for my reading of *Absalom*, the messy familial dynamics that serve as the play's dramatic force speak not to the power of the state and its rules for cultural intelligibility but to the power of the uncouth forces--- queer desire, gender trouble--- that continually push against the state: the specters of the law's nonworking. The critical insistence that a play largely about the persistence of

dissidence in the face of multiple, compelling structures of domination--- military force; monarchical rule; the domesticating effects of the family structure; gendered, racialized, and classed conditions of visibility in the public sphere--- is in fact about the eternal impenetrability of the state and the father embodies the naive and self-serving form of interpretation that so often passes for *critical* theory within the academy.

Butler further reads Antigone's unfeminine vocality as an assumption of masculinity that evidences the function of political legibility as a tool of articulation rather than a universal edict of human behavior. Rosa similarly experiences a discursive moment of masculinization during the summer Bon's first visit to the Sutpen home derails her family's life. She describes how she "lived out" that summer "not as a woman, a girl, but rather as the man which I perhaps should have been" (116). Interestingly, it is not a stereotypical facet of masculinity that prompts Rosa's masculinization, such a physical fight or a love for a woman, but the opposite: her desire (call it sexual lust or a fascination borne of boredom) for a man, Bon. She describes how:

> "I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love [...] I became all polymath love's androgynous advocate [...] I did not love [Bon]. (How could I have, when I had never seen him?) And even if I did, *not as women love*, as Judith loved him, or as we thought she did. If it was love (and I still say, How could it be?) it was the way that mothers love when, punishing the child she strikes *not it but through it* strikes the neighbor boy whom it has just whipped or been whipped by; caresses not the rewarded child but rather *the nameless man or woman* who have the palm-sweated penny. But not as women love [...] I do not even know of

> my own knowledge that Ellen ever saw it, that Judith ever loved it, that Henry slew it: so who will dispute me when I say, Why did I not invent, create it?--- And I know this: if I were God I would invent out of *this seething turmoil we call progress* something (a machine perhaps) which would adorn the barren mirror alters of every plain girl who breathes with such as this--- which is so little since we want so little--- this pictured face. It would not even need a skull behind it; almost anonymous, it would only need vague inference of some walking flesh and blood desired by someone else even if only in some *shadow-realm of make-believe*" (117-118, emphasis mine).

Much as Butler reads Antigone as a literary figure who, insofar as she is political, is political in the sense that she animates the "political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed," (2) it is in passages like this that I locate the latent insurgency of Rosa's feral characterization. On the level of literal representation, Rosa is a staunch conservative: much of her grief over her family's downfall finds its outlet in grieving the loss of the confederacy, and she treats Sutpen's Black domestics and offspring with the same disdain as the rest of the white segment of the family. However, she is also the family member who demonstrates the most awareness of the Southern codes she is so seemingly invested in as fungible. In describing her burgeoning 'love' as a fourteen-year old for Bon, she sees herself as "polymath love's androgynous advocate," rejecting the feminized fantasy of romantic courtship typically associated with teenage girls in favor of the non-gender identification of a restless, feral creature of unpredictable yearning.

Rosa's fantastical narration of her desires can also be understood through Butler's argument that Antigone is less a play about the intractability of kinship norms than a play about how, as the most prominent structure for the social intelligibility of relatedness, patriarchal kinship forms arbitrarily serve as the main avenue through which Western subjects can experiment with and learn how to relate to each other. Rosa describes her love for Bon as not only more like a mother's than a woman's but specifically like a mother who will caress her child in order to "through it" caress "the nameless man or woman" with whom it is socially unacceptable for her to directly associate. The ferality of Rosa's mind suffuses her description of Bon as the ungendered "it," who Ellen *may have* seen, Judith *may have* loved, and Henry *may have* slew. Rosa's ungendering of Bon also recalls both Spillers' theorization of the exploitative ungendering of Black flesh under US plantation slavery *and* C. Riley Snorton's re-conceptualization of ungendered flesh as a space of transitive potentiality outside of white gender and sexuality norms. Like Antigone, Rosa rhetorically claims divine power in imagining herself as the God who invented Bon in all his wildness and would indeed create many Bons out of "this seething turmoil we call progress" in order to "adorn the barren mirror alters of every plain girl who breathes." For Rosa, the image of Bon and his feral disruption of her family story serve as a discursive structure through which she can imagine herself into more than the plain, feminized role Southern domesticity forms have allocated her; her image of Bon "would not even need a skull behind it," only the "vague inference of some walking flesh and blood desired by someone else."

This passage also captures the deep ambivalence Rosa holds towards her Southern heritage and the "seeming turmoil" the South "[calls] progress.". By the time she invites Quentin over, however, Rosa has funneled her grief over her lifelong abjection in the family into the more singular focus of blaming the loss of the confederacy and the resulting ignominy of the South in the eyes of the nation on Sutpen's bespoiling of the town's name. Rosa's old-age obsession with telling her family's story and maintaining official records of the town's involvement in the Civil War illustrates her continued understanding of the underlying discursivity (or word-of-mouth nature) of Southern heritage with the difference that she seems to have lost the sense of feral play and creativity that defined her younger imagination in favor of the questionable safety of publicly-sanctioned forms of discourse. At their first meeting, Quentin describes Rosa as "the town's and the country's poetess laureate" who "[issued] to the stern and meager subscription list of the county newspaper poems, ode, eulogy, and epitaph, out of some bitter and implacable reserve of undefeat" (6). Her turn to literary forms of mourning in order to preserve the legacy of the confederacy indicates a resigned acceptance of the white Southern system of recognition that she formerly resented for leaving plain girls like herself nothing but "barren mirrors" with which to perceive themselves. Quentin wonders at the "speculative, urgent, and intent" expression on Rosa's face as she gets ready to tell him Sutpen's story. In dismay, he thinks to himself,

> "it's because she wants it told [...] so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the war: that only

through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He slay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth" (ibid).

In her psychoanalytic reading, Spillers notes that Rosa's hatred for Sutpen operates as a foundational trauma, a "torn place that would separate her from the life unfolding around her," (349) which she reads as illuminating both the disjunctions and the repetitiveness of Rosa's story. I would add to Spillers' reading Butler's interpretation of Antigone's defining crime--- the act that separates her from civilized society and from which she can't recover--- as "[laying] claim to a rageful agency within the public sphere" (35). Rosa's hatred for Sutpen is different in quality from the town's insofar as it is not the anger of disrupted complacency but an anger borne of dissatisfaction and aimed at disruption.

Later in the novel, the reader learns that Rosa's obsession with archiving began when her father locked himself in their attic and refused to fight in the War, in protest of his disgraced son-in-law's, Sutpen's enlistment. Faulkner tells how, "beside a shuttered and unsleeping candle [Rosa] embalmed the War and its heritage of suffering and injustice and sorrow on the backsides of the pages within an old account book, *embalming blotting* from the breathable air the poisonous secret effluvium of lusting and hating and killing" (137, emphasis mine). That Rosa both embalms and blots, or preserves and obscures, the "poisonous secret" of Southern society "of lusting and hating and killing" animates a specter of outrage and refusal that persists even in her late-life turn to respectability. Butler similarly infers from Antigone's suicide that "the symbolic might be understood as a certain kind of tomb that does not precisely extinguish that

which nevertheless remains living and trapped within its terms, a site where Antigone, already half-dead within the intelligible, is bound not to survive" (44). Indeed, what is so threatening about Sutpen and the ferality that surrounds him and his family is less how it embodies the violence of whiteness than how it makes visible conquest as an unstable *process* of becoming, rather than an always-already accomplished event within the teleological (his)story of Western civilization. The uncivilized elements of creaturely being-- an animal physicality, a willingness to be on intimate terms with his Indigenous and Black associates, the air of desperation that comes from material insecurity--- associated with Sutpen's unknown lineage remain "living and trapped" within him even as he successfully acquires the trappings of Southern respectability. His and his family's performances of white Southerness-- their marriages; their legitimate, white children; their commitment to maintaining the plantation--- are always-already accompanied by the specter of bastardness, whether literally in Bon's arrival on the plantation or metaphorically in the suggestion of incest that hangs over the entangled network of desire between Rosa, Ellen, Sutpen, Judith, Henry, and Bon, and their haunting suggestion that perhaps the better life resides in that which has so far been rejected and disavowed.

I also read in Rosa's ambivalent relationship to writing Faulkner's own ambivalence towards the medium he turned into a renowned career. Faulkner's oeuvre as a whole critiques the violent and self-destructive nature of white patriarchy with very little fondness left over for white Southern culture. However, the specter of feral agency the town fails to domesticate out of Rosa and that Faulkner seems to treasure in his white characters is absent in the particular spectrality of his Black and Indigenous characters.

Their opacity embodies less a feral poetics of refusal than a continued dispossession of voice insofar as their symbolic animality and unknowability primarily serves to facilitate the self-reflectiveness of the white family members. In his reflections on Faulkner, Glissant notes that, "Faulkner, who spoke so frequently of blacks, never sets out to write one of the interior monologues, of which he is such a master, for one of these characters [...] Thus Lucas, the black character who is the principle hero of *Intruder in the Dust,* is never interiorized by Faulkner; he is described entirely through postures and gestures, a silhouette filled in against a horizon" (66). In failing to interiorize his non-white characters, Faulkner reinscribes the presumed dumbness of animality and racialized Otherness; unlike the complex queerness of Rosa's feral subjectivity, the animality of Faulkner's non-white characters lacks the alter-worlding capacity of interiority that defines the feral as a political mode. In arguing for the relevance of Faulkner's work to the Many Souths model, Byrd similarly notes that, for all his writing's conceptual depth, "in [Faulkner's] triangulation of race and colonialism, whiteness continues to be maintained and reproduced as both the agent of original harm and the potential site of redemptive interrogation toward resolution" (Byrd 614). Despite its evident anger towards the South, Faulkner's writing, like Rosa's, seems resigned to the South's mythologization of imperialism as a regrettable but inevitable stepping stone within the larger story of Western modernity. The remainder of this chapter will turn to a close reading of *Sula* to consider the poetics of ferality Morrison offers in place of the paternalistic mythology of white supremacy. Her Black feminist imagination offers not only a more optimistic rejoinder to Faulkner's fatalism but also, from a theoretical

standpoint, refutes critical understandings within the academy of Afro-pessimism as inimical to futurity.

## ***Sula* and Afro-pessimism as a Worlding of Possibility**

Despite she and Faulkner's similar interest in the oppressive imagination of whiteness, Morrison occupies a different relationship to the Jim Crow landscape than Faulkner. As a Black woman always-already dispossessed from the social capital of patriarchal white supremacy, she possesses a healthy dose of skepticism towards the white male claim on possibility suggested by Faulkner's fatalistic depiction of Western modernity. Morrison also grew up with a more scattered geographic heritage. Her mother was born in Alabama and her father in Georgia; her mother moved to the North as a child and her father moved to Ohio as a young man after a lynching on his street disillusioned him with the South's post-emancipation promises (Ghansah). Ohio did not prove to be much more enlightened: the Morrisons' landlord set fire to their house with the family inside when Morrison was two, after her parents missed rent (Streitfield).

Morrison's oeuvre reflects this mixed heritage, with characters often moving North both post and pre-emancipation, haunted by the ghosts of lost homes and struggling against a present struck through with the false promises of a free future. As with Denis in the previous chapter, Morrison's multiple geographic ties also gives her works a distinctly feral homing fitting to a Many Souths model of interpretation. In her literary worlds, there is not a clear division between Southern and Northern racism, and the haunting presence of Southern origins, in the sense not of literal geography but of a

shared imaginary of labor exploitation, gratuitous Black death, and bondage, reads less as a vestigial remnant of US history than a foundational element of modern life.

Like *Absalom, Absalom, Sula* takes place in a fictional American town: Bottom, Ohio. Also like Yoknapatawapha County, Bottom originates in white fabulation. The Black residents of the region were promised the fertile valley lands as payment for their labor but given the unprofitable hill lands under the claim that those were what the landowner meant by the 'bottom' of the region. *Sula* begins with the origin story of Bottom and a sweeping view of its inhabitants via a retrospective narrative viewpoint that knows the town will soon be leveled to make way for golf courses. In her introduction to the novel, Morrison describes her decision to open the narrative with a sweeping view of the town as providing a "lobby, as it were, where the reader could be situated before being introduced to the goings-on of the characters" (xv). Spillers reads Morrison's delayed entry into the interior of the titular character, Sula, as a form of "ex-centricity" which offers "a genealogy of character" (9) distinct from the individualistic development structure of typical literary character studies.

ImMorrison's contextual genealogy of character in *Sula*, which "helps unify the neighborhood until Sula's anarchy challenges it" (Morrison xvi) also offers a narrativization of Spillers' "interior intersubjectivity," a psychoanalytic concept I will highlight briefly here and return to at length in chapter four to flesh out my framework of feral interiority. Spillers articulates 'interior intersubjectivity' as an intervention against both white sociological approaches to culture in which Black Americans specifically are encouraged to see their community as a "passivity worked upon, worked over, by others"

(383) and white psychoanalytical approaches to the self that elide the influence of race and culture on psychological development and stress. She describes interior intersubjectivity as "the 'mine' [as in the possessive 'my'] of social production that arises, in part, from interacting with others, yet it bears the imprint of a particularity" (ibid). Interior intersubjectivity thus allows critics to interrogate both the social formation of the self and the self's idiosyncratic internalization of the social world. Spillers argues that holding out space for the complex entanglements of individuality and culture is particularly important for contemporary Black Americans, whose various experiences of community dissolution and diaspora in the age of global capital and an ever-widening wealth gap have led to the loss of "a certain lightness of being" (ibid) that characterized pre-Civil Rights era Black cultural production.

Morrison describes similar frustrations with literary criticism in her introduction to *Sula*. She laments "the depressing experience of reading commentary on [her] first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, by both black and white reviewers" that largely centered around whether "Black people-- are-- or are not-- like this" (xii). A psychoanalytic heuristic that positions the selves within a community as entangled with but also extending beyond a given social structure enables reading Black American art and literature as not just representing a social problem (or what many Black critics today refer to as 'poverty porn') but as complex discursive productions that wrestle with and intervene in social abjection *and* social mobility, double-consciousness *and* self-understanding, community belonging *and* alienation, race *and* the various other difficulties and joys that assail contemporary life.

The overview of Bottom, Ohio presented in the first chapter not only settles the reader into the fictional town but also sets up Morrison's disinterest in the white gaze and its tendency to alternatively fetishize or patronize the Black community as a unified affective community of either childlike joy or debilitating misery. Morrison describes how if a white man from the valley went up to into the hills to collect rent

> "he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messing around' to the lively notes of a mouth organ [...] and it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids [...] He'd have to stand in the back of Greater Saint Matthew's and let the tenor's voice dress him in silk [...] Otherwise the pain would escape him even though the laughter was part of the pain. A shucking, knee-slapping, wet-eyed laughter that could even describe and explain how they came to be where they were" (4).

In a way, the history of the town is written into the woman's laughter but it is a fraught communication that contains both the adult pain of navigating atmospheric anti-Blackness and the liberation of that which escapes incorporation into the worlding of white supremacy, a "wet-eyed" joy. The inaccuracy of the valley man's gaze and the way it serves as a foil through which the people of Bottom are briefly unified in sharing the particular story of "how they came to be where they were" becomes important for understanding Morrison's later critiques of Bottom in their attitude towards Sula. While Faulkner uses Sutpen's ostracization as proof of the county's reluctance to truly know the barbarism at the heart of their world-making, Morrison uses Sula's ostracization to

highlight the precarity of the balance the town has struck between the slow violence of imperial forms of respectability (the nuclear family; social hierarchization; competitive resource-guarding) and the immediate violence of refusing to hew to them (becoming homeless, losing access to the legal protection of the state, state execution). It's not that the town believes the naive, self-confident whiteness embodied by the valley man is a superior form of being but that the necropolitical stakes of racial legibility has led to a tightly-maintained vigilance over how Blackness is performed within the community.

What Morrison advocates for in the chapters that follow is an understanding that the slow violence of the nation state is intimate with its more spectacular violences and that the risks of suppressing Black feminist worldings are as great as embracing them. Morrison illustrates this through the two feral characters the town is "mightily preoccupied" (6) with at the end of the first chapter: the mad Vietnam vet, Shadrack and Sula. Shadrack makes his entrance in the second chapter, before Sula. Though his presence in the narrative ostensibly serves as a warning reminder of the spectacular violence of the state through his debilitating PTSD, Morrison's description of his wartime experience emphasizes the banality of military life. She describes how,

> "It was his first encounter with the enemy and he didn't know whether his company was running toward them or away [...] Shellfire was all around him, and though he knew that this was something called *it*, he could not muster up the proper feeling--- the feeling that he would accommodate *it*. He expected to be terrified or exhilarated--- to feel *something* very strong. In fact, he felt only the bite of a nail in his boot, which pierced the ball of his foot whenever he came

> down on it [...] Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet" (7-8).

That Shadrack doesn't know "whether his company was running towards [the enemy] or away" and is unable to feel anything "very strong" about being in the midst of enemy fire subtracts from the potential shock value of his witnessing a decapitation. Moreover, Shadrack's intuition as an American soldier that he should feel something grand and "proper" to war combined with his inability to define what that haunting "*it*" would look like speaks to the Western cultural imaginary of war as based in a vague sense of spectacularity and patriotism that is ultimately divorced from the everyday, banal reality of combat.

Throughout his role in *Sula*, Shadrack is an improper--- or feral-- witness. After he returns from the battlefield and is recovering in the army hospital, he becomes convinced that his hands are growing in size "like Jack's beanstalk all over the tray and bed" (9) and tries to fling them off until the attendants place him in a straitjacket. After he is released from the hospital, he sees the people around him as "paper dolls floating down the walks" (11). Both of these 'mad' perceptions hold metaphoric value in relation to a post-war epistemology. His complicity in violence against the Vietnamese could make some call his hands, the body part often associated with accountability, monstrous, while his witnessing of sudden, seemingly random killings would make him perceive other people as precarious and insubstantial, like paper dolls. Later on, Shadrack is the only

townsperson who does not see Sula as a foreboding figure of evil. Shadrack thus occupies a feral position of witnessing borne of madness, whose kin positioning next to Sula as occupying an ostracized epistemological space supports Theri Pickens' argument that "madness and Blackness both get authored by a public that takes for granted their synonymous relationship with excess and abjection" (108). Shadrack also echoes Warren's interest in Joe, an eighteenth century Black man, who was used as a character study of madness in white scientific epistemologies due to his belief that he was, literally, dead. Warren notes how, given the abject status of Joe as a Black man within eighteenth century America, "if Joe were to pronounce that he was alive and well, *that* would be a disjuncture between reality and perception" (*Ontological Terror*, emphasis mine).

Shadrack's mad, Black epistemology is similarly disillusioned from the fictions of state power. When Shadrack returns to Bottom, he feels overwhelmed with the knowledge of he and his fellow neighbors' precarity. To survive, he realizes he needs to

> "[make] a place for fear as a way of controlling it [...] It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the *unexpectedness* of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day. On the third day of the new year, he walked through the Bottom down Carpenter's Road with a cowbell and a hangman's rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their *only* chance to kill themselves or each other" (14, emphasis mine).

Shadrack's institution of a National Suicide Day intervenes against the necropolitical abjection of Blackness. Aware that he cannot control his chances of being executed by the state, as he witnessed the arbitrariness of state violence on the battlefield, he decides to give everyone in town *one* chance "to kill themselves or each other" in order to make the rest of the year "safe and free." Although one could argue that Shadrack thus irrationally overlooks the fact that it is white people in the valley who pose the greatest risk to Bottom, not each other, I argue that Shadrack here exhibits a utopian imagination in working from the assumption of an autonomous Bottom. His collective day of suicide provides a utopian twist the Agambenian state of exception; Shadrack offers his neighbors an exceptional reprieve from biopolitical control rather than the spectacle of total vulnerability that characterizes the historical states of exception studied by Agamben.

Despite its seeming morbidity, Shadrack's collective day of suicide thus models a politics of care in line with Butler's theorization of precarity as the grounding condition of creaturely life. Butler points to how the base conditions that sustain and reproduce life, such as hunger and the need for shelter, "[precede] contract, and [are] often effaced by those forms of social contract that depend on the ontology of volitional individuals" (xxvi). She goes on to argue that Western culture obfuscates and relegates the reality of creaturely precarity through the implicit messaging that one can avoid spectacular conditions of precariousness, such as homelessness or bankruptcy, with an appropriate amount of self-control and discipline. Self-control is then racially coded as a white

characteristic and contrasted with the supposed excesses of Black culture (see, for example, the white fabulation of welfare queens).

The relegation of precarity to racialized Others is key to understanding the West's warped evaluations of which violences are excessive and which justified. The simultaneous construction of white economy and Black and Brown excess feeds into the patriotism and militarization of Western states that discursively transforms the destruction of Black and Brown life into an ethical necessity the latter brought upon themselves. Shadrack's PTSD embodies the affective consequences of the logical contradiction between the racialized nature of military recruitment as a rare site of job opportunity and advancement for dispossessed members of the public and the violence military officers are forced to enact against kin dispossessed populations that informs the widespread occurrence of PTSD amongst US veterans (Reisman). Examining the logics that were offered to justify the mass torture and execution of Brown bodies during the War on Terror, Butler argues that the simultaneous compassion for white life and the knee-jerk acceptance of the murder of Brown life speaks to the "unreasoned schism [that] functions at the basis of [democratic] contemporary political rationality" (160).

The "unreasoned scism," which smooths over the cognitive dissonance that would otherwise seem to follow from the mass-scale of US foreign interventionist and domestic racialized violence, further supports Pickens' deconstruction of Black irrationality as a social construction that spectralizes Black critique in order to downplay its epistemological weight. She notes how, "the full force of delegitimizing power" most often targets the social locations of madness and/or Blackness during "media discussions

of Black rage, the aftermath of state-sanctioned and extrajudicial killings of Black people, and the gaslighting of non-Black allies" (14). Butler and Pickens' dissections of the irrationality of white political epistemologies and its disingenuous coding of Black and Brown outrage as madness allow us to read Shadrack's characterization through the life and death stakes of mad Black epistemologies.

An unbiased perception of the Western biopolitical landscape thus underlies Shadrack's National Suicide Day. If an unstable valuation of life is foundational to modern democratic politics, yet the communities consistently on the receiving end of its inconsistencies are amorphous to its structures of recognition--- visible only as sketchy outlines of pain or disorder--- then the state destruction of Black life can never be fully read as an actual break with civility on an institutional level. Shadrack's figuration is thus utopian not in the sense that a *Purge*-like day of suicide is an ideal model for a liberated political sphere but in Stephen Best's Afro-pessimist sense of "the making of a world that will no longer have me" (132). Best's Afro-pessimist framework examines how the tangled nets of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy make modes of "negative sociability such as alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, broken intimacy, impossible connection, and failed affinity" the norm for Black queers. Rather than see this as counter-productive, he argues that the coercive demand to fight for one's acceptance into the ruling community of the present consolidates its continued hegemony. Negative socialities offer the crucial opportunity to preserve counter-communities and possibilities.

Best offers a mode of aesthetic and literary criticism fitting to "impossible black sociality" (10): artworks whose mode of appearance necessitates the near-immediate

destruction of their surface meaning, such as a tapestry of bottle caps that in one glance appears priceless and the next trash. Such self-effacing artworks provide a Black queer viewer phenomenological "vacations" (44) by pointing to a way of being in the world that escapes the dominant field of appearance and its pressure to assimilate. Best also close reads slave archives and literary representations of slavery for the seemingly 'crazy' rumors spread by and between slaves in the British colonies that the Queen of England was a Black abolitionist whose demands for their freedom were merely being stalled by the obstinacy of plantation owners (109). He considers how, through these speech acts, "one might extract a sense of the future to which they found themselves fit. What would that world actually look like? In what world are their white masters subject to a black queen? On the basis of what sorts of perceptions were they imagining such things? From what perspective could such things even be imagined?" (128). Shadrack's National Suicide Day speaks to a similarly irreducible logic: if the people of Bottom are going to be subject to unpredictable acts of slow and fast murder by the state, then they might as well make a holiday out of temporarily reclaiming the choice to live or die. Though it does not follow that the people of Bottom will be safe for the rest of the year, the act itself enacts an imagination that has let go of the illusion of a better, stable present in favor of briefly performing a different world built on the sand of impossible logics and all that such a performance makes visible.

The impossible ethics of the mad Shadrack illuminates the ostensibly senseless acts of interpersonal violence dispersed throughout the rest of the novel, for which Morrison refuses her reader the palliative of a clear explanation and which center much

of the critical work on *Sula*. In his essay on *Sula*, Alan Nissen, for example, reflects on how even in describing the instances of violence and their ethical ambiguity a critic must assume "some sort of attitude toward them" (265) via how they choose to describe and/or explain their happening. The first instance occurs when Eva, Sula's grandmother, kills her son, Plum, after he returns home from war and develops a heroin addiction. While he's sleeping in his bed, Eva covers him with gasoline and lights him on fire. Nissen's point is that in my saying Eva *kills* Plum, I'm implying via the social connotations of "kill" a malevolent agency on Eva's part; I could say instead that Eva *frees* Plum, for example. What I will say is that Eva and Plum's sociality is negative in Best's sense of existing under impossible necropolitical conditions and her decision to take him out of the present world is most immediately one of selflessness. Listen to how Morrison describes the event:

> "Plum on the rim of a warm light sleep was still chuckling. Mamma. She sure was somethin'. He felt twilight. Now there seemed to be some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell. It wound itself-- this wet light-- all about him, splashing and running into his skin. He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep" (47).

Plum finds the smell of gasoline "deeply attractive" and sees the 'murderous' hand of his mother as "the great wing of an eagle." He goes to sleep--- i.e. death--- knowing that

"everything is going to be all right." The ambiguous, metaphoric form of Morrison's description of the event--- "some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing"--- as well as Plum's animalization of Eva into an eagle transforms his death and her involvement into feral ontological modes that exist outside of the moralized limits of biopolitical legibility and within Glissant's opaque poetics of relation.

A bad-faith reading of this passage might see it as advocating for the right to murder in the face of limited life quality. On the contrary, it's crucial to her framing that Morrison is not so much re-moralizing Eva's action as 'good' as she is moving towards a representational sphere of Black experience and judgment outside of white humanist and humanitarian ethics that embraces the ethical necessity of opacity. Likewise, in her work on racialized precarity, Butler turns to Saudi-British scholar Talal Asad's critical reflections on why suicide bombers are read as morally evil, as opposed to American soldiers whose participation in mass murder is read as patriotic. In response to reductive readings of Asad's implications, Butler emphasizes that Asad "sets aside the question of whether or not a form of violence is justified [...] not because he has some particular sympathy for that violence, but because he is interested in showing us how the domain of justifiability is preemptively circumscribed by the definition of the form of violence at issue" (155). Asad's critique of the harmful and limited nature of the Western interpretive sphere of violence is equally applicable when it comes to Plum's involvement in the U.S. military. Consider how the U.S. Army and its careless disregard for the mental health of soldiers, and particularly soldiers of color, ruined his life but would not be judged with the same condemnation as Eva's decision; as Asad points out, enlistment is

disingenuously circumscribed as a moral sacrifice, despite the fact that, on the domestic side of the equation, U.S. army recruiters target low-income, communities of color whose decision to enlist is less of a moral choice than the result of material coercion.

The interpretative difficulties that surround Plum's death-murder foreshadow the fraught stakes of seeing and being seen that encompass the subsequent feral violences in the narrative. After setting up Bottom's town history and community dynamics, Morrison finally allows the reader to meet the titular character, Sula. Even Sula's introduction, however, emphasizes her individuality as always-already informed by her intersubjective world. Morrison introduces Sula at the end of a chapter on her soon-to-be best friend, Nel's family. She describes Nel's primary goal as a child as leaving the insular world of Bottom, "but that was before she met Sula, the girl she had seen for five years at Garfield Primary but never play with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula's mother was sooty" (29). Nel and Sula are both raised in matriarchal households. Nel's mother, Helene, is a loving but judgemental woman with a deep investment in Black respectability. Sula, on the other hand, lives with her grandmother, Eva, and her mother Hannah. Eva is a commanding, one-legged matriarch, who is rumored throughout the town to have sold off her other leg in order to feed her household after her husband left. She and Hannah use their home as an unofficial foster home, allowing various dispossessed children in Bottom to filter in and out. To Eva's disdain and Sula's curiosity, Hannah's greatest joy in life is sex and many men also filter in and out.

Sula is thus ostensibly raised in a more liberatory household than Nel, which could easily be used to explain her later rejection of normative gender and domestic roles.

Certainly, many readings of Sula focus on the radicality of Sula's individuality and self-will, which they seem to feel protects her from the fraught weight and expectations of the Black American community. Maggie Galehouse argues that, "Despite any real or perceived limitations imposed by her family, her community, or the era in which she is depicted, Sula does not put any limits upon herself" (340). However, to my reading, Sula's ferality has a less optimistic explanation. When she is twelve, Sula overhears Hannah telling her friends, "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (57). Afterwards, she stands "at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight" (ibid). It is thus not a radical self-love but a radical sense of disinheritance--- her mother fundamentally not liking her--- that motivates Sula to leave Bottom in search of other homes, both literally, when she leaves Bottom for several years, and then figuratively, when she returns but flouts all of its social conventions. Morrison foreshadows Sula's feral turn when four teenage white boys threaten Sula and Nel in the street and Sula's reaction is to take out a knife from her pocket and cut off the tip of *her own finger*. Sula's reaction to the threat of violence, to inflict violence on herself, indicates not an insular narcissism but, as with Shadrack's 'madness,' an intuitive turn to the unexpected in the face of violent social structures.

For a brief time, before she leaves Bottom, Sula finds a safe harbor in her friendship with Nel, who, if not to the same extent, also often feels alienated from her mother and her stringent expectations. Morrison describes how Sula and Nel "were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them

stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of  a dream" (51). Together, Sula and Nel are fabulators, creating delightful and impossible visions out of the depth of their own need to be seen by someone else. Their technicolored dream-machine of a friendship comes to a halt, however, when they witness each other's complicity in the accidental death of a young boy, Chicken. They meet Chicken while playing around in a large field. Bored, they challenge him to climb up a tree with them; nervous but excited, he does. Afterwards, Sula jokingly picks him up and "[swings] him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear is bubbly laughter" (61). Though both girls "expected him to come back up, laughing," (ibid) he never resurfaces. The violence of Chicken's death, and the girls' unintentional involvement in it, is once again softened by Morrison's description of Chicken's ballooned knickers and bubbly laughter; it is with some shock that the reader understands what has actually happened to him.

When Sula and Nel realize Chicken has drowned, "Nel spoke first. 'Somebody saw.' A figure appeared briefly on the opposite shore. The only house over there was Shadrack's. Sula glanced at Nel. Terror widened her nostrils. Had he seen?" (61). The bolder of the two, Sula goes up to Shadrack's house and knocks on the door. When he opens it, she gives him a scared, beseeching look, the question of if he saw on her lips but unable to come out. He responds, kindly, "Always," (62) which both girls, devastated, take as confirmation that he saw what they did to Chicken.

A white bargeman finds Chicken. Of the belief that Black people are "fit for nothing but substitutes for mules," (63) he delays turning in the body. The upshot is that Chicken doesn't "get to the embalmer's until the fourth day [after he died], by which time he was unrecognizable to almost everybody who once knew him, and even his mother wasn't deep down sure" (64). Although Sula and Nel are wrought with guilt at the funeral, for the rest of the town, their collective rage over the neglect of Chicken's body serves, as with Antigone's mobilization over her brother's body, as a metaphoric opportunity to grieve and protest the state biopolitical sphere and its disregard for Black life. Morrison describes how, as Chicken's eulogy begins, "the hands of the women unfolded like pairs of raven's wings and flew high above their hats in the air," (65) a poetic embrace of animality that sharply contrasts the bargeman's dismissive equation of Black people and mules; Morrison frequently evokes images of birds and symbolic feats of flight as signifiers of Black freedom, gesturing towards Jackson's interest in the possibilities offered by the historical entanglement of animality and Blackness as cultural imaginaries. Black imaginings of animal being and inter-species intimacies, in contrast to white imaginings of Black animality, look towards the liberatory nature of becoming outside the human. Joshua Bennett has likewise argued for re-thinking muleness within Black feminist literature as less the straightforward symbolism of abjection it is often taken for than a utopian interrogation of the subversive vitality of becoming amidst and in spite of abjecting structures (Bennett 117).

As the town listens to the preacher memorialize Chicken's life,

> "They did not hear at all what he said; they heard the one word, or phrase, or inflection that was for them the connection between the event and themselves [...] They acknowledged the innocent child hiding in the corner of their hearts, holding a sugar-and-butter sandwich. That one. The one who lodged deep in their fat, thin, old, young skin, and was the one the world had hurt. Or they thought of their son newly killed and remembered his legs in short pants and wondered where the bullet went in" (65).

As with the woman's wet-eyed laughter in the first chapter, the affective atmosphere of Chicken's funeral exemplifies Spillers' interest in interior intersubjectivity as an interpretative tool for non-reductive political readings of Black art; each person at the funeral has a different entry-point into "the connection between the event and themselves" that provokes inward reflecting and grieving, a drawing away from the community at the same time as they are drawn together. Although they all are in some way inflicted by the painful reality of living within an anti-Black state--- "the one the world had hurt, their son newly killed"--- what Chicken's young death reminds his community to hold out space for is the self that precedes the violence of racialization, "the innocent child hiding in the corner of their hearts, holding a sugar-and-butter sandwich." Morrison's infantilized image of want reinforces Butler's point that mutual vulnerability grounds the self that precedes social contract, rather than the base instinct toward greed that capitalist ideologies claim need be guarded against through unforgiving political hierarchization.

The hungry and innocent child metaphor for the self is also significant within a novel that centers its exploration of Black female agency around various efforts and failures to mother. In her essay collection, *Revolutionary Mothering,* Alexis Pauline Gumbs posits that mothering is a fundamentally queer thing for marginalized communities in the sense of making space for and protecting forms of life that are devalued by the state. She describes how Black feminism evolved throughout the late twentieth century in response to state programs that stigmatized Black, single mothers by accusing them of abusing welfare programs and fighting for their sterilization (20-21). Black feminists in turn located motherhood as a ripe space for revolution; Gumbs points to June Jordan's interest in children's literature as a space for encouraging radical imaginations and preempting state indoctrination efforts.

Morrison accordingly points to her experience as a broke, single mother in the 70s as central to her development of Sula as a character. She describes how she and other single mothers found their exile from dominant cultures to be a rare space in which it was "possible to think up things, try things, explore. Use what was known and investigate what was not. Write a play, form a theater company, design clothes, write fiction unencumbered by other people's expectations" (Morrison xv). They took care of each other by trading "time, food, money, clothes, laughter, memory--- and daring" (xiv) in spite of their material disenfranchisement. Although theories of sociopolitical domination tend to focus on how reduced access to state resources limits individual agency, Morrison's account indicates that there is a feral creativity that comes with those limits, a savvy and generous economization of the tangible-- food, money-- and the intangible--

memory, daring. Her account provides a clear example of what Spillers is getting at when, in reflecting on what necessarily precedes and exceeds racialization, she posits that, "we can guess without apology that there is an aspect of human agency that cannot be bestowed or restored by others" (383). In *Sula*, we can see this evasive "aspect" in the daring and feral imaginations that lead to Shadrack's National Suicide Day, Sula's marred finger, and the town's determination to joyfully celebrate Chicken's life despite the disrespect of his body.

After Chicken's funeral, Sula leaves town for many years. Her ostracization begins when she returns as an adult and becomes the town's scapegoat for its bad luck. On the surface, her sins are not all that different from Hannah's or Eva's. She is sexually promiscuous and stubborn. The main difference appears to be that her behavior is less easily explained, of uncertain origin. Hannah was self-indulgent sexually but otherwise normal, a woman with perhaps unusually intense hormones. Eva's controlling attitude towards her household could be understood as motherly over-protectiveness, an endearing trait even if Eva took it to an unprecedented extreme. Sula, on the other hand, was "as willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life [...] In the midst of a pleasant conversation she might say, 'Why do you chew with your mouth open' not because the answer interested her but because she wanted to see the person's face change rapidly" (118-119). Despite what they tell themselves, it's not so much that she is obviously evil or hell bent on destroying the town but that her motives are undecipherable, short-circuiting their normal metrics for ethical categorization.

Sula's feral creativity reveals how Bottom's defensive social structure of community vigilance and Black respectability (particularly Black *female* respectability) is built on a failure of imagination. Spillers describes how, "Sula is specifically circumscribed by the lack of an explicit tradition of imagination or aesthetic work, and not by the evil force of 'white' society, or the absence of a man, or even the presence of a mean one" (Spillers 96). In her political impenetrability, Sula's character development forces a specifically aesthetic critique that intervenes against literary criticism that interprets Black literature solely through its commentary on "the evil force of 'white' society" and/or dysfunctional patriarchs. Black queer Studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o views the reductive politics of literary criticism as a heritage of the influence of white Marxism, most famously embodied by the Frankfurt School, in which a cornerstone assumption is that "the deciphering or decryption of reified life will produce a truer picture of the world as it is" (204). For Nyong'o, this results "only in yet more fantasy production" (ibid). He instead proposes a form of criticism oriented towards deconstructing how "reifications bind our desires to the very process of their binding" (ibid). Morrison offers a clear example of the stakes of this unbinding when Bottom--- led by its male contingent--- grounds their instinctual animosity toward Sula within the fabulist conviction that she sleeps with white men. Reading all of the tension in their community through the reliable analytic of racial loyalty allows the town to evade the complex questions of identity and relatedness Sula's presence raises.

Sula's perspective on her relation to the town is distinctly more imaginative. She focuses on how not only the town but also and more importantly Nel breaks ties with her. She marvels at the fact that,

> "Now Nel was one of *them*. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below [...] If they were touched by the snake's breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role [...] But the free fall, oh no, that required--- demanded--- invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues or stay alive [...] [Nel] had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her dry little corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall" (120).

For a character often read for her individuality, I want to stress here how Sula's attention, even as an adult facing mass ostracization, remains on Nel. She mourns the town's circumscription of what Sula saw as Nel's potential as a child with an imagination as vivid and desires as errant as her own. Her use of spiders and snakes as estranging metaphors for Bottom's racial relations speaks to the enduring ferality of her own imagination, which she wishes was still mirrored in Nel's. Moreover, Sula's call for "invention" echoes Black feminist calls for an embrace of critical fabulation in the face of the paternalistic tendencies of scholarly judiciousness, or what Wilderson describes as "the complete disorder" (77) of decolonization (Hartman, Keeling).

One of Sula's most discomfiting acts is sleeping with Nel's husband, Jude. Nel walks in on the two, naked and entwined, and Sula does not bother to perform abashment. And yet, if one exits the humanist interpretive sphere of marital fidelity that is arguably most strictly applied to the female side of the 'partnership' anyway, Sula could be read as acting in Nel's best interests. Not only is Sula forcing Nel to reflect on the strength of her marriage but she is also modeling a form of female sexuality that privileges desire over respectability. Earlier on, Nel had admitted to herself that, over the years, her love for Jude "had spun a steady gray web around her heart," until Sula's return reawakened a "playfulness" (95) in their sex life that is inferrably not about Jude. In Nel's outraged reaction to a break in a unsatisfying marriage, we can see Nyong'o's point that the more insidious effect of reification is not its most obvious social structures, such as the gender wage gap as evidence for patriarchy, but the day-to-day affective responses that bind us to the world as we are used to knowing it and whose undoing would require entirely new forms of being and relating.

The ending of the novel is ostensibly pessimistic. Sula dies of a painful illness. Soon after, many members of the town die in a mobilization effort against a local coal mine that refuses to hire Black workers. Not long after that, Bottom is razed over and transformed into a golf course, as Morrison foreshadows in the beginning. However, just as Sula's re-entry led to a doubling-down of Bottom's defensive disciplinary structure, her death provokes an opening-up to the feral modes of thought and being she represented, for both the reader and occupants of Bottom. Thrown into a period of reflection after Sula's death, Shadrack thinks back to the day he saw Nel and Sula throw

Chicken into the lake. In a fabulist monologue reminiscent of Faulkner's "my mother is a fish," Shadrack

> "remembered the scene clearly. He had stepped into the door and there was a tear-stained face turning, turning toward him [...] She had wanted something--- from him. Not fish, not work, but something only he could give. She had a tadpole over her eye (that was how he knew she was a friend--- she had the mark of the fish he loved), and one of her braids had come undone. But when he looked at her face he had seen also the skull beneath, and thinking she saw it too--- knew it was there and was afraid--- he tried to think of something to say to comfort her, something to stop the hurt from spilling out of her eyes. So he had said 'always,' so she would not have to be afraid of the change--- the falling away of skin, the drip and slide of blood, and the exposure of bone underneath. He had said 'always' to convince her, assure her, of permanency" (157).

Although Sula and Nel interpreted Shadrack's 'always' as confirming the immutability of their guilt--- that he would never forget what they had done--- Shadrack actually intended to comfort Sula with his knowledge that her self would endure beyond death, a prediction that is supported by the profound effect Sula's death has on Bottom.

I also read this passage as Morrison further illuminating the conceptual significance of Shadrack's morbidity, his fashioning of suicide as a public holiday and his prophetic vision of the blood and skin that will eventually fall away from Sula's face, leaving nothing but bone behind. Building on Hartman's theorization of the ontological nature of post-emancipation Black debility, Nyong'o defines Black trauma and loss as

nonevents that “[remain] unrepresentable in liberal humanist discourse” (202) The task of the anti-humanist critic then becomes to transform “the discourse of trauma and reparation” into “a poetics of redress,” (ibid) which aims not to provide a compensation for loss based on an abject arithmetic of suffering but to provide a space in which a Black subject articulates their grief by abandoning the debilitating structures of discourse that caused it. Nyong'o relates the difference between the discourse of reparation and the poetics of redress to the performativity inherent to critical fabulation, while also stressing that “to liberate the performative, in these terms, is in some sense to be liberated *from* the performative: at least, to be liberated from the ideal model of the subject constituted through civic voice and political agency within a public sphere” (203). He also notes that re-reading Black loss as a ‘nonevent’ within humanist public spheres allows for critics to re-think the assumed morbidity of queer anti-relational and afro-pessimist modes of thought, which I will reflect on further in chapter five (ibid). From an anti-humanist perspective, their apparent ‘negativity’ is not so much a capitulation to existential obliteration but rather an embrace of the ontological ferality inherent to modes of being that refuse the disciplinary confines of humanist representation and address.

Morrison gestures towards the representational limits of a humanist frame of life through Bottom’s collective suicide, one of the final scenes of the novel. On that particular National Suicide Day, the first one to come after Sula’s death, a new energy sweeps through Bottom. The town had been sitting on a collective anger over the fact that none of their men were selected for the work crew on New River Road, a tunnel that would connect their town to a town across the river and be the first in a grand

government vision of cross-river towns to facilitate trade and financial prosperity. Instead of any of the available and willing young Black men from Bottom, the white overseers chose an unimpressive crew of old, frail white men. So that year, watching Shadrack march down Bottom with his bells and whistles, and in the midst of a "flaccid despair" (153) over the fact that their animosity towards Sula, which, as with Sutpen, had grown to mythical proportions, had lost its motivating object, they decide to join him. For Shadrack, the march "was not heartfelt this time, not loving this time, for he no longer cared whether he helped them or not," (158) because Sula, the one he loved most of all, is dead. For the town, however, their steps are deeply purposeful; they direct the march to the tunnel construction site. Shadrack and Sula have created a new world spirit in Bottom, a world in which the place laid for them will be empty. Upon arriving at the tunnel site, Shadrack's company

> "Like antelopes [...] leaped over the little gate--- a wire barricade that was never intended to bar anything but dogs, rabbits and stray children--- and led by the tough, the enraged and the young they picked up the lengths of timber and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not mixed or even been allowed to haul; tore the wire mesh, tipped over wheelbarrows and rolled forepoles down the bank, where they sailed far out on the icebound river.
>
> Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build [...] And all the while Shadrack

> stood there. Having forgotten his song and his rope, he just stood there high up on the bank ringing, ringing his bell" (161-162).

As with her preference for birds, Morrison figures the animality of the revolting crowd through the figure of an ostensibly vulnerable creature--- the antelope--- whose nimble agility is often misread as merely a tool with which to escape more dominant creatures. In contrast, the crowd's furious and restless agility allows them to descend quickly on the construction site and destroy it before anyone can stop them. While most of them die when the tunnel comes crashing down, Morrison's feral poetics transforms their fictional death into one of the most vibrant moments in the novel, one whose poetry echoes the passages drawn from Sula's interiority. That the "old and young, women and children, lame and hearty" take equal part in the revolutionary effort dissolves the stringent gender and domestic roles Sula so resented. Rather than a nihilistic and fruitless extinction of a down-on-their-luck community, the suicidal mobilization enacts a brief moment of ungendered, feral possibility. A parting gift from her own feral imagination, Morrison leaves it to the reader to decide what worlds to make with and of it.

**Concluding Thoughts: Ferality as a Utopianism of Self-Defeat**

In her last appearance in the narrative, Nel stands over Sula's grave, reflecting on her deep unhappiness in the many years since Jude left her, shortly after his affair with Sula. She realizes that, while she had been attributing most of her grief to losing him, it is Sula she truly misses. When she finally acknowledges her enduring love for Sula, she lets out "a fine cry--- loud and long" that "had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174). How should we read her cry of despair, a cry with no beginning

and no end? Does such a full-body articulation of regret mean that her life meant nothing, is better off forgotten?

In his Afro-pessimist intervention into Black historiography, Best pushes against the prevailing reading of “the moans, stutters, and shouts that inaugurate the black tradition,” often attributed to the enslaved, as “a failure of speech” (122). In line with Nyong'o’s utopian framework of illegibility, he argues that the incoherency of the past to contemporary epistemologies in fact allows the restlessness of the dead to live on. The desire to make the disorderly speech of the past make sense stems from a teleological Western understanding of historiography as a tool of assimilation; arguably this misconception can even be traced in ‘radical’ leftist theorists like Fredric Jameson and his conception of history as what hurts, as if history were a malevolent agent hiding behind the curtains of the present (*The Political Unconscious*). Rather, Best argues that we are always-already alien to history, lost to the worlds and the people that created us, like feral dogs. This is not to say that the lack of official archives for historically marginalized groups is not a painful loss for their descendants, but rather that the forms of preservation offered by historical archives were never going to live up to their claims of political revelation and recuperation.

Letting go of the desire to assimilate the lives of the past to the present also means letting go of the hope that the futures we create, for better or for worse, will hold out space for us. As with Sutpen and Sula, how we are read in the future is doomed to the contortions of social misperception, conflicting loyalties and desires, and collective epistemologies alien to the time in which we were written. A utopian approach to futurity

is dependent on a self-negating trust in the fact that meaning will eventually be made, just not by us. Sula and Shadrack's distrust of social reproduction and harm reduction as viable forms of future-making meant a leaning into the opaque, the experimental, the mad, which seemed to Bottom an impossible way of life but whose traces eventually became the town's primary source of political and spiritual energy. While it would be reductive to assimilate Rosa's queerness to the contemporary politics of queer culture, her animosity towards the cultural roles available to her, entwined with her fantastical imagination, can be read as dissimulation in the face of Southern domesticity, a dissenting force that carries the rageful energy of the novel. Accepting that the past will always escape full interpretation is not a nihilistic capitulation to ahistorical presentism but an urgent way to remember what endures in us beyond present modes of interpretation and their opacities: an ontological ferality whose effects may later be carried forth in unforeseen ways. Returning to and re-reading the past bears all the more importance for its futility. In failing to capture our predecessors we are reminded of the ways we ourselves can never be fully captured.

## Chapter Three

## Practical Fantasies: Fairy Tale Epistemologies in Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*

The previous chapter thought about domesticity as an imaginary that attributes a power to fathers, real and metaphorical, out of step with their actual contributions to the relational system. In this chapter, I turn to the fairy tale genre to consider how its feminization and infantilization within modern Western culture speaks to the potential ferality of its epistemological function. Both fairy tales and folklore are subject to the paternal codification of collective oral storytelling as a primitive form of knowledge-production (Cajete 75). The imperial paternalism that envelops Western attitudes towards fairy tales is evident in the ontological structure of the character systems of its culturally dominant touchstones—- *Cinderella*, *the Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*: tales of hapless female adolescents whose narrative journey centers around their incorporation into the patriarchal kinship systems of marriage and childbearing. In order to unpack the feral potentiality of the fairy tale for the imaginations of those dispossessed from cultural capital, this chapter considers the writing career of Angela Carter and the controversies surrounding the implications of her fairy tale re-writings for modern Western feminism. I then perform a close reading of contemporary Nigerian-British writer Helen Oyeyemi's novel *White is for Witching* to argue for the fairy tale as a transnational feminist epistemological structure shaped by feral poetics.

Angela Carter represents one of the most prominent Western writers to take on the fairy tale as her primary narrative grounding. Like other female writers attracted to the genre, she used the fairy tale and its association with embattled female protagonists in

part to deconstruct the normalization of sexual violence; additionally, through the transactional nature of fairy tale romances and kinship systems, she sought to critique the capitalist commodification of everyday forms of behavior and relation. Bad-faith criticism maligned her work due to its innovation, difficulty, and unapologetic anger over the state of contemporary art and politics. Such criticism framed her depictions of male and class violence as tacky political correctness. In an essay written just two months after her death, John Bayley claimed Carter made "imagination the obedient handmaid of ideology" (qtd in Bristow and Broughton 8). Ironically, given Bayley's critique, Carter and her work in fact came into friction with the liberal feminist community due to the moral ambiguity at the heart of her female characters. Her creation of victimizing, rather than victimized, women threatened the black and white moralistic visions of gendered power relations embodied by feminist critics like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon (Dworkin and Mackinnon). Carter's focus on the complex entanglements that govern state power structures and instrumentalized subjectivities, as well as the often inexplicable nature of creaturely life, instead attracted and continues to attract the interest of feminists of color and transnational feminist activists concerned with the crossovers between patriarchal and imperial modes of domination (Sempruch, Neilly).

While Carter, a white British woman, was certainly not a faultless critic of British imperialism--- her characters of color are often exoticized and rarely given the same amount of narrative space as her white characters, and her travel writings on Japan veer towards Orientalism--- her writing does gesture towards the intersection of state power, class, gender, and race (Crofts). Her short story, "Black Venus," imagines the interiority

of Jeanne Duval, a nineteenth century Black French-Haitian actress and dancer, who had a tempestuous romantic relationship with the famous white French poet, Charles Baudelaire. Unsurprisingly, Duval's history with Baudelaire often over-determines archival understandings of her life and personhood, a misogynistic subsumption that Carter's story resists, the very title, "Black Venus," a nod to and critique of Duval's cultural positioning as a symbolic impetus for male genius.

Read alongside her more folklorish works, such as *Heroes and Villains*, which ostensibly takes place outside of history in a community of Barbarians warring against Scientists, "Black Venus"'s interrogation of historiographic epistemologies demonstrates how Carter's feminist commitments offer a re-imagining of modern Western epistemic infrastructures. Such an assertion may seem like a big claim in the context of a fairly cursory overview of Carter, so I'll now turn to a more thorough overview of her artistic background, political commitments, and guiding intellectual concerns, with a focus on her draw to the fairy tale as a genre. My focus on Carter's relationship to the fairy tale stems from my belief that she chose the genre because of its cultural marginalization and the ways in which taking it seriously as a writer paved the way for an incisive critique of the Western value system she distrusted.

**The Practicality of Fairy Tale Epistemologies**

The two literary genres that most interested Carter were the fairy tale and pornography. This may seem both counter-intuitive and not. Traditional fairy tales frequently contain explicit sexual imagery and, even when they don't, are implicitly propelled by the unmet sexual desires of a young, virginal protagonist. On the other hand,

porn is considered an adult, male genre that does away with the frilly narrative decor of fairy tales in favor of the raw and immediate delivery of sexual climax. Both, however, have been influential in gendering morality insofar as they have reified cultural understandings of good vs bad women, desirable vs undesirable bodies, and the rewards of gender conformity vs the perils of sexual waywardness. To stake an interest in both challenged gender norms from multiple angles and for multiple parties with varied investments. While the high literary community was dismissive of Carter's interest in the fairy tale and other literary forms of fantasy, 'radical' feminists like Dworkin and Mackinnon criticized her draw to pornography and called into question her ethical commitment to feminism (Gordon). Critics and readers interested in deconstructing the value system of both the literary establishment and mainstream feminism, however, appreciated the connection Carter was drawing between the cultural role of pornography and the fairy tale as historically disciplinary and gendered storytelling forms (ibid). Indeed, by bringing together the material politics of sex and the imagination, Carter was making an urgent point about the dangers of presuming a clean divide between the material world and the interiorities of its inhabitants.

Carter's interest in pornography began in the seventies when she first became acquainted with the work of Marquis de Sade (Lorna 54). She saw the lack of moralization that defined his portrayal of BDSM-suffused aristocracies as an intervention against simplistic understandings of female agency, desire, and sexuality, and one that importantly addressed the complicating factors of class and unequal power relations. In 1978, she published a book-length study of her reading of Sadeian gender politics, *The*

*Sadeian Woman And the Ideology of Pornography.* Unfortunately for its reception, *The Sadeian Woman'*s release coincided with the pornography debates of the 1980s, in which prominent liberal feminists argued that pornography embodied state violence against women (Boyle). Such a claim departed significantly from Carter's thesis in *The Sadeian Woman* that the transparency of power relations within pornography and prostitution was, while not without its faults, significantly better for women than the relational structure of marriage, in which the fact that "all wives by necessity fuck by contract" (10) is obscured by the cultural imaginary of marriage as the ultimate happily ever after. Carter's critique of the Western marital imaginary and her interest in pornography spoke to her larger point about the way certain sociomaterial 'realities' are deeply entangled with cultural narratives strung through with self-serving fabulations (such as that heterosexual marriage is a fulfilling state of being), while certain cultural forms of fantasizing, such as pornography, can accurately depict the subjective experience of dominant sociopolitical structures (such as sex as a power relation with varied rewards). To feminists like Dworkin and Mackinnon, who were, for the most part, served well by the epistemic infrastructures of the modern West, Carter's critique seemed besides the point.

Carter's interest in fantasy as an appropriate and even ideal form for cultural criticism also put her at odds with the majority of Leftist intellectuals of her time. Carter scholars Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton note that her career-long disdain for realism alienated both feminist and Marxist critics, who tended to favor social realism for its naturalistic depictions of hegemonic social structures (11). A common complaint from progressive intellectuals was that fantasy-based literary forms like the fairy tale were too

simplistic to capture the complexity of human experience necessary for incisive social criticism. In an influential and particularly damning review of Carter's oeuvre, Patricia Duncker argued that evidence for Carter's underlying alignment with the patriarchy came down to her generic preference for the fairy tale. She contended that, even within Carter's supposedly feminist rewritings of traditional tales, such as Bluebeard's Castle and Beauty and the Beast, "identity continues to be defined by role, so that shifting the perspective from the impersonal voice to the inner confessional narrative [...] merely explains, amplifies and reproduces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic" (qtd. in Bristow and Broughton 12). Seen from another perspective, Carter's portrayal of the suffocating and often inescapable nature of social roles (often domestic and feminized in nature, such as wife or daughter) through trope character forms spoke to the violence of a biopolitical state structure, in which the stakes of being able to play a culturally legible role are, in fact, quite high.

The reactionary stance of Carter's contemporaneous critics also speaks to an elitist and ahistorical philosophy of literature. Fairy tales, like folklore, originated in the early modern period and were the art form of a largely illiterate and impoverished populace (Warner xvi). However, it does not follow that the stories contained therein offer limited epistemological visions of possibility; such a classed equation of economic marginalization with restricted imagination merely serves as a gatekeeper within dominant fields of artistic production. Carter, for instance, came from a mixed-class background; her father's family were solidly middle-class, but her mother's family, with whom she spent most of her time, hovered between the middle and lower classes and

were active in the British Independent Labour Party (Bristow and Broughton 9). Bristow and Broughton note that, "like many intellectuals hailing from the lower middle class, [Carter] had contact with a very broad span of cultural products. She omnivorously consumed Freud as well as 'pulp fiction', and she was an *aficionado* of both Hollywood *film noir* and French arthouse cinema" (9). They relate her mixed education of high and low culture to her work's illustration of "the resilience, wit and creative energy of working-class lives," (6) in contrast to high literary realist novels that focus on the degradation and limitations of working class life.[7] While it is important not to romanticize the limits financial precarity poses on artistic production, high literary imaginaries are just as liable to the blindspots of their sociomaterial context as popular culture imaginaries, if not more so. Often high literary novels are merely detailed descriptions of the same worldview and their replication of the shared assumptions of the dominant consumer class is mistaken for acuity of vision. In deconstructing the imperial politics of modern aesthetic production and reception, Lloyd argues that the naturalist or realist representation of political issues operates to distance aesthetic representation from "insisting on the justice of a particular point of view" (Lloyd).

In contrast, the aesthetic and narrative richness of the fairy tale speaks to the depth of imagination and practical ingenuity necessitated by limited political power, as well as the genre's origin in collective storytelling. Carter scholar Lorna Sage notes how

[7] It is thus somewhat ironic that feminists criticized Carter for a degrading depiction of female experience while also telling that much of that criticism came from the perspective of white, middle-class critics. Positioning *The Sadiean Woman* as supporting the female degradation supposedly inherent to porn conveniently overlooks that one of its central interventions is highlighting bodily sanctity and sexual morality as linked to class privilege and whiteness as much as patriarchy.

even modern adaptations of fairy tales retain the "fantasy and recursive patterns" (53) of oral storytelling. Recall from the previous chapter Hortense Spillers' interest in Faulkner's use of repetition with a difference to capture the reality of intersubjective discourse as necessarily strung through with half-truths, vying political investments, and engrained modes of (mis)perception. From such a perspective, the persistence of character types does not so much replicate a "deeply, rigidly sexist psychology" as it offers a way of re-animating fraught social histories in both their historical weight and contingency. Certain characters, like the cursed daughter, may reappear across various retellings but rarely without a twist in perspective or tone that breathes new life into a shared form of subjectivity. Like the original tales, the re-animations are not free from inequitable political investments and cultural assumptions but rather center their narrative tension on the complex dance between the onto-epistemological entrapment of history and the unforeseen disruptions of futurity.

Of especial interest to this project, Lorna argues that the critical preoccupation with whether Carter did or did not hate women obscures how she loved fairy tales for their broader access "to a world where our dreads and desires were personified in beings that were not-human without being divine" (Lorna 57). Under Carter's pen, animal and animalistic characters are glossed with queer characteristics and urges: some associated with non-normative sexual behavior, some nonhuman animal behavior, and some gesturing towards the fantastic or the otherworldly, but all feral in their disdain for or just plain inability to hew to the paternalistic expectations of civilized humanity. In "The Lady of the House of Love," a tale of Nosferatu's daughter and only heir who is doomed

to feed off of men and innocent wood creatures in order to remain alive and protect his estate, Carter describes how

> "All claws and teeth, she strikes, she gorges; but nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition, nothing [...] she loathes the food she eats; she would have liked to take the rabbits home with her, feed them on lettuce, pet them and make a nest in her red-and-black escritoire, but hunger always overcomes her. She sinks her teeth into the neck where an artery throbs in fear; she will drop the deflated skin from which she has extracted all the nourishment with a small cry of pain and disgust" (*The Bloody Chamber* 134).

The lady of love is powerful--- godly almost-- were it not for the paradox that the unrelenting nature of her prey drive, her ostensible will to power, leads her into a constant state of self-disgust. She wants to bond with the woodland rabbits but needs their blood to survive. Carter's villains are in general characterized less by the self-indulgent satisfaction of the knowingly callous than by a state of helplessness in relation to their overwhelming desires. Like in Denis' *High Life*, for Carter, violation of boundaries is an inevitable aspect of intersubjective survival and is not without its pleasures nor its complications, a form of trouble worth staying with, to paraphrase Haraway (Haraway). Sara Sceats notes how in Carter's character systems, "equally, some satisfaction or partial control may be wrested from the subjection, even if only temporarily, for a victim's agenda wields its own kind of power" (109). Carter's openness to exploring the pleasures of victimization and the terrors of power illuminates part of her tension with liberal

feminists, who feared that highlighting the grey areas of sexual and gender domination may further consolidate the victim-blaming dimension of rape culture.[8]

In another short story, "The Erl-King," Carter imagines the titular German goblin as a sexually voracious embodiment of nature itself:

> "The Erl-King lives by himself all alone in the heart of the wood [...] He knows which of the frilled, blotched, rotted fungi are fit to eat; he understands their eldritch ways, how they spring up overnight in lightless places and thrive on dead things. Even the homely wood blewits, that you cook like tripe, with milk and onions, and the egg-yolk yellow chanterelle with its fan-valuting and faint scent of apricots, all spring up overnight like bubbles of earth, unsustained by nature, existing in a void. And I could believe that it has been the same with him; *he was alive from the desire of the woods*. He goes out in the morning to gather his unnatural treasures, he handles them as delicately as he does pigeons' eggs, he lays them in one of the baskets he weaves from osiers. He makes salads of the dandelion that he calls rude names, 'bum-pipes' or the 'piss-the-beds,' and flavours them with a few leaves of wild strawberry" (*The Bloody Chamber* 108, emphasis mine).

Carter's depiction of the fungi as "existing in a void" and thriving on "dead things" counters humanist notions of nature as mystically held apart from the brutality of human civilization. Her take on the mythical Erl-King emphasizes the animacy and potential crudity of the natural world; nature not only desires but its desires are embodied by a

[8] Carter's work thus anticipated calls by fourth wave feminists for more nuanced conceptions of consent that take into account the complicated and often opaque ways in which sex and power are lived out by and between desiring creatures (Shane).

goblin who names flowers “bum-pipes” and “piss-the-beds” and who will eventually rape the first-person narrator. Read together, Carter’s anti-moralist narration of the subjective experience of violence and power and her interest in animalized humans and humanized animals challenges the social process of naturalization itself, meaning the solidification of what is understood to be natural that is always-already entangled with what (and who) is understood to be human and moral.

By embracing the fantastic imaginary of the fairy tale, Carter vitalizes forms of mobility, animacy, and agency obscured by disciplinary humanist frameworks of morality and psychological legibility. Warner notes how, within the animist natural world of fairy tales,

> “the dead cannot be suppressed; animate forces keep circulating regardless of individual bodies and their misadventures. Even when a tree has been cut down and turned into a table or spindle, its wood is still alive with the currents of power that charge the forest where it came from [...] The spirit of Cinderella’s dead mother flows through nature and sparks the tree, inspiring the birds to help her daughter, and later to peck out the eyes of her wicked stepsisters” (21).

The animist magic of fairy tales opens a feral dimension of possibility and reclamation for subjects disinherited from a biopolitical state. Marxist Feminist scholar Silvia Federici traces the early modern delegitimization of magic and animism to the capitalist disciplining of lived experience as rote and predictable. She describes how, “magic [...] rested upon a qualitative conception of time and space that precluded a regularization of the labor process. How could the new entrepreneurs impose regular work patterns on a

proletariat anchored in the belief that there are lucky and unlucky days, that is, days on which to marry and others on which every enterprise should be cautiously avoided?" (142). Arguably the five day work week is as arbitrary a labor structure as working only on days one feels lucky (luck may in fact be a more logical hermeneutic; one may feel lucky for logical reasons, such as having recently broken a bone or lost money), but magic is by definition more about intuition and chance than numerical measurement and homogenization, making it less accommodating to biopolitical control.[9]

The gradual and state-enforced cultural dismissal of magical animacy structures has significant epistemological implications. In *Funk the Erotic*, L.H. Stallings traces the modern delegitimization of sensual and sexual experience as avenues of knowledge-production; her findings have significant resonances with Fedirici's study of the delegitimization of magic. To delineate the epistemological value of sexual experience, Stallings builds on Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick's Black feminist framework of demonic grounds, meaning pathways of knowledge centered on uncertainty, disorganization, and the supernatural. For diasporic Black communities, demonic grounds are also a way of engaging with ancestral and spiritual knowledges (Stallings 151-152). In arguing for reading sexual epistemologies as demonic, Stallings asserts that "the pornographic and erotic are key cultural components for validating human and nonhuman relationalities that exceed biopolitics and necropolitics" (152).

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[9] Federici further traces the delegitimization of magic through both banal capitalist bureaucratization and overt regimes of terror to the devaluation of the imagination as an instrument of knowing and the social relegation of nonhuman animals to mechanistic brutes. Thus both nonhuman animals and human animals whose minds were associated with ferality and fantasy (i.e. madness) retained their structural dependency on the state (Federici 157-159).

Demonic erotics avoids the "fetish of organization" (180) at the center of Western imperialism, replacing the sober affect of the civilized with the creative affect of the carnivalesque, which Carter scholars also outline as a central mode of her fiction (Bristow and Broughton 16). The demonic ground framework of creative eroticism also extends beyond the liberal feminist focus on sexual liberation and politicizing the personal by animating decolonial and other-than-human forms of relationality and self-expression; as with Federici's framework of magic, it refutes Western capitalist ideas of morality and productivity that frame sexual, ecstatic, creative, humorous, and/or spiritual experiences as impractical and extraneous because of their racialized associations with over-indulgence and poor self-control.

Stallings' work illustrates the through line between Carter's interest in the fairy tale and pornography. Though fairy tales and porn may seem to occupy quite different forms of fantasy and fabulation, they are both ultimately marginalized for addressing needs not being met by dominant epistemic infrastructures. Lorna synthesizes Carter's draw to the fairy tale and porn as centered in how both offer a mode of "practical fantasy" (54). To link "practical" to "fantasy" is in itself an argument against capitalist notions of productivity, even though all fantasies are in a sense goal-motivated behavior: visions of what a subject desires but doesn't yet have. Stallings locates the radical politics of erotic knowing in its reliance on "the immaterial [nature] of creativity and the imagination," (Stallings 16) which she argues is particularly important for colonized subjects whose ontological potentiality in the 'real world' is limited by gendered and racialized material conditions of debilitation. The practicality of fantasizing is thus eminently political in

how the usefulness of the imagination as a mode of ontological animation varies directly with one's degree of sociopolitical marginalization.

Stallings' attention to the immateriality of eroticism does not foreclose the understanding of sexual culture as undergirded by material inequities Carter excavates in *Sadeian Woman* but rather builds on it. Stallings goes on to show how the devaluation of creative epistemologies, such as eroticism, humor, and mysticism, boil down to the Enlightenment order of knowledge and its privileging of rationality and empiricism. She describes how,

> "Were it not for modernity's creation of interior and exterior selves, the order of knowledge's separation of logic and rationality from eros and creativity where the exterior social self becomes ranked over the interior, or the human construction of time where conscious, living, and organic matter takes precedence over dead and inorganic matter, then what has been named fantasy and imagination might be legibly written as one possible reality in which eros and creativity could be transferred into powerful individuals" (154).

The privileging of the living over the dead and the external over the internal may seem practical-- Marxist, even-- but replicates the same problem of who is a knower and who is forced to be known within the privileged worldview. When exteriority is presumed to trump interiority in its reality principle then material power and biopolitical legibility (often grounded in race, gender, and ableism) remain the gateway to architecting epistemic infrastructures, while the interior visions of the conquered are written off as self-indulgent fantasizing. The cultural marginalization of the active and often critical

imaginations of the disinherited has the bonus effect, for the state, of making the disinherited question the very reality of their subjective experience, often one's most immediate tool for verification and cross-checking. In her critique of the presumed objectivity of a universal system of justice, lawyer and critical theorist Patricia Williams explains how,

> "what links child abuse, the misttreatment of women, and racism is the massive external intrusion into psyche that dominating powers impose to keep the self from ever fully seeing itself. Since the self's power resides in another, little faith is placed in the true self, in one's own experiential knowledge. It is thus that children's, women's, and blacks' power is actually reduced to the 'intuitive' rather than to the real: social life is based primarily on the imaginary. Furthermore, since it is difficult constantly to affirm the congruence of one's own self-imagining with what the other is thinking of the self-- and since even that correlative effort is usually kept within limited family, neighborhood, or religious-racial boundaries-- encounters cease even to be social, and are merely presumptuous, random, and disconnected" (63).

No subject has pure access to the material world; what we perceive as 'reality' is always-already entangled with cultural imaginaries and engrained forms of perception; however, for privileged subjects, the cultural ecosystem and dominant epistemic infrastructures are affirming of their perception of how the world does and should operate. In contrast, for materially disempowered subjects, fantasy, or what has been relegated as fantasy, may allow for a way of working through disavowed experiences of

selfhood through the privileging of the subjective imagination and its desires unfiltered by the disciplinary (and implicitly gendered and racialized) restrictions of rationality culture. What comes across as crass and generic within popular fantasy genres, such as the helpless princess or the ruffian underdog, are in fact workable embodiments of historically specific identity and relational structures within modern biopolitics.

Marina Warner's historiography of the fairy tale, for example, shows that its stock characters and quaint domestic settings make much more direct and far-reaching political commentaries than they're often given credit for. She describes how,

> "Behind the gorgeous surfaces [of fairy tales] you can glimpse an entire history of childhood and the family: the oppression of landowners and rulers, foundlings, drowned or abandoned children, the ragamuffin orphan surviving by his wits, the maltreated child who wants a day off from unending toil, or the likely lad who has his eye on a girl who's from a better class than himself, the dependence of old people, the rivalries between competitors for love and other sustenance" (75).

During the premodern era of the fairy tale's emergence, "mothers died in childbirth, and large families of step-relations arose as a result, competing for resources," (78) making tales like *Cinderella* and *Snow White* less a fantasy of orphanage and a charming prince than a reflection of widespread necropolitical precarity. Warner further argues that while fairy tale historians have long been obsessed with locating an actual, historical person behind *Snow White*, following the 'identification' of Bluebeard as the fourteenth century serial killer Gilles de Raise, the "thirst for stable genealogies" should be replaced with the acknowledgement that "Snow White's situation is historical *and* generic: it encapsulates

fundamental dynamics of family over a *longue duree*, unfortunately" (88, emphasis mine). Cinderella and Snow White may be beautiful women but without a father figure to facilitate their exchange within the familial market that is intra-class marriage, their beauty becomes a liability. Behind their descent into unforgiving days of domestic labor lies the longer shadow of lower class, enslaved, and indentured women for whom the middle class home has always been a site of degradation and debilitation.[10] Fairy tales' seemingly indulgent portrayal of good vs. evil animism thus allows for a collective grappling with politicized ontological forms, like the abandoned step-daughter, in the context of malicious, illogical, and impenetrable structures of worlding. They actually work from sturdier ethical foundations than social realist novels in which mass exploitation is framed as a regrettable but logical result of industrialization, itself a symbolic stand in for human progress.

Not all fairy tales contain the seeds of political liberation, just as not all porn subverts patriarchy. Though some feminist critics reacted to *Sadeian Woman* as if Carter uncritically celebrated all pornography as radical, she acknowledged quite explicitly that pornography, like most art, on the whole reflects the power structures of the world that births it, meaning for a genre focused on sex that porn generally privileges male desire in addition to replicating racialized and classed notions of desirable bodies (*Sadeian Woman* 15). Yet, she saw potential in how, in porn, "the activity the text describes, into which the reader enters, is not a whole world into which the reader is absorbed and, as they say

[10] In her historiography of the racialized surveillance state, Simone Browne, building on Patricia Hill Collins, argues that the surveillance of the Black female domestic slave within the white plantation household was the prototypical model for modern racialized surveillance, more so even than the field slave and the overseer (57).

'taken out of himself.'  It is one basic activity extracted from the world in its totality in such a way that the text constantly reminds the reader of his own troubling self, his own reality" (14). She similarly saw the fairy tale's extraction of an imaginative space focused on states of powerlessness and domination by outside forces as an ideal form for grappling with the capture of modern subjectivity by biopolitics. Her contribution to the genre was to give space to the complexities of creaturely desire obscured by humanist structures of moralization: the feral interiority of selfhood. No creature is innocent from the desire for power or the urge towards violence and just because someone is structurally powerless does not mean they can't both do harm and enjoy it. It may have been harder for some readers of Carter's tales to believe that women can take pleasure in violence than to believe that trees could talk.

I trace Carter's legacy in the contemporary proliferation of politicized folk and fairy tale retellings, which often evoke intersectional and transnational feminist lenses, such as Helen Oyeyemi's entire oeuvre; Carmen Gimenez Smith and Kate Bernheimer's 2010 anthology *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me*; Porochista Khakpour's 2014 novel *The Last Illusion*; Lesley Nneka Arimah's 2017 story collection *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*; Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*; Daniel Lavery's 2018 story collection *The Merry Spinster*; Michael Pearce's 2018 film *Beast*; Ali Abbasi's 2018 film *Border*; and Dada Masilo's 2019 ballet *Giselle*.[11] By legacy I do not mean that these artists were directly influenced

[11] This list is by no means exhaustive but rather represents a selection of contemporary fairy tale retellings with direct resonances to the interests of this project. *The Last Illusion* and *Border*, for example, both use the other-than-human dimension of fairy tales to critique global imperialist structures of debilitation, while *The Merry Spinster* and *Giselle* confront the gendered nature of

by or necessarily even familiar with Carter's work but that their turn to and use of fairy tale narrative structures for decolonial political critique and otherwise worldings carries on her feral aesthetic interventions. At the same time, the coincidence of their emergence speaks to the increased entrenchment of the biopolitical structures of debilitation that most concerned Carter within global epistemic and sociomaterial infrastructures. I similarly position this chapter's case study, *White is for Witching,* as intimate with Carter's fairy tale epistemologies in how its critique is centered in the domestic and its attendant biopolitical control of women, specifically daughters. I pair Oyeyemi's decolonial literary style alongside her generic preference for the fairy tale to better understand the onto-epistemological implications of the realism-fantasy divide within literary politics and its origins within imperial paternalism. I do not so much seek to prove that fantasy literature is just as 'real' as realist literature as to, like Oyeyemi and Carter, question the terms on which reality is being offered.

## ***White is For Witching*: Whiteness, Femininity, and Other Haunted Houses**

Like Carter's daughter characters in *Heroes and Villains* and *The Magic Toyshop,* which both center the journeys of a young female protagonist trying to escape the hierarchical resource distribution and self-deluding worldview that structures patriarchal family systems, Oyeyemi's daughter character in *White is for Witching*, Miranda subverts the sociogenic reproductive expectations of the nuclear family by refusing the most basic tool of biological reproduction: food. In her essay on food and hunger in Carter's oeuvre, "The Infernal Appetites of Angela Carter," Sceatts argues that food in Carter's fiction

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humanist morality through female and nonbinary characters that treat vengeance and violence as pragmatic tools of address within necropolitical structures of worlding.

often embodies the complexity of social power dynamics. She relates the symbolic flexibility of food to the Foucauldian model of shifting power relations in how "hunger is continually renewed, acts of eating are perpetually recreated, and appetite is neither constant nor more than temporarily satisfied" (110). Carter's characters tend to possess extreme relations to consumption, with villain-coded patriarchs like Nosferatu and Uncle Philip of *Toyshop* having a voracious and near cannibalistic appetite, while female characters starve as a metric of both powerlessness and contained refusal or prepare sometimes deadly and sometimes sumptuous meals for their household in a Carteresque show of the dangers of underestimating the feminine and the domestic (106).

Carter herself had a troubled relationship with food; at seventeen, she had her doctor prescribe her a weight loss plan and began smoking, swearing, and dressing in skin-tight black clothing (Gordon). This reactionary stage of Carter's appetite was inferrably less about health than familial identity; her mother was over-protective throughout her childhood and did not even let Carter use the bathroom on her own until she was a teenager. Both she and Carter's father were unimpressed by their daughter's pursuit of thinness and vulgarity. Shortly thereafter Carter began working on her own as a journalist, while her diet progressed into anorexia. At nineteen, she got married, a decision she would later describe as "one of my typical burn-all-bridges-but-one acts; flight from a closed room into another one" (qtd. in Gordon). She had flown from her claustrophobic nuclear family into a claustrophobic marriage with a man she barely knew who suffered from major depressive disorder. She would soon leave him, and her weight

would improve and ostensibly remain healthy from her late twenties until her death, but dysfunctional eating patterns remained a mainstay of both her adult life and her fiction.

*White is for Witching* replicates similar problematics of domestic oppression and consumptive power. The teenage protagonist, Miranda Silver, suffers from pica, a mental disorder in which a person is driven to consume non-edible substances, like plastic. Her disorder worsens after the death of her mother; much of the tension in the household, in addition to their collective grief, results from her twin brother and father trying to force her to gain weight and develop an appetite for nourishing foods. My reading of Miranda's domestic struggles focuses on two threads of critique in Oyeyemi's work that are, though not absent, not as pronounced in Carter's fiction: firstly, the connections Oyeyemi draws between the oppressive family habitat and the biopolitical structure of the Westernized nation-state that determines its resources. *White is for Witching* is set in Britain, and the xenophobic reactions of its white populace to refugees and other immigrants haunts the borders of Miranda's insular world; more immediately, the ghost of her deeply racist and controlling great-grandmother literally haunts the family home. Secondly, from a formal perspective, I consider how Oyeyemi illustrates the larger ecology of Miranda's eating disorder through surprising shifts in narrator, none of whom prove to be totally reliable, forcing the reader to reconsider their initial assumptions about who is in charge of the story. *White is for Witching* is jarring and in both tonal and perspective shifts; one of the more infrequent narrators turns out to be the xenophobic family home, who provides vitriolic commentaries on Miranda's attempts to escape her family heritage. Oyeyemi's division of storytelling across the very family and home Miranda is trying to escape

provides its own critique of how much agency the ostensibly self-willed protagonist has over her life.

*White is for Witching*'s narrative structure represents the Nigerian storytelling tradition Oyeyemi, who was born in Nigeria and raised in London, is in part building from. African storytelling takes an approach to characterization, story arc, and narrative agency philosophically distinct from the Western literary tradition. In his monograph on the cultural origins of craft in creative writing, *Craft in the Real World*, Matthew Salesses deconstructs the notion that craft is a transcultural art form, free from the ugly biases of the 'real' world. As examples, he focuses on dominant notions of good characterization and story building in North American writing workshops, which encourage psychologically complex characters and a three-act story structure that ends with a clear resolution. He describes how, "in my research for this book, I found various authors (mostly foreign) asking how it is that we have forgotten that character is made up, that it isn't real or universal. [...] To [Nobel Prize Winner Orhan Pamuk] a character isn't even formed by an individual personality but by the particular situation and context the author needs her for" (29). He turns to Czech writer Milan Kundera's philosophy of craft as a more productive alternative to North American literary individualism. Kundera's approach figures

> "the main cause of action in a novel [as] the world's 'naked' force. Kundera wants to decenter internal causation (character-driven plot) and (re)center external causation (such as an earthquake or fascism or God). He insists that psychological realism is no 'realer' than the bureaucratic world Kafka presents in which

> individuals have little or no agency and everything is a function of the system [...] Any novel, for Kundera, is about a possible way of 'being in the world,' and Kafka's bureaucracy came true in the Czech Republic in a way that individual agency did not" (24).

Salesses further points to how East Asian fiction is often criticized by Western audiences for being plotless, while African fiction is similarly criticized for a perceived lack of propelling action and having flat characters (28). As with critiques of Carter's characters as being stereotyped or reductive, these criticisms represent conflicting worldviews and values rather than objective craft issues within the writing. Both East Asian and African fiction place a greater emphasis on characters as belonging to larger ecosystems of communities and other outside forces. African fiction understands ancestry and spirits as part of everyday realities and does not necessarily cordon off the fantastic into its own genre, while East Asian fiction views the 'self' embodied by the literary device of character as primarily interdependent in development (Salesses 26, 31). Moreover, while both Western and Eastern literature originated within oral storytelling traditions, Eastern oral traditions trace back to cultures of "gossip and street talk," while Western oral traditions trace back to "oral performances meant to recount heroic deeds for an audience of the ruling class" (Salesses 30). East Asian literature makes room for alternative perspectives that may cast doubt on the dominant narrative circulating within the story world or larger public sphere, while Western fiction emphasizes the importance of psychological complexity and narrative reality-effects to win over the reader to the text's cohesive narrative authority.

East Asian literature also traditionally follows a four-act structure, in which the third act, before the resolution, is the twist, which often involves a change in perspective, rather than a dramatic, physical spectacle. Salesses gives the example of a story in which "a man puts up a flyer of a missing dog, he hands out flyers to everyone on the street, a woman appears and asks whether her dog has been found, they look for the dog together" (28). As with a new character appearing to claim ownership of the dog originally assumed to belong to the 'protagonist,' the narrative force of the twist resides in the sudden transformation of the reader's understanding of who and what the story is centering. Such a shift does not necessarily abandon the original focus points as unimportant but rather discourages insular narrative attention and interpretive complacency. Throughout my reading of *White is for Witching*, I locate a kin narrative strategy in Oyeyemi's sudden shifts in perspective, particularly in the last third of the novel when a seemingly minor character not only drives the final act but also troubles the reader's early investment in and sympathy for the Silver women as victims. Moreover, Oyeyemi specifically draws on a Caribbean diasporic folklore character, the soucouyant, as a metaphor for the vampiric nature of white feminism Jacqui Alexander has critiqued in her writings on contemporary feminism from a Caribbean feminist perspective (Alexander).

Salesses' study shows how storytelling traditions are not merely or only cultural entertainment but reflect "who has agency and who does not. What is worthy of action and what description. Whose bodies are on display. Who changes and who stays the same. Who controls time. Whose world it is. Who holds meaning and who gives it" (23).

The imperial naturalization of the Western storytelling tradition and its emphasis on psychological singularity and social realism has led, within the Western humanities, to the delegitimization of non-Western literary traditions and their interest in the fantastic, the counter-intuitive, and the collaborative as pragmatic modes of interpretation that resist the presumptions and inaccuracies of a single story. While Carter's works encourage an ecological perspective on character through her emphasis on power distribution within character-systems, generally she preferred first-person narration with a sustained focus on a single protagonist. *Nights at the Circus* is unique within her oeuvre for its polyvocality and emphasis on the potentially unreliable nature of its multiple narrators through a journalist protagonist who is forced to untangle the conflicting stories of the circus crew he profiles. My interest in reading Carter's literary style alongside Oyeyemi's work resides in how Oyeyemi's use of perspective twists and a narrative de-emphasis on the ostensible protagonist can help flesh out the underlying ferality of the fairy tale and its epistemological potential for transnational feminism.

Throughout her oeuvre, Oyeyemi's approach to fairy tale retellings resonates with Carter's in her dexterity at bringing together the haunted undertones and formal playfulness of the genre to deconstruct the affect of living within a debilitating power structure while also sensing that there is life beyond its walls. Her 2011 novel *Mr. Fox* can be read as a twist on the Grimm fairy tale, "The Wedding of Mrs. Fox," in which a Mr. Fox becomes obsessively convinced that his wife is unfaithful; his nefarious schemes to prove so variously result in her leaving him or her being forced out. In Oyeyemi's version, Mr. Fox is an egotistical male author who kills off all the heroines of his novels

and eventually falls in love with an imaginary and idealized writing muse, Mary. When he becomes disenchanted with his actual wife, Daphne, she enters the imaginative space in which he and Mary pursue their affair and fights for his attention. Oyeyemi's version of the domesticated fox tale thus plays on the misogyny of literary culture; the interactive relations between writers, characters, and readers; and the unimaginative and unsatisfying nature of heterosexual marriage. Her 2014 novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* similarly builds on the tale of "Snow White" through the character of Snow, a white-passing Black girl, whose white stepmother sends her away due to the unfavorable comparisons she sparks between herself and her darker-skinned half-sister in their small town.

Like *Mr. Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird*, *White is For Witching* interrogates the entrapment of domesticity and the racial politics of the nuclear family through the fairy tale tropes of cursed inheritances and soucouyants. The title speaks to the novel's framing of whiteness as a form of witchcraft that feeds off the life of the Silver women, who bear the burden of not only reproducing white purity through marriage and procreation but also of guarding against the ever-present threat of Blackness within the family's insular social life. Oyeyemi's highlighting of the witchery inherent to imaginaries of racial purity pushes against the hegemonic association of witchcraft and magic with non-Western cultures, itself used to prop up the mystical notion of Western rationality. Further, in framing the Silver women as soucouyants, or blood-sucking witches who inherit their twisted appetites through the matriarchal line, Oyeyemi uses a stock character from Caribbean folklore as a metaphor for the consumptive nature of whiteness. Like soucouyants who feed off the blood of others to attempt to live forever, white

supremacists safeguard their superiority by defining themselves against racial Others who they spectralize as invaders of humanity. Such logic works to disavow the dependency of whiteness on the continued presence of Otherness for its ontological sustenance.

In *White is For Witching*, each generation of Silver women grows less attached to protecting the purity of the Silver family heritage--- more out of boredom than political awareness--- but, like Nosferatu's daughter, they find themselves trapped by the over-determining influence of power as a spiritual inheritance and worldview. Miranda's great-grandmother, Anna Good, appears to have the most ardent xenophobic beliefs and to be largely responsible for trapping subsequent generations into the walls of the Silver home. As a child, she was selected to play Britannia in her gymnastics class, for which she "[wore] a bronze-coloured helmet and a white gown and a blue sash and [sat] at the top of a chariot built of the other girls' bodies," (134) foreshadowing her later role as the primary family soucouyant. She is outraged when her granddaughter, Lily calls nationalism "embarrassing and dangerous" (135) and believes Lily's mind to have been warped by "incomers [...] [twisting] it so that anything they were not part of was bad" (135). Anna is also the first woman in their line to occupy the social clout of the Silver name; born into a regular, middle-class family, as a young secretary, she married her "stinking rich" (ibid) boss, Andrew Silver, who introduced her to a life of upper-class British respectability. When Anna meets Andrew, she is wearing a white dress, introducing the titular line: "white is for witching, a colour to be worn so that all other colours can enter you, so that you may use them. At a pinch, cream will do" (136).

Andrew is killed fighting the Germans in Africa, at which point Anna seemingly melds with the Silver family home, 29 Barton Road, and its structural foundations in white property theft and racialized enclosure politics. 29 Barton Road itself narrates how Anna's grief-borne hatred of "Blackies, Germans, killers, dirty… dirty killers" came from "that part of her that was older than her. *The part of that will always tie me to her*, to her daughter Jennifer, to Jennifer's stubborn daughter Lily, to Lily's even more stubborn daughter Miranda. I can only be as good as they are. We are on the inside, and we have to stay together, and we absolutely cannot have anyone else" (137). Keeping the Silver daughters inside, however, proves harder than expected: Anna's daughter, Jennifer runs away after giving birth to Lily out of aversion to a stuffy domestic life. Lily evinces an artistic temperament and becomes a photojournalist; she is eventually killed on assignment in Haiti, enraging 29 Barton Road further. Finally, though all three Silver women who came before her had struggled with pica disorder, Miranda inherits the worst case, which is further exacerbated by Lily's sudden death, and has trouble keeping up the appearance of baseline functionality in the outside world.

The exacerbation of pica throughout the generations can be read alongside their urge towards flight from white domesticity; eating the inedible and improper allows for a brief foray into ferality in the face of a civilizing and homogenizing inheritance. Oyeyemi's choice of pica to manifest the disordered consumption habits of the ambivalent trustees of a claustrophobic, white supremacist heritage is also instructive in its particularity. While hunger strikes are well-known performative gestures of political refusal, it is less common to figure the mass consumption of objects, such as chalk, that

are considered inedible as anything other than irrational behavior. However, like Carter, Oyeyemi's use of food and hunger as metaphors complicates reductive notions of over and under consumption as bearing a one-to-one relationship with power and marginalization. In a brief chapter, "Pica," told from the perspective of 29 Barton Road, the reader learns the Anna they hear from in the novel is not the 'real' Anna but an Anna born of the house's xenophobic imagination. 29 Barton Road describes how,

> "[Pica] runs in the family. Anna Good had it in 1938; a year before she became Anna Silver. She ruined her work stockings and skirt with crouching in the mood searching for acorn husks that would splinter down her throat. She ate leaves by the handful and chipped her teeth on the pebbles she scooped out of the brown water when she went walking on the promenade. *The house is Andrew's*, she told herself; *I have no part in it.* One evening she pattered around inside me, sipping something strong that wedged colour into her cheeks, and she dragged all my windows open, putting her glass down to struggle with the stiffer latches. I cried and cried for an hour or so, unable to bear the sound of my voice, so shrill and pleading, but unable to stop the will of the wind wheeling through me, cold in my insides. That was the first and last time I've heard my own voice. I suppose I am frightening. But Anna Good couldn't hear me [...] and wouldn't answer the thing that asked her to let it out
> (let you out from where?
> let me out from the small, the hot, the take me out of the fire i am ready i am hard like the stones you ate, bitter like those husks)" (26-27).

Anna's pica developed in the year before her marriage as a way to declare her independence-- *I have no part in it*-- from the domestic expectations of wifedom in an upper-class, British household. Oyeyemi's personification of the house and the mixed nature of its voice, civilized (grammatically proper, controlled in tone, linear in storytelling) at times and feral in bursts ("the take me out of the fire i am ready i am hard"), gestures towards the half-successful ontological domestication inherent to the domestic. Her feminization of 29 Barton Road and description of the house as struggling to find its voice, which frightens outsiders in its "shrill and pleading" tenor, points to how the women in a nuclear family disproportionately bear the violence of domestication as a forced dislocation to an isolated and monotonous environment and a form of silencing in the concomitant expectation to keep up proper appearances, meaning the suppression of uncouth or idiosyncratic impulses, of individual voice.

Oyeyemi further stresses the feminization of domestic terror through the fact that, while Miranda's twin brother, Eliot and father, Luc, both also live in 29 Barton Road, only Miranda is haunted by it. The men of the Silver household may be on the title but it doesn't require the draining of their vitality to stay alive. At one point, when Luc and Miranda are outside in the garden, Luc falls asleep and Anna (or 29 Barton Road's version of her) comes out to fetch Miranda and take her to a secret room, where the deceased Silver women all eat together. In the room, Anna and Jennifer sit side by side at the dining table, "naked except for corsets laced so tightly that their dessicated bodies dipped in and out like parchment scrolls bound around the middle [...] Padlocks were placed over their parted mouths, boring through the top lip and closing at the bottom.

Miranda could see their tongues writhing" (147). When Miranda asks Lily about their violent accouterments, Lily says she did that to them, "[sounding] proud," (ibid) indicating that the Silver women, unable to leave or even kill each other, have had to get creative in expressing their frustration with their extended stay in Barton Road. As they begin to eat, the vibrations of nearby bombs shake the room, which only Miranda is bothered by; she comes to realize the others "were used to this" (149). The bombs are a living memory of violence and vulnerability Barton Road internalized from its time as a building under threat by the bombs of World War II, a reminder for all the women of why, "it's safe in here [...] Us Silver girls together" (ibid). In its own narration, Barton Road describes how, "when Andrew went to war the sirens shrieked at night the sky was full of squat balloons that flamed and ate bombs and would not move with the breeze, these balloons and nothing else, not even stars," (27) ironically linking the home's xenophobia to the trauma of imperial violence.

Luc and Eliot in turn blame much of the family's current dysfunction on Miranda's eating disorder; they believe that if Miranda could get healthy and stop forcing them to worry about her they could be a happy family. However, 29 Barton Road tells a different story. In one of her turns as a narrator, she describes how,

> "Anna Good you are long gone now, except when I resurrect you to play in my puppet show, but you forgive since when I make you appear it is not really you, and besides you know that my reasons are sound. Anna Good it was not your pica that made you into a witch. I will tell you the truth because you are no trouble to me at all. Indeed you are a mother of mine, you gave me a kind of life, mine, the

> kind of alive that I am. Anna Good there was another woman, long before you, but related. This woman was thought an animal. Her way was to slash at her flesh with the blind, frenzied concentration that a starved person might use to get at food that is buried. Her way was to drink off her blood, then bite and suck at the bobbled stubs of her meat. Her appetite was only for herself. This woman was deemed mad and then turned out and after that she was not spoken of" (26-28).

The haunted and bewitched nature of 29 Barton Road is separate in causation, if later itself a contributing factor, from the Silver women's pica. If 29 Barton Road is to be believed, pica is the only inheritance the women have that is separate from their subsumption into the Silver family home. The original matriarch of the Good family line "was thought an animal," because "her appetite was only for herself," causing her to be turned away from the 'protection' of civilized society. Here again Oyeyemi intervenes against the dominant history of witchcraft as the prerogative of strange, single women, instead positioning the witchery, in the sense of its manipulative structures of animacy, that haunts 29 Barton Road as its obligation to replicate white domesticity and femininity and to forego the feral idiosyncrasy of the self.

In her monograph on building a decolonial approach to contemporary feminism, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander describes her struggles writing a truthful biography of Thisbe, a nineteenth-century Trinidian woman enslaved by European colonists and executed for her suspected participation in witchery. Alexander's difficulties with historiography recall Saidiya Hartman's in "Venus in Two Acts" but center less on the impossibility of replicating the totalizing violence of enslavement than

on the incommensurability of life as spiritually transfused by community and personal idiosyncrasy, or what Alexander names "the texture of living," (295) and the objective/objectifying narrative stance of a biographer. Alexander found her solution in the African spiritual epistemologies that guided Thisbe's life and led to her execution under colonial rule. She describes how, "if texture of living were to be felt and analyzed as not only memory but, importantly, voice and identity, all seeming secular categories in which subjectivity is housed had to be understood as moored to the Sacred since they anchored a consciousness that drew its sustenance from elsewhere: a set of codes derived from the disembodied consciousness of the divine" (ibid).

The implications of the Sacred's "set of codes derived from the disembodied consciousness of the divine" that set the self apart from historical and sociopolitical determinism can be seen in Oyeyemi's characterization of 29 Barton Road as alive, restless, and often inexplicable: "the kind of alive that I am"; they also illuminate the feral potentiality of the fairy tale's pan-animist structure of worlding. Whether the life of the house is 'real' within the narrow sense of the term as empirically verifiable is besides the point. The fairy tale's openness to animacies obscured by humanist subjectivity forms allows for a more direct confrontation with the lived experience of sociogenic structures of reproduction and their perpetual re-animation of haunted infrastructures. Like Carter, Oyeyemi uses the feral animacies that drive the magic of folklore to highlight the ontologization of specific domestic/domesticating forms--- wife, daughter, home--- as always-already built on shaky and haunted grounds. 29 Barton Road's description of itself as having a "kind of life" birthed from Anna's premarital ferality speaks to the

determining expectations of a white domestic home--- stability, homogeneity, and reliability-- but also the suppressed and pent up animacies of an only ever partially domesticated life that supersedes their determination. Miranda's brother and father, as white men whose mobility is not as limited by the biopolitical codes of domesticity, do not understand her impulses towards strange and alienating behavior, believing that conformity to the social is the medicine and not the wound.

29 Barton Road's difficulty in keeping the Silver women at home thus stems from the under-determination of history, in which the seemingly guaranteed reproduction of dominant sociopolitical systems is perpetually liable to the unpredictability of new life. At the same time, Lily and Miranda's personal and practical difficulties leaving behind the faux security of the Silver home speak to the vitality of the intergenerational animacy of inheritance only partially legible within the individualistic and presentist epistemologies of modern humanism. Though haunting has gained some credence within the Western academy through the scientific validation of epigenetics, belief in the ontological persistence of deceased family members and their beliefs, modes of relation, and traumas--- or ghosts--- is still largely figured within modern Western epistemologies as evidence of an overactive imagination.

For Alexander, the decolonial analytic of the Sacred is better suited to understanding the vying animacies that push and pull the self embedded in both familial and cultural histories and its own mysterious yearnings. Her work on the Sacred dissects how the secularization of modern feminism has led to a disinvestment in the spiritual that enforces a static and objectified understanding of the self evident in the second-wave

formulation of the personal as political. She proposes instead understanding the "personal as spiritual," (296) which accounts for how spirituality

> inheres the lived capacity to initiate and sustain communication between spiritual forces and human consciousness, to align the inner self, the behavioral self and the invisible, we are confronting an engagement with the embodied power of the Sacred, collectivized self-possession, if you will [...] for *even the most egregious signatures of new empire are not the sole organizing nexus of subjectivity*, if we manage to stay alive, and even in death there are commitments and choices about the when, how, and the kind of provisions with which we return" (328, emphasis mine).

Alexander's formulation of the Sacred as "collectivized self-possession" recalls Spillers' formulation of "interior intersubjectivity" to intervene against the self-community binary pervasive in progressive movements; the term "self-*possession*" additionally highlights the necessity of leaving space for the persistence of agential self-differentiation and self-knowledge even within spaces of near-total political domination. Both Spillers and Alexander complicate the dominant narrative of the West as a purely individualistic culture and everything outside the West as purely collectivist. The West is permissive of domesticated forms of individuality that fit into the state puzzles of racial capitalism and imperialism, but non-Western, spiritual understandings of the self allow for intersubjective frameworks of identity-formation reflective of creaturely existence.

Luc and Eliot's unconstructive approaches to curing Miranda's pica stress the insufficiency of Western epistemologies of selfhood and embodiment. Miranda's hunger,

just like the objects she uses to satiate it, stems from something other than a physiological nutritional deficit. Within her critique of the personal as political, Alexander further argues that,

> "of immediate importance to feminism is the meaning of embodiment and body praxis, and the positioning of the body as a source of knowledge within terms differently modulated than the materiality of the body and its entanglement in the struggle against commodification [...] There are Sacred means through which we come to be at home in the body that supercede its positioning in materiality, in any of the violent discourses of appropriation, and in any of the formations within normative multiculturalism" (329).

There is a tendency amongst Marxist and new materialist feminisms to hold up the body as a sort of material site of revelation, in which proof of capitalist exploitation and patriarchal hegemony can be irrefutably traced (Haraway, Alaimo, Grosz). While the debilitating effects of overwork, food inequity, and industrial toxicity are indeed crucial sites for collective address that disproportionately affect women of color, valuing the materialist analytic over immaterial understandings of subjectivity is part and parcel of the racialized and gendered production of plasticized subjectivities. The material self is also the visible and surveilled self. Part of what makes the immaterial Sacred is the self-protective nature of ontological opacity. Materialist analytics are also vulnerable to a naive faith in the rigor of scientific empiricism, a rigor dependent on a decontextualization from political critique favorable to imperial hegemony. As trans scholars have been at pains to note in critiquing fetishistic scholarship on the body as

truth, scientific findings about the biological and chemical determinism of the human body are often inconclusive, liable to the correlation as causation fallacy, and/or later overturned. Trans understandings of embodiment in turn embrace the mutability and opacity of the interrelation between the self, the body, and the social ecologies in which they circulate (Stryker).

In their concern over her diminishing frame, Luc and Eliot chastise Miranda for not prioritizing her health while not understanding that it is precisely white British understandings of 'good' and 'healthy' that are sucking the life from her. In one scene, Luc takes Miranda clothes shopping, and she tries on a variety of stylish, feminine dresses to try to please him, but he only expresses anguish at how thin she is. He tells her, "Miranda. No one who is well looks the way you look at the moment [...] You will have to eat. You will wear your other clothes until they fit. It will be good for you [...] Getting healthy won't be so bad [...] I'll try to make it delicious, I promise" (47). In response, Miranda

> "[nods] again, everything paralysed but her head and neck. *You are being silly*, she told herself desperately, but the words had no effect. Because she didn't move to face him, her father kissed the top of her head, the point of the triangle where her parting dissolved into the rest of her hair. She felt the kiss on her actual skull, the skin of her scalp crinkling between his lips as they broke through" (47).

Miranda tries to be good, to listen and believe her father, but she has a fundamentally different understanding of her body and her hunger.

Throughout the sections of Oyeyemi's third-person narration, which appear to hew closely to Miranda's perspective, she evinces an estranged, morbid view of her body, quite distinct from the superficial view typically ascribed to teenage girls with eating disorders. She feels her father's kisses on her "actual skull," causing the "skin of her scalp" to crinkle; she seems in part disgusted by the feral reality of a body that subsists apart from the colonial imaginary of human, and particularly female, subjectivity as that which has risen above the animalistic. Shortly after the dressing room incident, she finds a sketch of an imaginary woman in Lily's art studio. She perceives it as depicting how

> "a perfect person has no joints. The arms, emerging from short sleeves, are unmarked by the ripple of skin that shows where the limbs bend [...] The pose of the perfect person was so natural, the colouring so lifelike that the omission of joints and eyelids seemed deliberate [...] The perfect person was a girl [...] The perfect person had beautifully shaped hands, but no fingernails. A swanlike neck that met the jaw at a devastating but impossible angle. Me, but perfect" (56-57).

In other words, the drawing depicts the impossibility of white femininity as anything other than an imaginary; the "omission of joints and eyelids" and lack of ripples in the skin figure a body with no practical mobility. Inferrably, this is the ideal of femininity Miranda inherited from Lily or at least believes Lily desired. Though 29 Barton Road does not characterize Lily with the same degree of xenophobia as its puppet version of Anna, the third-person narrator indicates that Lily herself had an ambivalent relationship to her family's imperial heritage. That she died on a photojournalism assignment in Haiti indicates that she saw herself as more cosmopolitan than her agoraphobic grandmother

but can also be taken as evidence of a cannibalistic orientation towards non-Western cultures. Taking photos of a place renders it static and submitting them as British journalism subjects it to the appetites of the Western gaze; the Silver women's pica similarly represents a mode of consumption directed by the feral desire to escape Western paternalism and its 'civilized' appetite but that is self-destructive in its insularity.

Moreover, other narrative glimpses into the Silver family life pre-Lily's death indicate that Miranda's conception of her mother is not entirely or only in her head. In a flashback scene, Miranda and Eliot discuss their memories of their grandmother with their mother. Lily brings up Anna's "crack-up," (84) which led to her being placed in a nursing home. Miranda says she remembers the crack-up as

> "like the heraldic pelican [...] the bird that pecks itself to death to feed its children. She tried to give us her blood but we didn't want it [...] She rubbed it on our lips, Eliot, but you wiped it off [...] Her whole hand was covered with blood, and she had her hand over her face and we could see her looking through her fingers, and she got down between our beds and---" (84-85).

Lily grows increasingly angry at Miranda's interpretation and tries to cut her off:

> "'I can't think where you got that from [...] I did say you wouldn't remember. You were three. You can't remember everything [...] There is nothing… mysterious and gothic about a crack-up. If anything it's just sad.' Lily was so angry she was almost singing, her temper changing the stress she put on her words. 'There is no need to make up stories about it'" (85).

Lily's anger is in part understandable; she feels her daughter is romanticizing her mother's nervous breakdown, an event that was more immediately traumatizing for Lily. However, her refusal to give Miranda's interpretation any space in the conversation, to consider what it means that her daughter remembers Anna's breakdown as like a bird that mutilates itself to feed its daughters, also speaks to the dysfunctional cycle of storytelling and interpretation the Silver women are stuck in. They experience the ontological structure of white domesticity as the ghost story it is, replete with invisibilized animacies and unaddressed rage and sorrow passed through the generations of women who sustain it. Yet they are told by their husbands and fathers--- real and internalized-- that proper women do not see ghosts, do not eat chalk, do not have joints that bend and skin that ripples. Any expressed belief in 'fantastical' stories that accurately capture the violence of colonial domestic ontology as that which feeds on the self it simultaneously destroys is read as an isolated incident of madness. It would in fact be more accurate to understand their family heritage as a bird pecking itself to death.

Oyeyemi stresses the spiritual vitality of decolonial hermeneutics through the character, Sade, a Yoruba woman Luc hires as the family's housekeeper shortly after he converts 29 Barton Road into a bed and breakfast. Sade loves cooking but, unlike Luc, does not scold Miranda or pressure her into eating her food for the sake of Miranda's 'health.' One day, Sade is in the kitchen, "[jiggling] from countertop to countertop, chopping chillies, crushing garlic, tossing handfuls of spice into pots. The smell made Miranda realise how hungry she was; not for the sharp-toothed fireworks that Sade was lighting in Luc's pot. Not for chalk, not for plastic…" (112). Miranda begins to sway on

her feet from the sudden shock of hunger. Sade sees Miranda struggling and asks, "They're calling you, aren't they? [...] Your old ones [...] I know it's hard" (ibid). When Miranda, surprised by Sade's insight, asks

> "'Please tell me more about old ones calling' [...] Sade looked so alarmed that Miranda thought the topic must be the utmost taboo. Then she saw herself on the floor. Water makes a mirror of any surface. She'd sucked her cheeks in so far that the rest of her face emerged in a series of interconnected caves. Her eyes were small, wild globes. The skull was temporary, the skull collected the badness together and taught it discipline, that was all. Miranda wanted to say, That is not my face. No, it wasn't hers, she had to get away from it, peel it back. Or she had to leave and take this face with her, defuse it somewhere else. Eliot and Luc, she had to protect them" (113).

Sade is the first person in Miranda's life to recognize her hunger as spiritual in origin, a hunger that cannot only be solved with a plate of food, however nutritious or flavorful. Sade's unexpected recognition of her plight sends Miranda, who has been steeped in imperial epistemologies, into a spiral of self-loathing, in which she sees her reflection as an image that needs to be disciplined.

Sade's entrance into the novel, about a third of the way through, also makes clear to the reader the entanglement of the Silver matriarchy's bewitchment by whiteness and and the debilitating effects of xenophobia on the mobility and life quality of British people of color, immigrants, and refugees: a heritage that further illuminates Miranda's sense of herself as a collection of badness and barely-contained violence, which she

inaccurately interprets as primarily threatening her brother and father. Earlier incidents in the novel indicate Miranda's partial awareness of her complicity in ongoing state and local violence towards people of color in her town, as well as her will to suppress the weight of such knowledge. One morning, Eliot, who prides himself on being more politically aware than his sister, passes her *the Dover Post* over breakfast; Miranda

> "[reads] of the stabbing of the fourth Kosovan refugee in three weeks. Three had died in hospital. Her gaze *could only touch the page very lightly* before it skittered away [...] The main picture was of a boy a little older than her [...] She was not sure how to pronounce his name, not even in her head would the sound make any sense. She had to look away to stop herself from making up more stories about him. Also because from the page he said, Look away, look away from me, what can you do, nothing so don't. The article commented on the silence of the refugee community. No one was naming names, or even suggesting any. Eliot told Miranda that it was a sign of the community choosing to protect its own [...] Miranda slumped in her seat. What Eliot was saying made sense but it didn't. There was an untruth to it that made her tired" (34-36, emphasis mine).

That Miranda cannot look directly at the article indicates her stunted ability to reckon with the violence of whiteness that is eating her spirit alive and taking the lives of people of color. At the same time, her sense that her brother's self-righteous knowledge-claim over the incident has an "untruth to it" that "[makes] her tired" indicates a partial awareness that the structural debilitation of the refugees cannot be solved through the enlightenment of British newspapers and smug high school boys. Her distrust of Eliot's

explanation can be connected to her stubborn insistence on the fantastic as a more truthful and reliable hermeneutic for reckoning with the mysticism of racialization processes.

In contrast to Miranda's ambivalent half-awareness of xenophobia, as soon as she begins working in the Silver home, Sade makes it part of her weekly routine to prepare food for and visit the local Immigration Centre, where the majority of the population consists of Kosovan refugees; she takes Miranda along with her, presumably to show her the stakes of her blindspots. During one of their visits, they come across a crowd of protestors in front of the Centre. When they ask a protestor what is going on, she tells them, "another inmate hung themselves" (133). In response, "Sade made a short, low keening sound that seemed not to come from her mouth" (ibid). Miranda, in contrast, reflects on how, though she "had known the address of the detention centre before she had come [...] she had reimagined the building as white and similar to a hospital. But now she understood that that would be silly. A building of this size would not blend on the Western Heights if it was white" (134).

On the word "white," like a flipped coin, the narrative perspective twists back to 29 Barton Road, who continues "white was a colour that Anna Good was afraid to wear" (ibid) and then gives the reader Anna's backstory as described earlier, completely upending the scene at the detention centre. The narrative's sudden turn when Miranda is beginning to think about the detention centre as part of the infrastructure of her world, forcing the reader's attention back into the insular world of 29 Barton Road, once again emphasizes the claustrophobic and imprisoning structure of white domesticity; Oyeyemi's direct parallel of the two perspectives and sudden narrative shift, however,

makes overlooking the resonances between the direct and inescapable violence of being targeted by whiteness and the diffusive and voluntary violence (and power) of inhabiting it difficult for an even mildly attentive reader.

The entanglement of Anna's puppeteered xenophobia and Miranda's tentative complicity in the social reproduction of whiteness is made explicit on the level of content as well as form when Miranda is mistaken by a Kosovan student at her school, Tijana, for another white girl who stabbed her cousin. Tijana and her friends first pin Miranda down on the ground outside the school and demand she confess; she insists that they're mistaken and runs away. When Eliot hears about the incident, he tracks them down and has them show their cousin a picture of Miranda so as to clear her name. When the boy looks at the picture, he concedes, "Okay, well that's different. I don't know that girl. The girl I meant has short hair and smokes these weird red and white cigarettes, and she said her name was Anna. It's the same word backwards and forwards, the same word in a mirror, she said" (131). Based on the ghost-ridden character-system of the novel, the most obvious explanation is that he's talking about Anna Silver. Her description of her name as "the same backwards and forwards" can be read as a metaphor for the ideal inheritance structure of white supremacy, in which each generation is a direct reflection of the previous, absent any feral impurities. It also speaks to naming as a structure of social and familial determinism and how the obligation the Silver women feel to be 'good,' according to Anna's maiden name, is in fact one of their main sources of misery and dysfunction.

Miranda is shaken by the incident with Tijana but remains avoidant about confronting the violence of imperialism that haunts her family. She becomes obsessed with a mannequin she takes home from a department store to help her sew a coat for herself, since her father won't buy her any clothes that fit. She is attracted to the the mannequin, which the shopkeeper no longer felt comfortable using, because it

> "had no hair, no face, was very white under a film of grime, and had a fifties waist and a nonexistent bust which pleased Miranda because that way she would be able to see how the coat would look on her even as it was being made. At home, she put the mannequin in the bath and washed it with a flannel, from face to torso to heels, until it was completely clean. The mannequin was taller than her, but as she pulled it out of the bath by its hands, she felt as if she was its mother" (143).

Miranda's relationship to her mannequin traces the intricacies of the relationship between power, femininity, whiteness, and embodiment. Like Miranda, the mannequin is "very white," both in terms of skin color and disciplinary beauty expectations, with a "fifties waist" and childlike frailty. Miranda's draw to her in part speaks to her bewitchment by white femininity, while the care with which she bathes the mannequin and her sense of being its mother indicates a subconscious understanding of white femininity as a self-debilitating mode of subjectivity, a form of power that comes at a a price and from which she wishes to rescue the mannequin. Yet, she is still unable to draw the connections between her intuition of white patriarchy as an unsustainable form of worlding and the daily violences and dislocations experienced by the women of color in her life. After Miranda begins sewing the coat, "Sade's trips to the Immigration Removal

Centre no longer included Miranda, who forgot even to be apologetic, enthralled as she was by her sewing machine, her courtier-like hovering around a still white figure, her hands smoothing cloth, and her mouth full of pins" (156). She is too busy taking care of her mannequin doppelganger to remain even tangentially involved in addressing a refugee crisis in which she has been directly implicated.

Oyeyemi stresses the continued self-absorption of Miranda's worldview when she and Eliot both receive the results of their A-levels. In the hallway of their high school,

> "They opened each other's envelopes on results day, and Miranda felt that the rows of numbers and percentages that added up to three perfect A's beneath Eliot's name belonged to her [...] Eliot ripped Miranda's envelope open so hurriedly that a corner of the paper inside fell off. He cast a glance over the page, seemed to make some quick calculations, then whooped and lifted her off her feet [...] Eliot and Miranda walked out of school with their arms around each other [...] Tijana was nearby, with her mother. Tijana's mother was radiant with smiles, but Tijana's eyes were red and her wrists stuck out of her black sleeves with alarming scrawiness" (157-158).

The reader soon learns that Miranda and Tijana both did well on their exams and got into Cambridge; however, unlike Miranda and Eliot, Tijana has other concerns besides her results. Tijana's cousin, the one Miranda was suspected of stabbing, kills himself by drinking bleach over the summer. Tijana arrives at Cambridge grief-stricken and disillusioned with the white-dominated institution.

### Feral Curiosity: Exiting the Haunted House

The exam results scene is one of the concluding moments of Part One, "Curiouser," of *White is for Witching*; Part One makes up roughly two-thirds of the novel and is told exclusively from the Silver family perspective. Part Two, "And Curiouser," is told largely from the perspective of Ore, a British-Nigerian student Miranda meets in Part One, when their Cambridge interviews are scheduled for the same day. Ore had been convinced she would fail the interview and was about to skip it when Miranda convinced her to stay. At Cambridge, the two fall in love, but their relationship is vexed by Miranda's unstable eating habits and conviction that she is dead; the racial politics of Cambridge and their origin families; and their insecurity about their queerness, which both are newly discovering. The shift in narrative perspective from the Silvers to Ore, formerly a very minor character, two thirds of the way through the novel speaks to Oyeyemi's use of a feral narrative system to force her reader to reorient their understanding of the story being told and which characters matter. Just as she ends the exam results scene with a brief glimpse into Tijana's experience--- a glimpse just extensive enough to indicate to the reader that Miranda and Eliot's giddiness is not the full story--- her turn to Ore shakes the reader out of the bewitchment of the Silver family drama and the easy assumption that they are the main characters.

The division of the two parts into "Curiouser" and "And Curiouser," an explicit reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, recalls Anna's mirror metaphor for her name; however, instead of an ideal mirror that offers a direct reflection of the subject looking in, Part Two is more like a *Through the Looking Glass* mirror, which refracts the interpretative field of

Part One into something stranger and less easily understood through Western hermeneutics. The uneven length of Part Two relative to Part One emphasizes the imperial nature of whiteness and its cannibalistic tendency to totalize the discursive sphere despite the insular and reductive nature of its storytelling traditions. In a similar vein, Zakiyyah Jackson argues that often in Black feminist fiction, "black female figures [...] underscore the manner in which representation *performs* in worlds and in the (un)making of worlds rather than indexes *the* world *as such*" (92). Accordingly, the mirror structure of Part One and Part Two embodies the worlding function of storytelling through the differential animacy ecologies of mobility and debilitation within the worlding of patriarchal white supremacy and the otherwise worldings of queer Black femininity.

Fittingly, Ore and Miranda's relationship forms around storytelling. At Cambridge, Ore's comfort object from home is "a book of Caribbean legends 'for storytellers'" (170) gifted to her by her mom. Like Miranda, Ore's relationship to her family is complicated; she is the adopted child of two white, working-class parents and her mother exhibits insecurity about whether Ore resents her for not adequately incorporating her Nigerian heritage into her childhood. Ore in general is not resentful but does often feel out of place both within Cambridge and within her adopted white family. When Tijana, with whom she is also friendly, tells her she should join the Nigerian society on campus, Ore firmly rejects the suggestion, seemingly not wanting to Other herself further. She ends up spending most of her time studying or hanging out with Miranda. Through her studies, she begins to research her favorite Caribbean legend: the

story of “the soucouyant, the wicked old woman who flies from her body and at night consumes her food, the souls of others--- soul food!-- in a ball of flame. At dawn she returns to her body, which she has hidden in a safe place” (170). In the story, the soucouyant is killed by rubbing her abandoned body with salt and pepper, making it inhabitable. When Ore reads it to herself,

> “as always, the soucouyant seemed more lonely than bad. Maybe that was her trick, her ability to make it so you couldn’t decide if she was a monster. Still, I wondered if the salt and pepper were really necessary--- they seemed too cruel when it would be easier to despatch her by blowing out her flame before it grew, or by holding a mirror up to her wrinkled face and saying, ‘I don’t believe in you.’ But then, maybe ‘I don’t believe in you’ is the cruellest way to kill a monster” (171).

If we read soucouyant ontology as white femininity, as Part One encourages us to, Ore’s insight that a refusal to believe in the reality of the soucouyant may be the cruelest way to kill her speaks to Jackson’s work on the “aesthetico-ontology” (90) of humanist narrative worldings, in which the assumed superiority of liberal humanism safeguards the epistemological authority of whiteness by obscuring its grounding in long, unstable histories of imperial myth-making and the cannibalization of Black female onto-epistemologies. Jackson describes the importance of contemporary fiction that thus

> “contemplates the stakes and possibilities of a mode of non-self-identical onto-epistemology to emerge, some other relation of being to knowing to feeling to sensing than what organizes our antiblack present-- not based on re-presenting

> ‘the voice’ or ‘experience of the oppressed black woman’ or simply affirming subaltern knowledge in the form of African religion-- but by investigating the conditions of possibility for representation itself” (92-93).

It is thus less significant, though not unimportant, that Black female experience is represented in the novel through Ore’s perspective than that Ore’s interest in the cultural politics of storytelling opens up an explicit critique of the dysfunctional interpretive patterns that structures the haunted whiteness of the Silver women. Jackson and Oyeyemi’s interest in the ontological possibilities of radical aesthetics also mirrors Carter’s interest in the fairy tale as not only a fantastical literary form but also a critical epistemological form.

Ore’s academic research into the historiography of the soucouyant “explores the meaning of the old woman whose only interaction with other people was consumption. The soucouyant who is not content with her self. She is a double danger--- there is the danger of meeting her, and the danger of becoming her. Does the nightmare of her belong to everyone, or just me?” (179). Ore experiences the double danger of both meeting the soucouyant and becoming her when she finds her growing infatuation with Miranda makes her forget to eat and, like Miranda, begin rapidly losing weight; however, the dynamics of their relationship also point to a more complicated narrative than Miranda as the evil creature heartlessly sucking the life from Ore. For one, Miranda is equally infatuated with Ore; when she’s alone in her dorm room, daydreaming about kissing her, “momentarily, she wondered what the goodlady would have to say about that, then forced herself to knit meanings out of the words in the book before her. Don’t concentrate on

Ore. Don't witch her to death, Miranda" (196). Having fallen for Ore, Miranda lives in fear of her bewitched inheritance, recalling Carter's look into the ambivalent interiority of Nosferatu's daughter. One night, when they've fallen asleep together, Ore wakes up to find that

> "Miranda was on top of me, clinging to me, I knew she would be lost [...] 'I can't stay here,' she said, and got up, hurrying around the room, gathering things and dropping them. 'I'm to go home. The house wants me,' she cried. The moonlight made her look blue. It made her look as if she was dead" (203).

Throughout their relationship, Miranda warns Ore against being with her, claiming she is dead, a ghost; after the incident of being called home, she tells Ore, "I have a theory [...] there's this fireplace downstairs. I think I went down there for some reason. To hide, maybe. I thought it was all my fault my mother died. And I hit my head on the marble. My brain bled. I died," and that Ore "should run" (210) from her. Oyeyemi's characterization of Miranda as convinced she is dead extends Carter's characterization of her stock fairy tale characters as self-hating to comment on the oppressive and ambivalent inhabitation of power structures by gesturing towards not only Miranda's distaste for her heritage but also her sense that it threatens to take her out of the animate present and into a calcified past of ontological homogeneity.

Ore and Miranda's shared interest in fairy tales revolves around their entangled function as disciplinary morality tales and archives of feral animacies. Earlier, the two got into a discussion over the characterization of monsters. The conversation begins when Miranda asks Ore,

"'Please tell a story about a girl who gets away.' I would, [Ore thinks to herself] even if I had to adapt one, even if I had to make one up just for her.

'Gets away from what, though?'

'From her fairy godmother. From the happy ending that isn't really happy at all. Please have her get out and run off the page altogether, to somewhere secret where words like 'happy' and 'good' will never find her.'

'You don't want her to be happy and good?'

'I'm not sure what's really meant by happy and good. I would like her to be free. Now. Please begin.' I was silent. I couldn't think of a single story [Miranda] would want to hear" (190).

Ore ends up telling Miranda the story of "the girl who killed the soucouyant" (191) by rubbing her body with salt and pepper. Ore's version ends with the soucouyant

> "having no other option, [rushing] to join her flame with that of the rising sun. [...] 'Thank you,' [Miranda says.] 'That was just the thing.' 'The girl doesn't get away. It's not a story about her getting away. She was born free.' 'The soucouyant gets away though. Doesn't she count as a girl?' [Ore] drew back. 'No, she doesn't,' I said. 'She is a monster. She dies [...] All monsters deserve to die.' Miranda didn't say anything" (192).

Miranda and Ore's fixation on who is good and evil in the traditional story of the soucouyant needs to be read alongside their developing understanding of their sexuality. Miranda's insistence that the soucouyant should count as a girl speaks to her troubled relationship to white femininity and lifelong inability to perform the role of a good,

healthy daughter, the type who will grow up to be a good wife. She sees in the other than human soucouyant who is traditionally coded as female in the story the feral potential to be an otherwise sort of girl, a potentiality that is arguably more urgent for her at this point in the novel when she is realizing she is not only not traditionally feminine but also queer. In her study of the politics of happiness as a Western cultural imaginary, queer theorist Sara Ahmed notes that her critical view on the so-called universal right to pursue happiness began through feminist scholarship on the domestic, which questioned not only the assumption that all women want the white picket fence ideal but also the degree to which such a narrative is proliferated in the public sphere: an injunction to not only live a certain life but to also be made happy by that life that Lauren Berlant, in her coining of 'cruel optimism,' argues has only worsened under neoliberalism. Ahmed's argument centers on the way the social enforcement of affect consolidates the modern biopolitical disciplining of the body and its orientations towards the world. She notes how, "becoming civil converts the language of 'must' to the language of 'might' and eventually to the language of will and choice. We end up with a fantasy of a moral and middle-class subject as the one who is without habit, who will and can choose insofar as they are imagined as free from inclination" (35). The desire to be happy and to be made happy by certain objects has its roots in the object-choices of the state, but those coercive roots are often mystified by the naturalization of free will as inherent to the assumption of humanist subjectivity and its concomitant moral imperatives.

When Ore describes the girl who kills the soucouyant, the protagonist we are supposed to root for, as 'born free,' she is replicating the assumed accompaniment of

freedom to morality and goodness--- the assumption that for good people it is natural to be so. Miranda's counter-point that the soucouyant is actually the free one, but only after she escapes her body and joins the rising flame, is arguably a more perceptive understanding of what unconditional freedom under Western modernity would actually look like. As Miranda has experienced, to have a body is to be subject to not only its surveillance, exploitation, and violation in the material world but also subject to disciplinary social imaginaries of 'proper' embodiment. This knowledge would once again be more urgent following her first queer sexual experiences with Ore; the potentiality that their queerness, once made public, will alienate them from the elitist space of Cambridge and their insular nuclear families would make donning the immaterial subjectivity of fire intensely appealing.

In Alexander's Sacred framework of embodiment, she, like Ahmed, describes her research as beginning in part with feminist work on the biopolitics of the domestic, in both the failure of Western feminism in addressing the domestic as a zone of imperialism and the successes of women of color coalitions in outlining the entanglement of gendered, racialized, classed, and imperial control over the (in)visibility of domestic subjugation. She gained much of her insight into the entanglement of domestic and biopolitical state control following the enactment of the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act in the Bahamas, which proceeded the demands of feminist activists that the state legally recognize and offer protection from domestic violence. In her recountings of the legal hearings that followed, Alexander shows how the judicial codification of domestic violence in fact worked more to consolidate the state's prioritization of

patriarchal and heterosexual reproductive modes than to make the home a safer space for feminized subjects. She focuses on the ways in which the sudden criminalization of heterosexual sexual and intimate acts (battery, rape etc) and its implicit acknowledgement that heterosexuality can in fact be 'wrong' and 'unnatural' forced lawmakers to confront the contradiction in how homosexuality had formerly been positioned as *the* space of criminal and unnatural intimacies. How could--- logically, objectively, as the law claimed to do--- homosexual parliamentarians who had consensual relationships be judged by the same condemnatory moral heuristic as heterosexual parliamentarians found guilty of rape, for instance? She concludes that, "the normalization of violent sex inside and outside of the family had *a profound existential dilemma.* Something had gone terribly amiss in the human organization of things" (31, emphasis mine). She continues,

> "the ideological fragmentation within the legal text [made] [heterosexual] forms of violence appear as if they were either idiosyncratic or individually imagined [...] for the legal discourse is conducted narrowly, as if incest and rape were only to be understood as sins against God or crimes against man, or if they primarily took place on the outside, as if there were no ideological and material links between state/parliamentary patriarchy and domestic patriarchy, for instance, and as if homosexuality could only be imagined as residing at the pinnacle of perverted heterosexualized violence. Ultimately, this narrow content resides within the rhetorical form prescribed within the law" (40)

The discursive structure of the law's grounding in abstraction and neutrality allowed it "to provide a 'civilized,' presumably neutral, objective mode of escape from a major

ontological conundrum" (43). Instead of staying with and pondering the contradictions inherent to the laws they were enacting, whenever the issue of newfound heterosexual villainy rubbed up against the formerly taken-for-granted criminality of homosexuality, parliamentarians retreated to reified political discourses, such as the degree to which the government had the right to regulate the private sphere, without any attention to the degree to which the privatization and heterosexualization of reproductive politics was the real problem all along.

It is not only that queer bodies are punished for public displays of their sexuality but also that queer potentiality has been made to bear the discursive weight of depravity and criminality in order to protect the moral purity of heterosexuality. When Ore and Miranda discuss the ostensibly impractical concern of whether or not the soucouyant is a monster in the midst of their burgeoning love affair, they are actually finding a language for how to deconstruct the cultural imagination of monstrosity. The imaginaries of fairy tales are about animating and materializing the unseen and unspoken, such as the queer spirit of rebellion that escapes from a punished body into a skybound flame. Mel Chen, in their study of animacy as the overlooked feral dimension of language, has argued that the political danger of language resides in its connotative and referential nature, through which a speaker can further animate the abjection of queerness without explicitly mentioning it, mystifying intentionality and purpose (*Animacies* 34). Someone could call an acquaintance a pansy, for instance, in explicit reference to their perceived cowardice but in function consolidating the cultural imagination of queerness as indicative of degraded character. Miranda's defense of the soucouyant can be traced to her

understanding of the double-edged sword of storytelling; as described earlier, her family often mocks or dismisses her draw towards the fantastic while they themselves mystify the obvious truths of their family's dysfunctional grounding in internalized patriarchy and xenophobia through the dominant British rhetorics of politeness and reason and their implicit dismissal of rage and confrontation.

However, there is also something lacking from Miranda's analysis, if we return to the entanglement of soucouyant ontology and white femininity, which also in part explains Ore's hesitancy to grant the soucouyant a redemptive reading. Miranda's inability to recognize that her continual insistence that she is dead and her self-destructive eating habits are placing a debilitating caretaking burden on Ore speaks to the inability of white femininity to sustain itself without immiserating others while simultaneously claiming victimhood all for itself. The soucouyant may be miserable in her body but she is still responsible for all the lives she consumed to feed it. Moreover, the traditional version of the soucouyant story represents one of Ore's few connections to her culture, which she may be understandably reluctant to cede to Miranda.

During Winter Break, Ore goes home, where the reader follows her struggles with her white British nationalist family members. At one point, Ore's cousins are reading leaflets posted around town by a local nationalist party in the family room after dinner. "Do you know how many immigrants are living in the UK at present," her cousin Sean reads out loud, "for the fifth, sixth or seventh time. The leaflet featured clip art of a bulldog and a British flag on it" (231). Ore stays out of the political conversation, but

when she tells them that her friend from college has invited her to stay with her in Dover, her other cousin, Adam responds,

> "Dover is a fucking mess. Bare refugees pissing off the locals. A short piece ago some Kosovan brer and his landlady got stoned. On the actual doorstep of the landlady's house! That's dark man. You'd better take care of yourself in Dover, or they'll fucking bury ya. You can take my dog down there if you'd like" (233).

Adam's offer to Ore to take his dog for protection speaks to his hypocrisy in presuming to care about the welfare of his adopted family member of color, given that he was promoting the xenophobic discourse that implicitly consolidates anti-Blackness minutes before; additionally, though, Ore's family's conversation about immigration also mirrors Eliot and Miranda's dinner table conversation in Part One. That the two white families, notably vocalized through their male adolescent sons, take opposite sides of the issue---on the one side performative liberalism and on the other side performative nationalism illustrates Frank Wilderson's argument that whiteness is ontological and not political--meaning that white subjects cannot choose the degree to which they are invested in its violences-- in how

> "the imaginative labor of White radicalism and White political cinema is animated by the same ensemble of questions and the same structure of feeling that animates White supremacy. Which is to say that while the men and women in blue, with guns and jailers' keys, appear to be White supremacy's front line of violence against Blacks, they are merely its reserves, called on only when needed to augment White radicalism's always already ongoing patrol of a zone more

> sacred than the streets: the zone of White ethical dilemmas, of civil society at every scale, from the White body, to the White household, through the public sphere on up to the nation" (131).

The violent foundations of whiteness are thus not physical brutality but the presumption of civility that pivotally turns on a humanist structure of worlding. Oyeyemi's paralleling of the two family debates and the similarity of their outcomes--- white complacency and inaction--- brings home *White is For Witching*'s overall critique of the epistemological devaluation of folklore and non-Western spiritualities as less about their supposed lack of analytical cogency than about the threat they pose as exorcists of white civility and its discursive witchery. The Silver women's continued bewitchment and complicity in British imperialism despite their gradual political progressivism illustrates not only the self-deluding nature of modern liberalism but also its increasing desperation to mystify the racial violences that feed it via the performance of a diplomatic and cosmopolitan civility.

Ore agrees to visit Miranda in Dover; however, she finds herself in the hands of malevolent forces in 29 Barton Road and Miranda's increasingly strange and unstable behavior. When she takes a shower, she is confronted by

> "huge white towels, hotel towels, draped over the towel rack and I took one and dried myself, keeping my eyes on my face. The towel the girl in the mirror was drying herself with-- I frowned and looked at my towel. Where it had touched me it was striped with
>
> black liquid, as dense as paint

(don't scream)

there were shreds of hard skin it. There was hair suspended in it

'The black's coming off,' someone outside the bathroom door commented. Then

They whistled 'Rule Britannia!' and laughed

*Bri-tons never-never-never, shall be slaves*" (246-247).

Oyeyemi's framing of the "huge white" hotel towels--- implying their cleanliness and ostensible luxury--- as complicit in the ghosts whistling "Rule Britannia!" provides a fictional illustration of Ahmed's perception that "feminist archives are full of scenes of domesticity in which domestic objects, happy objects, become alien, even menacing" (77). In addition to the liberal feminist point that the domestic is a place of grueling labor and social alienation for most women, Oyeyemi uses the towels and the "shreds of hard skin" impeded in them to underline the racialization of the middle-class domestic home as an epistemic infrastructure dependent on the continual performance of white civility that mystifies its origins in the undoing of Black families and especially the ungendering of Black mothers, as I traced in the previous chapter and will take up more extensively in chapter four. Oyeyemi breaks through this discursive bewitchment through 29 Barton Road's narration, which names that which is supposed to remain implicit--- "the black's coming off"--- and cannot maintain an even, civilized tone. The house betrays the affective investments of whiteness because of the 'madness' caused by its wartime traumas but misdirects them at the original red herring of World War II, the threat of Otherness, instead of the imperialist structure of worlding it still believes will protect it, mistaking patronage for freedom.

Ore ends up escaping 29 Barton Road with Sade's help but is unable to save Miranda. Realizing she needs to leave, she takes an elevator in the home known for taking unwanted guests of color to fantastic (and often deadly) places. She winds up in a foyer "flooded with people who stared and said nothing. Their eyes were perfect circles [...] They were alabaster white, every one of them" (264-265). 29 Barton Road's collection of white people who "[stare] and [say] nothing" underlines white civility's demand for silence and obedience that has haunted the rebellious Silver women. When Ore pushes past them, she finds Miranda sitting in the corner of the room. She explains:

> "I didn't speak to her. If I was going to help her I shouldn't speak to her. I knelt beside her and rested my hands on her head. She tensed, and I cracked her open like a bad nut with a glutinous shell. She split, and cleanly, from head to toe. There was another girl inside her, the girl from the photograph, all long straight hair and pretty pearlescence. This other girl wailed. "No, no, why did you do this? Put me back in.' She gathered the halves of her shed skin and tried to fit them back together across herself. I fell down and watched, amazed, from where I sat" (265-266).

Ore understands that if she is going to save Miranda she can't speak to her because she has gleaned that the witchery of whiteness is grounded in discursive mystification and the entrapment of named lineages. However, by that point, Miranda is convinced that if she is a good girl and obeys the house her family will help her and Ore; though Ore grants Miranda's supposed lifelong wish of escaping her body and its demands, she ultimately cannot let go of the false security of her family inheritance because it is what she knows.

When Ore flees the room, she falls through a trapdoor but is caught by a white net Sade built to rescue her from the Silvers. When Miranda flees the room and falls through the same door,

> "the house caught her. She had thought she would find the goodlady below, or Lily, or Jennifer, or her GrandAnna, but there was no one there but her. In trapdoor-room her lungs knocked against her stomach and she lay down on the white net that had saved Ore but would not save her. Two tiny moons flew up her throat. She squeezed them, one in each hand, until they were two silver kidneys. Acid seeped through her" (276).

Miranda finally has to take responsibility for her passivity in the face of an inheritance of violence: "there was no one there but her" (276). After all, the ghosts of her mothers were not really themselves but puppets for centuries of white fear. Oyeyemi's larger critique, though, is directed at the white epistemological structures that discipline and obscure feral

knowledges of worlding for new and questioning subjects. At the ostensible end of Miranda's life, "two tiny moons flew up her throat," indicating that the fantastical form of perception that led to her dismissal as a knowledgeable subject within her family was in fact what was going on in her own body.

The connection between knowledge and freedom is also made clear by Sade's final appearance in the novel. At the end of the chapter in which Ore is rescued, a chapter told almost entirely from her perspective, the last few sentences turn to Sade as she leaves the Silvers behind, her final job completed:

> “Miranda followed me to the train station. I didn’t know it until the conductor blew his whistle and I looked out of the window--- as a reflex, I always do this, the whistle blows and I check the window--- and I saw the tall girl in black, swaying on the platform as if her newly stitched knees were failing her. *That’s all I know*. Now I have said all I know” (267, emphasis mine).

Shortly after Sade’s exit, Miranda falls and is eaten by the house, so Sade is inferrably getting a glance of Miranda on the cusp of her death and final subsumption into the cannibalistic appetite of Western imperialism. Her perception of Miranda as swaying on “failing” and “newly stitched” knees gestures towards her knowledge of the haunted Silver family home as an unsustainable and debilitating ecosystem in which to live and grow. The brevity of her final turn in the narrative and her decisive statement that “That’s all I know. Now I have said all I know” can be read as declining further participation in the Silver family narrative in the knowledge that there are other and better stories to give life to.

Finally and briefly, I’d like to return to the novel’s prologue, which takes place after the ending (i.e. Miranda’s disappearance) and is led by a series of questions to which the most prominent narrators in the novel provide answers. To the question, “Where is Miranda,” Ore answers, “in Dover. In the ground beneath her mother’s house [...] Does she remember me at all I miss her I miss the way her eyes are the same shade of grey no matter the strength or weakness of the light” (1). Eliot answers, “Just gone. We’d had an argument [...] She looked in my direction but she couldn’t seem to focus on me. She was the thinnest I’d ever seen her [...] There was an odd smell to her, heavy and

thick. It was clear to me that she was slipping again, down a new slide" (2). 29 Barton Road answers,

> "Miranda is at *home* (homesick, home *sick*) Miranda can't come in today Miranda has a *condition* called pica she has eaten a great deal of chalk--- she really can't help herself--- she has been very ill--- ***Miranda has pica she can't come in*** today, she is stretched out inside a wall she is feasting on plaster she has pica" (3).

The three narrators' answers illustrate different epistemological value systems that differ in more important ways than just their level of correctness. Miranda, eaten by the house, is arguably gone, in Dover, and at home all at once. However, while the question prompts Ore to reflect on her love for Miranda and her specificity as a person ("her eyes are the same shade of grey no matter the strength or weakness of the light") apart from dominant social value systems (i.e. she's thin or smart), Eliot effectively blames Miranda for her disappearance ("she was slipping again, down a new slide"). 29 Barton Road, the culprit behind Miranda's disappearance, does a similar rhetorical move by blaming Miranda's eating disorder for her inability to participate in the outside world but with its characteristic difficulty at maintaining a civilized pattern of speech.

The prologue's polyvocality sets up the ethical stakes of storytelling the rest of the novel will unpack. Only one narrator provides genuine care for Miranda and her answer is not significant or vitalizing for its literalism, though Ore does provide accurate information as to Miranda's spatial whereabouts. The point is that language, whether steeped in the authoritative cloak of legalese or in the relative freedom of the fantastic, does more than just describe: based on the cultural ecology in which it circulates, it gives,

restricts, and/or takes life. The modern Western infantilization and feminization of fantasy, for one, has meant the suffocating effects of both material rationalization and discursive rationalism continue to debilitate and marginalize the lives and imaginations of patronized subjects. Such inhibition of feral possibility is framed as the cost of epistemological advancement rather than the violence of empire. And yet, there remain ways to imagine otherwise.

In *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi uses fairy tale and folklore trappings to highlight the limits of Western epistemologies. She parallels the insular and claustrophobic domestic life of a white, British family to the insular and claustrophobic nature of their storytelling patterns. Beyond her direct references to folklore, Oyeyemi's use of the haunted house trope to critique of the worlding stakes of storytelling and the spiritual internalization of patriarchal imperialism illustrates the ways in which the marginalization of fairy tales as a form of literary criticism and the marginalization of domesticity as an optic for deconstructing state power stem not from their relative epistemological value but from the naturalization of imperial patriarchal epistemologies. Her turn to the fantastic on the level of form and her characterization of a Yoruban Black woman and a British-Nigerian adoptee as the only ones able to break through the discursive witchery of the Silver family on the level of plot outline Black and transnational feminist epistemologies as key to decolonizing contemporary epistemic infrastructures. My analysis draws from Oyeyemi to highlight the magical animacy systems of fairy tales and folklore as specifically feral epistemes, with all the feminist, queer, and decolonial potential that entails. In the second half of this dissertation, I turn to

speculative and experimental approaches to the life writing genre to consider how dispossessed subjects have played with the feral animacy of selfhood through a genre traditionally bound to normative understandings of subjectivity and legibility.

## Chapter Four

## Vocabularies of Escape: Testimony and Black Feminist Fugitivity in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Spill*

In previous chapters, I've considered the influence of life experience on fiction writers' feral approaches to narrative form and character-development. The remaining chapters now turn directly to the genre of life writing in order to deconstruct the modern Western domestication of voice and testimony through a genre historically burdened by moralized expectations of authorial transparency. As a subset of nonfiction, life writings are expected to be grounded in 'reality,' by which a Western reader typically means events, interactions, and feelings actually experienced by the author: things that did not occur solely in the imagination. Life writing and autobiography scholars have in turn been at pains to point out the subjective and cultural nature of 'reality' as it is used as a shorthand for believability. The perception of what is real or what could conceivably *be* real depends on the limited horizons of dominant epistemic infrastructures, which means that the experiences of non-normative subjects are likely to be dismissed as unreal (Stremlau, Gilmore, Aubry). Moreover, the Western understanding of reality as it is applied to life writing relies on a hermeneutic of individualism that many non-Western cultures do not recognize as foundational to or necessary for the truthful narration of life experience (Sands). Decolonial autobiography scholars argue that the scholarly fixation on the reality question speaks most immediately to the Western colonization of autobiography studies as a discipline (Berger). For the following three chapters, I explicitly use the term 'life writing' to encompass the autobiographical texts under

consideration, as life writing scholars tend to more readily acknowledge the epistemological and hermeneutic messiness of the genre, even as life writing scholarship is often stalled by many of the same repetitive concerns over truth and individual representation as autobiography studies (Riley and Pearce, Henke).

My approach to life writing studies is most intimate with Leigh Gilmore's. Gilmore's work focuses on the entanglement between the contemporary U.S. life writing market (particularly the post-1980s memoir boom) and the global consolidation of neoliberalism, which she argues works to suppress accurate firsthand accounts of state violence and encourage the Western world's hypnosis by cruel optimism in the form of the trauma to redemption narrative arc (Gilmore).[12] As with decolonial autobiography scholarship, Gilmore locates the most potential for harm within the Western cultural insistence on autobiographical transparency and individuality. She points to global reactions to K'iche' Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú's personal, book-length testimony to the genocidal violences perpetuated against indigenous Guatemalans during the Guatemalan Civil War. When Menchú first published her testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in 1983, it was widely applauded as a brave and important work of activism; she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 (Gilmore 63). However, in 1999, white American anthropologist David Stoll published a book-length fact-check of Menchú's testimony, titled *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (ibid). Stoll's criticism's of Menchú and the accuracy of her testimony focused on arguably

[12] As referenced briefly in the introduction, Lauren Berlant developed the concept of cruel optimism to describe how subjects under neoliberalism remain invested in state structures of slow violence and debilitation through a combination of the sunken cost fallacy and a form of magical thinking supported by a stream of feel-good narratives circulated within the public sphere whose optimism is at odds with the day-to-day experience of most contemporary Western subjects.

besides-the-point details, such as whether she was actually present at the scene of her brother's murder and her level of education, rather than the larger fact of mass violence against indigenous Guatemalans to which she was most directly testifying (Rohter). Gilmore reads Stoll's attack on Menchú and the global scandal that followed--- many Western critics demanded Menchú's Nobel be revoked--- as evidencing how the reality culture that pervades autobiography studies serves less as an agent of truth than as a way of discounting truths that are inconvenient to dominant consumer publics.

Gilmore's work reorients life writing studies away from the prevailing understanding of publicized personal narratives as facilitating a privatized information-exchange between an individual reader and an individual author towards an understanding of life writings as circulating within and amongst national and globalized publics with the power to exact or refuse justice on the level of the state. Her reorientation proceeds from the understanding that:

> Life writing [...] represents another jurisdiction, or forum of judgment. Both the text itself and the public sphere it enters can be understood as jurisdictions; indeed, thinking of the public sphere in this way elucidates the mechanisms of judgment that pervade it, the contest of authorities that can arise around oppositional texts, and the levering forward of ethics, truth telling, and scandal as the language through which such extrajudicial 'trials' unfold. Thinking of life narrative as a jurisdiction also helps to clarify the kind of agency a text can exert and the quasi-legal authority it possesses for its advocates and detractors (77).

Gilmore's formulation of life writing as juridical in function simultaneously underlines the stakes of public attitudes towards life writing and demystifies the dominant positioning of the judicial system as a sanctimonious space untouched by the crassness of the outside world and its self-motivated opinions. In pointing out how life writing (and all other published writing for that matter) enters a "forum of judgment" whose contours are determined by cultural understandings of what counts as ethical, truthful, or scandalous, Gilmore elucidates how the discursive structuring and public reception of life writings are intimate with the discursive structuring and public reception of legal judgments. Indeed, much of Gilmore's scholarship draws parallels between patriarchal and racist legal judgments, such as the dismissal of Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas, and paternalistic and dismissive responses to life writings by white women and people of color (Gilmore 28).

Her work also usefully locates how the affect-based intuitions of racist and patriarchal mentalities are often passed off as reasonable doubt through rhetorical sleights of hand. For instance, in considering the most common reasons given for dismissing women's testimonies of sexual violence, she points out that, "the locution 'no one knows what really happened' is less a position of reasoned and reasonable skepticism than an active, reflexive, and ultimately political feeling that women cannot be trusted to say what harm has befallen them" (142). Gilmore thus extends the stakes of life writing scholarship beyond the subjective nature of truth to the discursive and affective dimensions of state power. Building on Gilmore, my work focuses on how life writing, and specifically the tension between a *life* and a *writing*, provides a productively messy

site for navigating the internalization of domesticating state epistemologies while also giving voice to the feral knowledges that subsist in spite of the state's top-down domestication efforts.

Informed by Hortense Spillers' concept of "interior intersubjectivity" (discussed in Chapter Two) and Jacqui Alexander's concept of "collectivized self-possession," (discussed in Chapter Three) I consider how a life writing text's inability to fully contain a life and life's inability to fully speak itself resonates with the messy entanglements between the private interiority of the self and the social and nosy nature of surrounding publics. Life writing provides a pathway through which a writer can attempt to know themself better, and yet, parts of their 'self' will remain opaque, or may simply be something that reading publics will punish the writer for forcing them to know (such as the writer's queerness or experience being violated by a beloved community member). The knowledges offered by a given piece of life writing are thus always undercut by the everyday dance between self-expression and safety, privacy and sociality, self-awareness and self-unknowability, and the sociomaterial stakes of specific identity claims within a given political atmosphere. The two life writing texts I turn to as case studies in this chapter, Carmen Maria Machado's 2019 memoir *In the Dream House* and Alexis Pauline Gumbs' 2016 poetry collection *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, are both testimonies to domestic abuse that center explicitly on the narrator's simultaneous domestication by the discursive limits of the self-as-text and the epistemic infrastructures of national and cultural communities. I choose to focus on testimonies of domestic abuse specifically for the ways in which they foreground multiple technologies of

domestication taken up in previous chapters, such as the nuclear family, heteropatriarchal reproductive cultures, and the racialization of domesticity, as well as for how public testimonies to domestic abuse by definition trouble the private-public binary supposed to protect the sanctity of the family home. To demand the public recognize domestic abuse is itself a feral act insofar as it requires venturing outside the home. Machado and Gumbs' mutual distrust of state avenues of recognition in turn implicates the structure of the national family as an equally violent agent of domestication.

*In the Dream House* recounts Machado's experience in an abusive, queer relationship and how her recognition of the relationship as abusive was stalled by the lack of public recognition of queer domestic abuse, as well as her identity as a fat, queer woman of color whose understanding of herself as an unreliable narrator was consolidated by the Western epistemic infrastructures of fatphobia, homophobia, and patriarchy. Each chapter title of *In the Dream House* situates the memoir as a different genre, such as "*Dream House* as Romance Novel." Each genre, many of which are fantastic in nature, provides a different way to understand the experience of being and staying in an abusive relationship in a culturally recognizable form, often with reference to popular tv shows and movies. The experimental and fantastic chapters are also interspersed with more traditional retellings of scenes from the relationship as well as a detailed history of the slow and woefully incomplete recognition of queer domestic abuse within the U.S. legal system. *In the Dream House*'s mirror house of genres performs Machado's own insecurities and struggle to recognize the truth of her situation while also critiquing the epistemic infrastructures and national institutions of care and justice

available to her. If the reader (and the state) cannot recognize a queer woman as a possible victim of domestic abuse, perhaps they will sympathize with her situation as illustrated through an episode of *Star Trek*. *In the Dream House* embodies both the performative labor required of abuse victims as well as a deep, underlying rage over the debilitating nature of that requirement, while the moments of wildness and ferality that haunt the text's narrative edges embody the vitalizing and opaque nature of feral epistemologies.

*Spill* similarly documents the difficulty of both logistically and psychologically extracting oneself from an abusive relationship; however, *Spill* is not strictly a personal memoir. Most commonly classified as either feminist theory or poetry by booksellers, *Spill* is generically ambiguous. On the level of structure, it follows the stanza form of poetry. On the level of narrative, it ostensibly follows a single protagonist leaving an abusive and suffocating marriage, though the protagonist is never identified by name or visual features. Most of what the reader learns of her has to do with her community belongings; she is a Black American woman struggling at once against the intergenerational history of her mother, grandmother, and female ancestors suppressing their desires to support their family and against the Black American community's centuries-long history of structural disenfranchisement from the Middle Passage onwards.

Gumbs' representation of domestic abuse, like Machado's, thus centers on the structural roots of domestic identity forms and relational structures; however, her approach to the interiority/exteriority question is quite different and also exemplifies why I choose to position *Spill* as life writing. Gumbs uses the ambiguously autobiographical

nature of poetry to resist the identitarian approaches to selfhood that have historically worked to surveille Black women and restrict their mobility. Poetry, more so than fiction, is often explicitly about the writer's life experiences insofar as it does not create new characters to hide the self behind, but, because of its structural grounding in the metaphoric, is rarely read as autobiographical. Many sections in *Spill* focus on the violence of naming as a form of control, which is in turn connected to the claustrophobic nature of the nuclear family as a site of self-discovery: realities that haunted Miranda in the previous chapter. Fugitivity from being named and domesticated becomes the protagonist's only way out. I locate the testimonial dimension of *Spill* within Gumbs' tracings of the historical domestication of Black American women and the feral vitality of Black female fugitivity. *Spill* is both more and less than a testimony to an individual instance of domestic abuse. In response to the historical use of discursive homogenization as a tool of domestication (all Black people etc.), Gumbs prioritizes the idiosyncratic individuality of her protagonist through an interior-driven narrative; however, she also refuses to settle her protagonist's experience of domestic abuse within a spatiotemporal context in order to assert Black women's experience of domestic confinement as endemic to American culture rather than specific to one person.

While Machado in some ways relies on a multi-genre format to make the crushing reality of domestic abuse as undeniable as possible, Gumbs, equally disillusioned with institutional structures of recognition, cares more about preserving the feral vitality of the protagonist beyond the boundaries of the text than about convincing a potentially dubious reader that patriarchy and racism are real. There are different advantages to the two

approaches. Machado provides a deeply incisive perspective on queer domestic abuse from multiple cultural lenses, and the strategic way in which she frames her personal difficulties recognizing direct acts of interpersonal violence as abuse condemns individualistic frameworks of abuse that work to blame victims for their structurally determined susceptibility to interpersonal violence and domination. I in turn read her testimony through feminist scholarship on the national cultures that inform situations of domestic abuse, as well as postcolonial scholarship on the insufficiency of state structures of recognition and justice for substantially addressing state violence against disenfranchised subjects. I do so specifically to push against understandings of violence within the domestic as isolated from global ecologies of state violence.

Gumbs' turn to authorial and testimonial fugitivity in turn necessitates engagement with Black feminist scholarship on fugitivity (where the concept originated and developed), as well as African diasporic scholarship on building a sense of self after the violence of mass displacement. I develop Gumbs' framework of fugitive selfhood alongside my own framework of ferality, which I argue complements the scrappy, survivalist stance of the fugitive with a focus on opacity as the grounds of ethical relationality and witness. My readings of *In the Dream House* and *Spill*'s struggles with and against testimony ultimately question the utility of legibility as a starting point for community restructuring in the wake of violence, given that the recurring issue with the recognition and address of structural harm has not been the clarity of the testifying speaker but the willingness of dominant audiences to listen to stories that question the

ethics of their continued power. In consequence, the apparent nihilism of the feral begins to look something like hope.

### Queering Testimony in *In the Dream House*

*In the Dream House* opens its deconstruction of representational politics with a critique of the archive. Machado cites Saidiya Hartman's groundbreaking essay, "Venus in Two Acts," which considers the silences implicit to archives of slavery, to set up her exploration of archives as technologies of invisibilization. She focuses specifically on how archives of domestic abuse have invisibilized queer people and other marginalized subjects whose experiences do not fit the character tropes of a physically intimidating husband and a fragile, cowering wife. She asserts that, "as we consider the forms intimate violence takes today, each new concept--- the male victim, the female perpetrator, queer abusers, and the queer abused-- reveals itself as another ghost that has always been here, haunting the ruler's house" (5). Machado's framing of disavowed victimizing and victimized subjectivity forms as ghosts within a ruler's house reinforces the importance of Carter's nuanced depictions of gendered power relations to undoing imperial epistemic infrastructures. One of the main conundrums haunting *Dream House* in turn becomes how a ghost makes itself visible to a culture whose denial of its specters is foundational to its power.

In his influential take on the archival impulse, Derrida traces the origins of the concept of an archive to a powerful, private home, not unlike the one Machado finds herself trapped in throughout *Dream House*. The Greek term, *arkheion*, from which "archive" originates, represented the home of the *archons*, or Greek magistrates---

powerful citizens seen as embodying the brute force of the law. Official documents were stored at the *arkheion,* and *archons* were granted the power of interpretation, the final say, over the document. *Archons* were thus not merely the physical guardians of legal documents but the judges of their meaning and its bearing on the politics of the public sphere. Derrida describes how, "it thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret" (*Archive Fever* 10). The Greek *domiciliation* of legal documents points to the entanglement of the domestic sphere with the legal sphere often overlooked within modern analyses of Western law but that, as Agamben's analysis of the paternal roots of legal power showed us in chapter two, remains foundational to determining which subjects are granted judicial and hermeneutic power in and outside the courtroom. Moreover, Derrida's description of the allocation of documents to the *arkheion* as a "house arrest" imbues the archival process with an aura of carcerality, or a state-enforced state of immobility, that foreshadows the cultures of policing, from social services to neighborhood watch, that will come to define both the contemporary family home and movement outside of it. His perception that the "passage from the private to the public" does not always mean "the secret to the nonsecret" highlights the mystifying function of legal interpretation--- also a point of focus for Agamben--- in which the logical justifications for a given legal interpretation are secondary to the perceived strength of a judge's claim to power.

Machado's figuration of the archive as a haunted house brings together Derrida's critique of the archive and his framework of hauntology, meaning the ways in which the seeming stability of a given identity is always haunted by that which it defines itself against (*Specters of Marx*). Derrida develops hauntology in response to Western philosophies that presuppose a conceptual immanence to ontological frameworks: a self-coherence that, from a deconstructionist perspective, entities born in discourse always already lack. Machado's sociopolitical critique of archives as functioning not to preserve and build community knowledges but to spotlight some communities and invisibilize others within the public imagination extends Derrida's theorization of hauntology as speaking to not only how a given personal identity is haunted by that which it denies but also how privileged subjects (contemporary *archons* if you will) are haunted by the marginalized subjects off of whom their power feeds.

The differential allocation of reality, in which some subjects are more 'real' than others under the *domiciliation* of Western law, structures Machado's relationship with her abuser. Machado's ex is a skinny, blonde, able-bodied, white woman who comes from a monied, if emotionally dysfunctional, family. She and Machado met in their early twenties, when they were both applying to graduate school. At the time, Machado had little experience in relationships and was recovering from an hyper-Christian childhood in which she was seduced and emotionally exploited by a youth pastor who was eventually expelled from the church for sexual abuse. Machado was thus used to being a specter within a rigidly authoritative social setting and finding refuge in narcissistic and powerful community members. When she first meets her ex, it feels like she first felt in her

relationship with the pastor: as if she was being rescued from her comparatively unglamorous self. The problem is less that Machado inaccurately reads her various abusers as good people than that, within her structural situation of relative immobility and disempowerment, she intuits and is attracted to their access to social power and freedom of expression. Late in *Dream House*, when Machado is struggling to extricate herself from her relationship, she thinks about a

> quote from Kahlil Gibran […] 'If your heart is a volcano how shall you expect flowers to bloom in your hands?' [...] I know what he's saying, but even rhetorically he is making the exact wrong point. The fact is, people settle near volcanoes because the resulting soil is extraordinary, dense with nutrients from the ash. In this dangerous place their fruit is sweeter, their crops taller, their flowers more radiant, their yield more bountiful. The truth is, there is no better place to live than in the shadow of a beautiful, furious mountain" (189).

Of course, for Machado, the "beautiful, furious mountain" is her ex. Machado's re-reading of Gibran's volcano challenges his implicit blaming of an individual for not being able to love properly--- to soften their volcanic hearts--- through a turn to the reality of resource precarity for hungry creatures. Sure, the volcano can kill anyone who settles near it, but a person starved of nutrients will eventually die anyway. In a culture that deprives queer people, and especially fat, queer women of color, proper care and space for not just being a 'good citizen' but for being messy and alive, staying with a woman who has access to public mobility is a survival tactic, if one that is unsustainable in the longterm.   Machado's interest in ecosystems and other-than-human frameworks of

life is threaded throughout *Dream House,* providing a form of knowing the self and its place outside of humanist structures of moralization and individualism. Early on, she describes how,

> Our bodies are ecosystems, and they shed and replace and repair until we die. And when we die, our bodies feed the hungry earth, our cells becoming part of other cells, and in the world of the living, where we used to be, people kiss and hold hands and fall in love and fuck and laugh and cry and hurt others and nurse broken hearts and start wars and pull sleeping children out of car seats and shout at each other. If you could harness that energy--- that constant, roving hunger--- you could do wonders with it. You could push the earth inch by inch through the cosmos until it collided heart-first with the sun (13).

Through the metaphor of "the hungry earth" and its indifferent subsumption of dead human lives, some of whom may have started wars or shouted at each other, Machado makes clear that in relaying her experience of interpersonal abuse to a larger audience she is not advocating for a romanticized or moralized view of sexuality, romance, or other forms of relationality, in which no one is ever hurt and everyone is happy. Historically, romanticizing and/or moralizing sexuality and intimate relationships has served to consolidate the epistemic infrastructures of heteronormativity that Machado rightly holds accountability for invisibilizing and criminalizing queer life (Ahmed, Berlant). She instead seeks a way out of her abusive relationship and its psychological entrapment without relying on the disingenuousness, implicit victim-blaming, and forced conformity

to a narrative of redemption that characterizes the cult of Western individualism and cruel optimism.

Machado's continual attention to the ecological implications of social power refutes individualistic frameworks of domestic abuse that obsess over why it is so hard for a victim to leave, as if the structural construction of female dependency were an eternal mystery. In her book, *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* queer theorist Sarah Schulman traces the consequences of the contemporary cultural vocabulary surrounding abuse. She grounds her study, which builds on her experience in grassroots domestic violence and queer support organizations, in the continued escalation of police violence against Black people, as well as the escalation of Israeli state violence against occupied Palestinians. Given her topic of focus, her grounding case studies may seem unusual, but her perspective on domestic violence centers contemporary state structures of biopolitical debilitation, and specifically the epistemic infrastructures that enable them. For example, she points to how, in the state murder of Eric Garner, in which Garner repeatedly told the officer strangling him that he couldn't breathe, "policemen looked at *nothing*, the complete absence of threat, and there they saw threat gross enough to justify murder. Nothing happened, but these people with power saw *abuse*" (16). Garner's state of utter abjection served as a blank slate for the police's paranoid projections of unruly Otherness against which they are trained to see themselves at war. Schumann parallels the cycle of racialized misperception and projection evident in US police brutality to Israeli's occupation of the Gaza Strip, in which Gaza responded to the unrelenting terror of the

Netanyahu government with rockets “of such poor quality they had only symbolic impact,” while Israeli responded “with over fifty days of aerial bombing and ground invasion, causing mass death and massive destruction of literal, cultural, and psychological infrastructure” (16-17).

Schulman traces the distorted perception of threat and public indifference to mass cruelties evident in both policy brutality and Israeli occupation to “a culture of underreaction to abuse and overreaction to conflict” (21). Her case studies of domestic terror throughout *Conflict is Not Abuse* revolve around how the proliferation of the term ‘abuse’ has worsened the conflation of any form of tension within interpersonal relationships with abuse worthy of state intervention.[13] The upshot of the overgeneralization of abuse, Schulman finds, has not been strengthened infrastructures of care for vulnerable groups but the consolidation of state infrastructures of policing and punishment and their overuse by people with social power. Schulman describes how, in her experience working with grassroots domestic violence organizations, “perpetrators increasingly are the ones to call the police, threaten legal action, send lawyer letters, or threaten or seek restraining orders as part and parcel of their agenda of blame and unilateral control” (74). The Western romanticization of family and marriage works in tandem with the insular nature of the nuclear family to encourage the perception on the

[13] Anti-Black police brutality and the Israeli occupation of Palestine has been going on far longer than the roughly two decades in which the overgeneralization of abuse and trauma discourses has been particularly evident, especially with the advent of social media. Schulman’s point is that both cases represent the distorted view of abuse and victimhood brought on by the blinders of mass power, as well as the illogical nature of the rhetoric evoked to justify such abuses of power. Both phenomena are in turn worsened by a culture increasingly unable to understand conflict as a normative element of community belonging and to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate reactions to conflict.

part of partners with social power that their unhappiness is not only their partners' fault but is in fact a form of abuse. The likelihood of the police believing the partner who has the greatest alignment with dominant markers of respectability--- white, wealthy, straight, cis, male, athletic--- not only confirms the abuser's distorted worldview but also worsens the victim's structural vulnerability by placing them at the mercy of the state. Schulman notes how the mutually reinforcing nature of an abuser's worldview entangling with the worldview of the state is particularly evident in police intervention within queer relationships. She cites how a 2014 National Coalition of Anti-Violence programs' report on LGBTQI Intimate Partner Abuse found that, "the police mis-arrested the survivor as the perpetrator of violence' in *over half* of all queer domestic abuse arrests" (75, emphasis mine). Though Machado's ex never called the police on her, the overgeneralization of abuse claims and the consolidation of state mechanisms of power are evident in Machado's difficulty truly knowing herself as a victim and in her ex's continued insistence that Machado is the partner deserving of blame. As Schulman notes, Machado's situation was exacerbated by being in an abusive queer relationship, which, if brought to public attention, would be measured by heteronormative metrics of visibility. Not only was Machado's abuser not a man but she was a seemingly frail white woman, the public figurehead of domestic abuse victimhood.

The unusual memoir structure of *Dream House* emblematizes Machado's lifelong experience growing and learning within institutional structures of silencing. Western readers may expect memoirists to be as transparent as possible within their writing, but how can you be transparent when you've spent your whole life being told your own

experiences are inaccurate, leaving all your memories shrouded in doubt, and, more to the point, *why* would you be transparent when honesty has always led to punishment? Machado's adolescent relationship with her youth pastor, Joel develops because he, unlike her conservative parents and the rest of her conservative church, gives her a space to speak the truths of her life. Joel "gave smart, politically progressive sermons that sowed indignation among the older congregants, which delighted [Machado] to no end" (30). He would close the door to his office so they could

> [talk] about God and ethics and history and school; his marriage; the sexual assault in my freshman year that I couldn't excise from my brain. He gave me permission to swear in front of him, which I did, profusely [...] Once, I sat down on the floor, and he joined me there, our knees touching. 'Sometimes you just need a change of perspective,' he told me (32).

Joel's openness ends up being another example of the person with power in a relationship over-valuing their needs and disregarding the consequences of enacting those needs through a vulnerable partner. When Joel is revealed to be a sexual abuser and has to leave the state, cutting Machado out of his life, she is devastated and also deeply confused. He initially seemed to offer her the avenue to a more open world but turned out to be complicit in the banal, everyday reality of male entitlement. The revelation that Joel is an abuser makes it equally possible that the rest of what she learned throughout their relationship--- that it was okay to critique the church, to talk openly about sexual violence, to curse--- were just more tantalizing lies.

Layered onto Machado's childhood of religious suppression and her adolescent relationship with Joel is the fact of her queerness, whose forced denial in a conversative town worsens her learned insecurities about the accuracy of her own desires and impulses. During her sophomore year of high school, she grew close to another bookish girl in her class without realizing her feelings were imbued with sexual desire. Looking back, she describes how, "I didn't know any queers. I did not understand myself. I didn't know what it meant to want to kiss another woman. Years later, I'd figure that part out. But then, I didn't know what it meant to be afraid of another woman. Do you see now? Do you understand?" (139). Machado's inquiries to her reader, "Do you see now? Do you understand?" are asking if they understand why she took so long to recognize her relationship with her partner as abusive, when her whole life as a queer woman has been threaded with misrecognitions and forbidden intimacies. Part of not knowing "what it meant to kiss another woman" or "what it meant to be afraid of another woman" is just the nature of a first experience, but it was also undeniably worsened by the epistemic infrastructures of a conservative family, church, and nation-state that forbid the disclosure and recognition of queer relationalities.

Queer archive scholar Ann Cvetkovich posits gay and lesbian archives as "archives of feeling," because of how they privilege ephemera and affect: two forms of evidence often dismissed within dominant archival institutions. The queer privileging of ephemera and affect stems from how queer experience necessarily occurs in the margins, sometimes without leaving a tangible trace of its happening. Cvetkovich explains how, "the archive of feelings is both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that

might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records" (244). She notes the particular importance of pop culture, such as "the fan cultures that queer certain stars or the use of pulp novels as an indication of the existence of homosexuality,"' (254) within the history of queer recognition and archival practices. She compares queer archiving to fandom in the obsessive and fantasy-driven nature of trying to locate invisibilized traces of queer life (253). Her reading of the politics of fandoms supports the previous chapter's discussion of the importance of fantasy and fantasizing for epistemologically marginalized communities.

Cvetkovich's interest in the resonances between pop culture fandoms and queer recognition practices also illuminates Machado's use of pop culture and fantasy within her documentation of queer domestic abuse. Machado's pop culture references cover a wide breadth of cultural histories and aesthetic forms, from the traditional fairy tale misogynist Bluebeard to the 1872 gothic novel *Carmilla* to George Cukor's 1944 film *Gaslight*, which laid the groundwork for dominant cultural understandings of gaslighting and psychological abuse, to George Cukor's own psychological abuse of Judy Garland while directing her in *A Star Is Born* (1954), to *I Love Lucy* and the cruelty hidden within the audience's laughter, to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. As Cvetvokich argues is characteristic of the queer archivist, Machado's object-choices seem alternatively "fetishistic, idiosyncratic, or obsessional" (253) but her readings develop a common theme of the female entrapment within misogynistic character frames and the close reading required to ferret out the complexities of the internal experience of psychological

manipulation and control. Not only the content of the texts themselves but, often more importantly, the public responses to them speak to a centuries-long romanticization of heteropatriarchal domination that informs the normalization of domestic abuse and state paternalism.

Machado's counter-readings build an alternative epistemic infrastructure of queer and female vitality; she also uses marginalized or 'nerdy' popular cultural forms like *Star Trek* to contest the forms of knowing privileged by dominant epistemological institutions. Throughout *Dream House*, she footnotes various functional and dysfunctional incidents in her relationship with citations of tropes from Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature.* When she and her ex first say "I love you" after having sex, Machado footnotes, "Type C942.3, Weakness from seeing woman (fairy) naked" (28). Her paralleling of her ex to a woman (who could be a fairy) hints at the deceptive and manipulative nature of the ex's romantic overtures. Not too long afterwards, her ex flies into a rage at Machado for leaving her alone at their workplace for two hours to help another woman in the building who was having a breakdown (caused, notably, by the fact that she was raped and she can't get anyone in her life to believe her).[14] After screaming at her in the car, the ex tells Machado, "Don't you ever write about this. Do you fucking understand me," which Machado footnotes "Type C420.2, Taboo: not to speak about a certain happening" (44). Identifying both mundane and abuse-laden moments in her relationship with folklore tropes both speaks to Machado's interest in genre as a tool of cultural legibility and her reliance on popular culture and fantasy to

[14] Machado's ex-girlfriend is never explicitly named in the memoir, which works to give Machado authority over both her own story and the story of their relationship.

understand how she came to be a victim in her own story. As in Angela Carter's fairy tales, folklore tropes in particular tend to reflect the perspective of the powerless and to be a useful hermeneutic with which the marginalized can break through the mystifying effects of power. Through the application of folklore epistemologies, Machado can understand her ex's gaslighting strategies as not special or indicative of a particular genius but as mundane and characteristic of structural disempowerment.

It's, however, equally impossible to escape the fact that Machado's very need to rely on pop culture texts to make her experience legible to both herself and her reader stems from the absence of institutional structures of recognition and care for community members facing situations of interpersonal abuse and debilitation. Cvetkovich's archives of feeling framework is important in the context of the creation of grassroots queer archival collections, but how does one use affective and fantasy-based forms of evidence in the context of state testimony and political demands for community justice? After Machado finally ends her relationship, she reflects on the fundamental ways in which the experience of being abused has changed her, such as the "sixth sense" she develops when "meeting a new classmate or coworker, a friend's new girlfriend, a stranger at a party" that tells her when someone is capable of abuse through an intense wave a physical revulsion, "akin to the sour liquid rush of saliva that precedes vomiting" (238). Machado's sixth sense resembles the affective trace in which Cvetkovich locates the possibility for making visible what the dominant culture has refused to see, but it is not in itself capable of ensuring anyone beyond Machado is safe from the revulsive abuser.

In her post-breakup reflections, Machado cites José Esteban Muñoz's kin formulation of ephemera as queer evidence.[15] With an air of satire, she combines Muñoz's suggested turn to ephemera with the scientific language of legal evidence forms:

> The ephemera: The recorded sound waves of her speech on one axis and a precise measurement of the flood of adrenaline and cortisol in my body on the other. Witness statements from the strangers who anxiously looked at us sideways in public places. A photograph of her grip on my arm in Florida, with measurements of the shadows to indicate depth of indentation; an equation to represent the likely pressure. A wire looped through my hair, ready to record her hiss. The rancid smell of anger. The metal tang of fear in the back of my throat.
>
> None of these things exist. You have no reason to believe me (225).

Machado's sardonic perspective on queer ephemera comes from her own experience of the public reluctance to believe victims of abuse, *especially* when the victim lacks empirically verifiable forms of evidence. Her experiences being doubted compound her lifelong difficulties believing her own intuitions, illustrating the ways in which the cultural reliance on empiricism and a dismissal of affect and imagination discussed in the previous chapter can in fact further solidify sociopolitical and material inequities by

[15] Muñoz's work is taken up more extensively in Chapter Five. However, I should note here that his conceptualization of ephemera is different in function than Cvetkovich's. While Cvetkovich's work on ephemera, in line with her focus on physical archives, encompasses largely material ephemera, or at least ephemera with visible and concrete forms, such as popular culture, Muñoz's conceptualization of ephemera develops from his work on queer futurity and Agamben's politics of the gesture (Muñoz 65). He thus centers ephemeral actions, such as the "mannish strut" (ibid) of a Butch woman, that leave no trace. I make the distinction because Muñoz's framework of ephemera is explicitly set against the Western culture of rationalism that informs contemporary standards of evidence and which Machado is also critiquing here (Muñoz 54).

reinforcing the hegemony of what is already known and who is already believed. When she tries to tell people about how her ex treated her,

> some people listen. Others politely nod while slowly closing the door behind their eyes; you might as well be a proselytizing Jehovah's Witness or an encyclopedia peddler. Kind to you in person, what they say to others makes its way back to you: *We don't know for certain that it's as bad as she says. The woman from the Dream House seems perfectly fine, even nice. Maybe things were bad, but it's changed? Relationships are like that, right? Love is complicated. Maybe it was rough, but was it really abusive? What does that mean, anyway? Is that even possible?* (223).

On the surface, the public responses to Machado's claims may seem to indicate an attempt to complicate the discourse surrounding abuse through the questioning of "what does [abusive] mean, anyway." However, the general tendency to doubt Machado and give her ex the benefit of the doubt embodies the trend towards the powerful territorializing what gets read as truth and what fiction. Moreover, the carousel of justifications offered for disbelieving Machado illustrates the logically contradictory and disjunctive form of rhetoric employed whenever the powerful are called to account. In his work as a researcher on human rights commissions against Israeli occupation, architect and scholar Eyal Weizman focuses on the legal discourses of evidence and justification. In his experience giving legal testimony to Israel's mass abuses of power, he has found that the discourse of empiricism Machado mocks through her satirical imagining of a "precise measurement of the flood of adrenaline and cortisol in my body [when being abused]" is rarely evoked in the courtroom as a mutual standard of rigorous evaluation

but rather as a tool of decontextualization that draws attention away from the big picture towards minor details and forays into intellectual masturbation ("what does [abusive] really mean anyway?" (223)).

Weizman points to the example of the holocaust denier David Irving, who filed a lawsuit against historian Deborah Lipstadt that "forced the veracity of the events of the Holocaust to be put on trial" (13). In court, Irving's arguments eventually settled around whether one could *currently* see holes with which to introduce cyanide canisters in the side of the architectural remains of an Auschwitz crematorium. He refused to acknowledge the possibility that the Nazis could have covered up the holes before abandoning Auschwitz, which is, anyway, hardly the only explanation for the absence of holes a half-century after the event in question. Weizman argues that the underlying logic behind Irving's efforts---that to fixate on the holes would distract the court from the reams of historical and cultural evidence supporting the reality of the Holocaust--- is reflective of the bad-faith empiricism that characterizes modern structures of legal testimony. When confronted with evidence of mass destruction, Israeli lawyers also draw the court's focus to minor details, such as the precise diameter of a bomb's impact or the exact number of civilians whose presence during the explosion can be proven, both of which lines of inquiry neglect to answer for the question of what gives Israel the right to bomb Palestine in the first place (22).

The modern legal insistence on scientific precision, objectivity, and universal legibility to advance testimonial claims and demands for justice operates not so much to safeguard all communities from ill-intended fabulation as to safeguard powerful

communities from the contextual implications of their power. Israel erases its decades-long history of over-consumption, environmental devastation, and attempted genocide of Palestinians when it uses the epistemological infrastructure of a courtroom to spend the majority of a legal hearing debating whether the recorded measurements of a single bomb's impact are, centimeter for centimeter, accurate. Weizman's human rights team, Forensic Architecture, are building a counter-history of forensic investigation and community justice that demands the privileging of historical and political context. Their stated mission is to reorient the modern field of forensics around the Roman concept of the forum and its attendant philosophy of voice, in which

> The forum was a *chaotic and multidimensional* domain of economy, circulation, politics, and judgment in which both people and things participated and were presented. Small things, such as coins or daggers, could be physically displayed, but things abstract, far away, or too large, such as rivers, territories, wars, towns, famines, or empires, had to be *made vivid by the power of representation* or aural demonstration.

However, as its role evolved throughout Western modernity,

> The forum for its use gradually started referring exclusively to courts of law and 'forensics' to the use of science, primarily medical science, in them. The critical dimension of forensis-- its public, political element-- was lost in the process. Forensics has instead become the art of the police (65).

Forensic Architecture's historically-grounded understanding of forensic investigation as a public forum for the aesthetic and rhetorical performance of subjective and community

experience recalls Leigh Gilmore's insistence that life writings be read as testimony because of how they necessarily circulate through various public spheres and negotiate cultural attitudes towards rhetorical authority and truthfulness. Moreover, their conclusion that the modern privileging of legal and scientific analysis consolidates the dominance of policing culture through their mutual emphasis on surveillance and forced visibility aligns with Schulman's observation that contemporary institutions of justice are ill-equipped to care for victims of domestic abuse due to their entanglement with state policing methods. Like Machado, abuse victims may not only lack the traditional markers of domestic victimhood (white femininity, clear physical debilitation) prioritized by the police but are also often navigating complex histories of social disempowerment that cannot be captured by the insular lenses of scientific evidence structures. Their story, like "the metal tang of fear in the back of [Machado's] throat," may reside below what Weizman names the "threshold of detectability" (20).

*Dream House* can in turn be read as an example of the forms of knowing made available by a return to *forensis* as a mode of truth telling and justice seeking. Machado's multi-genre approach to life writing embraces the "chaotic and multidimensional" and her turn to fantasy and layered storytelling uses the specific powers of representation to make that which cannot be physically displayed vivid. Her use of popular culture and research-based narration of North America's history failing to recognize queer domestic abuse also provides the "public, political element" that distinguishes *forensis* from the decontextualizing structure of modern forensics. Though not, like Weizman, an architect by training, Machado's use of the dream house as the metaphoric (and literal) grounding

of her testimony further evokes the philosophy of *forensis* in its emphasis on the infrastructural dimension of personal testimony. In his description of Forensic Architecture's architectural activities, which, for their current project of aiding testifiers recovering from war trauma, center on virtual reconstructions of black sites and decimated buildings and homes, Weizman argues that, "though forensics is generally understood as a shift away from the ambiguity of testimony toward material evidence, (58) their virtual reconstruction technologies embrace the opacity inherent to personal testimony by allowing testifiers to safely relive traumatic memories and re-enter traumatic spaces on their own terms, agency they lacked during the actual event. How much they share of those re-encounters is up to them. Architecture in this sense studies not only the material structure of habitats but the larger history of how people have navigated those spaces: the forms of mobility they've been allowed, their relation to different objects in their environment, and whether they felt safe or doomed by their surroundings. In the chapter, "*Dream House as* Haunted Mansion," Machado similarly contemplates how the trope of the haunted house speaks to the entanglement of material and social infrastructures I similarly trace in the twinned function of the domestic sphere as both a material and epistemic infrastructure. She reflects:

> What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly? You know the formula instinctually: a place is steeped in tragedy. Death, at the very least, but so many terrible things can precede death, and it stands to reason that some of them might accomplish something similar. You spend so much time trembling between the walls of the Dream House, obsessively attuned to *the position of her body relative*

> *to yours*, not sleeping properly, listening for the sound of her footsteps, the way disdain creeps into her voice, staring dead-eyed in disbelief at things you never thought you'd see in your life time. What else does it mean? It means that metaphors abound; that space exists in four dimensions; that if you return somewhere often enough it becomes infused with your energy; that the past never leaves us; that there's always atmosphere to consider; that you can wound air as cleanly as you can wound flesh (127, emphasis mine).

Machado's learned attunement to the position of her abuser's body speaks to how forensic architectural analysis can capture not only how a single body may move through a building but how two bodies move relative to each other, meaning the power dynamics within a given space. Her reflections on the multidimensional nature of metaphor also recall the previous chapter's proposal of the self as spiritual, as well as Glissant's proposition that metaphor embeds the simultaneous opacities and resonances that structure relationality. It may sound New-Agey to claim that your home "becomes infused with your energy," but when a trauma survivor returns to a virtual reconstruction of their old home pre-bombing and suddenly remembers the day of the bombing, something 'invisible' has indeed materialized. In the context of testimony, metaphors like "a haunted home" can provide evidentiary tools for making legible to an audience of varied backgrounds the intangible aspects of personal experience and historically entrenched power relations. In *Dream House*, metaphor is particularly important for Machado, whose abuser relied primarily on verbal and psychological abuse, which do not by nature leave visible imprints on the body. The spiritual dimension of the haunted home

recognizes that "you can wound air as cleanly as you can wound flesh:" that just because a creature exhibits no scars does not mean they were never sliced open.

Of course, there is Weizman and Machado's trauma-informed understanding of the spiritual infrastructure of testimony, and then there is the reality of living within a world determined by liberal humanism and its refusal to recognize the ghosts who haunt Western modernity. Machado could possibly get away with including the metaphor of a haunted home in a legal testimony to domestic violence, but it would be taken as the fanciful bent of a writer and not the evidentiary core of her testimony. The futility of trying to be heard in a world constructed not to listen to someone like you haunts the pages of *Dream House* through the ghostly appearances of wild animals, who appear to Machado during moments of clarity about her relationship. When she and her ex take a road trip and her ex angrily demands to do all the driving on the way back, despite the fact that she is falling asleep at the wheel, Machado arrives home terrified, both from the near-death drive and her awareness that her ex has hit a boiling point. She explains:

> The car pulls into the driveway around four in the morning and sits there in silence. You feel like you are going to throw up. The leaves drop onto the car's roof and the wind snatches them away with a papery scrape. Finally she reaches to unbuckle her seat belt, but you are watching the lawn. Two dark shapes are crossing it, like dogs, but not. Coyotes? It would have been a lovely sight at any time, but in contrast to this night's terrors it is so beautiful your face tingles. 'Look,' you say softly, pointing.

> She starts as if you've struck her. Then she sees what you see. You wait for her coo, for her sweetness.
>
> 'Fuck you,' she says. She leans towards you and speaks directly into your ear. 'You say look without saying anything else, I think you're fucking pointing out someone who's going to fucking kill us. It's the middle of the night. What the fuck is wrong with you?' She kicks open the car door; the coyotes bolt for the trees. You watch her stomp through the Dream House. Her silhouette is thrown up against a series of illuminated windows--- kitchen, bathroom, bedroom--- and then all the lights go out.
>
> You get out of the car and sit against the side of the house, putting your winter coat on backward like a smock. The coyotes come back, after a while, trotting casually across the lawn. Deer too, and foxes, all paying you no mind, as if you are part of the scenery, as if you aren't there at all (89-90).

After nearly getting them both killed in a car accident, her ex once again plays the victim--- "I think you're fucking pointing out someone who's going to fucking kill us"--- as if Machado is threatening *her* life. For Machado, the distraction of the coyotes' wild beauty and its contrast to her ex's illuminated violence inside their shared home makes clear the terrorizing entrapment of the domestic. She experiments with going feral, putting her clothes on backwards and refusing to go inside. Her draw to wildness in a moment of abuse stems less from a romanticized view of nature than from the knowledge that the supposed privileges of the human world--- civilization, marriage, political rights--- are mythological cloaks that obscure the bad behavior of the privileged and

relegate disinherited subjects to the shadows of civility, the unspoken horrors that keep the human world turning. The way the coyotes, deer, and foxes all pay Machado no mind as if she is “not there at all” points to a different form of invisibility, an opacity not predicated on the disavowal of unflattering realities but on indifference towards the human and its concomitant demands for subject legibility. By becoming feral Machado can escape her predetermined subject position as a fat, queer woman of color; her socially learned identity as an unreliable narrator; her abjection as an abuse victim with limited avenues of escape; and just be another hungry creature.

Wild animals reappear throughout *Dream House*, reminding the Machado in the story that she can leave her ex and the Machado *writing* the story that she can stop at any time--- give up trying to make her experience legible to the doubting American public and embrace the fugitive stance of the feral. However, there remains the underlying fact that she began *Dream House* to address the cultural silence surrounding queer domestic abuse, and if she goes feral that silence will continue, as will the insecurity of other queers experiencing abuse concerning whether their experience is real or all in their heads. In his work on testimonies to the Armenian genocide, historian Marc Nicachian argues against the role of testimony in caring for survivors of state violence. His argument centers on how testimony necessarily places survivors in the affective mode of shame: shame over their abject position as victims of the state and shame over the need to prove their own abjection to the very state who violated them (120). As an historian disillusioned with the profession, he argues that the evidentiary structure of historiography privileges forms of evidence that conform to the state’s narrative of its

own behavior: bureaucratic documents that give the illusion of order and professionalism and historical texts that perform the language of objectivity and support a teleological philosophy of history (78). He refers to the state disciplinary function of historiographic narratives as the logic of the archive, which can be read as intimate with Derrida's conceptualization of archive fever in its construction of the archive as a space of confinement rather than intellectual expansion.

The consequence of the dominance of archival logic in the Western judicial system and academy is that those who do not or cannot meet its requirements for recognition lose access to the public realm of visibility, or what Nicachian refers to as the civilized world. To be visible within the civilized world, something must "already [be] part of a public memory, of a knowledge or an acknowledgment operative in the space of the civilized world," (97) meaning that to be seen something must already *have been* seen, making the appeal to witness implicit within testimony a "perfectly desperate" (ibid) effort. Nicachian's deconstruction of the futility of testimony sheds light on why it so often doesn't matter how disciplined a sexual abuse survivor is when giving testimony--- how objective they remain in tone and how much scientific evidence they rely on to support their claims--- as most forms of sexual abuse do not have an accompanying "acknowledgement operative in the space of the civilized world."[16]

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[16] Consider the different performances exhibited by Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh when she testified that the prospective Supreme Court judge sexually assaulted her in high school. Ford, a professor of psychology, retained a calm demeanor despite the acrimonious and politicized atmosphere of the courtroom, and largely relayed her assault and its effects through deeply rationalized, scientific terminology, such as "indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter" (Ducharme). Kavanaugh, in contrast, quickly lost control of himself during his testimony; his face turned red and he spat out his answers, devolving into adolescent defenses of his high school behavior, such as "I liked beer" (Shabad). Regardless, Ford's testimony, like Anita Hill's years before, was dismissed and Kavanaugh was appointed to one of the highest positions in the Western legal system.

Western civilization was founded on the mass sexual and reproductive abuse of enslaved and Indigenous women, the domestic confinement and sexual exploitation of white women, and the forced invisibilization of queer desire (Spillers). Or, as Machado puts it in "*Dream House* as Epiphany," "most types of domestic abuse are completely legal" (112). For the state to 'see' that fact would be to give the lie to its foundational narrative of historical progress and Western male entitlement. On the few occasions the Western judicial system does recognize and dole out justice to an abuse survivor, such recognitions are reflective of exceptional access to state power on the part of the testifier rather than the state reckoning with its own violences.

Nicachian is not generally optimistic about cultures of testimony and witnessing within the modern world, having, like Weizman, witnessed firsthand the entrenchment of denialist rhetoric within Western epistemological institutions; however, to the extent that he does express hope, it is in the way literature as a feral representative form provides escape from the abjecting requirements of legal testimony, in which one must adopt the language of the state to demonstrate the violence of state structures. He describes how the Armenian writer Aram Andonian knew "he had to make literature in order to escape the shame of testimony," (111) when he began writing novels of the Catastrophe, though Andonian later published *Documents Concerning the Armenian Massacre*, which "inaugurated the historiography of the event and was addressed to civilized humanity" (111). Nicachian reads the trajectory of Andonian's testimonial writing career as evidence of the impossible position Armenian writers were placed in by having to choose between writing forms that worsened the abjection of the Armenian peoples and writing forms that

would go unrecognized by the state as evidence for the reality of the Catastrophe, thus supporting the invisibilization of Armenian rights. He describes how, “By way of this subjection [by the logic of the archive,] they enable us today to speak the phenomenon, the heart of shame, the primary transformation of testimony into a discourse of proof and its engulfing into the archive, through which the survivor is literally deprived of his own memory” (112). Machado’s “perfectly desperate” efforts to make her experience with queer domestic abuse known through the writing of *Dream House* performs a similar role, enabling her readers, especially those undergoing kin battles with state violence, to speak “the heart of shame:” the reasons why it took Machado so long to recognize that her childhood friendships with girls were actually crushes, that her youth pastor was exploiting her and other girls in the church, that her partner was abusive and deeply warped by structural power, that all along Machado deserved care and love and the space to be messy and hungry without being ashamed. The heart of shame is not that Machado was being dumb or naive but that she was raised under abjecting epistemic infrastructures who denied the reality of her queerness to safeguard the unstable ‘reality’ of a straight and proper world founded on mass violence. The shame is the state’s and the way it passes off its guilt to its victims.

In the last chapter of *Dream House*, Machado has been free of her ex for a while and is attending a writing retreat in rural Oregon, where she will write the majority of *Dream House*. One morning, she wakes up to see a young buck foraging right outside her window. She finds herself

> utterly transfixed by him, a stray remnant of my childhood love of horses. I left him some baby carrots, hoping to let him know I meant no harm, but he didn't eat them, and within a few hours the air desiccated them into white, withered sticks. Every time I moved, he turned and watched me with black eyes. When he stopped noticing me--- when I'd been sitting reading or writing for a while--- he relaxed *as much as a deer can relax*. His eyes blinked more languidly. He nibbled greenery, chased flies away, whisked his ears and tail through the air. I even once saw him lick his lips, and then yawn. The intimacy, the trust, would have been almost unbearable, *if I thought it was trust*.
>
> Once I walked by the window and there were two of them, two bucks, sitting under the tree. Their fur looked soft, and they panted in the heat like large, beautiful dogs. But my foot creaked on the floorboards, and they bounded liquidly away through the grass. Half a mile away, they were still running (241-242, emphasis mine).

At this point, Machado has built a better life for herself: she is in love with a woman who takes good care of her, and she is in the process of writing a book that will give her some clarity on her domestic traumas. Machado's mindset is reflective in the beauty she finds watching the bucks, imagining them as large, carefree dogs. However, her ending reflections also make clear the potentiality for violence that continues within a nation-state founded on domination. Even at rest, the bucks can only relax "as much as a deer can relax." Within both the human animal and nonhuman animal worlds, they structurally occupy the position of the hunted, an animalized subject position I will take

up at length in the final chapter. The minute Machado's foot touches the floorboards, they run for it--- and continue running even at an ostensibly safe distance. By ending her testimony on the mixed note of brief, personal contentment amidst ecological precarity, Machado indicates that a queer life does not have to mean an abject life, but that it's still imperative to know when to run. I'll now turn to *Spill,* which provides an alternative, though intimate, framework of literary ferality and fugitivity based in the otherwise worldings of Black feminist thought. Gumbs' Black feminist perspective on fugitivity allows for how running from predators is not necessarily cowardice but its own type of strength.

**Black Feminism and the Art of Speculation**

Gumbs prefaces *Spill* with a homage to Hortense Spillers focused on how her work turns literary criticism into an act of worlding. Gumbs describes how, "what kept me coming back to [Spillers' *Black, White, and in Color*] over and over again was not only what she said [...] it was also *how* she said it. Again and again, there were phrases in her work that did far more than make her point. They made worlds. They invited affect" (xi, emphasis mine). Gumbs thus sets up the stakes of her aesthetic choices throughout *Spill* as either, like Spillers' work, ontologically capacious enough to hold the "nameless women in unknown places who were laughing and looking sideways at each other and a world that couldn't understand them" (ibid) through the embrace of affect and feral voice or, like much of the criticism Spillers was responding to, stilted by the Western investment in the human and its implicit coding in the discourse of even-toned criticism. Each footnote within *Spill*'s poetic vignettes cites a specific phrase from one of the essays

in Spillers' collection *Black, White, and in Color* that exemplifies Spillers' feral approach to criticism, which embraces lyricism, metaphor, and sensuality, in turn pushing against the academic insistence on dry precision and the forced detachment of the storyteller. The phrases cited instead flesh out social criticism with the reality of creaturely vitality, such as "oxygen supply of the social upside down" (cited in Gumbs 155) and "transgenerational haunting that no ghost-busting has succeeded in exorcizing" (cited in 156).

Gumbs explains that when she began the "experiment" (xii) of writing *Spill* as an ode to Spillers "doors opened and everyone came through. All the black women writers Spillers wrote about and didn't write about. All these characters those black women writers acknowledged and ignored. All the people living *novelistic* lives *without arcs or arks* to save them" (xii, emphasis mine). Her experience getting intimate with Spillers' use of writing as otherwise worlding led to a profound sense of the biopolitical implications of her own writing, meaning its ability to both foster and impede life, just as Black women writers generations before her recognized the lives of certain Black women while invisibilizing others, and Spillers, writing her criticism generations later, gave space to some of those Black women writers while leaving others behind. Gumbs' subsequent concern for the Black women "living novelistic lives without arcs or arks to save them," the ones "who made and broke narrative," (xii) informs her approach to character development and narrative perspective throughout *Spill*. Her paralleling of a Black woman's "novelistic" life to both a narrative arc *and* a biblical arc infuses the "material" reality of creaturely life with the "symbolic" realities of individual character

development and collective mythologies. Throughout *Spill*, the ostensible protagonist(s) weave through semi-grounded, domestic scenes of contemporary life interspersed with scenes and images grounded in ancestral and mythological knowledges. The layering of the personal and the mythological works to trouble both the humanist divisions between past and present and living and dead, as well as, much like Carter's approach to fairy tale tropes, emphasize how intergenerational cultural discourses always already infuse individual action and decision-making. They thus also speak to the nature of feral witness and its double grounding in idiosyncratic perspective and sociohistorical accountability.

The ambiguity of *Spill*'s protagonist further emphasizes the entanglement of individual consciousness with epistemic infrastructures. *Spill* can be read as the story of a specific, individual woman, as its various vignettes are divided into a somewhat linear narrative in which a woman is stuck in an abusive marriage, figures out a way to escape the marriage, and experiences freedom outside the domestic. However, the woman is never named or assigned visually-recognizable features; moreover, Gumbs embeds reflections on the violence of naming and recognition throughout the primary narrative of domestic abuse and escape. Gumbs' anti-identitarian approach to character development is thus partly informed by the racialized and gendered histories of naming, and the use of surnames in particular, as both a practice used to control newly-emancipated slaves in the Jim Crow South and a patriarchal technique for owning and controlling women (*Scenes of Subjection* 155). Her refusal to assign her protagonist visual traits further references the historical development of Western visual recognition technologies through the surveillance of Black people, both pre and post emancipation (Browne).

Additionally, though, Gumbs' decision to make the spatiotemporal contexts and character identities within a text not entirely legible inaugurates a new form of life writing centered in the decolonial politics of the opaque and the speculative. I also locate Gumbs' speculative philosophy of life writing in Saidiya Hartman's most recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), which is, like *Spill*, an ode to the queer, Black women whom history has refused to recognize. I further read both *Spill* and *Wayward Lives* as feral texts in how their interests in the animating potential of the fugitive are grounded in critiques of the domestic as a zone of imperial violence. Hartman originated the concept of fugitivity in Black feminist scholarship and is an evident influence on *Spill* in both its reflections on the fugitive as a mode of otherwise worlding and the terror the domestic holds for Black women. Hartman studied both phenomena at length in her 1997 book, *Scenes of Subjection*, whose reflections on the possibilities for Black selfhood and self-making in the Jim Crow South and its landscape of overwhelming violence, domination, and terror lay much of the groundwork for *Spill* and *Wayward Lives'* turn to speculative life writing as a form of fugitivity.

Hartman's main focus in *Scenes of Subjection* lies in how analyzing the bad-faith legal inscription of the 'free' Black subject post-emancipation illuminates not only the post-Emancipation period as continuous with, rather than departing from, the plantation period but also, on the level of social criticism, reveals the insufficiency of identity frameworks in capturing the textures of subjugation. For example, she describes her hesitancy to postulate gender as central to the subjugation of Black women because of the way white femininity has territorialized cultural understandings of gendered identity.

Within feminist criticism, modes of gendered subjugation are thus always read alongside the "social and sexual arrangements of the dominant order," (99) which cannot in turn explain the modes of subjugation experienced by Black women, who have historically been denied access to traditional kinship forms. Black women have also not only *not* been protected by the white cultural imaginary of female sexual sanctity but made more vulnerable to sexual violence by the white cultural imaginary of Black hypersexuality and invulnerability to pain. Hartman argues that, "by assuming that woman designates a known referent, an a priori unity, a precise bundle of easily recognizable characteristics, traits, and dispositions, we fail to attend to the contingent and disjunctive production of the category" (ibid). Jackson's conceptualization of the zone of plasticity created by the identification of Black people as alternatively human and not, discussed in Chapter One, similarly highlights how, for the state, identity is transmutable depending on what they require from the subject under consideration; the assumption of identity as stable within critical scholarship enforces the state's claim to ideological consistency, effacing the reality of its epistemological schizophrenia.

Recognizing "the contingent and disjunctive" nature of identity forms and their cultural production necessitates an awareness of the way in which an individual case study, such as the recorded experiences of a specific Black woman within the archive, can and perhaps should be used to deconstruct sociopolitical structures of subjugation but also risks consolidating the categories of identification used as justification for the very forms of violence under analysis. Hartman proposes an alternative critical strategy that "rather than assuming the subject, [begins] our inquiry with a description of

subjectification that did not attempt to name or interpret anything but to simply describe its surface" (100). I read her speculative turn in *Wayward Lives* as the culmination of her desire to deconstruct the surfaces of subjugation without forcing a subject into narrative or interpretive captivity. *Wayward Lives* narrates speculative accounts of the lives of early twentieth-century Philadelphian Black women and their fugitive relation to various forms of domestic entrapment and exploitation, such as wifedom, sexual abuse, and domestic labor. Hartman builds her accounts from scraps found in official archives, which largely focus on the women's deviant natures, such as police records or complaints from landlords and social workers. Her own narratives bring out the lost beauty of the women's lives, with a focus on love, desire, and freedom dreams. In her introduction, Hartman explains,

> "I prefer to think of this book as the fugitive text of the wayward, and it is marked by the errantry that it describes. In this spirit, I have pressed at the limits of the case file and the document, speculated about what might have been, imagined the things whispered in dark bedrooms, and amplified moments of withholding, escape and possibility" (xiv).

Like the nameless women who demanded entrance into *Spill* when Gumbs began writing, the spirit of errantry that propels Hartman throughout *Wayward Lives* is based on subverting the technologies of recognition that track a Black woman's every movement while also animating Black feminist imaginings of mobility outside of spaces of surveillance.

As a mode of knowledge-production, speculation is situated in a liminal space between the known and the unknown, the recognizable and the invisible, what is and what could be. One speculates from what is sensed but often not provable, such as a husband's cheating or a landlord's theft; speculations are thus necessarily strung through with personal fears and desires that are, just as equally, entangled with the cultural forms of violence one is most susceptible to and the cultural zones of mobility one is restricted from. Like the fairy tale imagination in the previous chapter, speculation is a particularly useful form of knowing for those who lack structural power and institutional recognition. Also like the fairy tale, speculative writing can in turn illuminate contemporary biopolitical structures of mobility and debilitation, as in how Gumbs' and Hartman's speculations center the domestic and its racialized and gendered forms of entrapment. For critics like Hartman, whose work focuses on recognizing lives invisibilized or inaccurately depicted within official archives but who has significantly more institutional power than her subjects, incorporating the speculative admits to the limited and potentially wrongfooted perspective of even the most well-intentioned archivist, as in Lisa Lowe's historiographic ethic of hesitancy.[17] Many of Hartman's speculative vignettes in *Wayward Lives* incorporate questions that point to multiple possible pathways for the narrated subject, such as, "was the violence experienced in an attic studio or at a neighbor's house irreparable? If so, how did it determine her course? Did it eclipse the possibility of sexual autonomy or stamp it indelibly?" (29). The tentative stance of the

[17] Lowe articulates her "history hesitant" framework in her 2015 book, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, which critiques the tendency of modern historiographers to make reductive and conflationary analogies between disparate spatiotemporal contexts of coloniality. She thus recommends historiographers adopt an attitude of humility towards their research objects.

speculative permits the archivist, particularly archivists of violent and debilitating social contexts, to consider the field of action likely available to the subject while still respecting their autonomy to have been otherwise.

In its respect for opacity and accountability to histories of misrepresentation, the speculative is a particularly feral epistemological mode. It provides an avenue to Hartman's proposed alternative philosophy of subjectivity conducive to anti-identitarian life writing and social criticism. Moreover, in her work on Black futurity, Kara Keeling positions the speculative imagination as a specifically queer epistemological form in how it pushes against the quotidian violences that "[maintain] a temporality and spatial logic hostile to the change and chance immanent in each now" (17). Keeling illuminates the queer politics inherent to unmooring space and time from dominant zones of legibility and their homogenizing grasp over social reproduction. Intimate with Hartman, her framework of speculation works from a conceptualization of queerness defined not by sexual identity but by

> how one signifies or how groups of living beings are made to signify within a given set of significations. It may include what one does, how one does it, and where those actions place one in relationship to the maintenance of the present organization of things, including the groupings and affiliations of living beings constitutive of social, political, and economic relations (ibid).

As in Machado's testimony to queer domestic abuse, Keeling's understanding of identity and queerness is ecological, grounded in the knowledge that dominant identity markers are not freely given social adornments but disciplinary technologies that provide

recognition within the public sphere at the price of domestication by dominant social arrangements. Keeling reclaims queerness as that which refuses the present organization of things at the most basic levels: time and space. In the next section, I'll turn to a close reading of *Spill* and its kin refusal of white, heteronormative spatiotemporality. My focus will be on how Gumbs deconstructs the surfaces of subjugation while refusing to name its subject by creating a poetics of speculation that brings together the elusive narrative stance of the poet with the feral curiosity of the speculator. Ultimately, Gumbs constructs a simultaneous testimony to anti-Black domestic violence *and* enactment of queer, Black futurities that rejects the forced relegation of the testifier to an abjectifying past.

### Going Feral in *Spill*

Gumbs prefaces each section in *Spill* with a different definition of the titular term, such as "**spill (v)** 2. (of liquid) flow over the edge of its container," (2) "**spill (v)** 4. (of a number of people) move out of somewhere quickly," (32) and "**spill (v)** *informal* reveal (confidential information) to someone (62). The shifting rhetorical context of each section speaks to both the protagonist's changing mindset as she decides to leave her marriage and the instability of identification and naming processes: *Spill,* both the book and the verb, may appear clearly defined as a liquid accident only to have Gumbs shift the frame and reveal an entirely different angle of legibility. Gumbs' play with definitions challenges the interpretive certainty of the reader; it also recalls Karen Barad's feminist re-reading of the famous wave/particle physics experiment.[18] Like Gumbs' use of the

[18] In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter Meaning*, Barad develops a feminist interpretation of the double-split experiment that showed a photon could behave as both a wave and a particle, depending on the experimental frame used during the process of measurement. Barad reads the ontological indeterminacy of the photon specifically within human-constructed processes of measurement as evidencing the entanglement of

indeterminacy inherent to the speculative to maintain Black freedom and fugitivity, Barad reads a particle's indeterminacy as either a wave or a particle as proof of the instability of dominant political infrastructures; it may be most politically expedient for one to be a wave, but if a slight disruption to the experimental frame can turn one into a particle, then clearly scientists never had as much control over the categorization of life and matter as they hoped. The field of definitions that overlays *Spill*'s narrative thus also sets up the entanglement of language and life, knowledge and being, in which Gumb locates the dangers of naming and the urgency of poetry.

*Spill*'s opening section and its incitement of a feral dissatisfaction on the part of the trapped protagonist portray a birthing scene--- not a biological birth but a birthing of the idea that there is a world outside the domestic. The protagonist describes how,

> first time i knew you existed the rest of the history of the world popped like a bubble unready unworthy and my body wanted only future, only you. the first time i felt you move we were deep underwater under something built to keep us under and i couldn't see anything but I understood there was something above everything. above everything despite everything I would find fresh air and breathe again. above everything despite everything I would free you. my best idea yet (13).

Mothering and birth as metaphors and as actualities are central to Gumbs' Black feminist philosophy of activism and justice, both in *Spill* and beyond. In 2018, she co-edited a

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ontology, epistemology, and ethics (Barad). While Barad's proposition--- that what we know is entangled with who we are and our responsibilities to a shared world--- is deeply intimate with my understanding of the political implications of life writing, the grounding of her study is focused on the materialist implications of Western science, and so I do not take up her work extensively here.

collection of essays with China Martens and Mai'a Willaims on queer mothering, titled *Revolutionary Mothering* (and discussed briefly in Chapter Two). Building on the work of June Jordan and Audre Lorde, Gumbs' core intervention in her own writings within the collection is to expand the dominant image of mothering (caring for living children, often assumed to be of biological relation to the mother) by highlighting the mothering inherent to literary and aesthetic creation. Art and literature influence the epistemic infrastructures within which children and people of all ages learn, grow, and live; to create art that is expansive in its worlding is to care for those debilitated by the limited visions of dominant institutions. In her essay "m/other ourselves," Gumbs explains,

> The radical potential of the word 'mother' comes after the 'm.' It is the space that 'other' takes in our mouths when we say it. We are something else. We know it from how fearfully institutions wield social norms and try to shut us down […] Mamas who unlearn domination by refusing to dominate their children, extended family and friends, community caregivers, radical childcare collectives, all of us breaking cycles of abuse by deciding what we want to replicate from the past and what we need urgently to transform, are m/othering ourselves (21-22).

For Gumbs, creative expression and m/othering have in common the embrace of the space of the 'other' that makes life outside of inherited domination practices possible. We can see the protagonist of *Spill* moving into that space as she realizes, "my body wanted only future," (13) and that even though she and her child were "deep underwater under something built to keep us under," she can finally see the "something above everything" (ibid). The "something above everything," or the space of the other, can also be read as

the protagonist's entrance into the speculative: the zone of worlding that exists beyond dominant circuits of knowledge, in intuition, intergenerational storytelling, whisper networks, freedom dreams, and outrage at the present order of things.

The unnamed and thus ambiguous identity of the protagonist and the child she births, as well as their positioning underwater, imbues Gumbs' characterization process with her philosophy of m/othering as embedded in both material practices of care and nurturing and symbolic practices of creative expression, teaching, and storytelling. All we know about the newly-birthed child is that she may be identified within heteronormative and transphobic classification systems as a girl: "the technician had looked for phallic signs and failed. so he said *it's a girl,*" (12) though that instance once again speaks more to the failure of imagination that sits at the heart of dominant identification processes. For my purposes, I read the child as a feral version of the protagonist's self, as subsequent sections follow the protagonist's growing rage at her entrapment within a stagnant home setting to an abusive man and her burgeoning plans to escape.

The point of Gumbs' characterization strategies is less to facilitate a final, correct reading of a character than to illuminate the Western histories of subjugation that have restricted Black possibility alongside the diasporic African storytelling and pedagogical traditions that have flourished outside the ostensible limits placed on Black being. The grounding of the protagonist's identity within discursive community-formations does not mean that Gumbs devalues individuality and selfhood--- to the contrary, *Spill* figures investment in the boundaries of the self as central to community flourishing--- but rather pushes against the Western culture of the novel and its obsession with a clearly

individualized and 'realistic' protagonist, which often means both that the sociopolitical determinants of individual action fade to the background and that dominant Western conceptions of normative human psychology and behavior are recycled.

The protagonist's underwater birth/rebirth brings in the histories of the African diaspora and their beginning in the Middle Passage, highlighting the particularly fraught nature of the entanglement between individual identity and community belonging for Black subjects. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman describes how, for the enslaved Black American community and their efforts in building solidarity networks to facilitate rebellions and escape, "the commonality constituted in practice depends less on presence or sameness than upon desired change-- the abolition of bondage. Thus, contrary to identity providing the ground of community, identity is figured as the desired negation of the very set of constraints that create commonality" (59).

The early grounding of the Black American community was thus, in a sense, constructed on the desire for there to be no need for the community. Of course, this is different from saying that those within the community disliked each other or that there was no pleasure or comfort taken within the community; rather, Hartman points to how the shared point of identification that created a sense of commonality amongst enslaved Black Americans was also necessarily underrun by deep anger over constant violation, abjection, and enforced immobility, as well as the perpetual state of mourning engendered by a community atmosphere of brutal and premature death.

In her latest book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Gumbs turns to the ocean and its witnessing of collective drowning throughout the

Middle Passage to work through the tensions implicit to Black individuality and collectivity within the African diaspora, as well as the related tension between grappling with past traumas and working towards freer futures.[19] She begins by positing that the act of breathing is itself a communal act in which "you share air and chemical exchange with everyone in the room, everyone you pass by today," (1) a reality we have all become aware of through the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as the act of breathing is often taken as an individual act when it is in fact a form of wide-reaching communication with all life, including plants and viruses, Gumbs argues that the mass drownings that occurred throughout the Middle Passage continue to implicate everyone living and breathing today; the strategic drowning of 'excess' Black lives on board slave ships and the burgeoning economization of life they represented inform the necropolitical structure of worlding we all still live under, though (as has also been also on full display throughout the pandemic) with vastly disparate levels of susceptibility to state exploitation and premature death.[20] Gumbs explains:

> And if the scale of breathing is collective, beyond species and sentience, so is the impact of drowning. The massive drowning yet unfinished where the distance of the ocean meant that people could become property, that life could be for sale. I am talking about the middle passage and everyone who drowned and everyone

[19] Given my positioning of *Spill* as a feral text, it's notable that Gumbs' most recent work focuses directly on animality; moreover, much of her work in *Undrowned* centers on critiquing the imperialist and gendered assumptions inherent to scientific language, particularly scientific terminology surrounding species classification and behaviorism.

[20] See Christina Sharpe's 2016 book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* and Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures*, particularly the introduction, for in-depth reflections on the relationship between the drownings of enslaved Africans throughout the Middle Passage and the consolidation of modern necropolitics. Sharpe focuses on the expendability of Black life traceable to contemporary policing and carceral cultures, while Keeling focus on the politics of calculation and speculated profit that informed the decision to throw people overboard.

> who continued breathing. *But I am troubling the distinction between the two*. I am saying that those who survived in the underbellies of boats, under each other under unbreathable circumstances are the undrowned, and their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whales, their kindred also. Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. *It made a context.* The context of undrowning (1-2, emphasis mine).

When *Spill*'s protagonist is reborn in the ocean, she has not managed to survive through sheer will and thus succeeded where her ancestors failed. She is breathing new life *with* those who drowned throughout the Middle Passage; *with* her ancestors who were not drowned but still captive and forced into equally unlivable circumstances in the New World; *with* the whales and other sea creatures who are now subject to poisoned waters and widespread species extinction in the same waters that saw the bloody beginnings of racial capitalism. The newborn woman in the ocean is born into a context; she is herself but she is not only herself. She breathes the world in and carries its weight in her lungs. To say someone is undrowned gives weight to the violence of ever having *been* drowned but also denies the act its final say over the trajectory of the self.

The protagonist's multivalent origins in the ocean and the history of the Middle Passage can be read alongside subsequent sections' lack of stable characterization. Post-rebirth, the protagonist appears unsure as to the reality of her existence. Like in *White is for Witching*, she is confronted by a *Through the Looking Glass* type mirror, in

which the reflection calls into question the stability of the viewer's reality rather than confirming it. Gumbs narrates how,

> it was a mirror. she thought it was a mirror. it had always been a mirror. but every now and then something wasn't right. something was in the mirror that wasn't back in here. was that a book? a mug of tea? a paintbrush? how did they get there into her sight but out of her reach? and that woman. almost the same but eyes on fire, smile almost inviting. what *is* she doing with my only face? (11).

The destabilization of the mirror's reality-effect can be read as the inciting point for the protagonist's embrace of fugitive and feral selfhood. At first, the protagonist is firm in her conviction: "it *was* a mirror." Then she concedes, "she *thought* it was a mirror." Finally, she realizes that it had simply "always been a mirror," but that does not mean it would always *remain* a mirror. Her description that "something isn't right" indicates her new and uncertain relationship to fugitivity, as the mirror now reflects objects that represent the care (a mug of tea) and freedoms of imagination and creativity (a book and a paintbrush) her former life lacked but she does not yet fully believe in. She cannot even recognize a woman who is identical in appearance with the exception of looking happy and alive-- "eyes on *fire*, smile almost *inviting*" as a possible version of herself. Gumbs notes, "the new female being, first of her kind, couldn't believe herself" (15).

I read the mirror that shakes the protagonist out of her domestic stupor as a mirror of speculation through its making-real the possible lives, notably grounded in the creative freedoms Gumbs names acts of mothering, that sociopolitical naturalization processes previously mystified. In her articulation of the framework of fugitivity, Hartman focuses

on the ostensibly small acts taken by enslaved subjects that preserved a sense of self in the face of a near-totalizing political system of dehumanization and massification, such as taking a walk outside the plantation or stealing small objects from their owner's home. Hartman explains,

> "Stealing away exploited the bifurcated condition of the black captive as subject and object by the flagrant assertion of unlicensed and felonious behavior and by pleading innocence, precisely because as an object the slave was the very negation of an intending consciousness or will" (*Scenes of Subjection* 69).

The gesture of the fugitive thus lies in exploiting the blindspots of a dominant landscape of visibility to create their own world out of sight; for enslaved Black subjects, fugitivity was facilitated by the white assumption of Black ignorance and inability, despite the obvious counter-example of the enslaved being the primary workers and producers on the plantation.

Hartman goes on to analyze how, post-emancipation, practices of fugitivity became both harder and more urgent for Black women specifically, as the domestic and its gendered structure of mobility became a primary zone of surveillance for signs of civilization and successful adaptation to the social order (and, in turn, a primary zone through which to justify the criminalization and disinheritance of 'free' Black subjects). 'Primers' on proper domestic habits proliferated throughout the social sphere, with a focus on "labor, hygiene, and discipline" (157). The cultural fixation on proper domesticity further entrenched racialized cultures of policing both on the part of anxious white subjects and in the literal enhanced power of the state police; it also produced the

figure of 'the house-visitor,' who would later become the social worker (160). The increasing stakes of performing domesticity worsened both the vulnerability of Black women working as domestic servants in white homes and the consolidation of heterosexual and patriarchal power structures within Black families trying to hold on to freedom (157). In the twentieth century, the infamous 1965 Moynihan report, titled *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* and written by white sociologist Daniel Moynihan, blamed widespread Black poverty in the U.S. on the prevalence of single-mother families, consolidating the white imaginary of Black familial dysfunction (Moynihan).

The protagonist's inauguration of a "new [type of] female being" before she starts planning her exit from her husband and her home speaks to these long shadows of domestic confinement and performativity that have subjugated Black women and invisibilized their individual desires and dreams, as well as their potential queerness and gender nonconformity. The first scenes that tell of the protagonist's growing rage and ferality take place in the kitchen, which Hartman describes as "the microcosm of the nation and the ethic of submission" (158) during the post-emancipation turn to domestic surveillance. Gumbs narrates how,

> "she put the words in his breakfast. wiped the spoon with the ink, stirred it deep into black tea. the words were blue and she pressed them into the china saucer underneath his teacup the delicate bowl before she put the oatmeal in. the words were sins that she allowed herself in the morning"

Read one way, the protagonist's continued commitment to domestic performance could represent a half-way point between subjugation and fugitivity. Gumbs' narration of the protagonist's mindset, however, is no longer threaded with ambivalence; even the motions of preparing oatmeal (a soft, quaint food) are performed with a violent tenacity: "stirred it *deep*," "*pressed* them into the china saucer."

Gumbs goes on to emphasize the protagonist's underlying rage and murderous intent:

> "her wrought written loops of language printed careful on the whiteness sweet as poison. before the sugar and the milk. *she loved the soft blue ocean of wishing he would die*" (22, emphasis mine).

Through the 'quiet' breakfast scene, Gumbs entangles the protagonist's ostensible domesticity with the reality of her murderous, feral interiority. Moreover, her emphasis on personal expression ("*her* wrought written loops of language") as the protagonist's exit strategy embodies the central strength of feral poetics as a mode of otherwise worlding, as well as its intimacies with Black feminist fugitivity. By quietly slipping away and leaving an explanatory note of dissatisfaction legible only to herself, she prioritizes the safety and privacy of the self under capture over any responsibility to fight for recognition and rights in the world of captivity.

Building on Black feminist theories of identity, Kevin Quashie has argued for centering quietness and surrender as modes of Black vitality within anti-Black national contexts. Quashie builds his intervention in part through a critique of W.E.B. Du Bois's framework of double consciousness, which is often used to understand the complexities of identity-formation for racialized subjects. For Quashie, while double consciousness

incisively articulates the fraught nature of moving within the public sphere, it is also built on the assumption that Black interiority is fundamentally receptive and blank, fully shaped by structures of racialization--- a critique that Hortense Spillers shares in her articulation of "interior intersubjectivity," as discussed in Chapter Two. Quashie's notes how, "in double consciousness, the twoness of black subjectivity does not represent another consciousness that is *free and wild*; instead, the twoness is a kind of pathology, a fractured consciousness that is overdetermined by a public language of black inferiority" (14, emphasis mine).

The freedom and wildness inherent to interiority is, for Quashie, what makes the concepts of quietness and surrender so urgent for re-thinking the resistance fetish within Black studies (and, I would add, critical theory more broadly). Resistance discourse, much like testimony, affirms one's structural position of inferiority: by insisting on the necessity of resistance, one reinforces the dominant image of one as marginal to the general order of things, always already on the verge of obliteration. In giving testimony, one confirms the higher power of the listening authority to judge the truth of one's story, always already admitting to the weak epistemological value of one's perspective. In both cases, the fault lies in naming oneself through the terminology of the dominant. Interiority and its defining opacity is, in contrast, one of the few spaces of freedom from discursive captivity. Quashie describes interiority as "expansive, voluptuous, creative; impulsive and dangerous, it is not subject to one's control but instead has to be taken on its own terms. It is not to be confused with intentionality or consciousness, since it is something more chaotic than that, more akin to hunger, memory, forgetting, the edges of

all the humanness one has" (21). We can read a dedication to interiority in Machado's earlier descriptions in *Dream House* of the ineffable nature of her hunger and desire, descriptions that defy both moralization and rationalization and that are often missing from testimonies of domestic abuse, as testifiers are called on to be both eminently rational and morally impeccable to earn the credence and empathy of dominant audiences. We can also read the power of interiority in Gumbs' line "she loved the soft blue ocean of wishing he would die," which tells us that the protagonist is not in fact ambivalent about whether she should stay or go, but rather that she is reveling in her rageful interior and taking pleasure in the quiet and secrecy of her fury, the knowing what her husband would never suspect.

Quashie's framework of interiority further eludicates the intimacies between Black feminist fugitivity and ferality as an otherwise way of being. To be feral is, in a sense, to be overcommitted to one's interior at the cost of one's publicness. Quashie relates his interest in surrender as a form of worlding to how "human subjectivity is not tethered to fighting the social world, but instead could be imagined as the agency to be had in surrendering to the wildness of one's inner life" (9). In other words, the agency of going feral. Quashie's work thus also helps articulate the centrality of the imagination, in its kin embrace of wild interiority, to ferality, as well as how ferality does not necessarily manifest as aggressive, physical defiance but can instead be an internal turning away from how one is supposed to think or know towards vitalizing and potentially unsettling forms of perception.

A key question Quashie anticipates from his audience, and that I anticipate in my proposal of ferality as a decolonial form of worlding, is how the politics of interiority translates into building solidarity networks and alternative political communities. For his purposes, Quashie turns to the dominant representations of the civil rights movement, which tend to center spectacular moments of anti-Black violence and Black resistance. Quashie counters that the movement, and particularly the development of Black nationalism and its prioritization of structural justice, depended as much on internal reflection, intellectual critique, and the shared expression of idiosyncratic fears and dreams as physical domination. Just as dominant representations of the civil rights movement reflect the U.S. valuation of competitive sociality and its concomitant blindspots, political frameworks that neglect interiority are in fact susceptible to a reductive and stagnant view of political membership that insists on performative homogeneity and the suppression of difference in perspective and lived experience.

The politics of ferality share with the politics of interiority an insistence on the importance of non-combative individuality to resilient and vitalizing political communities but, in line with the focuses of this project, speak to and from the history of Western imperialism and its use of domesticity and civilization as disciplinary imaginaries, rather than the dominant imaginaries of Black being that are Quashie's focus. Ferality in consequence carries with it a continued investment in rebelliousness that focuses on undoing gendered and racialized kinship forms, which include the traditional setting of the family home but also extend to national borders, carceral geographies, and teleological historiographic timelines that implicitly code futurity as the

prerogative of the civilized.[21] Like Quashie, though, I locate the implications of the feral for political solidarity in its refusal of the notion that homogeneity is a necessary foundation for the development of kinship and intimacy. My framework of feral poetics additionally embraces the hermeneutics of opacity implicit to Glissant's poetics of relation. Gumbs' description of the sociality inherent to her protagonist leaving her husband and her home exemplifies the alternative understanding of relationality embedded in feral poetics. I cite this section at length to draw attention to its pointed movement of narrative focus from the seeming isolation of the becoming-feral woman to the many people she carries with her in her becoming:

> she decided to walk out the door barefoot, hands empty unburdened by everything she had broken. she decided to weigh exactly as much as she weighed plus one thin favorite dress. she left the door open, screen and everything. she didn't take key nor pocket change. she didn't a write a note or expect to call. she didn't expect anything at all [...]
>
> she decided to stay and clean up everything. almost as if nothing had ever happened and never would. she put cinnamon and water in the oven so it would seem like she had been true and domestic the whole time. never mind there would be nothing to show. appearance is usually enough she remembered and dug her

[21] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a foundational activist in the prison abolition movement, developed the term "carceral geographies" as an alternative to the now overworked concept of the "prison industrial complex." As an alternative framework, carceral geographies accounts for the ways in which the racialized cultures of policing and incarceration are built into U.S. infrastructures that extend outside of prison walls, such as the redlining practices that enforce worse housing conditions, limited federal resource allocation to local public schools, and disproportionate exposure to toxic environments for low-income communities of color (*Golden Gulag*).

> nicest dress out of the trunk and wore the shoes that pinched. and sat by the window while the cinnamon replaced the salt and waited.

Initially, the protagonist seems to leave emptied of all worldly possessions, weighing "exactly as much as she weighed plus one thin favorite dress," foregoing any material connections to her former life. Her apparent asociality is further hinted at through the fact that "she didn't a write a note or expect to call." She actively erases any trace of life in the home, cleaning the house so thoroughly that it would be "as if nothing had ever happened and never would." Yet, her actions can also be read less as the nihilistic acts of the self-destructive than as the self-protective and strategic acts of the fugitive: she puts cinnamon in the oven to project an aura of having been "true and domestic the whole time," knowing from experience that "appearance is usually enough" for the superficial glances of both real and self-appointed police. She speculates as to what an embodied performance of her internal fury would look like:

> she decided to paint her discontent all over the outside walls with leftover house paint and chicken feathers and grease. she decided to pull up all the flowers that were not purple enough for how she felt. she decided to throw rocks in a cross formation warning any sacrificial company to stay the fuck away. she decided all that and then sat down and wrote about it instead.

In deciding to "[sit] down and [write] about it instead," Gumbs once again models feral fugitivity as not a performative denial of kinship or the need for belonging but an internal communion with the self. In countering the pervasive understanding of seeking freedom

for the self as neglecting social accountability and embeddedness, Quashie describes how,

> to ask about freedom within is to reimagine the collective such that the inclination to stand up for yourself is no longer limited to responding to the actions of others; instead, standing up for yourself means understanding your heart, your ambitions, your vulnerabilities-- it means engaging and living by these. Standing up for yourself is not oppositional, but abundant (100).

Giving space to the self and its potential misalignment with dominant narratives of how to be in the world and how to be with other people in the world performs an intervention on the level of shared imaginaries, modeling a thought-experiment of being otherwise that might very well turn out to be a tool of survival for other subjects living under kin sociopolitical conditions.

Accordingly, the protagonist's final exit from the domestic is not prompted by a letting go of her place in the social world but by a flooding in of all the people she has neglected throughout her domestic entrapment:

> she decided to call her sister and then her cousin and then her sometime friend. she decided to call her pastor at the church she went to once around the bend. she decided to call her mother and sugarcoat everything but the worst. she decided to call her grandparents long-distance via hearse. she decided to call on Jesus but figured he might not remember her name. she decided to call on the talking drum but her hands were curled up in shame. she decided to call up everyone but

> figured they weren't at home. so she walked out the door to see where they were and that's how she started to roam" (37-38).

That the people she calls on "weren't at home" can be read on a metaphorical level: that the people she feels true kinship with and the nature of her kinship to them extends outside of the relational structure of the domestic, to a place she has to roam outside to reach. Gumbs makes clear the nature of feral sociality, and how it is not without its complications, through the next sections' focus on the protagonist's fraught relationship to her mother:

> she tripped halfway down the porch steps before she felt it. mother deep smothering her ankles. round, locked, growing hot to the untouched. VapoRub tingle to the flesh. *what would her mother say*. and right there her wild skip turned shuffle like trying on cheap shoes bound by plastic. *if the shoe fits*, her mother would have sung. and she had never said mama no they don't fit and her mother never wore flat shoes anyway nor did she raise her eyes long or far enough to escape […]
>
> but daughter's heartbeat inescapable stole the piece of her pulse that was true. and that's why when she was cleaning the window she noticed the dove as it flew. when her youngest daughter finally escaped she smiled to herself. she knew (38).

Again, Gumbs complicates a superficial reading of the first stanza's articulation of ferality (a brave daughter escapes the shackles of wifedom and femininity that her mother had passively accepted) with the subsequent stanza's articulation of the protagonist's unbreakable bond ("heartbeat inescapable") to her mother and her mother's secret joy at

her daughter's escape. It's not that her mother's insistence that she wear painful, constraining shoes--- a metaphor for the disciplinary violence of domesticity--- does not anger the protagonist and inform her eventual decision to leave her husband but that, throughout *Spill*, Gumbs' understanding of action and mobility is historical and intergenerational: informed by the sociopolitical constraints different generations of post-emancipation Black American women face in their search for freedom. Though time is not named in *Spill*, the protagonist's mother presumably came of age in the mid 20th century, on the cusp of the civil rights movement and during the height of white American suburbia culture, which would inform her perspective on her daughter's chances for survival and happiness without a steady home and husband. Of course, they were plenty of Black female and gender nonconforming activists throughout the twentieth century *and* earlier centuries who critiqued and refused white, heteronormative domestic structures, but the epistemic infrastructure of queer, Black feminisms still had a more limited reach than in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with the advent of fourth-wave feminism and critical race theory.[22]

Gumbs thus makes a point of noting that the protagonist's mom did not "raise our shero to be ungrateful for the story she almost fit into," to mark that her mother is not a villain in *Spill*'s narrative and that the story she imagined for daughter, the one her daughter "almost fit into," was built out of love and care based on her perspective on what was possible. However, the fact remains that "hero is not heroine," meaning that ultimately her daughter had to recognize that the story she was raised for was designed to

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[22] See bell hooks' 1981 book, *ain't I a woman* for a more complete history of Black female and queer activism against U.S. patriarchal white supremacy from the abolition movement onwards.

nurture male ambition and futurity only--- that “the damn panties” were never going to “fit right.” The next stanza’s focus on the tensions between what the mother refuses to know, what she dreams of, and what her daughter actualizes, exemplifies the urgency of ferality for worlding the freedom dreams held in potentia:

> can i say sometimes the mother was glad about the distance and the unreliable post and the prejudice of telegraph companies and the constant smell of roast. can i say she felt relieved by what she couldn’t have known (since she and the farmer never upgraded to install a rotary phone). can you tell she avoided the corner store and the gossips and the seers and the well-connected minister and the questions of her peers.

Her mother takes comfort in “the distance and the unreliable post and the prejudice of telegraph companies” and avoids “the corner store and the gossips and the seers and the well-connected minister and the questions of her peer,” inferrably because then her daughter could not reach her to tell her about the abuse she was experiencing at home, and family friends could not speculate about what they suspected based on her daughter’s nervous behavior and increasing isolation. She herself is made miserable by her daughter’s continued marriage to an abusive husband, despite her avowed conviction that a domestic life is the best for her daughter, as she “[unteaches] herself to read” and “[works] day and night” to suppress her haunted conscience. Still, despite her best attempts at unknowing, when her daughter finally leaves, “she [smiles] to herself. she [knows].” The sociality of the feral thus also stems from its contagious nature in how it upends disciplinary ontological and relational structures, such as the nuclear family and

the submissive wife, that have long been only half-successfully confining the knowingness of the interior that something wasn't right.

Gumbs' narration of the intergenerational transmission of ferality is further informed by African diasporic frameworks of the self and knowledge-production, which are necessarily built from an understanding of 'home' as fluid and the necessity of internal methods for finding rootedness amid state processes of displacement. In her analysis of how the Middle Passage informed African diasporic spiritualities, M. Jacqui Alexander explains,

> African-based cosmological systems are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation. They are at the same time manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual and collective relationships to the Divine [...] the local pantheons that were encountered and transformed with successive waves of people; the degree of spatial autonomy that enslaved populations fought for and retained; and *Osanyin*, the ecology, a flora and fauna already inhabited by the Sacred (291).

African diasporic spiritualities, to the degree that they can be discussed as a collective, offer a conception of rootedness and belonging not dependent on homogeneous identity or spatial location. Their commonality resides in their shared transformation by dislocation. As discussed earlier, Hartman describes the fraught nature of commonalities based on violence and trauma in *Scenes of Subjection*; she also offers a personal account in her 2006 memoir, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* which discusses her experiences travelling to Ghana and realizing that the history of the Middle

Passage is a significant source of tension and division between contemporary Africans and contemporary African Americans, rather than a point of joyful coming together. Yet what Alexander points to is the resiliency of African cosmological systems in their understanding of spirituality as ecological, which contrasts most Western approaches to Christianity in their obsessive insistence on fidelity to the 'truths' of a centuries old text. On the level of the social, there may of course be political disagreements within Black communities over who has the right to pursue African diasporic spiritual practices, but, on the level of the interior, understanding rootedness as based on internal security and ancestral connectedness, rather than fixed markers like temporal and spatial location, makes space for a fluid conception of self amidst disorienting and uprooting life experiences. For example, proceeding her protagonist's escape from domesticity, Gumbs names the next section, "How She Survived until Then," (45) "then" being her feral exit as an adult woman. The section gives vignettes of the protagonist as a child and adolescent and her experiences with racism, sexual predation, and bullying. Gumbs highlights the lifelong development of the protagonist's fugitivity--- her distrust of publicness--- as the key to her survival and connects it the sense of support she finds internally, from diasporic spiritualities and their ancestral connectedness:

> she is learning it slowly cell by cell. the prison breathing that will save her. she is painting her skin the color of walls with prayers she thinks she is making up. the same prayers her bright ancestors carried to Brazil, whispersong shared to battle enslavement. *may they not see me. may they not hear me. may they not smell me. may they not feel wind and think of me. may they forget my very name*. it is not

> quite complete, the spell she is spinning around herself. when she walks home from the store the boys still see enough to harass her. but most days it seems to have worked perfectly on her teacher. for better or worse. day in day out. she act like she don't even know she there (50).

Notably, Gumbs frames the protagonist as "[thinking] she is making up" the "same prayers her bright ancestors carried to Brazil." Her lack of knowledge as to the historical reality of the prayers she whispers under her breath speaks to the dislocatedness Alexander points to as a defining feature of diasporic spiritualities. Additionally, though, the content of the prayers, "*may they not see me*. *may they not hear me*," points to the freedom to be found in remaining undefined, whether it be in archives or on the schoolyard. In *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes on Belonging*, poet Dionne Brand reflects on a conversation she had with her grandfather, in which he claims to know "what people we came from," (3) but when Brand pesters him for the actual name of their ancestral peoples, "Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandingo," (ibid) he refuses to answer. Brand comes to realize that her grandfather does not actually know what specific community in Africa they come from; he just wishes he does, yearns for the tangible connection. Their conversation and its mutual disappointments leads Brand to her book-length reflection on the ambiguous spatiotemporality of the African diaspora. She comes to the conclusion that:

> Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old

> World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings. Beginnings that can be noted through a name or a set of family stories that extend farther into the past than five hundred years or so, or the kinds of beginnings that can be expressed in a name which in turn marked out territory or occupation (5-6).

For Brand, the realization that to be part of the African diaspora is to have entered "the Door of No Return," is primarily melancholic; she traces her family's difficulties and her own difficulties as an adult making a home out of one location to the sense of displacement that accompanies not being able to trace or define your origins. However, interestingly, Brand also introduces a point of connection between the fugitivity inherent to diasporic life and the unique sense of worlding offered by aesthetic creation. She describes how, "to live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction--- a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness made like art" (19). By "the sign one makes," Brand means white stereotypical and fetishistic characterizations of Blackness, such as loud, unruly, hypersexual, tragedy-ridden, etc. that she argues make "the Black body [...] a domesticated space" (36).

Both her framing of "radiant moments of ordinariness" as "made like art" and the fact that she positions ordinary moments of aesthetic beauty as allowing Black subjects

escape from the domestication of white cultural imaginaries speak to the interiority and creativity of feral poetics and their resistance to the legibility of naming processes. Typically, art is lauded when it is 'universal' and engaging with dominant political and cultural discourses; however, as Brand points to, to engage with the terms of dominant discourse is often to subject oneself to identifying and massifying names (Black, queer, female) that are a form of territorialization/occupation, "a creation of empires." To embrace radiant ordinariness as art is to challenge the compulsory exposure culture of contemporary identity politics, to value the self above the public's right to know the self. As Brand and Quashie's work highlight, this is especially urgent for Black subjects whose subjectivity has historically been equated with the body and its legible movements, and who are particularly vulnerable to the violence of contemporary surveillance culture (Browne). Understanding art as a cultivation of interior opacity before it is a form of cultural engagement embodies the fugitive nature of African diasporic spirituality as a search not for "signs to the way home" but for "signs to somewhere free of signs for the body" (Brand 46).

To express oneself in art without identifying oneself--- to use signs as a way to escape signs--- may seem impractical and idealistic, but it is what Gumbs accomplishes with her ambiguous characterization and lack of narrative spatiotemporal grounding. Shortly after the protagonist's exit, she describes how, formerly,

> they called her peanut. not for carver. not for the etched inventiveness she ground down into. not for cut. for cute.

> they called her peanut. tiny. edible. they were not referring to the roughmap shell, the space she shrunk between, the armor that protected her from everyday uncle-type hell and her smooth skin. they were not naming the split-able sin of her seed prove double groove, her legume legroom. they did not know how much they needed her name in order to claim their own too-wide masculinity over her child-bride sensitivity. they could barely see her. but she could be butter, she could be fuel, she could be clock workings or gruel, she was that flexible. her name inexorable in the mouths of the barely knowing, received right when her mama started showing, she heard it that early. and she was sweet, not surly, smooth, not chunky, graceful, not clunky. she was who they imagined they needed her to be, with a smile, not a frown. and when she escaped she was fully free. and that's how she would always be. her nickname changed to *nutcase. no-name. that crazy bitch*. they had no way to track her down (43, emphasis mine).

The protagonist's nickname, peanut, highlights the use of naming as a form of domestication, particularly for women: by peanut they mean "cute," not "cut"--- a potentially violent act. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman notes that the use of surnames amongst newly-freed Black families to identify women and children as property of the husband "[marked] the decisive shift in the reproductive economy of freedom" (155). Gumbs similarly marks the gendered history of being named through the way the men in the protagonist's community "needed her name in order to claim their own too-wide masculinity over her child-bride sensitivity." However, Gumbs' phrasing of how the name the protagonist gives them sits "*inexorable* in the mouths of the *barely* knowing,"

(emphasis mine) questions the epistemological value of a name. The name becomes *inexorable*--- impossible to stop or remove--- while they retain minimal knowledge of the woman beneath the name. Gumbs thus demonstrates the force of subterfuge implicit to a name used as a cover, as the social importance ascribed to names gives them a surface value disproportionate to the quality of information they provide. By allowing them to name her, the protagonist becomes "who they imagined they needed her to be" and does so "with a smile," because she knows she has given them nothing real, that when she leaves she will leave "fully free."

Gumbs' fugitive perspective on naming can be read besides *Spill*'s unique position as a form of testimony. What would it mean to build a structure of testimony out of describing the surfaces of subjugation without naming the subject, as Hartman proposes is necessary to a rigorous deconstruction of power structures? For starters, aesthetically rich texts like *Spill* would need to be taken seriously, not only for the epistemological insight they offer but also, and perhaps more importantly, for the philosophies of subjectivity and voice embedded in their poetics, and the challenge they pose to Western testimony's investment in individual representation and transparent voice. In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben reflects on national attempts after the Holocaust to recognize the genocidal violence of the Nazi party and provide reparations for survivors and the Jewish community. One of his main concerns is the disingenuousness implicit to the framing by post-Holocaust tribunals, such as the Nuremburg trials, of testimony as providing emotional catharsis for the survivor, when Holocaust tribunals in actuality functioned to ease the conscience of the

state and the German public. His distrust of national structures of testimony leads Agamben to reflect on how they reflect and consolidate biopolitical structures of subjectivity, which, as he showed in his earlier work in *Homo Sacer*, gain their power from the false claim to know what qualifies as human and what qualifies as life.

Within his reflections, he develops an alternative framework of testimony that aligns the particular form of subjectivity testimony facilitates with the subjectivity facilitated by poetry. For Agamben, the continuity between testimonial subjectivity and poetic subjectivity lies in how "*the poetic 'I' is not an 'I'; it is not identical to itself*" (112). Agamben's insight refers to how poets typically speak *semi*-autobiographically, in that they tend to write directly from life experience but through the layered opacities of metaphor and lyricism. He quotes Keats' argument that "the poetical Character [...] it is not itself--- it has no self-- it is everything and nothing-- It has no character" (qtd in 112). Agamben then parallels the desubjectification implicit in poetry to the desubjectifying experience of a survivor of violence testifying to the experience of violence. He describes how,

> Testimony appears here as a process that involves at least two subjects: the first, the survivor, who can speak but who has nothing interesting to say; and the second, who 'has seen the Gorgon,' who 'has touched bottom,' and therefore has much to say but cannot speak. Which of the two bears witness? *Who is the subject of testimony*? (120).

Agamben's point is that the self of the survivor is not the same as the self in the midst of the experience they might not have survived. In being asked to give testimony, a person is

asked to transport themselves back to a time, place, and mindset that they no longer occupy, trapping them in a fraught zone of subjective in-betweenness. Brand describes Diasporic subjectivity as similarly existing within an "inexplicable space. That space is the measure of our ancestors' step through the door toward the ship. One is caught in the few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence" (20). Brand points to how the inexplicability of being, or the inability of language to capture the self, that interests Agamben is made forcefully obvious in moments of extreme violation and depersonalization, which create a heightened sense of unbelonging and irreality that can be carried for generations after the event. Being called to give a full account of yourself is thus doubly blocked by both the underlying structural impossibility of squeezing the self, who is necessarily dispersed throughout time, into the discursive flash offered by testimony and by an internalized sense of oneself as fundamentally detached from a shared sense of time and space. In considering ways to counter the violence of state testimony, Agamben in turn locates potential in how poetry highlights both the fragility of discursive knowledge systems and the reality of subjective mutability: the ideal form for the "vertiginous movement" (120) of testimony. He describes how, "subjectivity and consciousness, in which our culture believed itself to have found its firmest foundation, rest on what is most precarious and fragile in the world: the event of speech" (122).

In the final sections of *Spill,* Gumbs turns to a more explicitly collective address by offering the reader strategies of fugitivity through imperatives, such as "learn. learn not to write your name in vain," (121) and reflections on the current state of things and

how they might inform practices for better futures. The turn from individual escape to collective futurity reflects her use of ambiguous characterization throughout the text to capture the fraught entanglement between a self and a community, as well as the testimonial capacities of poetry in its embrace of desubjectification and polyvocality. It also brings the reader back to the text's framing interest in the word *spill*. As Gumbs moves into more community-based reflections, the protagonist "looked at herself in the mirror and all over the dance floor and flashing on the tv and wondered how did i spill. how did i spill out everywhere?" (105). In the end, to "spill" is not to slip up, to knock a glass over and ruin the carpet, but to escape the domesticating habits that have a stranglehold and to lean into moments of collective catharsis. Notably, the negative connotations of spill also mirror the negative connotations of ferality, both of which reflect an unsustainable trust in the security of containment. To go feral, to spill over, is not about embracing individual freedom at the cost of collective accountability--- who will pay for the carpet--- but about modeling freedom practices that allow for a collective pause to consider why maintaining a pristine living room was ever so important to begin with.

The presence of the feral woman hangs in the background of the ending sections, signaling that she has not risen above the community but remains deeply embedded in it, now as a gesture of possibility. In one stanza, a woman in town reflects on how,

> she was unnatural really. unsuited for a world that dressed itself in lies, that allowed bodies and promises to shed themselves and die. she was not like that. but then on the other hand what is more natural than letting summer into your skin.

> and wouldn't you keep it if you could? my sci-fi reading cousin says she had a special kind of melanin. i say she remembered something the rest of us forgot. my son says she's the first mad scientist he ever heard about (144).

Partly, the woman serves as testimony to a different way of being, to refusing to accept a world "that dressed itself in lies." The townie's observation that "she was unnatural really" recalls the woman's initial observation at the beginning of *Spill*, when looking at herself in a mirror and seeing a woman with a cup of tea and a paintbrush reflected back at her, that something was "not right." Social naturationalization processes stigmatize freedom from compulsory publicness as unnatural, entangling non-normative modes of behavior with biological imaginaries of genetic abnormality, a potential smear on the species. And yet, discursive stigmatization cannot fully discipline the shared, interior truths the woman's exit makes clear: "what is more natural than letting summer into your skin"? In spite of the town's surface judgments, the woman inspires speculation as to how one can achieve the freedom she models, with "special kind of melanin"? By "[remembering] something the rest of us forgot"? By being a "mad scientist"? Gumbs' use of biological and scientific references as speculative metaphors for the woman's ferality performs a re-orientation away from the town's investment in disciplinary behaviorism towards a contagious curiosity.

Part of the protagonist's resilience as a form of testimony for her community lies in how she remains in the speculative mode. She is less a feral subject in a definitive sense of a final reading of her character journey than a feral happening. For example, though the majority of the passages centered on the protagonist are narrated through the

third-person, one of the few passages narrated in the first, which appears in the final sections, situates her as always already existing outside the narrative space:

> i am before that. i am not born this morning when you wake up in fear and look frantic for breakfast to belittle, for something to burn and consume. i am before that. present like dew and like steam and like dreams without request. i am not assembled on demand when you suddenly don't know what to say. i am before that. i am structure of bone. i am contour of clay. i am paradigm of play. i do not arrive. i stay. i am before that. i am not invented at the moment in the agenda when the scapegoat schedule starts. i am before that. i am the drumbeat that dramatizes the heart. i am the whole point. i am your favorite part. i am not artifice. i am art.
>
> before black is bad and broken i am more. i am not coin or token. i am the deepest spell spoken. and you are shook. i am the energy of the birth that you took. i am every blackened letter pressing on the book. and before that (131).

The protagonist's soliloquy embodies the power she now claims over the fungibility inherent to language and definitions: a fungibility that Black feminist scholars, such as Hartman, Spillers, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Riley C. Snorton, argue is inherent to Black ontology as a result of living under necropolitical labor structures but that can in turn be used as a form of fugitivity to evade the onto-epistemological edicts of Western humanism.[23] All she claims to be: "dreams without request," "structure of bone," "paradigm of play," are structural elements that exist outside of an historically specific

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[23] Jackson and Snorton's theories of fungibility are discussed at length in Chapter One.

spatiotemporal mode. All that she claims to have predated ("i am before that") and exceed ("i am more"), such as "the moment in the agenda when the scapegoat schedule starts" and when "black is bad and broken," speak to the Western patriarchal and anti-Black structures of relation that began with the Middle Passage and that Gumbs has critiqued throughout *Spill*. Her consequent fugitivity outside of the history of Western imperialism returns to Spillers' and Quashie's arguments that Black consciousness cannot be totalized by historical, and thus contingent, structures of racialization. Through the use of repetition, with "i am before that" continually re-asserting itself, Gumbs instead imbues the protagonist with the authority of self-identification; moreover, the ambiguity and multivalence of the "that" that the protagonist pre-exists implies that she cannot be fully articulated by anything that can be named.

By modeling the appearance of disappearance, she exists both inside and outside of testimony, in Gilmore's sense of testimony as a reading public that shapes cultural attitudes towards ethics and justice. She explicitly frames herself as "not artifice" but "art," and specifically writing, ("i am every blackened letter pressing on the book") meaning not a false form but an aesthetically nuanced form that cannot be easily comprehended. Accordingly, throughout *Spill*, the kind of testimony she has given through the use of speculative poetics mirrors Weizman's classical definition of forensics in its understanding that situations of injustice that took place far away, whether spatially or temporally, cannot be literally re-created in the present space of judgment and must instead rely on aesthetic forms of communication to capture the affective and subjective atmospheres experienced by the subject seeking justice. At the same time, her insistence

that, "i am before that," indicates that she always already preserved a sense of self outside her justice-seeking portrayal of contemporary patriarchal, anti-Black violence and the intergenerational trauma carried by African diasporic communities.

In *Spill*, Gumbs thus offers a testimonial mode suited to Agamben's framing of testimony as less a representation of subjectivity than a representation of the impossibility of discursive captivity. The protagonist's experience going feral and becoming town legend in turn highlights the possibilities for sociality outside of domesticated kinship terms, like wife and daughter, and the contagious nature of ferality as that which lifts the state boundaries placed on relatedness. Ultimately, not only does the definition of spill shift between each section, but also, and more importantly, the value the reader places on a dictionary definition.

**Conclusion: After Testimony, then What?**

In *Dream House* and *Spill*, Machado and Gumbs narrate experiences of domestic abuse through feral poetics. They grapple with the tension between the self and the community that defines life writing through ecological perspectives on social power and discursive authority, disrupting the Western assumptions of life writing as individualistic and as circulating within an equal playing field. Machado provides a detailed overview of the failures of recognition that have accompanied the incorporation of domestic abuse into U.S. law, with a focus on its invisibilization of queer relationships. By paralleling the limits of state and dominant cultural systems of recognition with her own difficulties recognizing herself as a victim of domestic abuse, Machado emphasizes the stakes of leaving current patriarchal and homophobic epistemic infrastructures behind. Her reliance

on speculative and fantasy-driven forms of knowing to deepen her understanding of the mechanics of domestic abuse, for both herself and her readers, through multiple epistemological perspectives questions the continued dismissal of speculation and fantasy as facilitating insular and weak knowledge-production.

In *Spill*, Gumbs provides a Black feminist testimony to domestic abuse with a focus on the historical origins of biopolitical domesticity within U.S. plantation slavery. Her use of speculative poetics as a feral form of testimonial voice builds on Black feminist theories of speculation and fugitivity and also expands Machado's critique of disciplinary epistemic infrastructures by outlining compulsory publicness as an historical encumbrance to Black liberation and structural element of the supposed privacy of the domestic. Her use of ambiguous characterization and narrative spatiotemporal grounding provides an outside to testimony for her justice-seeking subject while also making space for the thousands of drowned and undrowned ancestors of the Middle Passage whose freedom dreams inform her subject's feral relation to contemporary domesticity.

Both Machado and Gumbs outline the danger of public discursivity while also depending on language to make their concomitant demands for justice on behalf of their communities. Their excavations introduce the question of how one approaches testimony in the contemporary West. Machado's deconstruction of Western legal epistemologies as consolidating heteropatriarchal values affirm testimony scholars', such as Marc Nicachian and Eyal Weizman's, theorizations of the near-impossibility of attaining reparations and justice from state structures of testimony. However, Gumbs' interest in speculative poetics as facilitating feral futurity while still speaking to and from

historically and culturally specific situations of injustice provides an avenue towards reclaiming the justice-oriented promises of testimony without ceding agency to state disciplinary forms of subjectivity and voice. Gumbs' portrayal of burgeoning ferality indicates that ferality not only begins at the grassroots level but is made all the more resilient for its structural origins in generous interiors rather than invasive and immiserating publics. From the perspective of futurity, her hazy portrait of the kind of life that extends beyond the necropolitical present recalls the afro-pessimist insistence on foregoing the easy comforts of sure futures discussed in Chapter Two. There is no clear trajectory as to where *Spill*'s protagonist goes after leaving her home; there is only the knowing that she is elsewhere and that elsewhere is a possible place to be. In the next chapter, I take up David Wojnarowicz's memoir of undrowning in the form of his AIDS diagnosis during a state-facilitated epidemic. Wojnarowicz's furious, breathless aesthetics provides a kin model of feral potentiality at the same time as it grapples with the injustice of being forced to anticipate your final breath.

Chapter Five

# Utopia in Ruins: Queer Futurity and Exile in David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*

In chapter two, I considered the utopian implications of Afro-pessimism as a mode of thinking otherwise that does not attempt to totalize the possible, that accepts the necessary companionship of the opaque. In this chapter, I turn to contemporary debates within queer theory surrounding reproduction, relationality, futurity, and optimism incited in part by Lee Edelman's controversial 2004 book, *No Future*. Critical hesitancy towards *No Future* revolves around its perceived nihilism, as is implicit in Edelman's relegation as an "anti-relational" figure (Knadler); however, the condemnatory response to *No Future*'s negativity arguably reflects the heteropatriarchal and imperial structures of compulsory optimism Edelman and other queer theorists, such as Lauren Berlant in her equally influential *Cruel Optimism,* critique.[24]

In this chapter, I position *No Future*'s assumed nihilism alongside the assumed nihilism of ferality. Just as I have argued the feral is less about rejecting collectivity as a whole than about troubling the homogenizing and policed approach to sociality through which contemporary relational forms have become legible, Edelman's hesitant stance towards futurity does not reject queer potentiality totally. Rather, his criticisms of the Western romanticization of the nuclear family question the cultural understanding of ontological potentiality as necessarily tied to a shared vision of what progress and

[24] Black feminist theorists have in turn located potential within the debates sparked by Edelman's *No Future* to intervene against the perceived nihilism of afro-pessimist thought (Wilderson, Clark). James Bliss, for instance, points to the intimacies between Spiller's framework of the modern American family as a symbolic grammar system that disenfranchises Black subjects and Edelman's understanding of the child figure as a dimension of the Western cultural imagination that works to disinherit queer subjects from state protection and resources (85).

fulfillment look like that encompasses paternal reproductive mandates discussed in previous chapters. Edelman's deconstruction of heteronormative futurity can thus be read as intimate with Gumbs' theory of m/othering and its subversive and capacious understanding of parenting as not transmitting shared values but nurturing the onto-epistemological alterity of new creatures and creations.

For the literary case study of this chapter, I turn to David Wojnarowicz's 1991 memoir, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* in order to work through the entangled impasse between queer negativity/positivity and queer exile/futurity. *Close to the Knives* describes Wojnarowicz's experiences as a gay artist, activist, and writer watching many of his friends and acquaintances die from AIDs at the hands of an indifferent government. Wojnarowicz's memoir, which is, like Machado's, equally a work of social criticism, focuses its studies on two interrelated phenomena: the disingenuous privatization of sexuality and kinship via the nuclear family and the disingenuous understanding of the slow violences of the state as less harmful than individual acts of violence on the part of disinherited subjects trying to fight back or just survive.

The umbrella of queer theory known as anti-relationality similarly emerged as an historically-specific intervention against the policing and whitewashing of queer life during the AIDs crisis.[25] Leo Bersani, who, like Edelman, is considered a foundational

[25] Throughout this chapter, I use the term "the AIDs crisis" as a shorthand for the period of mass queer death and debilitation throughout the 1980s and 90s. I do so in part to evoke the larger cultural mythologies and epistemologies surrounding that history. However, a significant dimension of my reading of Wojnarowicz centers around his critique of the obfuscation of the slow violences of the state via the making-spectacle of individual acts of physical violence on the part of abjected subjects. Berlant has raised a similar critique of the rhetoric of crisis, specifically, for her, in reference to the classed and racialized dimensions of the so-called obesity crisis. In *Cruel Optimism*, she argues that, "long-term problems of embodiment within capitalism, in the zoning of the everyday, the work of getting through it, and the obstacles to physical and mental flourishing, are less successfully addressed in the temporalities of crisis and require other frames for

theorist of anti-relationality, argued that, as a result of the AIDs-induced stigmatization of gay sexuality and the perception of gayness as itself a deadly contagion, queer activists attempted to tame queer identity to court state aid by de-emphasizing the difference of queer sexuality and insisting on the relative normalcy of queer life. The problem with these visibility efforts for Bersani was that they depended on the promise of eventual invisibility: through adaptation to the nuclear family and the privatization of sexual behavior within the family home, queer activists ensured that the state and heteropublic would accept them as long as they never had to actually see them *as* queer. Or, as Bersani put it, "once we agreed to be seen, we also agreed to being policed" (*Homos*). Bersani's ambivalent relationship to public discourses surrounding queer identity and collectivity thus centered around his tracing of the invisibilization of queerness in the very effort to make queer life known and cared for during a time of mass queer death. For Bersani, the post-Stonewall queer pride movement and its development throughout the AIDs crisis was inherently tinged with morbidity as the tenets of social adaptation it became focused on allowed white, middle-class queers to disappear into the world of the normal, while the lives of many gay artists and activists, who had fought for a better, *different* world, disappeared through no choice of their own.

Throughout most of his memoir, Wojnarowicz is, like the artist-activists Bersani mourns in his work, a stateless nomad, first on a road trip through middle America and then moving between different homes in New York caretaking for ill friends. Like

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elaborating contexts of doing, being, and thriving (104). I would posit my framework of ruined utopianism as one such way of understanding the fraught nature of surviving and, occasionally, thriving under capitalism, but, for the purposes of this chapter, I use the term "the AIDs crisis" when a neologism would distract from the argument at hand.

Machado and Gumbs, he disrupts the expected transparent individuality of the memoir form by assembling a collection of observations of the lives of other Americans in place of a linear recounting of his personal development. He then weaves his interiority into his feral witness by intermixing present-time glimpses into his life with references to the violence that characterized his childhood living under a tyrannical father.

My reading of *Close to the Knives* focuses on the ferality inherent to both Wojnarowicz's social critique and writing style. His alienation from a violent family home leads to a sharpened attention to the pervasiveness of a dysfunctional paternalism throughout American culture and a lifelong pursuit of feral forms of relationality not beholden to hypocritical morality standards and the cruel optimism of American nationalism. Additionally, his career as a writer, photographer, and artist gives him an understanding of the fraught politics of public representational fields that is reflected in the ambivalent affective stance of *Close to the Knives.* Throughout his memorializations of his dying friends, Wojnarowicz veers in tone between sadness, wonder, and rage, the last of which is directed at the fact that he is forced to preserve his companions in words when the state should have preserved their lives. Wojnarowicz's destabilizing vacillation between wonder at the beauty of creaturely life and disgust at state neglect enacts the feral refusal of legibility sought by queer anti-relationists.

Edelman and Wojnarowicz's hesitancy towards futurity, familialism, and their entanglement within modern Western culture can also be understood alongside the anti-reproductive futurist turn in queer theory. Rather than critiquing hope and futurity across the board, anti-reproductive futurism critiques the political motivations behind

affective investments in certain kinds of futures. As a critical enterprise, it unravels the compulsory birth-to-death timeline that forms around heterosexual marriage and subsumption into the nuclear family lifestyle. Kathryn Bond Stockton's 2009 *The Queer Child* and Rebekah Sheldon's 2016 *The Child to Come*, for instance, take up reproductive futurism and the ways in which the homogenizing mandates of heteronormative temporality obscure the reality that the movements of time and futurity are inherently queer in their chaos-prone resistance to top-down logics.[26] Their projects are intimate with this dissertation's interest in deconstructing the paternalism at the heart of modern biopolitics.

Anti-reproductive futurism has also been central to recent scholarship on queer archiving and historiography practices that deconstruct the Western archival logic of *domiciliation* discussed in the previous chapter. Heather Love's 2009 *Feeling Backward*, Elizabeth Freeman's 2010 *Time Binds*, and Alexis Lothian's 2018 *Old Futures*, all consider how the queer reorientation of time as nonlinear can be applied to radical archiving and historiographic practices that figure the traces of the past recoverable in historical documents, personal memorabilia, art, literature, and popular culture as interactive with contemporary forms of lived experience. Love, Freeman, and Lothian share an interest in undoing prevailing notions of the past as less radical or liberatory than the present, instead positing evidence of past queer life, whether in the form of radical

[26] Stockton develops the concept of 'growing sideways' to capture how queer subjects grow older without growing into the heteronormative vision of adulthood, while Sheldon focuses on the biopolitical implications of the sanctified child figure in relation to the culture of denialism that surrounds the imminent future of climate disaster (Stockton, Sheldon).

protest or barely hanging on, as an urgent source of kinship for contemporary queers facing the questionable rewards of neoliberal state incorporation.

The anti-reproductive futurist turn and its critique of the affective structures encoded by the word 'future' can be read alongside decolonial critiques of imperial teleology and its totalization of modern Western historiography and political progressivism. Moving against the future as a disciplinary discursive structure means troubling the prevailing notions of happiness, success, and fulfillment that support not only complacent but self-debilitating relations to empire. Queer theorists Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant have, for instance, convincingly argued that public notions of happiness and a good life within the modern West are more oppressive than liberatory in effect, particularly for the majority public marginalized by patriarchal imperialism (Ahmed, Berlant).[27] Anti-reproductive futurist theory works against the cruel optimism of state narratives of queer futurity, such as the "It Gets Better" campaigns, which imply that recent political events, most prominently the legalization of gay marriage within the U.S., have allowed contemporary queer subjects to pursue a normal life unfettered by the supposedly long-past ignorances of homophobia (Puar 6). As queer theorists like Love and Jasbir Puar counter, sometimes--- often, even--- it gets worse. Moreover, worsened quality of life for contemporary queers of color can be directly traced to the national promise of happiness for white queers insofar as the progressive attitude towards modern

[27] In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed describes how, "the happy queer is a form of social hope, a sign of 'how far we have come' or hope for a world where discrimination has been overcome. The risk of this hope is that it reimagines the world *as if* there is no discrimination" (113).

sexuality espoused by contemporary Western governments works in part to justify mass racialized violence within and beyond national borders (Puar 95, Butler 105).[28]

From the perspective of relationality to empire, José Muñoz offers a more productive critique of the anti-relational debate than a flattening dismissal of Edelman's presumed nihilism. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz notes that Edelman "clearly announces his mode of argumentation [in *No Future*] as being in the mode of the ethical," (11) rather than the mode of the literal through which it is often evaluated. He then asserts his main issue with anti-relationality (a scholarly category he importantly describes as "provisional" (ibid)) as its "distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference" (ibid). Muñoz traces Bersani and Edelman's aversion to identitarian contamination outside of sexual difference in their preference for scenes of "gay male sexual abandon" (14) to ground their conceptual gestures towards alternative onto-epistemologies. He argues that their focus on the gay male orgasm both further decenters lesbian desire within queer theory and effaces the larger cultural communities that necessarily inform a subject's

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[28] Puar traces how Israel relies on spectacles of reproductive and gay rights progressivism via the advanced reproductive technologies it offers LGBT couples to prop up its performance as an enlightened nation in contrast to the supposed barbarism of the Palestinians, who receive the brunt end of its technological advancement in the form of its massive defense industry (cit). Million has similarly criticized Canada's truth and reconciliation movement for the ways in which its performance of decolonial solidarity actually works to consolidate imperial paternalism through its implicit positioning of the Canadian settler state as the therapist overseeing the healing process of aboriginal nations; the temporal logic of apology also relegates the trauma of settler colonialism to an unenlightened past that obscures its ongoingness, particularly for aboriginal women (Million 3).

sense of self. What Bersani and Edelman's theories lack is an articulation of how their ethical pursuit of a liberatory space outside of the violence of identity and subjectification can retain the necessary weight of social embeddedness and accountability. They also replicate the implicit ahistoricism of liberal humanist individuality and its disingenuous freedom from the ugly business of empire.

Muñoz's contribution to the impasse surrounding queer futurity in the wake of the false hopes of Stonewall and the mass mourning of the 1980s and 90s, as well as the racialized and gendered blindnesses of reactionary white gay male narratives of refusal, is to reorient the prevailing understanding of the utopian's relation to the pragmatic. The utopian is often understood to mean a mode of thought that expects too much and desires what is not possible, leaving it susceptible to accusations of political naivety.[29] From the perspective of the queer, Muñoz posits the perceived impracticality of the utopian as in fact its strength. His philosophy of the utopian is informed by Ernest Bloch (Muñoz 3-4). Muñoz focuses specifically on Bloch's understanding of the utopian affective mode of hope as necessarily *also* accompanied by disappointment in its grappling with "the past and potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening" (9). For both Bloch and Muñoz, the utopian is thus always, in a certain sense, sad, given its double grounding in both an unrealized past and a yet unrealized dream for the future.

To illustrate the usefulness of the utopian's promise of disappointment, Muñoz turns to linguist J.L. Austin's understanding of the faltering functionality of language in

[29] Of course, such accusations neglect the fact that foundational utopian novels, such as William Morris' 1890 *News from Nowhere* and Edward Bellamy's 1887 *Looking Backward*, were developed from the deeply pragmatic and focused goals of socialist philosophy.

its abstract nature as a non-material medium that lends it to cycles of misinterpretation but also serves as driving force of new connections and social possibilities. He focuses on how Austin proposes moving from a true/false hermeneutic to felicitous/infelicitous when evaluating speech acts:

> "Felicitous speech acts are linguistic articulations that *do* something as well as say something. But as Austin maps out the life of the felicitous speech act we see all the things that eventually go wrong and the failure or infelicity that is built into the speech act. Bloch's hope resonates with Austin's notion of the felicitous insofar as it is always eventually disappointed. The eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process" (9-10).

For Muñoz, the move from the true/false to the felicitous/infelicitous is a particularly important intervention for critical theory and its stagnation within "a disabling political pessimism" (9). Within the renewed hermeneutic field offered by Austin and Bloch, the hopefulness of the utopian is not false but faltering. In other words, the utopian succeeds precisely in the moment that it fails. The moment of failure and disappointment, or "the opening," illuminates a path not yet able to be taken but that was open enough to be attempted.

Muñoz grounds his understanding of the utopian and its relation to queer futurity through his articulation of the anti-antirelational, which is designed to complicate the binary between the compulsory positivity of heteronormative sociality and the supposedly liberatory anti-sociality Bersani and Edelman locate within the gay male orgasm. As his case study of anti-antirelationality, Muñoz close reads a passage from

Eileen Myles' *Chelsea Girls* that describes her time caretaking for the elderly, queer poet, James Schuyler. Muñoz describes how,

> "the younger poet notes a sense of 'hopelessness' and feeling like a jerk as she works to take care of the older man, whose attention waxes and wanes. The relationality is not about simply positivity or affirmation. It is filled with all sorts of bad feelings, moments of silence and brittleness. But beyond the void that stands between the two poets, there is something else, a surplus that is manifest in the complexity of their moments of contact" (14).

The "affective surplus" (ibid) of the anti-antirelational, found in "moments of silence and brittleness," highlights moments of subjective indistinction, in which the roles Schuyler and Myles play for each other become unclear in purpose and sustainability. Muñoz thus, like Edelman and Bersani, grasps onto zones of ontological potentiality outside of identitarian frameworks but ultimately locates the potentiality of subjective indistinction less in self-obliterating, spectacular states like the orgasm than in the quiet, hesitant moments between Schuyler and Myles that offer an opening up to the other. Here, sociality facilitates not so much a state of capture but the possibility of becoming something else to someone else through a transformative moment of contact. Muñoz's attraction to moments of pause additionally recalls Quashie's interest in the politics of interiority and surrender from the previous chapter.

In pursuing forms of sociality that are neither obviously positive or negative, liberatory or oppressive, Muñoz introduces a way out of the moralized relational structures of reproductive futurism without attempting to re-stabilize queer identity

within extreme affective states like pride or despair that do not allow for the opacity and wavering inherent to everyday action and experience. The anti-antirelational's grounding in the bittersweet pursuit of utopian openings also folds into the afro-pessimist understanding of futurity as not something that can be foreseen and offered as insurance previous to the transformation of the present social order. Likewise, the Blochian opening is not a blueprint of what necessarily *will* be but a gesture towards the otherwise within the contested now. However, I find the phrasing of "anti-antirelational" awkward, as it forces the conceptual work to remain, if only in name, stuck in a cycle of antagonisms. For the close readings of this chapter, I supplement Muñoz's "anti-antirelational" and its reaching for the bittersweet utopian with Heather Love's concept of ruined subjectivity.

**The Ruins of Empire: Queer Performativity and Feral Community**

In *Feeling Backwards,* Love grapples with the inevitability and stickiness of "bad" feelings, with a focus on misfits within queer archives who are often overlooked or dismissed by contemporary queer publics and their determination by the rhetorics of queer pride and resistance. The "ruined" dimension of Love's subjectivity framework captures the historical consciousness tenet of Bloch's approach to utopian thought, as well as the reluctant witness of the feral. By "ruined," Love means subjects who were unable to overcome the deleterious effects of living under a necropolitical and homophobic state structure and whose lives were seemingly characterized by immobility and dread.

Love offers multiple case studies for the politics of ruined subjectivity, but, for my purposes, I'll focus on her reading of the nineteenth century literary figure, Walter Pater.

Not unlike Bersani and Edelman's solitary and prickly white male case studies, such as Scrooge and Proust, Pater was trapped within a subjectivity with access to social mobility via his class, racial, and gender status but with little desire to actually *be* in the world in its current structure. Though Pater never explicitly identified as gay, he notoriously lost a proctorship with the Oxford professor Benjamin Jowett after Jowett was given romantic letters between Pater and a male undergraduate. Pater's friend, A.C. Benson wrote of how, "Pater's whole nature changed under the strain after the dreadful interview with Jowett. He became old, crushed, despairing-- and this dreadful weight lasted for years" (48 Dodd). Benson's description of Pater becoming "old" through a swift confrontation with the institutional power of homophobia provides a dour spin on the ways in which queer subjects may be out of step with straight time: queerness may allow a person to stay young in the sense of evading the disciplinary adulthood of heteronormativity, but it may just as easily force them to grow old in a single moment through the crushing effects of social rejection. Love's reading of Pater focuses less on redeeming his alienation as a vitalizing political mode of resistance than on using his "shrinking'' (57) attitude towards the public sphere to reorient idealized understandings of political action at the margins within contemporary queer and critical theory. She argues that,

> "We want our politics to respond to inequalities of power, *but we construct a model of politics that has nothing in common with the experience of the powerless* [...] Given the ruination to which history's others are subject, we need to recognize and even affirm forms of ruined political subjectivity" (Love, emphasis mine).

For Love, Pater was an artist and writer historically situated at the emergence of modernism who distrusted the modernist claim of liberation through the new and retreated into a sort of melancholic classicism. Love reads Pater's retreat into the past within his public work through Eve Sedgewick's concept of queer performativity, which refers to a model of performance that involves an approach towards the spotlight immediately followed by a shamed withdrawal into the self. Sedgwick relates the ambivalence towards publicness underlying queer performativity to "to the experience of queer childhood, with its combination of alienation, extreme self-consciousness, and lots of time for reading" (Love 58). Queer performativity thus involves the intense dedication to interiority that characterizes the feral undergirded by the urge towards cultural engagement that accompanies sustained reading (a literary form of witness) and the self-protective hesitancy that accompanies historical marginalization from the dominant cultural sphere.

In tracing Pater's enactment of queer performativity, Love turns to his chapter on Botticelli in Renaissance. In the Botticelli chapter, Pater focuses on the neutral angels---the ones who were too fraught with indecision to choose between the Devil or God-- who Dante consigned to hell in *Inferno*. In Pater's reading, Botticelli was more sympathetic to the neutral angels he brought to life through his illustrations of Dante, giving their exile an air of "sweet melancholy" (63) appropriate to those who choose to avoid the violence of battle not because they are indifferent or lazy but because they wished for a different form of life. Through the angels' doubled exile due to being physically consigned to hell yet spiritually identifying with neither the world of Lucifer nor the world of God,

> "Pater imagines a community of subjects defined through indecision and delay. This liminal, semipublic space allows for the beautiful deferral and, one assumes, for the emergence of alternative forms of sociability. As attractive as this world is, the air of melancholy that infuses it serves a reminder of the fact that it is not a dwelling place that is freely chosen. One ends up there not by choice but rather by refusing to choose" (Love 64).

Pater uses his study of melancholic exile to craft what Love names an "epistemology of the vestibule," (64) which I read as intimate with Brand's African diasporic framework of the door of no return; both attempt to work through the degree to which political philosophies of revolution and resistance dependent on choice and agency can be applied to communities weighted by long histories of dispossession and dislocation. Like Brand, Pater takes comfort in the relative spatiotemporal freedom offered by literary and aesthetic production; however, as is also true for Brand, for Pater, the joys of art and literature cannot overcome the melancholy of remembered violences. Lingering in the vestibule-- the space before passage through the door-- becomes a way of retaining a sense of potentiality for those who have historically been disappointed by what waits on the other side. The epistemology of the vestibule also allows for a "semipublicness" through the vestibule's existence as an opening proximate to a social space. The ambivalent forms of sociality that develop amongst melancholic queer subjects who strategically defer from heteronormative publics but still long for embrace represent another model of the feral community-building I began to outline in my reading of *Spill*.

Building on Love's ruined subjectivity and the violent dispossession that characterizes feral subjectivity and collectivity, I frame the epistemology of the vestibule as equally an epistemology of the ruins. I prefer the spatiotemporality of "ruins" as opposed to "vestibule" for its greater attention to the onto-epistemologies quandaries forced onto subjects recovering from mass state violence. However, I hold onto Love's interest in states of waiting and existential fuzziness as a way of moving beyond the false confidence and compulsory publicness of contemporary resistance politics. Ruins are, after all, necessarily sites of apprehension: the detritus they contain memorializes the destruction of the society they once held; the driving question for those left standing is what now? Ruins and ruined subjectivity thus also open up to the Blochian politics of the no-longer-conscious, which looks to the past to imagine the future.

In applying Bloch's concept of the no-longer-conscious to his queer formulation of the not-yet-here, Muñoz analyzes how, "To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of" (31-32). To Muñoz's formulation of ecstatic time, I would add the melancholic time he previously located in the moment of pause between Myles and Schuyler. Such a moment also resists the liberal humanist individualization of time, as Myles is thrown back not into her past but into Schuyler's past as a young, mobile, and talented poet much like herself. Though less glamorous than ecstasy, melancholy equally leads one to step out of or be at out of step with the present moment. While some theorists have argued against a politics of melancholy due to what they perceive as its stagnating effects, I concur with Love that moments of stagnation and

hesitancy are underrated within contemporary politics and critical theory (Brown). This is not to say that the potentiality Muñoz locates in ecstasy is unproductive or false but rather that the burning anticipation he associates with the not-yet-here can be found not only in the affective extremes of ecstasy and despair but also within seemingly middleground states, such as the low hum of a long held sadness and the quiet anxiety of waiting.

My close reading of *Close to the Knives* accordingly uses Wojnarowicz's affective ferality to develop a queer politics of exile undergirded by a bittersweet utopianism. As a text, *Close to the Knives* is itself a gorgeous piece of writing underlined by the morbid reality of mass death. Wojnarowicz reveals his own diagnosis with AIDs around the middle of the narrative; a year after its publication, it would kill him. His reliance on aesthetics and writing to retain a sense of vitality in the midst of collective debilitation and premature death speaks to the bittersweetness of queer utopianism. His aesthetic of morbidity does not romanticize the violence of necropolitical state structures but rather holds onto and cherishes the vitality of the subjects being extinguished. To do otherwise would be to give weight to the obfuscating temporality of Western imperial historiography and its assertion that the dead are irrelevant to the workings of the present. Through such a lens, hope lives not in the castle but in its ashes.

### ***Close to the Knives*: The Nation as Family/ The Family as Ruins**

Wojnarowicz opens *Close to the Knives* with an unsentimental portrait of his family origins in a chapter titled "Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds":

> "So my heritage is a calculated fuck on some faraway sun-filled bed while the curtains are being sucked in and out of an open window by a passing breeze. I'd

> be lying if I were to tell you I could remember the smell of sweat as I hadn't even been born yet. Conception's just a shot in the dark. I'm supposed to be dead right now but I just woke up this dingo motherfucker having hit me across the head with a slab of marble that instead of splitting my head open laid a neat sliver of eyeglass lens through the bull's-eye center of my left eye. We were coming through this four-and-a-half-day torture of little or no sleep. That's the breaks" (3).

Wojnarowicz's framing of his "heritage," a term typically used to capture points of pride within one's biological family tree, often with a hierarchy-driven focus on national and racial identity, as an unceremonious "calculated fuck" that amounts to nothing more than "a shot in the dark" sets up *Close to the Knives*' demystification of the heterosexual family and its imagined safeguarding of Western moral purity. His focus on the crudity of the base act of sex required for biological reproduction refuses the romanticization of heterosexual marriage as grounded in love and maturity rather than sexual need that enforces the homophobic understanding of queerness as a form of moral contamination in its explicit focus on sexuality. In an essay examining the obfuscating epistemic infrastructures of heteropatriarchy, Jennifer Doyle explains how,

> Queer studies begins from a baseline awareness of the violent operations of phobic disavowal, including the disavowal of the fact that we live and work in forms of sexual community, whether or not we have sex with each other. The space supercharged with sexual anxiety is the space coded as 'not sexual'; these

> are homosocial, deeply mystified, and hierarchical structures dedicated to the reproduction of wealth and power (*Harassment* 157-158).

Throughout *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz is critical of the cult of sexual repression that undergirds American politics, particularly in the wake of Reaganism. His confrontation with national imaginaries of sexuality and relationality mirrors and folds into his confrontation with national imaginaries of violence and violation. In the above passage, he follows his unsentimental portrait of heterosexuality with an unsentimental portrait of friendship. He describes a "buddy" (4) of his "having hit me across the head with a slab or marble" (3) but then explains the antagonistic behavior through their mutual sleep deprivation and drug use, concluding, in a non-judgmental and resigned tone, "that's the breaks" (ibid).

Wojnarowicz's philosophy of violence is contextual and centered around ecologies of power. In the context of two equally down-and-out queer friends who are structurally susceptible to various forms of biological and emotional deprivation, an act of physical violence committed within a state of mental fogginess does not merit the condemnation of bad friend or bad person. Wojnarowicz is particularly reluctant to judge individual acts of violence in light of the nation-state's commitment to overlooking the day-to-day structural violences of welfare privatization and legally-enforced insular kinship forms. His reluctance to condemn the violent behavior of the dispossessed also needs to be understood through the representational politics of the AIDS crisis and the moralized abjection of queerness as a site of bodily and spiritual ruination. In her analysis

of the intersection of public health epistemologies and biopolitics, Lauren Berlant describes how,

> a hegemonic bloc organizes the reproduction of life in ways that allow political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies and their competence at maintaining health *or other conditions of social belonging*; thus this bloc gets to judge the problematic body's subjects, whose agency is deemed to be fundamentally destructive. (105, *emphasis mine*).

Through the implicit homophobia of national AIDs awareness campaigns and their focus on a moral sex life in the form of  abstinence outside of marriage queerness was framed as not only as not only a state of ruined health but of ruined sociality, the inability to desire the things and people that would contribute to the public good. Queer desire, already primed as a site of cultural abjection, became a scapegoat for the refusal of public health and government organizations to provide accurate information and appropriate resources for safe sex (Wojnarowicz 114).

The scapegoat ecology of blame that characterizes biopolitical epistemic infrastructures suffuses the (im)mobility of Wojnarowicz and his queer friends in the public sphere during the AIDS crisis but is also evident in their childhood histories navigating nuclear family structures. Shortly after his violent awakening, Wojnarowicz describes how he and his buddy would sometimes go searching for the buddy's foster parents in the hopes of scamming them for a large sum of money that would help them both get off the streets. He explains their motivation:

> Some nights we had so much hate for the world and each other all these stupid dreams of finding his foster parents who he tried poisoning with a box of rat poison when they let him out of the attic after keeping him locked in there for a month and a half after all dear it's summer vacation and no one will miss you here's a couple of jugs of springwater and cereal don't eat it all at once we're off on a holiday after all it's better this than we return you to that nasty kids home. His parents had sharp taste buds and my buddy spent eight years in some jail for the criminally insane even though he was just a minor (4).

This passage entangles several different forms of violence. There is the structural violence of the foster system as an inadequate and poorly-funded state solution to orphanage, child abandonment, or life-threatening situations of intrafamilial violence. There is the rather direct and spectacular abuse of power in the form of the foster parents locking their child in an attic for a month. There is the psychological violence of threatening that child into a twisted state of gratitude. And then, carrying the weight of all of the above, there is the violence of the desperate and deprived child attempting to kill the foster parents with rat poison. And of course it is the last that the state formally recognizes and punishes through an eight-year stay in a prison designed for adults. As I traced in my readings of *High Life* and *Absalom, Absalom*, both the legal inscription of violence and the legal inscription of its perceived actors and victims develops from a biopolitical taxonomy grounded in paternalism that empowers the father and his word at the peril of his literal and symbolic children, creating a gendered and racialized structure of precarity.

Within such a structure, the "hate for the world and each other" that defines Wojnarowicz and his buddy's relationship and the care they attempt to give each other in compensation are neither mutually exclusive nor ideal; they are utopian in the sense of being propelled to seek other forms of worlding but ruined in their learned orientation towards violence and a self-protective combativeness, as well as their internalized doubts over their capacity to enact other worlds. Like the buddy, Wojnarowicz grew up within a violent family home, and both men are gay and living within a homophobic nation-state. While the hatred borne from violation and abjection informs the depth of their solidarity, the lived difficulties of structural dispossession do not necessarily translate into recognizable political action or resistance. As Love argues, "there are ways of feeling bad that do make us feel like fighting back" (14). Ruination more often breeds resentment and retreat. Though Wojnarowicz does in moments obliquely reference what are typically considered 'direct' forms of political activism, such as letters of complaint to the government, generally throughout the memoir, and particularly throughout its first half, he takes on more of the role of a resigned observer of the violence of American life. As with the first buddy, he meets up with various dispossessed queer friends and acquaintances but their dreams and notions of 'fighting back' are often vague and half-formed, more self-soothing expressions of frustration than viable social visions. Within Wojnarowicz's largely gay male social circle, their political rage and its externalization through interpersonal conflict also often takes on shades of toxic masculinity even as his artist-activist friends conceive of themselves as acting in opposition to the heteronormative state. The provincial and at times toxic and

self-defeating nature of their approach to futurity and justice can, from one angle, be read alongside Muñoz's work as a queer reaching for the not-yet-here that is grounded more in the perception of inequity and the possibility for otherwise than in presently viable world-making; however, the distinctly non-utopian histories of patriarchal violence that shape their childhoods, adolescences, and present adulthoods necessarily make it difficult for them to inhabit forms of relation not structured on principles of domination while their queerness means they always already fail to meet national expectations of traditional masculinity. As with Machado's insecurities surrounding her self-knowledge in the previous chapter, that failure often amounts to the ruination of their sense of themselves as capable and worthy subjects. Moreover, the stakes of the not-hereness and inviability of their queer dreams and desires take on a morbid irony in the second half of the memoir, when many are dying from AIDs and become emotionally dependent on medical quacks claiming to offer miracle cures that result in medical complications and a quickened death.

For Wojnarowicz, the role of the wandering observer allows for the state of deep, interior reflection that represents feral politicking and that is, as Quashie outlines, traditionally exiled from the Western political sphere and its masculinized emphasis on combative publicness. Moreover, for Wojnarowicz, critical interiority is particularly important within the context of the U.S. nation-state and its invisibilization of structural violences via romanticized imaginaries of national togetherness centered on a Reaganist paternalism. Having left behind his abusive father as an adolescent, Wojnarowicz spent his teenage years "living on the streets and selling my body to anyone interested. I hung

around a neighborhood that was so crowded with homeless people that I can't even remember what the architecture of the blocks looked like" (32).

His displacement from his biological family and onto the streets informs his disillusionment with the paternalism of U.S. politics and the romanticized ideal of the nuclear family that cloaks not only the violence of the patriarchal kinship structure within the family home but also the dispossessed who lack stable living situations, whose lives in fact more aptly embody the national fantasy of economic individualism and its results. In their Marxist-feminist critique of the modern Western nuclear family, scholars Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh dissect how,

> The conflation of the individual and the family is absolutely necessary to sustain the conservative economic fantasy. This is a fantasy of an economy in which the actions of self-seeking 'economic men' add up, through the 'unseen hand' of the market mechanism to an optimal pattern of production and consumption (48-49).

Barrett and Mcintosh focus on how the Western economic fantasy embedded in the nuclear family structure is grounded in the conception of the father as the breadwinner, whose earnings will supposedly shelter those unable to contribute to the chain of production, leaving them, of course, dependent on not only his skill but also his beneficence. A conception of a working father as the savior of unproductive dependents within an economy fixated on maximizing production contrasts an economy organized around maximizing the number of people whose needs are met regardless of positioning within a kinship structure. Given Barrett and Mcintosh's analysis, it's unsurprising that the national fantasy of the father was particularly pronounced during the Reagan and

Bush administrations: years in which the nation was under the sway of graying gentlemen whose doltishness was paraded as charming while the national economy increasingly shifted away from social welfare towards privatization, leaving many without shelter and without hope.[30]

Wojnarowicz's reliance on sex for survival also brings him to the heart of national hypocrisy surrounding the queer pull of desire. In his recollections of his sex work, he remembers

> times getting picked up by some gentle and repressed fag living in a high-rise apartment filled with priceless north american indian artifacts and twentieth-century art who was paying me ten bucks to suck on my dick [...] I thought of the hundreds of times standing in a moving subway car, a cop standing with his back to me, his holster within easy reach and me undoing the gun restraint with my eyes over and over. I thought of the neonazis posing as politicians and religious leaders and I thought of my genuine fantasies of murder and wondered why I never crossed the line. It's not that I'm a *good* person or even that I am afraid of containment in jail; it may be more that I can't escape the ropes of my own body, my own flesh, and bottom line in the pyramids of power and confinement one demon gets replaced by another in a moment's notice and no one gesture can erase it *all* that easily (32).

[30] The paternalistic logic of capitalism also informs the proliferation of NGOs and human rights organizations aimed at helping 'underdeveloped' countries (as well as the categorization of over-exploited countries as underdeveloped) within the global neoliberal economy, which I will take up further in the next chapter's focus on geopolitics and racialized displacement.

The “priceless north american indian artifacts” that hang on above the “gentle and repressed fag” embody the ruined promises of the U.S. empire: despite the colonial accumulation of land and wealth represented by the man’s “high-rise apartment,” the beneficiary of such treasures is still repressed to the point that he can only bear to watch Wojnarowicz suck his own dick. Wojnarowicz in turn reflects on his personal limits as a feral wanderer, how he has fantasized of murdering a cop with the cop’s own gun but never actually been able to cross that line. He concludes that his own reluctance to engage in physical violence against state actants is not due to innate moral goodness or a self-protective fear of incarceration but to the felt pointlessness of individual action within a necropolitical state structure: a structure in which one is trapped within both “the pyramids of power” and “the ropes of [your own] body.”

In her work on another of Wojnarowicz’s texts, *Untitled (Hujar dead)*, which documents Wojnarowicz’s feelings about the death of his close friend and fellow artist, Peter Hujar, Doyle dissects the element of performativity embedded within the viscerality of Wojnarowicz’s work and its focus on the embodied experience of state neglect and violence. She also notes the distinct ambivalence of Wojnarowicz's role as a writer/performer, given his mixed feelings towards media and public fields of representation in light of state and media misrepresentations of the AIDs crisis. *Untitled* performs this ambivalence by layering a written critique of the government’s response to AIDs over pictures of Hujar lying dead in his hospital bed. Doyle describes how, in the recording of Wojnarowicz reading the text out loud that often accompanies *Untitled* in exhibitions, Wojnarowicz reads so quickly that he appears to be continually on the verge

of running out of breath. The combination of Wojnarowicz's rageful and breathless voice and the grim and still reality of Hujar's body

> bodies forth the affective world of a man who wants to live, a man who can feel the basic elements that life requires being withdrawn not from him but from the world. Blood, sperm, and money stand in for oxygen, sex, and access (to health care, political representation, and power). But laced through the work is something less easy to decode: a global panic (here meaning full-body and also worldwide), a sense of one's body as both nothing and gigantic (*Hold It Against Me* 131).

Indeed, much of Wojnarowicz's writing, despite its focus on the viscerality of violence and physical debilitation, ultimately leads to "something less easy to decode." It sits in the grief-ridden space between wanting to kill the nearest cop who embodies the indifferent government that murdered your friend and the reluctance to actually go through with it, to become part of the violent system you hate, the space of Gumbs' "soft, blue ocean of wishing you were dead." Such a space of rageful mourning can appear as but ultimately fits into neither vigilante nor nonviolent frameworks of justice and resistance. It speaks to the opacity of feral life in its affective ruination as a witness to mass violence and its refusal to yield its testimony to the forms of recognition currently available. The space of knowing a better world is out of reach only because we fail to grasp it.

Wojnarowicz's sense of his body "as both nothing and gigantic" can further be read alongside Sedgewick's framework of queer performativity as a brief flash of

exhibitionism followed by a shy retreat back into the mind informed by historical relegation to the shadows of the stage. Wojnarowicz's feral dedication to interiority and its access to a space beyond the epistemic and sociomaterial confines of publicness imparts a sense of his body as limitless and "gigantic," while his actual movements in public spaces impart the sense of himself as "nothing," as, like Hujar, relegated to eventual disappearance. His approach to life writing as an always-already fraught space of self-expression and publicness vacillates between the sociality of the performative and the quiet introspection of the reflective. In a chapter titled, "BEING QUEER IN AMERICA: A Journal of Disintegration," Wojnarowicz interlaces memories of his childhood with recent memories of watching a friend dying of AIDs take his final breaths. Much like *Untitled*, the result is ambiguous in its final message; Wojnarowicz veers between a raging condemnation of the U.S. public sphere and a humble state of wonder at the quiet beauty of creaturely life and death that is nonetheless underwritten by the same notes of urgency and desperation that inform the former passages. In the section on his childhood memories, he declares how:

> In my dreams I crawl across freshly clipped front lawns, past statues and dogs and cars containing your guardians. I enter your houses through the smallest cracks in the bricks that keep you feeling comfortable and safe. I cross your living rooms and go up your staircases and into your bedrooms where you lie sleeping. I wake you up and tell you a story about when I was ten years old and walking around times square looking for the weight of some man to lie across me to replace the nonexistent hugs and kisses from my mom and dad. I got picked up by some guy

> who took me to a remote area of the waterfront in his car and proceeded to beat the shit out of me because he was so afraid of the impulses of heat stirring in his belly. I would have strangled him but my hands were too small to fit around his neck. I will wake you up and welcome you to your bad dream (81).

Shortly afterwards, he goes back into the near-present moment of sitting at his friend's death bed with his friend's family and being

> totally amazed at how quietly he dies how beautiful everything is with us holding him down on the bed on the floor fourteen stories above the earth and the light and wind scattering outside [...] and I don't know beans about heaven and hell and somehow all that stuff is no longer an issue and at the moment I'm a sixteen-foot-tall five-hundred-and-forty-eight-pound man inside this six-foot body and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release (83).

In the first passage, Wojnarowicz reads as confident and driven: ready to enter middle-class homes and forcefully confront the complacent with the violence and desperation that informs the everyday lives of dispossessed queers. In the second, he reads as humbled, professing to not "know beans about heaven and hell" as he stands amazed by the quiet beauty of watching someone die surrounded by loved ones and with the basic elements of creaturely life— earth, light, and wind— still persisting outside the bedroom's walls. However, in the first passage, Wojnarowicz is not really as confident as the tone might indicate: he is remembering himself as a boy with hands "too small" to fight back against a man who beat him near to death. The ending of the second passage in

turn belies the apparent peacefulness of the scene, with Wojnarowicz feeling the pressure of a “sixteen-foot-tall” man pushing against the limits of his six foot frame. Behind the apparent forcefulness of Wojnarowicz’s entry into the performative as he addresses and threatens the “you” of middle-class America lies the melancholic desire to speak up for the helpless, ten-year-old version of himself, just as the reflective tone of the second passage answers a bittersweet desire to capture the beauty of a voice now lost. They ultimately both add up to the five-hundred-and-forty-eight-pound pressure of grief and rage: of not only one life in writing but of a life writer attempting to save his past selves and lost kin in the brief span of a single memoir.

In their work on transgenerational queer memory following the AIDs crisis, Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed focus on a phenomenon they name “de-generation,” (9) meaning the cultural pressure to move past the debilitating years of the AIDs crisis and to focus on cultivating happy (meaning neoliberal) queer futures, thus effectively erasing not only the traumatic but also the joyful memories of earlier generations of queers: how activists who lived through the AIDs crisis were just as much fighting for a more livable future as they were being killed by a genocidal present. Their study focuses on queer texts, such as *Will & Grace*, that serve as vehicles of countermemory in their insistence on the vitality of queer presence even within sociohistorical settings that demanded forms of masking and code-switching. For Castiglia and Reed, the aesthetics of transgenerational memory traceable in such texts are particularly valuable in how they move past an understanding of memory as needing to

be pure and infallible in order to serve the archival function of collective memorialization. They describe how

> memory is a broader category than history, not only because it allows for the archiving of acts, affects, and attitudes often denied the status of historical record but because it is incomplete, fragmented, affect-saturated, and for these reasons continually open to the imaginative processes of rearticulation, reinvention, and adaptation […] Sitting uneasily on the borders of public and private, individual and collective, historical and ephemeral, desire and impression, memory takes up the detritus of loss and preserves it more as a strategic, pliable, and evanescent expression than as a fixed monument or accurate rendition (23).

Castiglia and Reed's framing of memory as befitting the "detritus of loss" in its interpretive liminality sheds light on Wojnarowicz's life writing and its refusal to stay angry or to stay happy— to be either lost or redeemed. Grief is not just one thing and neither is its entrance into a public forum historically characterized by doubt and dismissal. Moreover, the space for interactivity with the past opened by memory as a fluid epistemological space introduces interior agency within moments in time primarily defined by structural debilitation. Wojnarowicz can take up the memory of being beaten as a kid and, figuratively, shove it into the minds of an American public who would otherwise choose not to see the violent fallout of compulsory heterosexuality.

Memory and its straddling of the borders between public and private, past and present, reflective observation and active engagement, also in part explains Wojnarowicz's draw to memorializing the lives of dispossessed adolescents. Like his

childhood self, the kids he memorializes are effectively disowned by society as it is currently organized, making their subsistence within the margins prone to the ruination of bodily and psychic debilitation yet charged with the feral potentiality of exiled youth. Wojnarowicz's recording of his brief glances into their lives preserves the potentiality of adolescence as an ontological turning point— a moment in which one may decide to suck it up and join the 'adult' world or to risk the insecurity of the otherwise that similarly drew Carter to the typically adolescent protagonists of fairy tales. In her work on the temporality of queer childhood, Stockton describes queer child development as "[growing] sideways" (5). Significantly for my purposes, she focuses less on the implications of growing sideways for children than the implications of *representations* of children going sideways for queer adults, for whom the remembered queerness of childhood as a state of both ontological potential and entrance into the disciplinary effects of social shaming may re-ignite "a heightened sense of growing toward a question mark. Or growing up in haze. Or hanging in suspense— even wishing time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that one wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble" (3). She intentionally turns to fictional examples of queer children in order to "[scout] the conceptual force of ghostly gayness in the figure of the child— this child's subliminal, cresting appearances only as a fiction (as something many do not believe in)" (4). For Stockton, the spectrality of fictional queer children mirrors the ghostliness of queer children in the public imagination as specters many adults claim to be impossible ("*kids* can't know what their sexuality is") yet fear for their potential to disrupt narratives of childlike innocence and queerness as adult perversion.

Although Stockton does not include adolescents in her framework, as her focus is on prepubescent children who most forcefully embody the national preoccupation with childhood as a site of innocence, adolescence is the crest of childhood and thus the point in which the question and potential risks of turning sideways become most urgent. For queer people, adolescence is also often the point of disinheritance, in which a child marked as troubled or odd loses the protective aura of cuteness and is presumed to be responsible and blameworthy for their own choices, despite their lack of access to state identification as a non-dependent until age eighteen. The social and material insecurity inherent to queer adolescence has strong resonances within Wojnarowicz's imagination, as he spent his adolescence on the streets getting by as a queer sex worker while simultaneously processing the psychological and physical abuses that characterized his childhood and observing the structural deprivations that define the lives of the homeless adults he walked amongst. The act of memorializing feral adolescents through his writing allows him to preserve the vitality of an adolescence lived in refusal. In one such memorial passage, Wojnarowicz watches a "fourteen or fifteen year old" (35) kid stealing money from pinball machines; shortly after he begins watching, the kid is caught by a police officer. The officer

> runs the distance and catches up to the kid and hog-ties him like a rodeo calf. By the time I reach them the officer steps back a few feet and pulls out a shotgun taking aim on the kid. I'm thinking, 'Oh man… he ain't gonna shoot him– he wouldn't do that.' And as I'm thinking that, the officer pulls the trigger and blows a hole open into the kid's side. The kid's side is gaping open near the waist

> showing pulsating intestines and stomach. I'm crouching near the kid's head looking into his eyes as the officer comes up and squats down next to me. The kid is no longer a kid; he's some kind of stray dog with bristly black fur and frightened eyes. The officer takes the kid's knife from the ground and with the other hand carefully parts the flesh of the wound until the organ that seems to be the stomach is revealed, its delicate pink grayish bloat quivering like a lung puffing in and out. The officer delicately cuts it open and clear liquid pours out. I look into the dog's eyes and watch the terror and pain change into an opiumlike daze. A sensual pleasure passes beneath their surface, a strange state of grace in the flight behind the eyes speeding up, the fading of life into the pale glaze of death (35).

Wojnarowicz's representation of an adolescent in the process of dying at the hands of the state adds a more literal dimension to Stockton's interest in the ghostliness of queer children: not only are there the theoretical specters of queer children that haunt the public imagination, but there are also the ghosts of queer or otherwise misfit children who were unable to survive a nation structured by xenophobia, resource scarcity, socioeconomic stratification, and continued denial that such conditions are unsustainable.

In his own work on queer ghostliness, Muñoz focuses on art that attempts to bring a presence to sociohistorical spaces of forced absence. Muñoz concludes that, "the double ontology of ghosts and ghostliness, the manner in which ghosts exist inside and outside and traverse categorical distinctions, seems especially useful for a queer criticism that attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a

politics that 'carries' our dead with us into battles for the present and future" (46). As with Machado's interest in the ghosts of queer domestic abuse and Stockton's interest in the ghostliness of the queer child within the Western imagination, Muñoz's queer utopian perspective centers how ghostliness and haunting embody the vitality and persistence of both Othered beings and other ways of being as well as the affective weight of temporal, social, and/or spatial displacement.

Wojnarowicz's case study of ghostliness, or the ontological state between life and death,  introduces a new question into Muñoz's utopian framework of haunting: what about the lost lives of those who didn't fight for a better world, or whose visions were insular and half-formed, ruined before they effectively began? Often scholarship on transgenerational queer memory post-AIDS presupposes a sort of romanticized unity to those lost during the crisis, as in Castiglia and Reed's chastising of contemporary generations of queers for forgetting their ancestors, who are in turn implied to have not 'sold out' like queers today, when in fact there was much tension, disagreement, and accusations of selling out amongst queer activists of the 80s and 90s (Schulman 92). As Wojnarowicz's writings makes clear, a community undergoing mass violence is just as often a community coming apart as it is a community coming together. Wojnarowicz's ending description of the kid accessing "a state of grace" in the moment of death, after his matter-of-fact description of the kid's gruesome death, gestures towards a space of ontological potentiality free from sociomaterial structures of dispossession while simultaneously emphasizing the inadequacy of that gesture as a form of resurrection or restitution.

Wojnarowicz also evokes the feral in his description of the kid as turning into "some kind of stray dog" in the process of dying; the passage's overlaying of processes of criminalization/categorization, necropolitical debilitation, and canine being recalls the first chapter's work on the history of the feral dog within the Western imperial imagination. In that chapter, I discussed legal theorist Colin Dayan's work on the entangled legal criminalization of canine and Black being that can equally be read alongside Wojnarowicz's depiction of the excessiveness of police brutality, the way it is driven by the infantilization and animalization of the Other and the concomitant will towards spectacles of power. However, in addition to their structural debilitation within Western law, Dayan considers the preponderance of dogs within transnational mythologies of death and the afterlife. She finds that

> "whether we consider public rituals of physical death or secret practices of psychic elimination, dogs figure ubiquitously. Dogs appear as demons, dead spirits, as persons bewitched or things left behind. In all parts of the world and throughout history, they are cast as spectral packs of white dogs, hell-hounds, heath-hounds, the gabble ratchets or Gabriel hounds, the red-eyed, dog-headed gatekeepers to the realms of the dead" (17).

Dogs are thus not just victims of state violence and the violence of domestication; their in-betweenness as domesticated creatures who are often abandoned— forced back into a state of becoming-wild— holds sway over the human imagination for its signaling of the instability of domestication, of supposed spaces of safety and security. Their appearances within tales of gateways to hell— borderlands between not only life and death but also

between goodness and badness— speaks to how the fear of death embodies fear not only of the biological reality of the heart stopping but also of a forced entrance into the unknown and/or the socially reviled, into ruination.

The boy's becoming-feral at the moment of death marks his abandonment by the state and, inferrably, the parental figures structurally designated to protect and provide for him. Yet the ferality of his appearance in the text also stems from all it refuses to tell the reader: his motivations for stealing (was the crime justified, i.e. was he a 'bad' person?), the type of person he identified as before, even the cop's decision to dissect him casts his death with the aura of the inexplicable. Part of the ethics of Wojnarowicz's memorial writing lies in his refusal to make sense of those he memorializes, thus why the various sections of *Close to the Knives* can seem disconnected. It's less about tying all the lives he observes together into a unified critique or structure of redemption than about preserving the ferality of those exiled by U.S. imperialism.

In her work on the criminalization of canine being, Dayan analyzes how the legal fixation on the quality of a dog's ownership (were they trained by the owner, did they serve a purpose for their owner) when it comes to a stolen dog's value is informed by colonial philosophies of civilized personhood. She describes how, historically,

> "the terminology of occupation (rather than ownership) made what had been the property of no one— *res nullius*— the framework for the conversion of persons into things, reclaimed out of wildness into obedience, whether by restraint or cultivation. These reflections on industrious appropriation demonstrate the juridical creation of a servile order. What makes the worthless worthy of being

> possessed– and its loss recoverable in damages— is the labor of the person who acquires, subdues, and enhances for himself what was nugatory" (213).

Western imaginaries of wildness and civility encode a post hoc structure of dependency in which the violence of occupation (or "cultivation") is the criterion for the violated creature becoming a person worthy of recognition and protection. The protections offered then stand in as justification for the originary violences. Neoliberal cycles of dispossession reproduce the logic of civilization through spectacles of criminalization and national defense in which subjects displaced, murdered, or incarcerated by the state are positioned as outsiders who had no redeeming social value when in fact the state's continued ability to perform displacement, murder, or incarceration is of upmost value for proving to its citizens the necessity of their continued investment in the state as such. That exiles who learn to behave will, like the citizens the state protects *from* them, earn equal access to national structures of care and protections is a ruse. The dog whose owner gets a good appraisal never loses his leash.

Towards the end of *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz devotes a lengthy chapter, "The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole" to recounting "a period of time [in which] I entered a circle of people who were attracted to forms and expressions of violence and bloodletting because these things contained some unarguable truth when viewed or experienced against a backdrop of america" (172). Within the timeline of the memoir, the chapter takes place after Wojnarowicz is diagnosed with AIDs, as old friends and acquaintances are dying of the disease at a rapid pace, and while the government continues to claim AIDs is not a national health crisis but

a problem specific to the queer community and its moral degeneracy. Within the timeline of Wojnarowicz's life, however, the recounted period occurs during the Reagan years, during the beginning of Wojnarowicz's disillusionment with the government response to AIDs and the American political landscape as a whole. The circle consists of Wojnarowicz and three other artists: Johnny, Joe, and Dakota. I read the chapter as offering a case study of ruined sociality through the precarity of the group's connection and the disparities in their life positions that make their brief moments of togetherness fraught. Johnny and Joe are straight, for instance, while Dakota and Wojnarowicz are gay. Wojnarowicz also describes both he and Dakota as "odd looking" (183). The two circumstances become a source of tension when Dakota develops a crush on Joe, the unreciprocated nature of which gradually eats at his already low self-esteem.

Moreover, as the title indicates, though the chapter is grounded in the group's dynamics and the politics of their morbid imaginations, it is also specifically a memorial of Dakota, whose fascination with violence, more so than the others, speaks to a desire to self-destruct borne in part from his fraught relationship to his sexuality. While the other artists are also down-and-out relative to the heteronormative public sphere, Dakota is the one whose preoccupation with violence is most deeply internalized and representative of the structural ruination of political radicalism and utopianism borne from the margins: a fact of American political life that haunts Wojnarowicz in his efforts to believe a better world is coming.

That Dakota's descent into self-obliteration haunts Wojnarowicz is also made clear on a personal level through the structure of the chapter; Wojnarowicz intersperses

his recollections of the group members and Dakota's spiralling lifestyle with descriptions of his own battle against addiction during that time: a period in his life in which his increasing reliance on heroin began alienating his more stable friends in the queer artist community and forced him to either reckon with his drug reliance or accept isolation and failing health as defining elements of his future. While he did end up getting clean, declining health would become a staple of his life even so with his eventual diagnosis. Ironically, it is Peter Hujar's chastisement of Wojnarowicz for throwing his life away on drugs that most encourages Wojnarowicz to get clean. Hujar then goes on to be the first of the two to die of the virus. Wojnarowicz and Dakota's remembered relationality is thus haunted by what Dakota's suicide represents, if Wojnarowicz once looked back on Dakota's choices as an embrace of the abyss but now the abyss has become the reality of being queer in America.

Wojnarowicz's reflections on the group against the background of his diagnosis and the acceleration of the AIDs crisis are informed by a renewed sense of the importance of public understandings of and meanings attached to death. He leads his reflections with a description of Johnny,

> a geneticist at a respected uptown laboratory. He also put out a xerox magazine called MURDER, which concerned itself solely with murder. It contained found clippings from newspapers, photographs of both real and staged murders, drawings of mayhem such as Elmer Fudd standing with a shotgun outside of a california McDonalds saying: 'Where's dat silly wabbit.' He culled most of the material from daily newspapers. When he compiled enough pages he would run

> them off on the hospital copy machine, putting out a couple hundred copies of the magazine. One day a security guard found him photocopying the magazine and hauled him up to the head of the lab, who told him the magazine was obscene and eventually fired him. It amazed me that this guy could walk through rooms of cages filled with mice heavily laden with intentionally introduced cancer tumors, past tables of beheaded rats, slit open and splayed out past the stench of death and the refrigerators filled with vials containing every horrendous disease, past lead boxes of highly radioactive materials— even worse was the fact that this lab, according to Johnny, obtained hundreds of thousands of dollars in AIDS research grants with no intention of using the monies for that purpose– and yet he could pale before the photocopies of news murder stories that his co-workers poured over every lunchtime while eating their sandwiches (178).

Johnny's insider position within a well-funded medical laboratory gives him a firsthand understanding of the layers of hypocrisy that underlie American biopolitics. The head of the laboratory espouses horror at the immorality of Johnny's open interest in murder while actively contributing to the state execution of queer people through the misappropriation of AIDs research funds. His affront cannot be justified by a personal squeamishness around blood and body parts; as Wojnarowicz points out, he regularly walks by rats dying of grotesque tumors, brought on, as with the misappropriation of AIDs funds, by the biopolitical plasticization of Othered bodies.

MURDER and its crude representations threaten the function of American civility as an obfuscating discursive machine that cloaks the racialized allocation of precarity and

death. While one or two stories featuring a true-crime report are standard practice within Western newspapers, culled together, the stream of murder-adjacent representations pushes the boundaries of spectacle into the suggestion of an insidious national compulsion. As Butler describes in her critique of national representations of war, "circulation reanimates intentions in new ways, exposes the image to new animating conditions, and often ends up producing effects that turn back on those whose control is supposed to be reflected back and solidified through the circulation itself" (*Frames of War*). MURDER makes newspapers say what they were designed to keep quiet: America is a nation with not only a propensity for violence but also a fetish for it. When asked the inciting motivation for MURDER, Johnny explains to Wojnarowicz, "it's the separation people feel from those who commit acts of violence or murder. The way they feel that a person who murders belongs to the *other*" (178). Being Othered by national structures of community— like Wojnarowicz, the rest of the group also come from unhappy nuclear families— leads Johnny and his fellow death artists to disidentify with the cruel optimism that grounds national silence around the commonality of debilitation. As artists with careers grounded in strategic representation, they focus specifically on what captures and manipulates public attention so as to engender the current state of hypocrisy. Joe makes films that "[strip] all the tedious buildup from hollywood movies whose essential draw for the ticket-buying public was five minutes of graphic violence. His films *were* the five minutes of blood-letting and mayhem," (189). Dakota "[makes] long cut-up prose poems using fragments of newspaper headlines and sub-headlines and pieces of type from advertisements [...] He was tugging at the trust people have for information when it is

disseminated through cold type in a daily newspaper, a paper propped up by millions of advertising dollars" (184). In addition to cut-up poems, he also makes paper dolls of various spiritual and voodoo figures that he hangs across his bedroom windows. His art questions the cultural valuation and ethics of different forms of representation, from the supposedly respectable "cold-type" make-up of public newspapers to the feminized and childish appearance of paper dolls, particularly those informed by 'irrational' spiritual beliefs. For him, it is the former with its exploitative photographs of starving Others and passive narration of bloody wars that embodies barbaric practices.

Dakota's paper-doll art is also distinct from MURDER and Joe's violent films in its embrace of feminized and infantilized aesthetic forms, which contrast the macho aggressiveness that characterizes Joe and Johnny's confrontational art. The affect of his morbidity is also distinct in its basis in sadness and a sense of failure, or ruination, rather than anger and a sense of righteousness. When Wojnarowicz interviews Joe after Dakota's suicide, Joe describes his first impression of Dakota as "real perverse; he seemed to be really into death and stuff— *more* than I was anyways" (191, emphasis mine). Joe's declaration of Dakota's perversity and his distancing himself from Dakota's morbidity, despite their art's mutual focus on death, is representative of how Dakota's open vulnerability in both his art and life discomfits Joe and specifically the grounding of his sense of self within the traditional parameters of masculinity, a fact that becomes more obvious as the interview progresses. When Wojnarowicz pushes Joe on "what do you mean, 'into death,'" Joe explains,

> it means: when you can't have what you want, you want everyone to die. Hahaha… and I know that feeling myself; I felt the same way. I have a fascination with anything out of the ordinary because daily life is so mundane. What I used to tell people was that, when I die, I want the whole world to die at the same time. If I have to die, I want everyone else to die; I want it all to cease at the same time. Everyone says, 'Oh, that's a very selfish outlook.' But then again it's from a feeling of not being fulfilled– feeling that you've been denied your due, which I still feel all the time. We grow up having these lofty ideals, which we're taught to expect by society, but then we don't get it [...]
>
> [Wojnarowicz]: Do you remember what you wanted?
>
> Joe: Yeah. Happiness. At that age it boiled down to wanting someone to love us… (ibid).

Joe's analysis of Dakota articulates the utopianism that undergirds the group's morbidity as well as the potential for toxicity when it takes on retaliative forms. Fascination with death speaks to a draw towards a turning point against the current state of things. At the same time, the self-pitying ease with which Joe justifies "[wanting] it all to cease at the same time" belies an uncritical acceptance of violence and domination as both the way things are and the sole means through which they can be changed. Moreover, Joe's sense of being "denied [his] due" (ibid) foreshadows the rise of a culture of victimization amongst contemporary white American men evident in the men's right movement and the INCEL community. In his analysis of how victimization shapes reactionary politics, David Higgins describes how,

> the power of embracing victimhood often lies in the fact that it seemingly liberates one from the limits that might otherwise govern ethical behavior. When you're the victim (or believe yourself to be the victim, or can rhetorically position yourself as the victim), it seems like you don't have to worry about hurting others, because ostensibly they're the ones who have hurt you first.

Joe justifying wanting "everyone else to die" because he never got an idealized form of love at the same time as he condemns Dakota for his abject morbidity also reveals the contradiction at the heart of Western masculinity: its equation of respectable selfhood with independence and emotional invulnerability at the same time as it denigrates the feminized Other whose care work ensures the conditions of material and affective nurturance that make a healthy sense of self possible.

Dakota commits suicide years after Wojnarowicz, Joe, and Johnny drift apart. Wojnarowicz only learns of it from a letter from Dakota's brother. After reading the letter, "Dakota's suicide left me with a sensation that there was something that was so irretrievable. Suicide is a form of death that contains a period of time before it to which my mind can walk back and imagine a gesture or word that might tie an invisible rope around that person's foot to prevent them from floating free of the surface of the earth" (241). Dakota's suicide inspires a state of intense grief but it also serves as a time-machine that brings Wojnarwociz back to the period of his life when he and Dakota were close, what it meant and how it could have gone differently, propelling the series of interviews Wojnarwociz intersperses throughout "The Suicide of a Guy."[31] The majority

[31] In *Queering Utopia*, Muñoz turns to the life and career of Fred Herko, a dancer and performance artist whose final performance ended up being, to the horror of his onlookers, his own suicide. Much like Dakota, Herko was a queer artist who often felt out of place amongst the

of the selections are of his interviews with Joe. In the selections, Joe reads as on the defensive, trying to justify how he began to distance himself from Dakota after the seriousness of Dakota's suicidality became clear, while Wojnarowicz keeps trying to push him into the introspective, to consider how his relationship with Dakota affected his sense of self and the world they lived in.

First, Joe describes Dakota's first suicide attempt, which

> must have been around '84 or '85. See, I hung out with Dakota just about every day for a long time. He was like my best friend. I had various girlfriends around this time and I could never understand why he hated them so much. Then I found out he was attracted to me. This was around '84 and I was moving into a different circle. Things were changing around me. It was because I was tall and attractive and Dakota was short and ugly— let's be blunt here— people were more willing to talk to me than they were to him. I think his suicide had a lot to do with him

various groups he moved between, including Warhol's ragtag factory. Also like Dakota, he struggled with a drug addiction but never let go of his dedication to making art, leading Muñoz to propose that "there is no more appropriate example of extinguished yet animating queer potentiality than the case of this neoromantic dead gay speed freak and his inscrutable aura" (149). Dakota's extinguished yet animating potentiality can be traced in Wojnarowiczs' recollections of him; at one point Wojnarowicz recalls making eye contact with Dakota while filming a scene for one of Joe's films and how Dakota's eyes "exhausted me with their energy" (184). Muñoz similarly revitalizes Herko's potentiality through a reading of his life and death that refuses the common narrative of suicide as merely a tragic case of lost potential. He contends that, "queerness and that particular modality of loss known as suicide seem linked. And to write or conjecture about suicide as a queer act, a performance of radical negativity, utopian in its negation of death as ultimate uncontrollable finitude, and not think about what it symbolizes for a larger collectivity would be remiss" (167). Suicide as an act the re-frames the common understanding of death as an "ultimate uncontrollable finitude" is perhaps most immediately true in the sense of illogical loss and the search for accountability it engenders, the forced speculation over a griever's personal relationship to the deceased— if they could have acted differently, been nicer or more attentive— as well as larger conversations about social, not just biological, quality of life.

> seeing his circle— Johnny was also very attractive; we seemed to have no trouble getting laid and Dakota did (211).

Wojnarowicz asks Joe if Dakota "[explained] that he was infatuated with you?" Joe reflects, "yeah. Of course. But I blocked it out— didn't think about it; didn't want to think about it because then it would make me question my own self; my own closetedness… these are things we macho dudes want to keep down… you know?" (ibid). Joe's retelling of Dakota's first suicide attempt positions Dakota's suicidality as less the result of a lack of desire to live than as the result of an unmet desire to be desired, to have the world want you back. Dakota's queerness and abjection as a "short and ugly" man expands beyond sexual desirability; people in their circle were hesitant to even talk to him. Of course, Joe's framing should be taken with a grain of salt; it also works to position himself as comparatively "tall and attractive." His reluctance to reflect on the possibility that he may have desired Dakota, too, and the way it would force him to question his "macho" sense of self in turn speaks to the ontological ruination queerness represents within a heteronormative epistemic infrastructure. However, it also gestures towards ruination as a zone of transformation free of the performative and spiritually taxing expectations of masculinity as a subjectivity form based in the disavowal of needing others.

Wojnarowicz's role as Dakota's archivist in turn follows Love's proposal of "impossible love as a model for queer historiography" (24). Impossible love as an archival heuristic works to understand social prohibitions within an historical relational structure, such as the prohibitions against queer love within a heteronormative state or,

more broadly, any expression of tenderness or care between men (Sedgwick). Wojnarowicz does not judge Joe for distancing himself from Dakota but prompts him to reconsider their relationship in light of how Dakota's sense of being impossible to love might speak to the structures of impossibilities they all lived under, such as Joe's sense, as an— at the time— heterosexual-identifying man, that macho dudes don't think about desiring or being desired by other men. Years later, in light of the fact that Dakota does not have a future ahead of him— that any reckoning with Dakota's subjectivity must be a reckoning with their shared past— Joe is able to see that it wasn't only Dakota who had places closed off from him. Joe's concession to his past hang-ups over his sexuality at Wojnarowicz's prompting troubles his original narrative that the rest of their group was moving forward while Dakota was falling behind.

Dakota's second suicide attempt, as described by Joe, is campy, performative: he sets up Buddhist "altar shit" and then slices "big hunks" of veins on his wrists, shooting blood all over his face. Dakota relates its failure to Joe later with his characteristic, especially when talking to Joe, self-denigrating humor. In recounting the events to Wojnarowicz, Joe seems happy to take Dakota's humorous narration at face value. He describes to Wojnarwociz how he was "rolling on the floor" laughing as he pictured Dakota's blood shooting wildly from his arms, ruining his attempt at a somber Buddhist ritual. Wojnarowicz in turn provides the lens of emotional vulnerability and care Joe resists; his follow-up questions focus on how Dakota's repeated attempts to kill himself affected Joe and Dakota's relationship, as well as Joe's own sense of either wanting to live or wanting to die. The exchange is weighted by Wojnarowicz's knowledge, from

having done a lot of drugs with Joe during that time period, that Joe too struggled with addiction, a form of wanting to obliterate the self. After Joe finishes the story of Dakota, Wojnarowicz pushes him:

> D [Wojnarowicz]: What did you say to him? How did that make you feel?
>
> Joe: I was laughing my head off. Because I couldn't believe it— he was laughing too. I just thought it was such an incredible story.
>
> D: But what did it bring up in your own head about yourself?
>
> Joe: Nothing. But then after that point… It brought up nothing because…
>
> D: Were you doing dope at this point?
>
> Joe: Yeah, yeah– I think… maybe not. But it made me want to… um… I was getting tired of it, y'know? Because it was gettin' obvious what he was doing.. um.. he was fascinated with suicide…
>
> D: Yeah, but earlier you said he had all this desire for connection with somebody…
>
> Joe: Yeah, but he was fascinated with anybody that killed themselves, y'know? After that second attempt he would disappear all the time and after that I just wished he would either do it or split because it was something I just didn't want to think about" (216).

Wojnarowicz's desire to delve into what Joe glossed over earlier— Dakota's "desire for connection with somebody" and its central role in his suicidality, as well as whether Joe himself was "doing dope at this point"— is indicative of the value he ascribes to interiority as a space of critical reflection that allows the self the onto-epistemological

mobility foreclosed by biopolitical epistemic infrastructures of abjection and ruination. Joe's reluctance to pursue the space of interiority Wojnarowicz offers him through his conclusion that Dakota's second suicide attempt brought up "nothing" of relevance to his own life reveals how masculinity in fact operates as a form of domestication in its emphasis on emotional suppression and an impossible self-sufficiency. The feminine vulnerability embodied by Dakota's despair as well as Wojnarowicz's attempts to memorialize it threatens Joe's unstable sense of self, even as the performative and alienating expectations of masculinity ensnare him into cycles of self-abuse and externalized retaliation. Moreover, his positioning of Dakota as the morbid one— the one who "was fascinated with anybody that killed themselves"--- and, inferrably, himself as well-adjusted is reflective of the larger culture of cruel optimism surrounding the biopolitical reality of widespread precarity that Wojnarowicz critiques throughout *Close to the Knives* for its enforcement of an anemic national witnessing culture.

In a passage enfolded within the sections on Dakota and his spiraling, Wojnarowicz reflects on the time when had to stay at Joe's after he couldn't afford a home of his own:

> I go back to Joe's house and he's still going strong with the needle. I got no other place to live and all the rents are up because the rich people decided the suburbs are really hell and are moving back to the cities. Joe informs me that people die of heart attacks all the time from one i.v. shot of ecstasy. It's the last time I do it. The darkness that comes from this shit is so pervasive that it taps into the dark tone of american structure. Everything that is horror-filled and powerfully ugly about the

> american dream and its resulting nightmare descends like a twenty-mile-wide blanket over this part of the city [...] everything is blowing out sideways: this elliptical stretch of flesh and mortality, the death implied in a refrigerated existence, the mounting and piling up of these words; these fragmented shapes called letters, the piling up of words in the pages of this book and the reader's eyeball at the voyeuristic microscope or telescope pouring over these sound-images and rattlings and bursts of thoughts and fuck you maybe I should be in some ratty ballerina outfit wearing the mask of a salivating mad dog twirling like some psychotic diva in a circular spot light all for your edification, for your discreet voyeuristic pleasure, and I should make a wild pirouette through the frameworks of my social death; a wild pirouette and a leap through the air to land at your feet only to throw up on your shoes. jerk (201).

The opening of the passage reflects Joe's hypocrisy in his narration of Dakota's morbidity given that Joe himself was, at the time, in the depths of a drug addiction. In Wojnarowicz's own torn position watching his friends and himself self-destruct while his home city increasingly renders its impoverished inhabitants disposable, he reflects on the utility of attempting to write against the cultural abjection and structural ruination of queer life. His sudden turn at the end of the passage, mid-sentence, to addressing the reader with a "fuck you" models the insurgent politics of his breathless approach to life writing: his desire to translate the energy of his body and his emotions onto the page so as to give some permanence to his friends and their ruined attempts at world-making even within a biopolitical empire founded on their continual debilitation. In his offering to

perform for his readers in "some ratty ballerina outfit wearing the mask of a salivating mad dog," he also addresses the paradoxical positioning of queer people during the AIDS crisis as both objects of public pity and paternalistic public health campaigns and as degenerate, feral contaminants threatening the moral hygiene of public spaces.

By "[making] a wild pirouette through the frameworks of my social death," Wojnarowicz betrays a desire for life in the face of his social relegation to the category of the soon-to-be-dead. In his influential essay on the influence of collective grief on AIDS activism, "Mourning and Militancy," Douglas Crimp considers how discussions on the entanglement between mourning and militancy, or the entanglement between grief over the dead and the fight for a world that would not have allowed them to die, often understate the emotional complexities and ambivalence involved out of a desire to present the queer community as a united front. Building on Freud's framework of the self as necessarily susceptible to unconscious narcissisms, he dissects how,

> For people with AIDS, the HIV-infected, and those at significant risk whose sero-status is unknown to them, narcissistic satisfactions in *still* being alive *today* can persuade us, will undoubtedly persuade us in our unconscious, to relinquish our attachments. But how are we to dissociate our narcissistic satisfactions in being alive from our fight to stay alive? And, insofar as we *identify* with those who have died, how can our satisfactions in being alive escape guilt at having survived? (9).

As Crimp describes, Wojnarowicz is dealing with the desire to stay alive amidst a social field of self-destruction and fatal disease caused by a national terrain of dispossession and

denial. As he watches his friends die— some, like Dakota, from their own hand but most, like Peter Hujar, from an unchecked disease— Wojnarowicz must cope with the knowledge that neither is really responsible for their death, given that it was structurally assumed, and the guilt that in turn ruins the fact of his still being alive and wanting to remain alive. The rage of his forward-facing "fuck you" is undergirded by grief and abject self-recrimination, a destabilizing mix of feelings towards life that leads his "wild pirouette" to end with vomiting over the shoes of his audience.

Crimp ultimately proposes that, if instead of seeing the embattled self as a coherent protagonist fighting against the coherent antagonisms of society, "we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be able to recognize— along with our rage— our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness. Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy" (18). The events that lead to Dakota's final and finally successful suicide attempt illustrate the confluence of mourning and militancy as the site of a self divided between grief and rage— the propensity for care and the propensity for violence— within an imperial patriarchal landscape of mass debilitation, the sanitization of structural violence, and the disavowal of vulnerability and interdependence. Towards the end of Dakota and Joe's friendship, Dakota becomes infamous amongst their social enclave for having actually killed someone, a rare occurrence amongst the down-and-out of New York City despite their glossing within the public imagination as criminals. Joe describes to Wojnarowicz how,

> *It blew me away* when he stabbed someone [...] He told me about stabbing that guy and he'd been hiding out—- and this time *he didn't like want to shout it from the rooftops* like when he tried to off himself or something. And he told me it was the first time the suicide urge ever left him was when he stabbed that guy [...] A guy had taken Dakota's money and sold him something and this other guy came up and said, Hey man, he ripped you off, he ripped you off. If you give it back to me I'll go back and make him give you the right amount. And Dakota, *always wanting to be friends with whomever*, finally relented and gave it to him and the guy split and never came back. So this really pissed Dakota off because he always got beat all the fucking time […] he went back down there at two in the morning after practicing for a couple of weeks […] he pulled the guy towards him *like in an embrace* and pulled out the switchblade and just stabs him in the kidneys there (219-222, emphasis mine).

Despite the fact that their friendship formed around their mutual interest in the aesthetics and politics of death and violence, Dakota is the only one in the group to actually engage in the act of killing: an outward expression of his rage and sense of helplessness that blows Joe away and leaves Dakota, for the first time, feeling something besides suicidal. It's not clear, though, that not feeling suicidal is the same as feeling good or fulfilled; unlike his suicide attempts, which he was able to narrate with a self-mocking humour, Joe frames Dakota as shamed into silence over the murder: "he didn't like want to shout it from the rooftops." Moving from victim to agent of American imperialism only worsens Dakota's sense of himself as ruined. His fundamental need for care and connection is, as

with his suicidality, threaded through his homicidality: the way he "always [wanted] to be friends with whomever," the way he pulls the dealer towards him "like in an embrace." That need for connection is hardly met by rendering someone else lifeless. Wojnarowicz retrospectively cares for Dakota in spectralizing the worlds Dakota needed at the time by writing the shadow of an embrace into the scene of his turning-murderer. Through the partial reality of analogy he gives the reader an opaque glimpse into a world where Dakota was able to give not violence but love, a world that would not have driven him to the knife, going wild only in the most self-defeating ways.

The cultural fear and fascination surrounding murderers is, of course, that they can *do* things: specifically the most unthinkable, unforgivable act, one that risks undoing the very foundations of civil society. What Dakota learns after killing his drug dealer is that murder really does very little in the biopolitical context of mass debilitation against which he was attempting to intervene, particularly when the murder takes place between two people already exiled via structures of social invisibility and death. All the murder amounts to on the scale of the public is "this thing in the paper about [the police] finding a dead junkie type in a dumpster" (222). Having fallen victim to, as Crimp describes, "the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society," and that allow "violence [...] to reap its horrible rewards," Dakota ascribed to homicidality the kind of power of individual actualization it holds in the public imagination only to find that power to be yet another myth cloaking the much more indomitable reality of a genocidal political structure.

Dakota kills himself quietly, after moving back to his hometown. Wojnarowicz only learns of the suicide thanks to a letter from Dakota's brother. He also learns from Dakota's brother that, like many deceased queers who, posthumously, become once again legally dependent on their nuclear family, Dakota will be subjected to a second death in the form of the erasure of his voice and art. In his afterword to *Close the Knives*, Wojnarowicz explains to the reader,

> In the following pages, I originally included segments of letters I'd received over the years from the guy named Dakota. They were letters filled with a terrible beauty outlining in words a fierce attempt to experience freedom and that elusive thing we call *life* in all its diversity and variousness. They were letters pertaining to his sexuality in early morning dreams, his desires for a structure of his own choosing, descriptions of standing in tornado winds and rain on the texas plains, baring his body to the elements, scenes of pushing the gas pedal to the floor along abandoned roads in the gulf coast countryside in order to experience the closest thing to flight the human body might possibly attain outside of death, and sweet descriptions of melancholy interactions with a dying parent, as well as notes from an asylum he'd checked himself into in order to detox. The notes from the asylum were chilling stories of families that psychically killed their children in the name of God and Society and Morality. I chose these letters because they were the only surviving pieces of evidence that allowed Dakota to speak on his own behalf about his humanity, his animal grace, his own spirituality. An interpretation of the copyright law brought about by a case (among others) involving J.D. Salinger

> prevents me from using any of these letters, despite the fact that the last letter I received from Dakota says that I was the only person who ever found use for his creative gestures. In tracking down a member of his family in order to see if I could get permission to use these letters from the legal owners of his estate (in this case, since he died in texas, texas law states that in the absence of a legal will, Dakota's belongings and estate, including the contents of his letters written to others, belong to his surviving parents), I spoke to his brother, who told me that Dakota's life work– his writing, screenplays, drawings, paintings, collages, photographs, and musical recordings— were destroyed by the parents. I was told there was absolutely no chance to get permission from them to publish the letters Dakota had written to me (252).

Here we see Wojnarowicz's determination to capture the ferality and persistence of queer life amidst the ruins: Dakota's "animal grace" as he bares his chest to tornado winds, his chasing after "the closest thing to flight the human body might possibly attain." The violence of state paternalism haunts Dakota's letters through the "chilling stories of families that psychically killed their children," stories Dakota uncovered in a therapeutic space that was supposed to help him get clean and take him off the path of self-destruction.

We can also trace the deep sadness of Love's hermeneutic of impossible love in Dakota and Wojnarowicz's forbidden letters. Clearly, there is love between the two men in how Dakota sees Wojnarowicz as "the only person who ever found use of his creative gestures," and in how Wojnarowicz devotes the majority of the second half of *Close to*

*the Knives* to Dakota's memory, but Wojnarowicz is forced to remove written traces of their intimacy due to Texas law and its privileging of the nuclear family kinship structure. Wojnarowicz admits to the reader that, "it is very emotional for me to have to participate in the process of denying him a voice by editing from this manuscript his personal words to me" (252). Retrospectively tracing the outlines of Dakota and Wojnarowicz's love helps clarify the sociopolitical structures, such as inheritance and property laws, that render certain relationalities impossible, but it does not bring the two men back together. Most of what the reader learns of Dakota comes from voices besides Wojnarowicz through the interviews he performs, in which he sits in the background as the prompter for others' memories. It's also notable that the loudest voice is Joe, whose own struggle with his sexuality and masculinity leads him to superficial and abjecting readings of Dakota's queer life. Wojnarowicz's feral perspective, a feminized interiority attentive to affective and interpersonal relations, haunts Joe's defensive narration through his gentle but provocative speculations and poetic descriptions that suggest otherwise wordings and desires grounded in the opacity of the not-yet-here. It gives Dakota a kind of life that is less than perfect but more than ruined.

## Conclusion: A Utopianism of Beached Whales

I'll end my reading of *Close to the Knives* by positioning Wojnarowicz's sense of helplessness in relation to his memories of Dakota alongside his fascination throughout the memoir with beached whales. Though never taken up at length, Wojnarowicz's passing mentions of whales occur throughout the memoir during moments of emotional duress, much like Machado's brief glances towards the wild animals outside her house

during moments of domestic abuse. The first mention of whales is interspersed throughout a recollection of Wojnarowicz taking a friend experiencing nausea to the hospital, only to realize while they wait for tests to be run that the friend is probably about to receive a fatal diagnosis of AIDs. Wojnarowicz describes how,

> I turn from the silence and the window and look at him and an iris appears beneath one half-lifted eyelid and its strength bores right through me. I turn away almost embarrassed having as much life in me as he hasn't. The iris was the size of the room; it dwarfed the winter light filling the streets outside the window; it radiated across the heavy clouds with fifty thousand windows reflecting the blue of sky through it.
>
> Whales can descend to a depth of five thousand feet where they can and must sustain a pressure of one hundred and forty tons on every square foot of their bodies (ibid).

Wojnarowicz's perception of his dying friend's eye as "the size of the room" recalls his earlier perception of himself as "a sixteen-foot-tall five-hundred-and-forty-eight-pound man" (83) as he watched another friend take his final breath. He seems to be trying to get at the enormity of life and the desire to live, to take up space, even within moments of overwhelming debilitation. On the contrary, Wojnarowicz finds life to be most robust in the face of imminent extinguishment; peeking out from the "half-lifted" eyelid of a dying body, the strength of his friend's iris "bore right through me."

His attraction to whales relates to the counter-intuitive constitution of their power, both literally and metaphorically. From a human perspective, whales are almost

unimaginably huge; their gargantuan size threatens to dwarf human claims to the top of the animal pyramid. And yet, their slow movement and preference for microscopic prey domesticate any speculative potential for violence. Wojnarowicz's curated whale facts emphasize their awe-worthy enormity and the strength it provides them: how the vastness of their bodies can barely be conceptualized but must not be underestimated. Shortly after describing their ability to "sustain a pressure of one hundred and forty tons on every square foot of their bodies," Wojnarowicz drops the fact, once again without transition and without context, that "after giving birth a female whale produces more than two hundred gallons of milk a day," (86) suggesting a surplus of life and vitality within an animal often characterized, within the human imagination, by serenity and the slow-paced whale songs that help insomniacs fall asleep.

The next whale reference comes after Wojnarowicz's own diagnosis, when he is learning to adjust to a new life centered around medication and symptom patrol. He describes his current housing situation, in which the landlord "allowed me to stay in my apartment without a lease only after signing an agreement that if there were a cure for AIDS I would have to leave within thirty days" and,

> a guy visiting the upstairs neighbor learned that I had this virus and said he believed that although the government probably introduced the virus in the homosexual community, that homosexuals were dying en masse as a reaction to centuries of society's hatred and repression of homosexuality. All I could think when he said this was an image of hundreds of whales that beach themselves on the coastline in supposed protest of the ocean's being polluted. He continued,

> 'People don't die— they choose death. Homosexuals are dying of this disease because they have internalized society's hate… (115).

Wojnarowicz's sardonic description of whales beaching themselves "in supposed protest" of ocean pollution suggests he does not really believe whales are beaching themselves out of a sense of activism. Neither does he believe gay men are dying of AIDS out of some Freudian response to national homophobia. Gay men are contracting the virus en masse because it is a highly contagious virus that has not been granted proper urgency or funding within public health infrastructures; that culturally-borne homophobia informs that process does not make the contraction of the disease a conscious choice. A poisoned ocean may turn the slow death of beaching into a preferable option, but that does not mean the whale that chooses it is acting out of free will. Later, Wojnarowicz will visit a friend's apartment and pass by a middle-aged neighbor who had one of his lungs removed and consequently spends "eighteen hours a day" leaning out of his apartment window, head over traffic, in order to "stop the sense of suffocation" (175). Wojnarowicz will "[think] of beached whales as [the neighbor] breathed-wheezed hello at my passing to get to the next flight" (ibid). A beached whale is a powerful animal who, in all its enormity, cannot overcome the toxicity of a dying planet. An animal left to a self-destructive dependency on the one place that will allow them a reprieve from suffocation.

In her study of marine animals, *Undrowned*, which moves through different species of marine life as case studies of Black feminist liberation strategies, Gumbs turns to whales specifically for their breath. In a section that would certainly be of interest to Wojnarowicz, she notes that, "the size of their breath is the length of their whole bodies"

(82). She also notes that whale breath, a combination of mucus and air exhaled through the blowhole, can transform into a rainbow. She wonders what it would be like to have that capability, that way of taking in and breathing out life, “my whole body breath in color” (ibid). Her reflections, like Wojnarowicz’s, highlight the overlooked wonders of whale being at the same time as they mourn the increasing precarity of ocean life. She speculates as to how:

> Used to be a right whale could breathe for a century. Now that never happens. They rarely live five years without scars from boat propellers, rope wounds from tangled commerce. And it’s not necessary. Boats could shift or slow their paths quite easily. You know what is necessary? Breath. Theirs more so than ours, truth be told. Yesterday I learned that the breathing of whales is as crucial to our own breathing and the carbon cycle of the planet as are the forests of the world. Researchers say, if whales returned to their pre-commercial whaling numbers, their gigantic breathing would store as much carbon as 110,000 hectares of forest, or a forest the size of Rocky Mountain National Park (24)

The sheer size of whale breath is thus not so much a marker of threat— a sign that whales should be feared— but a marker of abundance, of a resource that could be shared without scarcity anxieties. Moreover, no matter how unimaginably huge and apart from human society a whale may seem, a whale’s ability to breathe is intertwined with our own; human animals are just as dependent on healthy oceans that co-create sustainable carbon cycles as the marine animals who live in them. We wound and hunt them at our own peril.

While a whale does not beach itself for the sake of symbolism, a beached whale is nonetheless a symbol. It encourages witnessing by drawing crowds, creating a sense of unease amongst human bystanders: don't they belong in the ocean? Are they dead? Will they die soon? Can they make it back by themselves? And that is also what Wojnarowicz is left with as he nears his own death, the knowledge that Dakota and Hujar and nameless others and soon himself are more than symbols, more than interesting stories to tell, but that the only choice left is to preserve the vitality of their lives through a feral writing style that at once guards them from and abandons them to the reader.

In one of his introspective passages, Wojnarowicz articulates how his diagnosis has affected his sense of being in the world:

> where once I felt acutely alien, now it's more like an immersion in a body of warm water and the water that surrounds me is the air, is breathing is life itself. I'm acutely aware of myself *alive and witnessing* [...] All behind me are the friends that have died. I'm breathing this air they can't breathe; I'm seeing this ratty monkey in a cheap Mexican circus wearing a red-and-blue embroidered jacket and it's collecting coins and I can reach out and touch it like they can't [...] In better moments I can see my friends— vague transparencies of their faces over my shoulder or superimposed on the surfaces of my eyes— making me more aware of myself, seeing myself from a distance, *seeing myself see others*. I can almost see my own breath, see my internal organs functioning pump pumping. These days I see the edge of mortality. The edge of death and dying is around everything like a warm halo of light sometimes dim sometimes irradiated [..] I see

> my friends and I see myself and I see breath coming from lips and the plants are drinking it and I see breath coming from my chest and everything is fading, becoming a shadow that may disappear as the sun goes down (109, emphasis mine).

Wojnarowicz provides a look into the interiority of being undrowned: meaning, in Gumbs' sense, being a living member of a social group subjected to mass death. He is haunted by the knowledge that his friends are gone, unable to breathe the same air and share in the same daily mundanities. But he is also carried by them in his ability to appreciate not only the reality of his continued survival but also the gift of witnessing life in its ongoingness.

With that witnessing comes accountability to what is witnessed. Even if the public insists on looking away from the political realities that have led to the AIDS crisis, Wojnarowicz insists on recording them in deference to his responsibility to say something with the breath he has left. Butler describes how, "the precarity of life imposes an obligation on us. We have to ask about the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or set of lives as precarious, and those that make it less possible, or indeed impossible" (1-2). Living amongst the ruins, or in the aftermath of a collective trauma, should set the stage for a collective reckoning with how life is apprehended and valued. Doing so, however, means an understanding of the utopian predicated not on the disappearance of vulnerability and melancholy but on mortality as a unifying reality. An insistence on continued mourning for those lost amongst the ruins does not mean one is

stuck in the past but that one one refuses a future clouded by the same destructive amnesias that denied value to those dead at the hands of unsustainable social structures.

The reality of mortality as the edge to all creaturely life serves as an ambivalent but necessary source of epistemic illumination: “a warm halo of light sometimes dim sometimes irradiated” that draws attention to both the miracle of breath and its brevity, its imminent fade into a shadow that will disappear with the sun. A utopianism of the ruins, or a ruined utopianism, begins with the assumption that life is easily destroyed and must be held tight rather than shaken down for value. Ruined utopianism foregoes dreams of perfection and universal harmony without accepting that the potential for fulfillment and joy must follow. It is about valuing what seems, by the ‘improving’ standards of Western civilization, valueless and crude on its own: breath, flesh, desire, rage. It is a utopianism for ferals stubbornly content with scraps.

# Chapter Six

## Tender Words: Diaspora, Opacity, and Animal Language in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

"Monkeys, moose, cows, dogs, butterflies, buffaloes. What we would give to have the ruined lives of animals tell a human story— when our lives are in themselves the story of animals" (Vuong 242).

This chapter builds on the search for a utopianism pulled from the ruins of the U.S. nation-state with a shift in focus to the biopolitics of neoliberal globalization and the potential for transnational and cross-species solidarities. It takes up the question of the feral through the lens of forced diaspora by way of Ocean Vuong's 2019 autobiographical novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. While Wojnarowicz's case studies of ferality centered gay white men disillusioned with the national family, Vuong's case studies, borne of his life experiences as a Vietnamese immigrant, center individuals forcibly dispossessed of their national communities and homes. Vuong parallels the debilitation of contemporary human diasporic populations to various nonhuman animal case studies of ecological precarity, im/mobility, and threatened death: animals living "ruined lives" (242). Like Wojnarowicz, he threads a bittersweet utopianism throughout his case studies of biopolitical ruination; however, through his training as a poet, he also pursues the relational opacity of metaphor as a form of tender kinship that provides relief from the alternatively hardening and abjecting standards of the national family.

Like Wojnarowicz, he and his family struggle against histories weighted by patriarchal and imperial violences that create interpersonal cycles of fear and

defensiveness. He embeds the tension between subaltern vitality and structural vulnerability within the title, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous. On Earth* provides a fictionalized account of Vuong's childhood and early adulthood as a Vietnamese-American who was brought over from Vietnam as a toddler by his mother and grandmother in order to escape the ongoing violence of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. As a result of his early entry into the U.S., Little Dog (the fictionalized version of Vuong) has greater access to education and assimilation than his mother and grandmother but suffers from the joint weight of survivor guilt and the homophobia that haunts U.S. and Vietnamese culture alike. The temporal qualifier "briefly" that modifies "gorgeous" thus highlights the necropolitical state of siege under which Little Dog, his immigrant family, and his queer friends attempt to live, while Vuong's (who is best known for his poetry; *On Earth* is his first novel) lyrical descriptions of the beauty and joy, the gorgeousness, that characterizes their lives provides both the shelter of opacity and the feral vibrancy of metaphor. The spatial qualifier "on earth" in turn points to the global ecological perspective that grounds Vuong's interest in the potential for solidarity between nonhuman and human animal communities and serves as an indictment of the specifically human state of things that is necropolitics: only *on Earth* are we relegated brief moments of joy within endemic structures of pain.

My reading of Vuong and his interest in the global ecologies of necropolitics through the lens of discursive power is informed by Sylvia Wynter's work on the imperial politics of humanism and the human. In her most cited essay, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation–

An Argument" Wynter deconstructs modern notions of humanness in relation to the entrenchment of global disparities in resources and life opportunity brought on by Western imperialism. She argues that 'the human' and its implication of universality has served to mask the stratifying function of Western imperial ontology, which she names Man. She describes Man as a *genre* of being human in order to emphasize that it is a socially constructed, and specifically narrative, onto-epistemological form. We can trace Man as an onto-epistemological structure in the paternalistic traits of 'civilized' being dissected in previous chapters and the forms of being they relegate to a state of false dependency. In her subsequent work, Wynter searches for and insists on the necessity of writing (in the expansive, Derridean sense) new genres of being human, particularly in light of the imminent climate catastrophes which disproportionately threaten 'third world' communities (Wynter and McKittrick 63).

Considered alongside new materialisms and posthumanisms, the disciplines that typically lay claim to the question of the human, Wynter is unusual in how her decolonial critique of the human has led to a renewed commitment to humanism as an ethical structure. For Wynter, the connotations of togetherness that ground the human as a discursive structure must be retained and transformed from an ahistorical, romanticized universalism into an historically-grounded *global* reckoning with the story of Man and its fallout for human and nonhuman animals alike. What distinguishes the human for Wynter, apart from the various, questionable (and most often racialized) claims to species distinction that have been made on its behalf, is its propensity for storytelling. In an

interview with Katherine McKittrick meant to serve as an overview of her life's work and interventions, she explains:

> "In my own terms, the human is *homo narrans*. This means that as a species, our hybrid origins only emerged in the wake of what I have come to define over the last decade as the Third Event […] The Third Event is defined by the singularity of the *co-evolution* of the human brain *with*– and unlike those of all the other primates, *with it alone*– the emergent faculties of language, storytelling" (25).

From a political standpoint, she relates the storytelling nature of human being to the centrality of species mythos, such as the mythos of human progress embedded in best-selling 'historical' works like *Gun, Germs, and Steel*, to the formation of our historical and personal consciousness. The fundamentally discursive nature of human being and becoming means that we are as determined by our stories as by our biology, "so that in the same way as the bee can never have knowledge of the higher-level system that is its hive, we too can in no way normally gain cognitive access to the higher level of the genre-specific autopoietic living system of our status quo structured worlds" (Wynter and McKittrick 32). Wynter, building on Fanon, refers to the twinned influence of science and mythos on human development as sociogeny.

Wynter's insistence on the inextricable entanglement of biological and cultural determinism highlights the stakes of discursive power at the same time as it leaves room for disruption and change via the creativity intrinsic to language as a field of communication between differently positioned subjects. Katherine McKittrick describes Wynter's invitation to re-write the mythos of Man as

> "an interdisciplinary and collaborative task, one that allows us to think about how the creative narrative can and does contribute to what is otherwise understood as 'the laws of nature,' thus creating an intellectual space to explore the worlds of those communities who are otherwise considered unscientific, scientifically inferior, endangered, and/or too alien to comprehend. This framework also points to relational and connective knowledges rather than positioning, say, science first and resistance later" (154).

However, Wynter's gesture towards the bee hive is telling of the limited role animality plays in her work, which I would argue also risks limiting subsequent visions of "relational and connective" (ibid) decolonial epistemic infrastructures. Although Wynter's framework of the human and its emphasis on the historical violence of humanism has innumerable potential connections for animal studies, animality still serves as a metaphor for debilitation and the human retains its aura of distinctiveness insofar as it and "it alone" (25) illustrates the capacity for storytelling.[32] She analogizes humans and bees specifically and exclusively in terms of their mutual entrapment. That being said, it's important to note that Wynter's work as a whole looks towards non-hierarchical forms of being that would situate a unique capacity for language less as a marker of species superiority than as a noteworthy difference in a creature's possible field of action. Only

[32] In *Becoming Human*, Zakiyyah Jackson, for instance, takes up Wynter's work on sociogeny at length in order to deconstruct the Western scientific imaginary of the female reproductive system as exemplary of how racialized and gendered conceptions of embodiment implicitly undergird scientific taxonomies of human and nonhuman animal being. Her framework works to posit the enforced fungibility of Black women as the foundation of liberal humanism and its concomitant abjection of animality, demonstrating the potential of Wynter's work on sociogeny for bridging the fraught gaps between animal studies, critical race theory, and transnational feminism (Jackson 165).

surface readings of Wynter would situate her as an uncritical anthropocentrist. However, her call for rewriting current genres of the human and her focus on the uniquely expansive linguistic capacities of the human species does place nonhuman animals into a position of dependency on humans to be the authors of their fate at a time when, as Wynter stresses, the structurally dispossessed are most immediately at risk of death from environmental devastation and precarity.

Throughout *On Earth* Vuong, too, encourages a specifically global ethical perspective that is not synonymous with humanist portrayals of the Global North and its parasitic relationship to the Global South as a utopian breaking-down of borders. Rather, like Wynter, Vuong emphasizes the historical violence of universalism, as well as the histories of conquest that underwrite border-crossings undertaken by Western subjects. For Wynter and Vuong alike, to think globally is important to account for the larger, transnational and trans-species ecologies of Western imperial violence.[33] However, through the Vietnamese diasporic perspective of state terror and displacement, Vuong approaches the historic entanglement of humanism and imperialism with a focus on how language facilitates nationalism in its doubled functionality as a source of both xenophobia and a sense of belonging. He is focused less on universalized mythos than on the denigration of non-Western languages in the face of Western imperialism. Through

[33] Wynter and Vuong's turn to a global perspective on imperialism is intimate with Lisa Lowe's work in *Intimacies of the Four Continents* on the importance of reading across temporally and spatially disparate archives of imperial violence (such as, for Lowe, reading archives of the Atlantic slave trade alongside archives of U.S. settler colonialism, as well as reading archives of abolitionism alongside the modern introduction of Chinese and South Asian indentured labor in the U.S.) in order to understand the often obscured evolution of liberal humanism as it continually masks the consolidation of colonial structures of violation and exploitation across various national borders as the teleological progress of the human species (Lowe 5).

his background as a poet and poetic metaphor's hermeneutic multiplicity *and* opacity, he also supplants Western philosophy's historical appropriation of nonhuman animals as abstract metaphors for debilitation and muteness by using poetic metaphor as a literary form of care that gives weight to the fraught nature of Being in relation. Before turning to my close reading, I'll provide an overview of debates over the politics of language, opacity, and poetics within Black feminist, Caribbean diasporic, and critical animal theory that will help illuminate Vuong's complementary take on linguistic forms of care and harm within the contemporary terrain of globalized neoliberalism.

**Poetry and/as Animal Language**

Throughout *On Earth*, Vuong frames human language systems as primarily structures of dispossession from the perspective of both diasporic human subjects and nonhuman animal subjects. He foregrounds the English language as a vehicle of Western imperialism in its relegation of diasporic language speakers from the Global South as functionally illiterate within the terrain of Western hegemony. As the only person in his immediate family able to speak English, Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog serves as the day-to-day translator for his mother and grandmother: a role he takes on with ambivalence in its effective silencing of his loved ones. He also serves as the speaker for his animal case studies—- "monkeys, moose, cows, dogs, butterflies, buffaloes" (242); however, his narration of their lives is underlined by an awareness of the violence of representation and the very human capacity for wilful misunderstanding and presumption.

Indeed, a striking theme in the case studies of foundational Western linguists is the co-occurence of nonhuman animals and non-English speakers in thought-experiments on the ambiguity of language and the potential for miscommunication. Montaigne compares the difficulties of understanding nonhuman animals to the difficulties of understanding Basque speakers, while Wittegenstein compares entering "a strange country with entirely strange traditions" to how "if a lion could talk we could not understand him" (Meijer 19, 44). The readiness with which Montaigne and Wittgenstein turn to foreign speakers and nonhuman animals as kin case studies of incomprehensibility highlights Western linguistics as less concerned with universal grammar structures than shaped by human anxiety over the limits of language as a tool of communication and the epistemological vulnerability evoked by a confrontation with the Other.

Vuong's animosity towards a humanist conception of language as a hierarchical tool for domesticating Otherness informs his draw to the poetic mode and its embrace of affect, sensuality, and opacity. Within his reflections on nonhuman animality, he draws focus to nonverbal systems of communication and knowledge-production, such as embodied intergenerational species memory, devalued by the humanist prioritization of abstract language.[34] As discussed in the introduction and in chapter four, Black feminist theorists have outlined poetry as an urgent mode of critical theorizing in its push against

[34] However, given my focus throughout on contemporary diasporas and linguistic imperialism, it's important to note that I am not conflating non-English human languages with nonhuman animal languages. While I am reluctant to go on at length about how non-English human languages obviously possess the same degree of 'complexity' as the English language, as doing so would in part give in to the logic that nonhuman animal languages are more simplistic than verbal languages, my point in drawing comparisons between diasporic human subjects shamed for being unable to speak English and nonhuman animal subjects marginalized for their perceived inability to speak is to highlight verbal proficiency as a humanist red herring used to justify strategically racialized processes of political disinheritance amidst imperial processes of exploitation, stratification, and displacement for nonhuman and human animal communities alike.

traditional Western epistemological forms and their atomistic valuation of empirical clarity and reproducibility over creativity and conceptual richness. In her essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde describes poetry as coming from “these places of possibility within ourselves” that are “dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling” (Lorde). Lorde’s framing of poetry as embodying an ancestral knowledge that serves as a source of innovation and political transformation intentionally refutes an imperial understanding of knowledge-production as a movement towards progress that distances oneself from an unilluminated past and that takes place in a mind increasingly free of a body.

In his talk, “Poetry and Knowledge,” Aimé Césaire outlines poetry as embracing all that the Western academy disavows: affect and humor, as well as personal vulnerabilities like fear and desire. He notes that,

> “in this climate of flame and fury that is the climate of poetry money has no currency, courts pass no judgments, judges do not convict, juries do not acquit. Only the firing squads still know how to ply their trade. The farther one proceeds the more obvious the signs of the disaster become. Police functions are strangulated. Conventions wear out. The Grammont laws for the protection of mankind, the Locarno agreements for the protection of animals suddenly and marvelously give up their virtues. A wind of confusion” (Césaire).

Césaire fittingly develops a philosophy of poetry that is image-based and not reducible to a single meaning or interpretation. For my purposes, though, it is significant that the structures he portrays as falling apart in the face of poetic knowledge—- the police, the law, the courts— are necropolitical in function insofar as they facilitate the punishment and debilitation of deselected subjects and justify their violence through the protection of those either selected into civilized society or patronized as its dependents ("the Locarno agreements for the protection of animals"). Through Lorde and Césaire's frameworks, we can position poetry as a feral genre in its loyalty to the wild and uncivilized, the disavowed. Lorde's interest in poetry as accessing an interior space of creativity that has "survived and grown strong through darkness," a space that she theorizes as specifically maternal, can be read alongside decolonial theorizations of discursive opacity in the face of empire.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant historicizes the philosophy of language as a tool of comprehending the Other as specific to Western epistemologies of conquest. Importantly for the interests of this project, he parallels the relational structure of Western language systems—- that of rendering the Other transparent to the self— to what he names the political structure of "filiation," meaning a patriarchal system of inheritance based in a clear origin point and descendancy line. Analyzing how a philosophy of filiation suffuses Western literature, he describes how,

> Filiation is explicit in the Old Testament; it is implicit in the Iliad, in which the reputed or chosen sons of Gods play out the projected rivalries of the Immortals among themselves […] Filiation is indispensable for the Aeneid. And, if Dante

> does not have recourse to it in The Divine Comedy (because Christ had already realized the universal Church by then), he nonetheless places his journey into hell-in short, into our world- under the enlightened guidance of Virgil (50).

In contrast to the Western literary tradition and its epistemic infrastructure of paternal filiation, for Glissant, creole epistemologies founded in the opacity of mixed meanings and modeled by the literary form of poetry facilitate an understanding of language as a path of divergence and uprooting rather than incorporation and settlement. Glissant argues that the opacity that underlies Caribbean diasporic and poetic language forms is neither maternal nor paternal in its relational structure; it is founded on a spirit of "errantry," (144) or straying from origins. As in my framework of ferality, Glissant's framework of errantry frames the act of straying from home as a form of embracing the Otherness inherent to Being in relation rather than disavowing the need for companionship. Building on Gumbs, to speak in the poetry of diaspora is to (m)other.

The prose style of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* relies heavily on poetic metaphor and, in the latter half, breaks out into poetic stanzas. It is indeed as if Vuong is straying from the linear form of the novel into the opaque shadows of poetry. Vuong's turns to poetics also align with his contemplations of nonhuman and human animal entanglement and communication, gesturing towards the intimacies of poetic and nonhuman animal language in their potential to speak otherwise and joint relegation to the underside of humanist knowledge-production. Glissant's positioning of poetry as a language particularly adept at navigating the intricacies and difficulties of relationality lends itself to a philosophy of language which encompasses nonhuman animal languages

that challenge Western conceptions of legibility. Vuong's use of the hunt as a metaphor for the Western drive to both comprehend and conquer accordingly informs the poetic relation he sets up between hunted nonhuman animals and diasporic human animals. One of his most prominent case studies, for instance, is the macaque monkey, "the most hunted [primate] in Southeast Asia" (Vuong 41). Vuong's focus is on how both hunted nonhuman animals and diasporic human subjects are dispossessed of agency through the bad faith positioning of their perspective as incomprehensible within contexts of displacement and dispossession.

In her book, *When Animals Speak*, animal studies philosopher Eva Meijer takes up the longstanding debate within Western philosophy and science over whether or not nonhuman animals possess the capacity for language. Her intervention is both unusual and productive for how it relates the stakes of the debate not to whether nonhuman animals are as intelligent as human animals but to which subjects are allowed a voice in the political sphere. She describes how Aristotle's philosophy of the human

> [attributes] *logos* only to humans, [drawing] a line between humans and other animals. This line functions as a border around the political; only humans can be political animals. It also defines political speech: *logos*, meaning speech informed by reason, is contrasted with *phone*, the sound of the voice, which can express pain or pleasure (3).

Aristotle also moralizes "rational speech" as "the ability to distinguish between right and wrong" (ibid). Aristotle's humanist philosophy of language thus foreshadows the modern episteme of Western necropolitics in how subjects ascribed with a 'rational' voice are

given definitional power over what actions are deemed right or wrong and who has the right to live or die. Moreover, that abstract speech, or *logos,* is categorized as rational while languages borne of the body, and specifically responsive affective states like pain and pleasure, are counter-read as irrational and unreliable marks a pathway towards discounting testimonies of violation within the supposedly ethical political community Aristotle envisions.

In his counter-humanist philosophy of language, Derrida argues that the humanist preoccupation with arguing for the superiority of human language and the muteness of the animal in fact speaks to insecurities over the human capacity for self-understanding and intersubjective communication. Language becomes a stand-in for cognitive, perceptual, and psychological acuity generally and a means of feeling in control of the threat posed by Otherness. Prevailing frameworks of nonhuman animal expressivity as automatic reactivity to signals in the environment defensively overstate the degree to which human communication is replete with deep meaning. J.L. Austin's conceptualization of linguistic performativity, after all, stresses that a majority of human speech is grounded in practical functionality and social ritual rather than deep thought and conceptual innovation (Austin 25). Considering the Western philosophical framing of humans as *responding* and animals as *reacting*, Derrida asks, rhetorically, "and what would ever distinguish the response, in its total purity, the so-called free and responsible response, from a reaction to a complex system of stimuli?" (53).

Meijer goes on to dissect how Western philosophy's relegation of nonhuman animals to silence and incoherency is dependent on a narrow definitional field that

ignores bodily and nonverbal forms of communication. Drawing on a wide field of research to illustrate the capacious forms of language on display in the animal kingdom, she lists:

> Dolphins and parrots, for example, call each other by their names. African elephants use different alarm calls to distinguish between threats from bees and humans, as well as different groups of humans. Ravens use referential gestures. Fork-tailed drongos mimic the alarm calls of other species to scare them away so they can steal their dinner. We find grammatical structures, including recursion, in the songs of many species of bird. The skin patterns of squid can be seen as a language built up of sentences that have a grammar. Prairie dogs, a species of ground squirrel, describe humans in detail, including the color of their T-shirts and hair, the speed at which they are approaching, and objects they might be carrying (5).

The nonhuman animal languages Meijer describes are context-driven, based on the surrounding environment's possible threats and rewards and ensuring the safety of the community. Scientific studies that fail to 'prove' nonhuman animal species possess language place their animal subjects within experimental structures of displacement and restricted environmental feedback. Meijer points to how pigeons make their best decisions in groups but are often placed in solitary confinement for scientific studies of pigeon behavior (41). She also provides a counter-reading of the infamous case study of Hans the horse, who was thought to be able to perform math after he learned to correctly respond to calculation questions by tapping his hoof on the ground. It was later

discovered that Hans was actually responding to subtle facial cues given by his interrogator when they spoke the correct answer, which was then taken as evidence that Hans was not as smart as initially suspected. Meijer argues that Hans *was* in fact intelligent; he was just illustrating a different type of intelligence than the scientists were measuring for (61). Hans' intelligence was based in a close attunement to body language, as well as the ability to comprehend and adapt to what his interrogators wanted from him. Arguably, by tricking them he surpassed their intelligence in that they were clearly not as attuned to the subtleties of body language and the nonverbal messages they were sending.

The humanist devaluation of bodily, nonverbal, and context-dependent communication systems also informs the relegation of nonhuman animal systems of thought and knowledge as *instinct* rather than insight. The perception of nonhuman animals as acting merely on instinct rather than through deliberate cognition was particularly central to Descartes' positioning of nonhuman animals as automata that informs his formulation, "Cogito, ergo sum," or "I think, therefore I am." Meijer points to how the labeling of behaviors like fleeing from a predator as mechanical instinct underestimates the level of ingenuity required to flee without being successfully detected or caught (21). I would add that the differential labeling of instinct vs. intelligence also embeds the power relation of prey vs. predator. Of course, a prey subject is forced into reactive or 'instinctual' states like fleeing through the imminent threat of death, while a predator subject is free to sit back and observe the motions of their prey. One state is informed by captivity and the other oversight. Where the predator logic goes wrong, however, is in assuming the anxiety of flight hampers rather than sharpens the perceptual

attunement of their prey. In her essay, “When the Lambs Rise up Against the Bird of Prey,” poet Anne Boyer describes how,

> The lamb knows all it knows through awareness of the patterns embedded in a generalized state of risk. The lamb’s way of sensing is a clear-minded sensing of the world as world aligns against the lamb: demystified, dependent, and with brutality intact. The lamb— like all prey, and unlike any predator— is a scholar of the all, but the bird of prey flying overhead mistakes its expertise in corpses for proof of its own general acuity.
>
> The bird of prey may have talons, but to have talons is to conceive the world in an eye-to-claw-to-beak relation. The bird of prey makes only acquisitions. Its knowledge is a series of kills. The bird of prey knows what it knows only in a system built from desire’s instances, maintained in the expectation of desire’s satiation: a hawk-eye sees with the arrogance of only the particular of what it wants, not the whole of *what is*. The bird of prey understands a kill to be the world in its entirety when, in fact, a kill is only dinner, and dinner is not the entire world (20).

We can trace the faulty predator logic Boyer describes in Descartes’ conclusion, “I think, therefore I am.” “I think, therefore I am” not only privileges an abstract form of thought but it also simultaneously elevates the “I” of the thinker and divorces him from the environment that facilitates, motivates, and informs his thinking. In a sense, “I think, therefore I am” and its assumption of epistemological independence can be reformulated as “I know only myself.” Hans’ owners do not *need* to concern themselves with the

subtleties of his body language because they have structural power over him and are at relatively low risk of danger, but it is precisely the narrowness of their vision that creates the space for his successful 'deception.'

Meijer argues that one of the dangers of dispossessing nonhuman animals of the capacity for language is that language is, as Glissant also argues, at base a tool of intersubjectivity (Meijer 31). We speak in order to be heard. Limiting linguistic capacity to human animals facilitates the perception of nonhuman animals as objects to be used rather than subjects with an opinion about a shared world. The intersubjective nature of language is also why Western philosophical treatises on the essential muteness of nonhuman animals bleed into their dismissal as political subjects entitled to legal recognition and rights. In her consideration of alternative linguistic philosophies, Meijer turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework of language, which, as is characteristic of Merleau-Ponty's work, makes room for embodied languages like gestures and situates language as not defined by abstract verbalization but by the "production of meaning through the interplay of self and other" (68). Meijer then offers case studies of inter-species communication as exemplifying the dynamic potential of other-than-verbal linguistic interplay. Her inter-species case studies build on Wynter's emphasis on acculturation processes as complicating and transforming supposedly essentialist species-specific knowledges and thus extend the implications of the sociogenic principle and its capacity for change to nonhuman animal communities and nonverbal forms of language and culture. For example, Meijer references several dog-human relationships, including her own, in which the human adopted a partially-feral

dog and both the human and the dog had to learn to communicate their very different needs and worldviews to a creature whose way of life was essentially foreign to them. Meijer's stray dog Olli learned to make eye contact with her to communicate, even though feral dogs are often reluctant to do so as eye contact, within the canine species, can be a form of intimidation (Meijer 93). As one of her other main case studies, Meijer describes the anthropologist Barbara Smuts' journey living with a group of 135 baboons for two years:

> By living with the baboons, experiencing their habits and daily life, Smuts became attuned to their movements, which changed her experience of her surroundings. She felt like she was 'turning into a baboon' as she learned, for example, to read the weather as they did. During the rainy season, Smuts and the baboons could see storms approaching from a great distance. The baboons wanted to keep eating for as long as possible, and knew exactly when to move in order to find shelter in time. For months, Smuts wanted to move long before they did, until one day something shifted, and she suddenly understood clearly when it was the right time to move. Smuts describes this as a moment where she went from seeing the world analytically to experiencing it directly and intuitively. An important factor in this process was belonging to a group: Smuts stresses the individuality of the baboons, but also emphasizes their group consciousness. She describes the troupe of baboons as a 'larger feeling entity' that she gradually became part of (73).

The 'larger feeling entity' Smuts experienced herself as joining once she had adapted to baboon ways of knowing has direct resonances with Wynter's verbally-grounded mythos and its determination of social consciousness but is based in close attunement to weather patterns.[35] Read alongside Hans the horse's clever adaptation to the desires of his captors, the baboon mythos suggests an understanding of language as a tool of survival rather than its romanticized understanding within Western philosophy as a tool of abstract knowledge divorced from the material stakes of intersubjective care, resource-sharing, and environmental limitations. To situate language as, first and foremost, a tool of survival is not to say that language cannot also be a source of joy and connection but is rather to concur with Wynter that the primary motivating factor behind the drive towards understanding the self in relation to Others embodied by language is to carve a livable space for oneself and one's kin, to care and be cared for. Here I also return to Wojnarowicz's insight in the previous chapter that, particularly for feral subjects shaped by long histories of dispossession and premature death, the fact of being alive and being able to keep loved ones alive is itself a utopian achievement.

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[35] In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway reads Smuts' interactions with the baboons as a form of material-semiotic dancing that models the becoming with of nonhuman and human animal relatedness. Haraway's insistence on human and nonhuman animals as becoming with, rather than apart from or besides, each other, is intimate with this chapter's draw towards other than humanist modes of relation. In her own readings of nonhuman and human animal communication, however, Haraway explicitly resists categorizing instances of material-semiotic dancing, such as Smuts' journey with the baboons and her own experiences working with her dogs in agility competitions, as language, as she finds the debate over nonhuman animal linguistic capacity overwrought (236). As discussed throughout this chapter, I heartily agree with Haraway that when people discuss whether nonhuman animals 'have' language, they are often talking about broader concerns, such as theory of mind or a spiritual sort of interiority, that amount to the question of whether nonhuman animals are subjects worthy of political rights and recognition. Nonetheless, I find it worth looking towards nonhuman animal forms of communication and expressivity in order to expand popular notions of what counts as language precisely because language as a conceptual field is so deeply entangled with Western philosophical and public understandings of what it means to relate to, communicate with, and recognize each other.

In an interview four years afters its publication, Lorde clarified that her famous poem, "A Litany for Survival," in which she advises the reader, "It is better to speak/ Remembering/ We were never meant to survive," (Lorde) survival is meant to represent something more than not-dying. She explains that, "implicit in survival is joy, mobility, and effectiveness [...] if we do what we need to be doing, then we will leave something that continues beyond ourselves. And that is survival" (Phillips 193). Lorde's joyous perspective on subaltern vitality, that it is *better* to speak with the seemingly morbid knowledge that "we were never meant to survive" echoes Wojnarowicz's emphasis on the bittersweet beauty granted by attention to life's brevity. Positioning language as a tool of survival also highlights its ferality insofar as the primal necessity of communicating one's needs and desires transcends community boundaries formerly presumed to be immutable, as can be seen in both Smuts' adaptation to a weather-based language system and in Lorde's insistence on an intersectional framework of justice and radical community-building. Despite its contemporary associations with bare bones living, the Latin roots of survival combine super, meaning "over, above, or higher than," and vivere, which means "to live" (OED). To survive is always-already to move beyond the walls of one's own life.[36]

Building on Cesaire, Glissant, and Lorde—-all thinkers informed by Caribbean diasporic perspectives—- I read Vuong and his poetic literary testimony to contemporary

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[36] Recalling Agamben's testimonial philosophy of poetry from chapter four, to be a survivor is to be more than what one has survived, to be informed but not determined by the violences one has witnessed.

diasporic life as modeling the politics of feral communication strategies.[37] I also continue to develop the framework of bittersweet, or ruined, utopianism introduced in the previous chapter through my understanding of language as a tool of survival undergirded by the desire to care and be cared for as well as the threat of mis/apprehension. The ambivalent function of language is threaded through Vuong's characterization of his autobiographical narrator: Little Dog's seemingly pejorative nickname was given to him as a protectant. In the village where Little Dog's grandmother grew up, "the smallest or weakest of the flock" would be named after "the most despicable things" (18) to fool evil spirits from thinking they were easy prey. "To love something," Little Dog concludes, "is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched--- and alive" (ibid). Little Dog's nickname is designed to save him, and yet, the relegation of both creatures of small stature and canines to the category of "most despicable things" highlights the hierarchy of Man Vuong writes against in his focus on the beauty and creativity of nonhuman animals. The care practices of Little Dog's family are thus in part underlined by the violence of their surrounding mythos— a fact further driven home for Little Dog when his mother is

[37] Throughout this dissertation, my framework of poetry as a literary form of ferality is developed largely in conversation with Black feminist and Caribbean diasporic thinkers, such as Glissant, Gumbs, Lorde, Wynter, and Alexander; however, given this chapter's focus on Vietnamese diasporic experience, it's important to note that the sociopolitical contexts of the contemporary Caribbean diaspora and the contemporary Vietnamese diaspora are quite distinct. While, as discussed in chapter four, the roots of the Caribbean and African diasporas in transatlantic slavery and early modern Western imperialism mean there is a wide range of felt and actual temporal and spatial distance from homelands, ancestors, and empire, with some diasporic subjects recovering from recent displacement and some, like Brand's grandfather in chapter four, grappling with a sense of total alienation from their ancestral roots, the contemporary Vietnamese diaspora is more directly informed by the Vietnam War and late twentieth century U.S. interventionism, meaning that contemporary diasporic subjects often have immediate connections to families and homelands in Vietnam and grapple with a sense of being torn between two places at once (cit).

reluctant to accept his queerness given that it might make him vulnerable to homophobic violence when, as immigrants, they are already vulnerable to xenophobic violence.

The question that propels *On Earth* and Vuong's reluctant turn to writing as a way to preserve the story of his family and other hunted animals is the degree to which human language and storytelling can serve as a site of reclamation for those dispossessed from dominant fields of political representation. Vuong's approach to the question is a bittersweet one. He employs a poetic, metaphor-dense writing style to illuminate the vitality of his family and the nonhuman creatures he sees as kin, as well as to render them irreducible to political or scientific abstraction. His choice to write his story as autobiographical *fiction* gives him further thematic flexibility over how to represent his and others' experiences in word and poetic image. However, his continual attention to the violence and inadequacy of representation and verbal language indicates an ultimate refusal to believe that writing, however poetically phrased, can provide the key to surviving the necropolitical present. The history of human(ist) language use is, within the context of Western imperialism, largely a story of the will to extinguish the Other. Vuong's focus on Othered speakers and Othered forms of speech presents a rich array of linguistic communities that are shadowed by histories of becoming-prey. His framing of language as fundamentally a tool of survival indicates the need not for writing better stories but for reconsidering the taken-for-granted distinctiveness of human storytelling. I frame each section of my analysis with his most extensive animal case studies—- the monkey, the monarch, and the calf—- in order to highlight his use of metaphor as a form of opaque relationality that embeds human histories of imperial predation with the specter

of nonhuman animal survival within conditions of structural precarity. Neither his human nor his nonhuman animal characters are rendered transparent to the reader; rather, the stories and storytellers they are hunted by are undercut by the poetic specters of otherwise worldings and creaturely becomings. By the end of the chapter, the species categorization system that enfolds my close reading will itself break down, going feral on a theoretical as well as thematic level.

**Monkey**

**War and Other Legacies of Violence**

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* opens with a dead animal. Little Dog and his mother, Rose are visiting a rest stop in Virginia when they see a taxidermy buck hanging over the soda machine. Rose, shaken by the sight, demands of Little Dog, "I don't understand why they would do that. Can't they see it's a corpse? A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that" (3). Rose grew up amidst the Vietnam war and its aftermath, meaning she was often surrounded by death. She had to stop schooling at age five when the local school was destroyed by American soldiers during a napalm raid. As an adult, she struggles with self-consciousness over her lack of education, as well as PTSD from the violences she witnessed and endured, which redoubles her sense of vulnerability and dependency in a country that is half foreign and half home. Moreover, her life in America is, in many ways, differently but equally precarious as her former life in Vietnam. She makes a barely-survivable income working at a nail salon; the chemicals and physical labor demands have debilitating effects on her body. Her customer base consists of mostly white, wealthy women who treat her with racist condescension.

Her horror at the sight of a corpse not allowed to die thus in part speaks to differences between American and Vietnamese attitudes towards death and spirituality, but it also speaks to her empathy with kin sufferers of the extended form of death enacted by structural debilitation, as well as outrage at how the pain of the structurally debilitated is turned into a spectacle, so that the dispossessed are not even allowed the privacy of their own deaths. Little Dog, narrating the story retrospectively, describes how "you stared into its black glass eyes and saw your reflection, your whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror. How it was not the grotesque mounting of a decapitated animal that shook you— but that the taxidermy embodied a death that won't finish, a death that keeps dying" (ibid).

In their book, *Animacies*, an interdisciplinary work that brings together animal, queer, critical race, and linguistic studies, Mel Chen posits abstract language as a biopolitical site of alternative vitalization and debilitation. As an example, they point to how the term 'queer' originally served as a slur used to ostracize and debilitate queer subjects but has recently been reclaimed as a site of communal identification and empowerment. They frame the impetus behind their study as a recent bout of chronic illness, in which "I found myself deeply suspicious of my own reassuring statements to my anxious friends that I was feeling more alive again. Surely I had been no *less* alive when I was *more* sick, except under the accountings of an intuitive and immediately problematic notion of 'liveliness' and other kinds of 'freedom' and 'agency'" (1). Chen's hesitancy to proclaim themselves well stems from their intuition of how the discursive site of 'wellness' consolidates the dehumanization of sick and disabled subjects and could

also play into their dispossession from political rights and recognition. Chen's linguistic perspective on biopolitics informs their interest in animality as a kin conceptual site over-determined by politically fraught notions of worthwhile life, as well how nonhuman animals have been historically subjected to the violence of being spoken for.

To bring together their interest in the discursive debilitation of Othered human animals and nonhuman animals, they structure their study around the concept of animacy, meaning both the social perception of what and who is agential and a given subject's actual sense of mobility. Chen argues that animacy,

> "helps us theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times, particularly with regard to humanity's partners in definitional crime: animality (as its analogue or limit), nationality, race, security, environment, and sexuality. animacy activates new theoretical formations that trouble and undo stubborn binary systems of difference, including dynamism/stasis, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg. In its more sensitive figurations, animacy has the capacity to rewrite conditions of intimacy, engendering different communalisms and revising biopolitical spheres, or at least, how we might theorize them" (3).

Read through Chen's framework, Rose's sense of outrage at the making-spectacle of the dead buck engenders a communalism grounded in shared vulnerability and forced overexposure. Chen's interest in undoing the definitional power of humanness asks us to push beyond a simple reading of Rose and the buck as victims who must be rehumanized towards a questioning of what the perception of their lives as stories of victimhood says

about the potential blindnesses of humanist understandings of proper agency and subjecthood. I would add that it is important to give weight to the pain of sociopolitical abjection and immobility even as we recognize that victims of state violence are more than the stories of their victimhood. As with Wojnarowicz's beached whale, the question is about resisting the emotional appropriation of performative activism (that poor whale!) while remaining accountable to the material processes of environmental devastation that propel the beaching.

Like Chen, Little Dog focuses on language as a fraught structure of animacy, community, and nationalism. Within the first few pages, he explains to the reader, "I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*. But I wasn't trying to make a sentence— I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey" (4). His description of the freedom found in language as "nothing but the distance between the hunter and the prey" speaks to how his writing and his writing in English specifically are weighted by cultural imperialism. Little Dog's verbal proficiency creates a gulf between him and his mother, whose access to education was taken by American soldiers, and his fluency in English makes her dependent on him as the day-to-day translator of a generally hostile nation-state. Moreover, for Little Dog and Rose both, the Vietnamese language is equally fraught in its embodiment of a past life clouded in violence and grief, a world that had to be left behind not so much to get away from Vietnamese ways of life but to get away from a Vietnam left in ruins by American warfare. Little Dog describes how, "to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war" (32). He frames *On*

*Earth* as a personal address to his mother but acknowledges that she may never read it, for "each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (3).

The ambivalent form of address that structures the narrative perspective of *On Earth* also speaks to its ambiguous testimonial positioning as an autobiographical novel. Vuong's recounting of Little Dog's family story is a lightly fictionalized figuration of his own experiences growing up as a Vietnamese immigrant with his mother and grandmother, who, like Rose and Lan, Little Dog's grandmother, lived through the Vietnam war and its infrastructural consequences. In interviews, Vuong describes his background in poetry as informing his decision to write his story as an autobiographical novel. He explains that, "for me, as a poet, I was always beginning with truth [...] As a novelist, that seemed natural to me, to begin to see the truth as only the foundation" (Pineda). Vuong's framing of a poetic (or feral) approach to truth that positions empirical experience as "only the foundation" of a subjective exploration of structures of worlding recalls Gumbs' *Spill* and its use of the ambiguous subjectivity of poetry as a vehicle for bringing together cultural criticism, self-exploration, and speculative invention. It thus also refutes a Western approach to knowledge-production that privileges the insularity and rigidity of empirical investigation as hallmarks of epistemological discipline.

In his essay, "The Autobiography of My Novel," writer Alexander Chee explores the pervasive assumption that first novels are thinly-veiled autobiographies. Chee argues that the reality is more complicated: inevitably, the self pervades the fictional world created by the writer; however, the organizational narrative tools required for plotting fiction also allow the writer access to a different approach to and conceptualization of

their life experiences, not just a poorly-cloaked re-enactment. The sense of narrative satisfaction expected with a novel means greater attention to thematic relevance that demands the writer reckon with potential fields of social resonance, or, as Chen would describe it, the potential animacies attached to different discursive structures. Fictionalization, rather than abstracting a personal experience from its tethers to the real world, encourages close attention to how different discursive trappings may engender broader or deeper zones of communicability. Chee, for example, turned to the Japanese myth of the kitsune, a shape-changing fox demon, as a metaphor for his main (and autobiographical) character's sense of alienation borne of his mixed identity; the myth also captured the feeling of exile that accompanies secretly undergoing a sexual assault. Ultimately, Chee's first novel transformed his personal experience of sexual violation into a novel that captured the poetic truth of the afterlife of sexual trauma and resonated with a wide audience of sexual assault survivors. Chee explains, "I wish I could show you the roomful of people who've told me the novel is the story of their lives. Each of them as different as could be. I still don't know if I'd be in that room" (220). Chee's inability to say whether or not he would belong in the room of people who saw their own stories in his novel marks the purposeful authorial ambiguity and intersubjectivity of autobiographical fiction as a product of poetic truth. It also recalls Machado's use of fantasy and fairy tale tropes to embed her personal testimony within larger cultural histories of domination. Autobiographical fiction aims not to render the story of the self as the property of the author but to reflect on the interplay of self and Other necessitated

by the self's entrance into language and made more pronounced by the communal imaginaries accessed by fictionalization and fantasy.

Filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha describes how autobiographical work by artists from dispossessed communities often employs "diverse strategies" that "can favor the emergence of new forms of subjectivity: the subjectivity of a non-I/plural I, which is different from the subjectivity of the sovereign I (subjectivism) or the non-subjectivity of the all-knowing I (objectivism)" (192). The "non-I/plural I" of autobiographical fiction models an understanding of the self embedded in language as a self embedded in the imagination of others. Such a framework pushes against humanist understandings of personal identity as self-contained and the self as independently agential, emphasizing instead the feral sociality of the storied and storytelling self. Yet, Vuong's perspective on the discursivity of selfhood is as cautious as it is celebratory. The publicness inherent to language makes a subject vulnerable to violation and appropriation even as it introduces possibilities for connection: recall Gumbs' use of poetic subjectivity to retain the right to privacy in the face of the compulsory publicness forced onto Black American women. Living with the kin hypervisibility of immigrant subjects, Little Dog speculates, "it could be, in writing you here, I am writing to everyone— for how can there be a private space if there is no safe space, if a boy's name can both shield him and turn him into an animal at once?" (33-34). The language of survivors is not guaranteed protection from the ears of their hunters, and the memory of being hunted forces a heightened awareness of the stakes of speech as a calling of attention to the self.

Much of Little Dog's early relationship to the public sphere involves protecting his family from the shame of illiteracy and its forced exile into silence and nonrecognition of selfhood and humanness. In an early scene at the grocery store, Rose attempts to ask the butcher for oxtail, but she only knows the Vietnamese word for it. When the butcher, who only speaks English, presses her to be clearer, she mimes the motions of an ox:

> "His eyes flicked over each of our faces and asked again, leaning closer. Lan's hand twitched in my grip. Floundering, you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox. But he only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming. The sweat on your forehead caught the fluorescent light. A middle-aged woman, carrying a box of Lucky Charms, shuffled past us, suppressing a smile. You worried a molar with your tongue, your cheek bulging. You were drowning, it seemed, in air. You tried French, pieces of which remained from your childhood. 'Derriere de vache!' you shouted, the veins in your neck showing. By way of reply the man called to the back room, where a shorter man with darker features emerged and spoke to you in Spanish. Lan dropped my hand and joined you— mother and daughter twirling and mooing in circles, Lan giggling the whole time. The men roared, slapping the counter, their teeth showing huge and white. You turned to me, your face wet,

> pleading. 'Tell them. Go ahead and tell them what we need.' I didn't know that oxtail was called oxtail. I shook my head, shame welling inside me [...] That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (32).

Rose's performance as an ox could read as comical; however, Vuong's writing of the scene emphasizes the underlying violence and stakes of the encounter. Rose began the mime in response to the man "leaning closer," physically intimidating her and Lan, whose "hand twitched in [Little Dog's] grasp." When the man starts to laugh at Rose, she begins to sweat, "drowning [...] in air." Her neck "bulges" as she switches to French in a desperate attempt to find a common language. Realizing there is none to be found, she "[pleads]" with Little Dog to rescue her. Rose's desperation to be understood is not merely about having oxtail for dinner but about being seen as a person able to express themselves clearly and thus worthy of being heard. Little Dog has to take off their shared language and 'put on' his English in order for the butcher to truly see he and his mother as people, leading to Little Dog's lifelong determination to "fill in our blanks, our silences." The imperial coding of non-Western languages as more barbaric or less human than Western languages like French and English turns Vietnamese into a source of silencing and abjection for Little Dog and Rose, highlighting a less liberating dimension

of the imperial politics of opacity and the linguistic rifts that emerge between different generations of a diaspora.

Vuong's description of the men as "[roaring]" with "their teeth showing huge and white" provides a counter-framing of the men as behaving as animals, and specifically predators, in their shaming of Rose. Throughout *On Earth*, Vuong's thematic and metaphoric use of animality, like Chee's use of the kitsune myth, builds on his personal experience with the social abjection that accompanies immigrant status and perceived illiteracy to construct a broader exploration of the implications of the assumed tie between linguistic mastery and humanness. Here metaphor, which, within animal studies, is often critiqued as facilitating anthropocentric perspectives on nonhuman animal being, operates less as a tool of appropriation than as a tool of illuminating overlooked solidarities and embedding structurally engrained forms of domination with the resonances of their repetition throughout the history of Man. The predator metaphor is notably unstable; the men are not analogized to a specific predator animal but rather overlaid with the lyrical suggestion of becoming-predator in their degrading treatment of Rose. As with Vuong's use of the hunted-hunter relation throughout as a protean metaphor for globally-scattered imperial violences, the point is to situate the men's actions within the sense experience of terror in order to counteract their positioning of Rose's perspective, her fear and desperation, as inexplicable. This is particularly important for Vuong's critique of neoliberal globalization as a necropolitical structure that subjects plasticized nonhuman and human animal creatures to a logic of disposability under the cover of a humanitarian cosmopolitanism. Pheng Cheah, a globalization scholar

whose work critiques cosmopolitanism as a discourse, describes how, “although globalization creates a greater sense of belonging to a world because it makes individual lives globally interdependent, it has not, thus far, resulted in a significant sense of political allegiance or loyalty to the world” (107). Cheah instead posits that neoliberal globalization uses multiculturalism as a performative cover while in actuality rendering the Global South a philanthropic plaything for the Global North.

For Little Dog, the flawed logic of modern cosmopolitanism is evident within the cruelty and rapaciousness of American soldiers supposedly designated to improve the countries in which they are stationed. In one of his early turns to nonhuman animal being, he parallels a scene of a macaque monkey being eaten alive in Vietnam with a scene of Lan, baby Rose in tow, just barely escaping being shot by American soldiers. In the latter scene, Lan stands before a checkpoint, “a gate made of concertina and weaponized permission,” (35) set up by the American military outside her hometown in Vietnam. Vuong parallels the scene of Lan waiting for the soldiers to determine whether or not she can enter her home with a scene of a group of men sitting drinking and playing cards in a garage. Though the scenes are directly entangled in the novel, alternating paragraph by paragraph, it is unclear to the reader whether the garage is actually spatially or temporally close to Lan as she is held at gunpoint. Aside from the fact that they are “men” currently residing “somewhere deep inside this beautiful country,” (36) their national and racial identities are not made explicit.

Indeed, when I first began to write about the scene, I assumed the men were American soldiers because of how closely it overlaps Lan’s encounter and for a lack of

detail that would indicate otherwise; other readers have shared my assumption (cit). However, upon repeated engagement with the text, I realized that all Vuong really tells the reader is that one of the men is "white-haired," (41) a hair color that notably indicates age but not race. He further underlines the spatiotemporal ambiguity of the scene by framing it with "as legend has it," (36) recalling Machado and Carter's use of folklore tropes to critique legacies of violence. Further research indicates that Vuong could be referencing a 2018 event in which six men in Vietnam were charged with killing an endangered species after filming themselves eating the brain of a macaque monkey and uploading the video into social media, an event that made headlines across the globe, but his lyrical, dream-like depiction of the scene means that connection necessarily remains readerly speculation. When the scene is brought up in a X interview, Vuong explains, "I was interested in detecting the legacy of human violence, and the nonsensical, absurdist rationale around it." His interest in human violence as a legacy justified through absurdist rationales supports a reading of the scene's ambiguity as meant to draw attention to humanist violence as a structure of worlding rather than contributing to the making-spectacle of a particular incident; as in *Spill*, spatiotemporal ambiguity within representations of structural violence performs a form of testimony resistant to the bad faith facticity and empiricism that pervades modern structures of justice and operates to discredit the testimonies of dispossessed speakers. The blurred spatiotemporal lines surrounding the incident emphasize the violence as atmospheric to Western imperialism rather than idiosyncratic to specific men. Little Dog's telling of the scene accordingly

draws focus to the intimate relationality between Lan and the monkey's experiences of violation, enveloping them in a kin dysfunctional structure of worlding:

> "a macaque monkey, the size of a dog, is led, with collar and leash, by a stooped man with combed white hair. No one speaks. All ten eyes are on the mammal as it staggers into the room, its burnt-red hair reeking of alcohol and feces, having been force-fed vodka and morphine in its cage all morning. The flourescent hums steady above them, as if the scene is a dream the light is having. A woman stands on the shoulder of a dirt road begging, in a tongue made obsolete by gunfire, to enter the village where her house sits, has sat for decades. It is a human story. Anyone can tell it. Can you tell? Can you tell the rain has grown heavy, its key-strokes peppering the blue shawl black? The force of the soldier's voice pushes the woman back. She wavers, one arm flailing, then steadies, pressing the girl into her. A mother and a daughter. A me and a you. It's an old story. The stooped man leads the monkey under the table, guides its head through a hole cut in the center. Another bottle is opened. The twist cap clicks as the men reach for their glasses. The monkey is tied to a beam under the table. It jostles about. With its mouth muffled behind a leather strap, its screams sound more like the reel of a fishing rod cast far across the pond" (39).

Vuong's framing of the story of a woman begging to be allowed to go home "in a tongue made obsolete by gunfire" as "a human story," "an old story," refutes notions of American interventionism as a pathway to global progress. The aura of timelessness he casts on the scene instead gives it the tone of something that has been played out, a story

told so many times it's barely worth telling: a mythos. Similarly, the scene of the men eating the monkey's brain is not situated in an ambiguous "garage," where the light "flickers on and off;" Vuong emphasizes the scene's flickering opacity by describing it as "a dream the light is having" (38). His refusal to explicitly identify the men's nationality or race at the same time as he intertwines their actions with the violence of the American soldiers and the thwarted visibility of a flickering light creates friction for any reading of the brain-eating scene that would support Orientalist stereotypes of barbaric Asian eating habits. The metaphoric relation he draws between Lan and the monkey instead condemns the rapacious structure of Western empire and its overdetermination of the stories we tell. Like in Carter's tales, folklore trappings work to create a sense of entrapment within histories of violence that keep repeating themselves.

Yet, in qualifying the matter-of-fact statement that "anyone can tell [the story]," by turning to the addressed you of the narrative, Rose, and asking, "can you tell? Can you tell the rain has grown heavy," Vuong reminds the reader that while it is an old, tired story it is also a personal one. He further plays with the tension between the universal and the personal by referring to Lan as "the woman," throughout the scene, though the reader knows she is Lan. By situating the characters of the story as "a mother and a daughter. A me and a you," Vuong gestures towards the inhabitation of kinship roles and the embeddedness in language imposed by pronouns as alike shaped by the interplay of self and Other weighted by the stakes of survival and kinship.

Vuong intersperses reflections on naming as a structure of animacy and kinship underlined by the politics of recognition throughout the scenes of Lan and the monkey's

abjection. Lan studies the nametag on a soldier's shirt and considers how "the olive tag stitched to the boy's chest frames a word. Although the woman cannot read it, she knows it signals a name, something given by a mother or father, something weightless yet carried forever, like a heartbeat" (38). Lan's understanding of a name as "something given by a mother or father" recalls Glissant's observation that a relational structure of filiation has overdetermined modern language use. After the soldier demands Lan's name, Little Dog reflects on how it was always, for Lan, more than a practical form of identification, how the act of naming herself served as a way to gain autonomy from the patriarchal family structure: "Lan meaning Lily. Lan the name she gave herself, having been born nameless. Because her mother simply called her Seven, the order in which she came into the world after her siblings. It was only after she ran away, from her arranged marriage to a man three times her age, that Lan named herself" (39). Little Dog's reflections on naming, as that which can "both shield him and turn him into an animal at once," further establishes Vuong's ambivalence towards verbal language as an abstracted and easily manipulable form of address and communication. Lan, born into a situation of already stretched-out time and resources, names herself as a way of asserting that she is more than just the seventh child. She runs away out of that knowledge, borne of a name, that she can create for herself a better life than endless years with an elderly husband. But that knowledge is soon tempered by having to work as a prostitute for American soldiers in order to retain her material independence. A re-invented name can be a declaration of agency but it can also be a marker of disappointed hope: the hope that a word could be

enough to change a world, that it could give you possession of yourself even as others lay claim to your body.

The violence of being misapprehended and turned into someone else's symbol haunts Vuong's juxtaposition of Lan and the monkey. He continues the scene:

> "The white-haired man raises a glass and makes a toast, grins. Five other glasses are lifted to meet his, the light falls in each shot because the law says so. The shots are held by arms that belong to men who will soon cut open the macaque's skull with a scalpel, open it like a lid on a jar. The men will take turns consuming the brain, dripped in alcohol or swallowed with cloves of garlic from a porcelain plate, all while the monkey kicks beneath them. The fishing road cast and cast but never hitting water. The men believe the meal will rid them of impotence, that the more the monkey rages, the stronger the cure. They are doing this for the future of their genes– for the sake of sons and daughters" (41).

The men read the extremity of the monkey's duress as symbolizing the strength their brains will give them. They eat the brain while the monkey attempts to protest with a voice muffled by a leather strap. Vuong partly combats the forced silence of the monkey by embedding its voice with added meaning through the poetic use of repeated metaphor: "its screams sound more like the reel of a fishing rod cast far across the pond," "the fishing road cast and cast but never hitting water" (ibid). The metaphor of a fishing rod that never hits water emphasizes how the monkey's voice carries no resonance with their audience but also forces Vuong's reader to feel the weight of a cry of pain rendered opaque by what the audience is willing to hear. Of course, one could argue that the fact

that the monkey's voice is made audible to the reader via its very crafting into a *scene* by a Vuong supports the historic privileging of verbal language systems; and yet, it is also the symbolic order, through the handed-down ritual of consuming a monkey in duress to strengthen your family line, that trumps any ethical scruples on the part of the soldiers. Vuong is forced to give weight to the monkey's voice only because it was taken away in the first place. That they kill the monkey for the imagined and abstracted vitality of "sons and daughters," (which Vuong refrains from describing with the more personal *their* sons and daughters) speaks to Glissant's insight into filiation as a central symbolic system of conquest. The assumed tie between verbal capacity and intersubjective accountability is broken down further as the scene continues:

> "A sound now of dribbling. A liquid warmth slides down the hem of her black trousers. The acrid smell of ammonia. Lan pisses herself in front of the two boys— and holds the girl tighter. Around her feet a circle of wet heat" (41).

Lan pees herself in response to the pressure of the soldiers' continued wavering. While an act of incontinence would traditionally be associated with the animal body—- the languageless body that can't control itself— Vuong frames the circle of pee under Lan's feet as "a life sized period of her own sentence, alive" (44). The act of peeing and its visual residue is a communication, a demand for recognition of life and the desire to keep living within a system of relations that continually threatens death: a language borne of war. Vuong's framing of Lan's pee stain as a form of language as she reaches for two verbal languages that fail her uses poetic metaphor to suggest that what is often demoted to the merely material— the crude realities of life— can serve as a language of opacity.

Moreover, by paralleling two acts linked simultaneously to bodily need and social abjection, peeing yourself and eating an animal alive, whose perceived barbarism vs. meaningfulness is dependent on the social authority of the subject committing the act, he emphasizes the contradictions inherent to the entangled web of the body/mind, animal/human, and civilized/uncivilized binaries. Though naturalized under modern biopolitics, as Chen argues, discursive binaries of value attribution are rendered unstable by the feral nature of creaturely life and sociality.

Reflecting on the humanist dismissal of animal language, Derrida argues that, "the simplisticness, misunderstanding, and violent disavowal [of animal communication systems] that we are analyzing at present also seem to me to be betrayals of repressed human possibilities, of other powers of reason, of a more comprehensive logic of argument, or a more demanding responsibility concerning the power of questioning and response" (105). Derrida's focus on language as, at base, a system of "questioning and response" that demands social accountability aligns with Vuong's ambivalence towards the obfuscating nature of verbal language and consequent interest in nonhuman animal and/or nonverbal communication systems designed to navigate situations of threat and propelled by the need to survive. Vuong continues the scene:

> The brain of the macaque monkey is the closest, of any mammal, to a human's
>
> [...]
>
> 'Yoo Et Aye numbuh won,' she says, urine still dripping down her ankles. Then again, louder. 'Yoo Et Aye numbuh won.

'No bang bang.' She raises her free hand to the sky, as if to let someone pull her right up to it. 'No bang bang. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won (42-43).

Through the repetition of Lan's only verbalizations to the soldiers, "Yoo Et Aye numbuh won," "No bang bang," Vuong emphasizes the political baggage of human language in its imperial reinforcement of national and global power structures. The soldiers, trained in the ideology of American superiority, have not bothered to learn Vietnamese— the language of the country they currently occupy— and cannot understand Lan's first plea, while Lan's limited English leads her to the grammatically flawed second plea, "No Bang Bang," reinforcing her inferiority in the eyes of the soldiers.

As he recounts Lan and the monkey's encounters and how both have their pleas to live wilfully ignored, Vuong repeatedly returns the reader's attention to the intimacy of human and monkey cognition— "the brain of the macaque monkey is the closest, of any mammal, to a human's" (41)--- and the historical underestimation of monkey perceptual systems: "monkeys are capable of self-doubt and introspection, traits *once thought* attributable only to humans. Some species have displayed behavior indicating the use of judgment, creativity, even language" (emphasis mine). His concluding analysis, however, that, "in other words, macaques employ memory in order to survive" (43) takes a different analytical turn than the humanist preoccupation with proving whether nonhuman animals are as smart as human animals. While traits like introspection and creativity are valued within scientific studies as higher-power cognitive capacities that mark species superiority, Vuong frames them as merely practical tools of survival turned to in contexts of threat that adapt memories of how the self was harmed in the past to how

the self can survive the present. The question moves from demonstrating intelligence to what is lost when our epistemic resources are allocated to the measurement of intelligence and not protection from harm. If anything, the humanist categorization of narrowly defined behavioral traits like verbal language use and judgment has historically made an animal self, human or otherwise, liable to misrecognition, shaming, and violation within social contexts informed by hierarchical and narrow evaluative frames of life.

At the end of the passage, Vuong intersperses Lan's words with a kin phrase borne of war, spoken by Michael Brown as he was shot and fatally wounded by an American police officer: "Hands Up. Don't Shoot."

> Who will be lost in the story we tell ourselves? Who will be lost in ourselves? A story, after all, is a kind of swallowing. To open a mouth, in speech, is to leave only the bones, which remain untold. It is a beautiful country because you are still breathing. *Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands Up. Don't shoot. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. No bang bang* (43).

"Hands Up. Don't Shoot" further stresses the limits of verbal language as an animacy structure within contemporary necropolitics: on the one hand, it became an animating rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter Movement. On the other hand, the phrase carries with it the memory of its own failure, the fact that a shot was ultimately fired at a person as they pleaded for the right to live. Vuong's biopolitical framing of a story as "a kind of shallowing" that "[leaves] only bones" mirrors Wilderson's Afro-pessimist understanding of race, and specifically, for Wilderson, Blackness, as a discursive structure that hinges

on the “difference between those bodies that do not magnetize bullets and those bodies that do” (80). At the same time, Vuong’s addendum that the bones “remain untold” speaks to Glissant’s errant zones of opacity that subsist within seemingly totalizing sociopolitical structures. Despite being the setting of repeated imperial violence, Vietnam is “a beautiful country because you are still breathing,” (43) a call back to Vuong’s only spatiotemporal description of the monkey-eating men as residing “somewhere in this beautiful country” (36). The violence of empire, for Vuong, does not erase the potential for beauty that characterizes the vitality of creaturely life in spite of unfavorable odds. While his description of Vietnam as “this beautiful country” is tinged with sarcasm in the context of the men’s brutality, the ending reference betrays a genuine love for his mother’s homeland for having borne witness to her survival. The beauty of *a country*, unnamed and thus rendered partially opaque in Vuong’s most tender descriptions, lies not in its ability to maintain clear borders and a transparent heritage but in the more ineffable reality of life’s persistence within conditions of erasure. The spectral echo of Brown’s murder through the words that failed to save him intertwined with Lan’s protests in turn return the reader to the atmospheric nature of racialized precarity and the circumstantial nature of Lan’s escape from the story of gunfire.

It is not ultimately Lan’s verbal capacity that saves her but the soldier’s ability to see himself in her daughter’s racial identity: to recognize Rose as kin. Little Dog describes how the soldier,

> “takes note of Rose’s hair, its errant cinnamon tint fringed blond around the temples. Seeing the soldier’s eyes on her daughter, Lan pushes the girl’s face to

> her chest, shielding her. The boy watches this child, *the whiteness showing from her yellow body*. He could be her father, he thinks, realizes. Someone he knows could be her father— his sergeant, squad leader, platoon partner, Michael, George, Thomas, Raymond, Jackson. He considers them, rifle gripped tight, his eyes on the girl with American blood before the American gun" (42, emphasis mine).

Rose is the daughter of one of the American soldiers Rose slept with during her time as a prostitute. "The whiteness showing from her yellow body" that leads the soldier to recognize her as a human being worthy of protection is thus itself a marker of the violence of globalized necropolitics in how Lan was forced to give her body away to soldiers being paid a stable salary to occupy her country and terrorize her community. In her discussions of race, animality, and the human, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson concludes that, "animalization is not incompatible with humanization: what is commonly deemed dehumanization is, in the main, more accurately interpreted as the violence of humanization or the burden of inclusion into a racially hierarchized universal humanity" (18). Like with much scientific work that fetishizes the uniqueness of human being in order to justify the ecological violence of anthropocentrism, the discursive romanticization of a "universal humanity" belies the actual function of globalization and human rights law in upholding necropolitical distinctions between the worthy and the unworthy, the resourced and the dispossessed. In their studies of the animacy of race, Chen similarly argues that "one of [racism's] most profound dependencies" (40) is the construction of a supposedly universal humanity that is in fact highly mutable in its

perception of who counts as human depending on the racialized allocation of power and privilege in a given sociohistorical context.

Rose is later ostracized as a child in both Vietnam and the U.S. due to the perception of her mixed status as racially ambiguous. Little Dog describes how, in Vietnam,

> the children called [Rose] ghost-girl, called Lan a traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy. How they cut her auburn tinted hair while she walked home from the market, arms full with baskets of bananas and green squash, so that when she got home, there'd only be a few locks left above her forehead. How when she ran out of hair, they slapped buffalo shit on her face and shoulders to make her brown again, as if to be born lighter was a wrong that could be reversed (61).

Rose's nickname, "ghost-girl" signals how a mixed racial status can mark you as not only not wholly human but also not wholly *alive*. Rose's perceived epistemological instability as a mixed subject further recalls Glissant's poetics of opacity as emerging specifically within diasporic contexts of encounter. Within a context of war, though, perceived intimacy with invading soldiers bears the stigma of betraying an already besieged home country. For her young peers, Rose's racial opacity reads less as a sign of radical fugitivity than as a sign of American encroachment. Their anger at her is thus more complicated than the instinctual fear of the Other typically associated with racial ostracization. Their insistence on "[making] her brown again" expresses a frustration with the American disregard for Vietnamese life and a defensive assertion of the value of being Vietnamese. The crudity of their use of shit as face paint meant to re-animate

Rose's Vietnamese identity echoes Lan's use of pee to assert the value of her aliveness in the eyes of invading soldiers; both acts, however, ultimately underline Rose and Lan's abjection as simultaneously racialized and feminized subjects whose value is given and/or taken by violent boys and violent men.

Shortly after his reflections on Rose's social ostracization, Little Dog describes coming across, in his research as a graduate student, an 1884 news article on the trial of a white railroad worker for the murder of a Chinese man. He reads about how the case was dismissed because,

> The judge, Roy Bean, cited that Texas law, while prohibiting the murder of human beings, defined a human only as White, African, American, or Mexican. The nameless yellow body was not considered human because it did not fit in a slot on a piece of paper. Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are.
>
> To be or not to be. That is the question.
>
> When you were a girl in Vietnam, the neighborhood kids would take a spoon to your arms, shouting 'Get the white off her, get the white off her!' Eventually you learned to swim. Wading deep into the muddy river, where no one could reach you, no one could scrap you away. You made yourself an island for hours at a time. Coming home, your jaw would clatter from cold, your arms pruned and blistered—- but still white [...]
>
> To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice (63).

The freedom of self-definition often assumed to be one of the privileges of being human is dependent on security in the knowledge that the basic fact of you as possessing a self with the right to speak and the right to be heard will be socially recognized and affirmed. Little Dog's counter-reading of Hamlet's famous existential crisis over whether it would be better to live or to die given the general unhappiness of his family points out that existentialism is a privilege of those always-already granted the assumption of self-determination: a privilege taken away from colonized subjects under imperial regimes, particularly colonized women. Even when Rose swims for hours in a cold and unforgiving river, warping her skin with prunes and blisters, she cannot escape the fraught histories of imperial violence and racial degradation carried by her skin. Vuong shifts to a direct address to Rose after the canonical Western literary line, "to be or not to be," which disingenuously universalizes the fraught nature of social identity. Vuong's turn to direct address counters with a personal and tender portrait of his mother's attempts to gain a sense of autonomy that serves as a counterbalance to the indifferent brutality of racialized recognition structures.

**The Monarch**

**Diasporic Memory and Compulsory Opacity**

Vuong's next nonhuman animal case study, the monarch, embodies the bittersweetness of contemporary diasporic identity. Monarch migration patterns model the coercion implicit to diasporic movement, while their transgenerational mapping systems speak to Vuong's interest in animal stories borne of precarious conditions. Vuong introduces Little Dog's forays into monarch being early on, when Little Dog is moving

through early memories between him and his mother. The memories present a mix of conflict and care that emphasize the stress Rose is under as an immigrant attempting to raise a young child in a foreign country. The interspersed reflections on monarch migration center around how migration is performed out of necessity and also necessarily accompanied by loss. Vuong's bittersweet portrait of monarch being counters notions of movement away from origins as always a sort of freedom, providing a diasporic model of feral witness and the sorrow that underwrites its gaze backwards. He describes how "a colony of monarch butterflies, numbering more than fifteen thousand, are beginning their yearly migration south […]

> They perch among us, on windowsills and chain-link fences, clotheslines still blurred from the just-hung weight of clothes, the hood of a faded-blue Chevy, their wings folding slowly, as if being put away, before snapping once, into flight. It only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation" (4)

Monarchs migrate in order to escape the cold winters of the North. Vuong emphasizes the precarity of their journey in describing how a single frost can kill an entire generation. Moreover, by tracing how "they perch among us," around seemingly mundane objects, like "the hood of a faded-blue Chevy," Vuong returns to the potential for solidarity between human and nonhuman animal creatures facing different but entangled forms of precarity and dispossession.[38]

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[38] Vuong's object-choices of nonhuman animal communities under conditions of death and duress may resemble the paternalistic use of nonhuman animals as metaphors for debilitation amongst humanist animal rights organizations; however, I contend that he uses metaphor in Glissant's sense of opaque relationality, meaning not a top-town symbolic appropriation but a dialectical system of resonances specific to kin experiences of attempted erasure, bewilderment, and survival.

After the brief, mobile image of a monarch in flight, Vuong immediately shifts to Little Dog's memory of when he was five and

> leapt out at [Rose] from behind the hallway door, shouting, 'Boom!' You screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. I stood bewildered, my toy army helmet titled on my head […] I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves— but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom (4).

The specter of the monarch in flight intertwined with Rose's terror and Little Dog's bewilderment animate kin subjectivities shaped by the structural threat of death and a swift, compulsory escape to unknown lands. Vuong's framing of war as something that "once it enters you it never leaves" and that echoes in "a sound forming the face of your own son" models both how diasporas borne of state violence are not freely-chosen and how the emotional complications of national displacement are not resolved upon entry into a new country, particularly entry into the country that displaced you. In her reflections on the African Diaspora, Brand notes how, "in the Diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the spectre of captivity" (29). Another passage continues Little Dog's reflections on diasporic monarch being with a focus on its implications for intergenerational survival:

> The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.
>
> What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?

> That time at the Chinese butcher, you pointed to the roasted pig hanging from its hook. 'The ribs are just like a person's after they're burned.' You let out a clipped chuckle, then paused, took out your pocketbook, your face pinched, and recounted our money.
>
> What is a country but a life sentence? (8-9).

Vuong's paralleled and refracted questions, "what is a country but a borderless sentence, a life" and "what is a country but a life sentence" reflect the push and pull of contemporary diaspora twinned with the push and pull of discursivity as a tool of both abjection and vitalization. Diasporas reveal national borders and their supposedly immutable symbolism to in fact be fluid, susceptible to the shifting ecological needs of creaturely life; yet, equally, they embody the violence of shifting borders within the uneven terrain of contemporary globalization, in which the fluidity of the border in question depends on who stands on either side of it and the state retains the power of definition. Contained within Rose's clipped laugh at seeing how the ribs of a roasted pig resemble "a person's after they're burned" is the weight of having to know what a person's ribs look like after they've been burned, of entering a store where meat is freely available and recognizing the remains of your former kin within the prepared meat. Rose's impulse to recount her money after seeing the burned ribs underlines the memory as one grounded in lived precarity.

Vuong's interest in the temporal and generational structure of monarch migration revolves around the fact that the generation of monarchs that migrated South will not survive to return North, making it so "only the future revisits the past." The next

generation will not only be left to navigate the next winter alone, but they will also be weighted by the species-memory of the monarchs lost throughout the previous migration. As in Hartman's bittersweet reading of fugitive community-building within conditions of enslavement, a future created out of fugitive persistence will necessarily be haunted by the conditions that necessitated escape. Little Dog describes how, "the memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into [the genes of the next generation]," (12) preserving embodied memories of loss that crucially inform the monarchs' species-knowledge of how to survive. The lost migrant generation serve as "ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast" (10). But there is also a sadness to outlasting a narrative that your kin could not, a sadness that does not feel like freedom; Little Dog questions, "what do we mean when we say survivor? Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts" (13). As Lorde noted, survival implies efficacy, but efficacy is always already shadowed by the defective, the ones who could not master the tools of empire, to paraphrase another of her insights.

The ambivalent series of memories Vuong intersperses throughout Little Dog's reflections on monarchs gestures towards diasporic life as a feral movement towards freedom amidst the grief inherent to displacement: a ferality borne of the compulsory opacity of dispossession from national infrastructures of recognition and protection. In one passage, Little Dog describes how his mother, nearing fifty, became enraptured by coloring books:

> The time, at forty-six, when you had a sudden desire to color. 'Let's go to Walmart,' you said one morning. 'I need coloring books.' For months, you filled the space between your arms with the shades you couldn't pronounce. *Magenta, vermilion, marigold, pewter, juniper, cinnamon*. Each day, for hours, you slumped over landscapes of farms, pastures, Paris, two horses on a windswept plain, the face of a girl with black hair and skin you left blank, left white. You hung them all over the house, which started to resemble an elementary school classroom. When I asked you, 'Why coloring, why now?' you put down the sapphire pencil and stared, dreamlike, at a half-finished garden. 'I just go away in it for a while,' you said, 'but I feel everything. Like I'm still here, in this room.'

Vuong's framing of Rose's coloring obsession as allowing her the freedom of "[going] away" for a while but still "[feeling] everything" draws together Vuong's use of autobiographical fiction and Rose's love for coloring books as kin feral writing forms that allow for the the mutability of diasporic selfhood as well as the right to self-definition and exploration often denied by state structures of recognition. Through the coloring books, Rose can be in Paris, or a horse galloping through a plain. She can become someone other than her socially configured self. Moreover, Little Dog's emphasis on how the coloring books and crayons allow Rose access to colors with fancy names— vermilion, juniper, marigold— illegible to her via verbal language once again challenges the humanist conception of abstract language systems as unique from sensual forms of communication in their presumed ability to express a human consciousness, by which is typically meant a quasi-deep interiority worthy of political recognition. The scene

immediately follows an earlier memory of Little Dog trying to teach Rose how to read. Rose grew frustrated and slammed the book shut after failing to follow along as Little Dog traced her hand over the written words. Little Dog relates Rose's anger to how "that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered" (5). Diasporic intergenerationality and the layers of opacity and misunderstanding created between subsequent generations as they navigate new homelands, languages, and epistemic resources enforce a sense of alienation from the very people one expects to call home.

Little Dog intertwines brief references to Rose's physical abuse between the longer account of her coloring book hobby:

> The time you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hardwood dotted with blood [...] How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging? 'I'm sorry,' you said, bandaging the cut on my forehead (6).

The specter of Rose's abuse threads the ruination of histories of violence through she and Little Dog's fugitive turn to creative expression. As the previous chapter made clear, there are limits to the utopian impulse when it is simmering under the pressure of material and social dispossession, just as there are limits to Rose's ability to do the work of locating beauty and hope amidst daily material and social deprivations that make it hard to care for herself, let alone her son and mother. Vuong's references to Rose's physical abuse of Little Dog, which ends when Little Dog becomes big enough to defend

himself, are sparse and controlled, likely, as with the monkey brain passage, out of his awareness of the risks of enforcing racist stereotypes. Vuong has Little Dog pointedly describe how, “I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children [...] Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war. To say possessing a heartbeat is never as simple as the heart’s task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body” (13). Rose’s understanding of motherhood, of the act of raising and nurturing life, is informed by having lived the entirety of her own life within necropolitical state structures that continually try to wrest control over whether one’s heart will say *yes yes yes* to one’s body. Vuong has Little Dog end his bittersweet reflections on his childhood and her mothering with the shadowy image of Little Dog and Rose’s hands “merging” (6) and with Rose “bandaging the cut on [Little Dog’s] forehead” (ibid) to underline how Rose and Little Dog’s love for each other was sometimes rendered opaque by the structures of violences they inhabited but they, regardless, persisted with their efforts to nurture and care for each other.

Later in the novel, Little Dog delves deeper into the cultural and familial histories that haunt Rose’s mothering. The reader learns that her first pregnancy ended in a forced abortion. Little Dog finds out about his lost sibling the day he reveals to his mother that he’s gay, news she interprets as a different kind of loss. Little Dog explains, “we were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another” (133). Rose was seventeen, the same age as Little Dog when he comes out to her, when her husband’s family, faced with the reality of already not having enough food for each other, forced her to get an abortion at four months pregnant. Rose describes to Little Dog how, “people

were putting sawdust in the rice to stretch it. You were lucky if you had rats to eat" (ibid). The hospital gave her pills to expel the fetus, but the pregnancy was too far along for them to work. A month later, Rose feels a kick and is taken "back to the hospital, this time to the ER." She feels "him kick as they whirled me through the grey rooms, the chipped paint on the walls. The hospital still smelled of smoke and gasoline from the war" (135). As the nurses "went in with a long metal instrument and just 'scraped my baby out of me, like seeds from a papaya,'" Rose explains, "I saw him, Little Dog, I saw my baby, just a glimpse. A brownish blur on its way to the bin" (ibid). After telling Little Dog of her lost child in response to the news of his queerness, Rose, seemingly abruptly, changes topics, to when she

> "heard Chopin for the first time [...] I must have been six or seven. The man across the street was a concert pianist trained in Paris. He would set the Steinway in his courtyard and play it in the evenings with his gate open. And his dog, this little black dog, maybe this high, would stand up and start to dance. Its little twig legs padded the dust in circles but the man would never look at the dog, but kept his eyes closed as he played. That was his power. He didn't care for the miracle he made with his hands. I sat there in the road and watched what I thought was magic: music turning an animal into a person. I looked at the dog, its ribs showing, dancing to French music and thought anything could happen. Anything" (136).

Rose's dancing dog anecdote reflects a world in which a socially devalued and physically debilitated creature, a dog with visible ribs and "little twig legs," can make itself worthy

and beloved in the eyes of others. Moreover, it is a world in which what grants the dog the ontological value of personhood exceeds the rationalized standards of the state and enters the impractical and joyful realm of aesthetic experience: "music turning an animal into a person." Whether the connection Rose draws is conscious or not, she and Little Dog's conversation revolves around the precarity of structurally abjected life and the degree to which, from a practical perspective, survival is possible or desirable. Rose's husband's family forced her to abort her first child out of the belief that the quality of life he would have in a family that was already starving would not justify his being born. Rose similarly worries that Little Dog, if he chooses to live his life out of the closet, will face not only a miserable life but a life constantly at the risk of death. "They'll kill you," (130) Rose tells him, "They kill people for wearing dresses. It's on the news. You don't know people. You don't know them" (ibid).

Both mother and son, however, are obviously suffering from the logic of rationalization. Rose resents that the potential value of her son's life was dismissed so readily when she felt his vitality through his kicks, while Little Dog knows that a life spent in the closet is not a life at all. This is not to buy into the anti-abortion logic that all emergent life, from conception onwards, deserves the recognition of personhood, which is implicitly about removing agency from reproductive adult subjects, but rather to question the field of assumptions that determine dominant evaluations of life quality and which are often justified through fatalistic scientific lenses that ignore the potential mutability of the larger sociopolitical field in which such life would be rendered precarious. In their discussion of the differential allocation of animacy, for instance, Chen

turns to Charis Thompson's work on reproductive cultures, which is centered in "the contingency of the life and death of embryos in the biopolitical futures of assisted reproductive clinics, where a more sensitized mapping of 'abnormalities' (read as, for instance, disabilities or undesired conditions) broadens zones of terminability" (44). The advancement of contemporary genetics and its ability to locate more and more undesirable genes engenders an increasingly restricted view of what sorts of life are acceptable or worth supporting.

Following the sections in which he discusses the structural reasons behind Rose's difficulties mothering, Little Dog describes a memory of them shopping at Goodwill, in which Rose, unable to read English, asked Little Dog to check the label on a dress to see if it was fireproof. He describes how he,

> not yet able to read myself, said, "Yeah." Said it anyway. "Yeah," I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. "It's fireproof." Days later, a neighborhood boy, riding by on his bike, would see me wearing that very dress—I had put it on thinking I would look more like you—in the front yard while you were at work. At recess the next day, the kids would call me freak, fairy, fag […] Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed, their tiny black-and-red wings jittering like debris that kept blowing, for thousands of miles across the sky, so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof (13-14).

Little Dog's imagining of monarchs fleeing "not winter but the napalm clouds of [Rose's] childhood in Vietnam," flying so far away "you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from" recontextualizes the monarch intergenerational memory system within the personal context of the Vietnam war memories that haunt his mother. The poetic relation he draws between his mother and the monarch speculates a world where the seemingly fragile, paper-like wings of monarchs are intrinsically resistant to the harsh chemicals of human warfare, where Rose does not need a translator to fabulate safety within an hostile language because her very body is a form of armor. He layers the memory of a young Little Dog's abjection as a queer child, and specifically abjection through the verbal language of slurs, to highlight the symbolic systems of simultaneous hypervisibility and erasure that entrap them both. The opacity of metaphor provides the gift of defining yourself otherwise at the same time as it bears the weight of failed recognition.

## Calf

## Tender(ized) Sons and Brutal Fathers

Rose reluctantly accepts Little Dog's queerness, but she remains wary of the kind of life he will be able to make for himself. The last chapters of *On Earth* in turn center on his first queer relationship, with a local boy named Trevor, who, unlike Little Dog, remains in the closet throughout their relationship and, after Little Dog leaves for college, dies of an opiate overdose, a fate that increasingly overtakes their hometown and that Little Dog witnesses from afar. Lan's death follows shortly after, from a cancer that went left untreated for most of its progression; both events lead Little Dog to reckon with the

pain and beauty of lives forcibly rendered short by structural neglect and the question of futurity presented by his own continued existence and, indeed, success as a writer. As he moves from a scene-driven account of his relationship with Trevor to reflective sections on Trevor's death, the form of *On Earth* also evolves from novelistic prose animated by poetic metaphor to short prose broken up by poetic stanzas that intermingles his feelings about his Trevor with his political interest in language and animality as structures of animacy.

Little Dog's turn to Trevor and poetry, or the poetry of Trevor, also leads to his most morbid and debilitated animal case study: calves raised as veal. The utter helplessness of calves within the contemporary meat industry puts Vuong most at risk for consolidating the historical appropriation of nonhuman animals as objects of paternalistic pity and metaphors for human states of suffering in his literary turn to nonhuman animal being; however, that it is precisely within the Trevor/calf sections that the form of the novel begins to dissipate (or, to borrow a term from Wojnarowicz, disintegrate) into poetry and that Vuong devotes explicit attention to the fraught histories of literary representation specifically makes clear the intimacy of his tender use of poetic metaphor with Glissant's ethical understanding of metaphor as facilitating an opaque relationality that resists the compulsory transparency of Western symbolic systems. By intertwining scenes of the calf's Becoming-meat with Trevor's tortured relationship to his masculinity and queerness Vuong brings into relation kin histories of creatures forced to bear the weight of signifying the strength of empire at the same time as he mourns their lost potential to have spoken otherwise. Little Dog describes how, "I never wanted to build 'a

body of work,' but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work" (175).

The topic of veal is introduced by Trevor's dad, a single and generally unhappy father whose homophobia motivates Trevor to stay in the closet. One day after he serves veal at the dinner table and he and Trevor are in the process of eating, he tells his son of how veal is produced as a sort of man-to-man challenge to continue eating it. While the details are from Trevor's dad, the account of them is given by Little Dog in his emergent poetic turn. To make veals, calves

> are locked in boxes the size of themselves. A body-box, like a coffin, but alive, like a home. The children, the veal, they stand very still because tenderness depends on how little the world touches you. To stay tender, the weight of your life cannot lean on your bones.
>
> *We love eatin' what's soft*, his father said, looking dead
>
> into Trevor's eyes. Trevor who would never eat a child. Trevor the child with the scar on his neck like a comma. A comma you now
>
> put your mouth to. That violet hook holding two complete thoughts, two complete bodies without subjects. Only verbs (156).

Trevor's father looking his son "dead" in the eyes while explaining that "*we love eatin' what's soft*" can be read as an implied suspicion of Trevor's queerness and an assertion, disciplinary in intent, that 'soft' or unmanly queer men get eaten by the brutal appetites of larger society. Though Trevor and his father's relationship is not particularly warm, given that Trevor's father struggles under the structural precarity of poverty and single

parenthood, his implied challenge to his son to remain the eater and not the eaten can be read alongside Rose's fear that her child will not survive a world informed by long and deadly histories of homophobia. I read Little Dog's interpretation of the softness of veal, that "tenderness depends on how little the world touches you," as being attentive to both hardnesses: the hardness of a world with a restricted view of appropriate sexuality and the hardness of a father who would have his son adapt to a world from which he will always be in hiding. To keep calves away from a world that would harden them is to pretend that there is nothing to be done about the hardness of the world.[39] To consume softness instead of nourishing it is to give oneself the taste of its possibility while destroying the world it could have made possible.

The Trevor/Calf sections also layer the hunter-prey metaphor with the power relations of gender and sexuality, whereas its previous appearances had focused on the power relations of race and nationality. While Vuong's decolonial critique centered around the rapacity of globalized imperialism and the compulsory nature of diasporic movement, his turn to Little Dog's developing queer identity switches focus to the tenderness and brutality inherent to sexuality: the vulnerability of sexual desire as well as

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[39] In her influential book, "The Sexual Politics of Meat," animal studies scholar Carol J. Adams traces the entanglement of meat-eating and patriarchal cultures in their joint valuation of dominance and toughness, despite the fact that vegetarian diets have been shown to provide adequate nutrition for muscle-building. Adams argues that meat consumption developed not as a logical discovery of nutritional value but as a symbol of strength due to the abjection of nonhuman animals and the exhibition of power facilitated by killing them. She in turn relates the modern association of meat-eating and masculinity to the abjection and objectification of women. She describes how, "men who batter women have often used the absence of meat as a pretext for violence against women [...] As one woman battered by her husband reported, 'It would start off with him being angry over trivial little things, a trivial little thing like cheese instead of meat on a sandwich.' Another woman stated, 'A month ago he threw scalding water over me, leaving a scar on my right arm, all because I gave him a pie with potatoes and vegetables for his dinner, instead of fresh meat" (18). The assumed necessity of toughness often reinforces and encourages the hardnesses it is supposed to protect against.

the predatory drive to claim its object, the former of which American masculinity attempts to disavow in its performative displays of invulnerability and sexual prowess. Trevor and Little Dog's hunter-prey relation is accordingly shaped by Trevor's closetedness and his macho inheritance. Being attracted to Little Dog challenges his carefully guarded view of himself as not really gay, while his aggressive approach to their sexual encounters allows him to retain the sense of masculinity expected by his father as well as to project his queerness onto Little Dog, who takes on the role of the feminine bottom. Within the world they create between themselves, Trevor serves as the hunter; however, the larger reality is that they both suffer from the structural precarity of the hunted as two queer adolescents living in poverty in suburban America, a reality that will be driven home when Trevor falls victim to the opioid epidemic. They met on a jobsite for farm laborers, most of whom are undocumented migrants paid under the table, and they spend their time either in the farm's barn, Trevor's father's trailer, or Trevor's beaten-down truck.

Vuong in turn interlaces his poetic reflections on their relationship with repeated images of the isolated calf awaiting slaughter. The calf stands for the precarity of their queer love as well as the softness Trevor keeps hidden as he performs the role of hunter. The calf also plays a complicating role in Vuong's philosophy of language in its removal from a social world and thus zones of recognition and communicability. Vuong parallels the structurally-enforced condition of silence under which the calf awaits its death to the structurally-enforced secrecy that shrouds Trevor and Little Dog's burgeoning love. He thus brings into focus the languages of survival turned to by silenced subjects. One scene

parallels a liaison between Little Dog and Trevor pursued in the darkness of the truck with the calf waiting, not knowing for what, in its metal box:

> Your Trevor, your brunette but blond-dusted-arms *man* pulling you into the truck.
> When you say Trevor you mean you are the hunted, a hurt he can't refuse because
> *that's something, baby. That's real*.
> And you wanted to be real, to be swallowed by what drowns you only to surface,
> brimming at the mouth. Which is kissing.
> Which is nothing
> if you forget.
> His tongue in your throat, Trever speaks for you. He speaks and you darken, a
> flashlight going out in his hands so he knocks you in the head to keep the bright
> on. He turns you this way and that to find his path through the dark woods.
> The dark words—
> which have limits, like bodies. Like the calf
> waiting in its coffin-house. No window– but a slot for oxygen. Pink nose pressed
> to the autumn night, inhaling. The bleached stench of cut grass, the tar and gravel
> road, coarse sweetness of leaves in a bonfire, the minutes, the distance, the earthly
> manure of his mother a field away.
> Clover. Sassafras. Douglas fir. Scottish myrtle.
> The boy. The motor oil. The body, it fills up. And your thirst overflows what
> holds it. And your ruin, you thought it would nourish him. That he would feast on
> it and grow into a beast you could hide in.

But every box will be opened in time, in language. The line broken,

Like Trevor, who stared too long in your face, saying, *Where am I? Where am I?*" (157) The language Trevor and Little Dog develop between themselves is the language of the hunter and the hunted but it is spoken with different intonations than the predatory languages of fathers and nation-states. In work on butch identity, queer scholar Ann Cvetkovich provides an emotionally nuanced understanding of butchness as "[reconfiguring] the meanings of being hard or numb, showing both its necessity and difficulty, giving dignity to the moments when it is not possible to be vulnerable and also revealing the many ways in which vulnerability can be performed" (81). Within queer relationships, the predator/prey relation that underlines the butch/femme or top/bottom dynamic is shaped by the care work of recognizing what role your partner is comfortable taking on and what they need from a given sexual experience; their comfort level with or interest in physical dominance and giving or receiving pain may in turn be informed by past experiences of domination in other social contexts and, as Cvetkovich traces elsewhere in her work on BDSM and trauma healing, re-enacting those experiences with a caring partner does not mean reinforcing the original harm but rather reinterpreting it. Serving as Trevor's prey allows Little Dog "to be swallowed by what drowns you only to surface, brimming at the mouth," meaning to give into the vulnerability of being dominated formerly associated with social abjection only to find oneself made more alive by the sensation of being desired.

Little Dog's relationality to Trevor is informed by the pleasures of receptivity, of allowing Trevor to "[speak] for you," but as the passage evolves it also indicates that

Trevor is at a loss as to what to say with his ventriloquist powers. His assumption of the hunter role is undergirded by the *fear*, not the revelation, that being butch is not the same as being masculine, that they say different things to an outsider looking in, and that he and Little Dog will be punished for the queer language form they have created. He turns Little Dog "this way and that to find his path through the dark woods," only to wind up pleading, "*Where am I? Where am I*?" Language serves as a tool of locating oneself in relation to others and to the world, of speaking what one perceives and having it affirmed, and Trevor's fear is that while he is recognized and affirmed by Little Dog within their encounters he will not be able to find that sense of recognition and affirmation for who is he is becoming in the larger world. Vuong moves from Trevor and Little Dog to the calf as it grasps onto sensory details of the world outside its cage, "the bleached stench of cut grass, the tar and gravel road, coarse sweetness of leaves in a bonfire," as a way of locating itself within a context of social displacement in order to mirror the animacy of receptivity and attunement that strengthens Little Dog, thus countering notions of structurally silenced subjects as void of thought and perception, while also giving weight to the structural limits of bodies and words communicated in darkness that Trevor comes up against in his own attempts at self-understanding. Little Dog's conclusion that, "every box will be opened in time, in language" is ambiguous as to whether the anticipated opening will be one of animating possibility or of exposure to more violence, but it does point to language as a structure of continual change in the sense of both the forms of adaptation necessitated by survival and the transformations that follow from being embedded in fields of intersubjective difference.

As Vuong moves to the end of the Trevor/calf sections, he depicts a scene in which Trevor texts Little Dog to come help him and Little Dog finds Trevor hiding from his father and the rain under a slide in a local park. Like the scene in the truck, the metal slide mirrors the metal cage that engulfs the calf, that seems to protect it but actually emblematizes its capture. Little Dog describes,

> "Trevor who texts you after two months of silence—
>
> Writing *please* instead of *plz*
>
> Trevor who was running from home, his crazy old man. *Who was getting the fuck out*. Soaked Levi's. Who ran away to the park because where else when you're sixteen.
>
> Who you found in the rain, under the metal slide shaped like a hippopotamus.
>
> Whose icy boots you took off and covered, one by one, each dirt-cold toe, with your mouth. The way your mother used to do when you were small and shivering
>
> [...]
>
> A calf in a box, waiting. A box tighter than a womb. The rain coming down, its hammers on the metal like an engine revving up. The night standing in violet air, a calf
>
> shuffling inside, hoofs soft as erasers, the bell on its neck ringing
>
> and ringing. The shadow of a man growing up to it. The man with his keys, the commas of doors. Your head on Trevor's chest. The calf being led by a string, how it stops
>
> to inhale, nose pulsing with dizzying sassafras. Trevor asleep

beside you. Steady breaths. Rain. Warmth welling through his plaid shirt like

steam issuing from the calf's flanks as you listen to the bell

Across the star flooded field, the sound shining

like a knife. The sound buried deep in Trevor's chest and you listen.

That ringing. You listen like an animal

learning how to speak" (158-160)

Trevor's "two months of silence" marks his assumption of power over the terms of communication in the relationship as well as his reluctance to admit to his dependency on Little Dog, while his retreat to a hippopotamus-shaped children's slide belies the lack of escape options that inform his reluctance to take on the additional structural vulnerability of queerness. As the passage moves on, after Little Dog has found and comforted Trevor, Vuong's movement between images of the calf in waiting and images of Little Dog and Trevor huddled together beneath the slide picks up pace, suggesting an increased intermingling of the two and giving their metaphoric relation a feral unsettledness. As the "shadow of a man" with keys to the calf's cage approaches, the passage takes on an ominous tone that is equally cast over the soon-to-be slaughtered calf and Little Dog and Trevor's rain-soaked embrace. Vuong's positioning of Little Dog's "head on Trevor's chest" immediately adjacent to "the calf being led by a string" who stops to take a last sniff of "dizzying sassafras" highlights the mutual brevity of the moments of beauty experienced by Little Dog in his romance with Trevor and by the calf in its nose-led engagement with the outside world. As with his emphasis on the momentary beauties of diasporic life, his emphasis on how Little Dog and the calf's joys are still joys undertaken

in the shadow of slaughter refuses a wholly redemptive reading of the overlooked agency of structurally debilitated subjects that risks underplaying the violent reality of structural subjugation.

The scenes then become literally intermingled when Little Dog describes being able to hear the bell ringing from the calf's neck, a "sound buried deep in Trevor's chest." The practical implausibility of Little Dog hearing the bell of an imagined calf on some distant farm forces an anti-rationalist, poetic understanding of the language spoken between the calf and Little Dog that focuses less on whether they are *really* in hearing distance of each other—- recall the disingenuous direness of philosophical hair-pulling over whether animals can *really* speak— than on the meaningfulness of their connection as kin creatures who have been subject to the humanist violence of displacement and immobility. Little Dog's insistence that he hears the bell ringing enacts a refusal of the calf's assumed isolation from all means of being heard and its structural dispossession from political structures of recognition. Moreover, his location of the source of the bell inside Trevor's chest frames it as a form of language that is bone-deep, borne from the body of its speakers, in Lorde's ancient and hidden reserves of creativity and power. The imaginative nature of Little Dog and the calf's linguistic connection further recalls Wynter's interest in the creative potential of mythos as a communication-based structure of values not independently determined but also not deterministic in how it can be altered by shifting collective practices of interpretation and discourse. The ability to re-write debilitating myths depends not on the brilliance of a single speaker but on the space between two speakers and the weight they ascribe to each other's lives.

That the Trevor/calf sections end with Little Dog listening to the bell "like an animal/ learning to speak" frames himself, the writer and translator for his family— the one typically in control of language, as the animal in the relationship who still has much to learn about how to craft an adequate response to the sound of the calf's bells and what it demands of him. It returns to Vuong's suggestion that while we may think the answer to our struggles lies in making the stories of mistreated animals fit into a human(ist) tale of martyrdom and moral redemption, it actually lies in seeing our stories as equally the stories of animals, subject to the same limits and challenges in what we can understand and what we can say. As the Trevor/calf section comes to a close, Vuong returns to the scene-driven prose style of the earlier half of *On Earth*, with a focus on Little Dog's ambivalence over the burgeoning success of his career as a writer given the weight of the grief he carries. The reflections on writing as memorialization that unfold over the final pages is shaped by Little Dog's love for his mother as well as by Trevor and Lan's deaths and his anger over the lack of value the U.S. public sphere ascribed to their lives.

Vuong frames Little Dog's reflections on writing as an answer to his mom's question about "what it means to be a writer" (174). His first response is, "Seven of my friends are dead. Four from overdose. Five, if you count Xavier who flipped his Nissan doing ninety on a bad batch of fentanyl. I don't celebrate my birthday anymore" (174). Vuong thus establishes Little Dog's identity as a writer as, like Wojnarowicz, shaped by the morbid necessity of preserving the voices of those who can no longer speak for themselves: an understanding of writing grounded in the 'basics' of survival rather than an abstract pursuit of beauty and truth. After stating that the official cause of Trevor's

death was "on overdose from heroin laced with fentanyl," (178) Little Dog turns to a memory from a writing conference in which "a white man asked me if destruction was necessary for art" (ibid). He tells the man, "No, sir, destruction is not necessary for art [...] not because I was certain, but because I thought my saying it would help me believe it" (179). The man wears "a cap stitched gold with *'Nam Vet 4 Life*, the oxygen tank connected to his nose hissing beneath him" (ibid). Little Dog's first thought upon seeing him is that "he could be my grandfather," one of the soldiers Lan slept with during her time as a prostitute. The man's identity as a Vietnam vet, as well as his visible reliance on assisted breathing, recall Shadrack's madness from chapter two. The man's vivid presence—- the heightened visibility of his precarious breath—- reminds Little Dog that destruction is not an abstract concept that gives a universal quality to a work of literature but a lived reality with grave stakes for those at risk of being destroyed or whose bodies perform violence on behalf of an indifferent nation-state. That Little Dog tells the vet destruction is not necessary for good writing "not because I was certain, but because I thought my saying it would help me believe it," situates language as more immediately a tool of care and connection than a transparent representation of empirical truths.

Cheah's study of contemporary globalization discourse and its cloaking of Global North hegemony as a utopian cosmopolitanism similarly reworks the perceived ethical functionality of cultural production as it relates to the self-actualization mechanics of biopolitics. He considers how the material world is assumed to be a sort of cage humans have to work their way out of, while culture accesses a wider terrain of self-discovery and improvement. He argues that such a logic underlies utopian readings of the various

manifestations of contemporary globalization, such as global financial markets, the cosmopolitan tourist industry, and transnational human rights organizations. While global capitalism in particular is often problematized, it is, like NGOs and travel culture, still seen as a sign of the inevitable breaking down of borders and promotion of a sense of global solidarity presumed to result from human culture and its movement towards freedom and greater understanding and contact amongst all of humanity. From this perspective, current 'problems' surrounding globalization, like Northern production industries that exploit the labor of Southern women and the rise of autocratic political situations in the Global South as a result of U.S. interventionism, will inevitably be smoothed over by a universal recognition of ethical wrongdoing and the eventual incorporation of all of humanity into the global umbrella of human rights.

Cheah offers an alternative framework of the human that focuses on its determination by what he names "the inhuman" (232). For Cheah, the inhuman points not to ethical bankruptcy but to the larger sphere of sociomaterial forces that precede and proceed a necessarily finite human being's entrance into the world (Cheah 100). Because an individual human being cannot logically be said to be in control of the sociomaterial world they are born into, the so-called 'rational' human mind is subject to a "constitutive contamination [...] by the material conditions that craft it" (44). From this perspective, the violences haunting contemporary globalization will not be 'solved' by the teleological progression of humanity but are rather emblematic of how the increasing freedom of some humans is dependent on the unfreedom of others within a world ecology of finite resources. The problem is not that culture, often, within globalization discourse, equated

with national cultures, has not yet been sufficiently intermingled and freed from the blindsight of nationalism but that culture, as a discursive stand-in for human activity, interactivity, and potential, is assumed to be shaped by the inevitability of human progress and mastery. Cheah in turn proposes a different understanding of the kind of freedom available to the human as one terrestrial force among many inhuman ones, an understanding based in "an interminable negotiation with and responsibility to the forces that give us ourselves instead of the transcendence of the given" (79).

For Cheah, conceptualizing freedom as groundedness in, rather than transcendence of, the world as given enacts an urgent intervention against "the cosmopolitan consciousness" that "is largely the consciousness of transnational upward class mobility, especially that of the new technocratic professional class that manages and benefits from the global production system of flexible capitalism" (11). I in turn place Cheah's philosophy of the given alongside Vuong's philosophy of animal language, particularly for the way in which Cheah reconceptualizes freedom as a form of vulnerability to the Other rather than a form of mastery over the Other. He describes how, "the aporia of given culture implies a radical vulnerability [to forces which are radically other and beyond human control] that we have not learned to accept" (100). Like the givenness Cheah associates more broadly with human culture, Vuong's animal language case studies highlight the contextual, or given, nature of language as an intersubjective communication system borne of ecological needs and the shared drive to survive an often incomprehensible world; moreover, despite survival's connotation as a 'basic' need that lacks the existential glamor of self-discovery and philosophizing, the creative nature of

language stems from the improvisation and ingenuity necessitated by adapting to our precarious relation to what is given and what is unknown. The mutability of culture within the Cheah's framework similarly derives from our "interminable negotiation" with the given that is most successful when we, following Glissant, accept the radical opacity of the forces that determine our lives, the way in which any language is always a journey undertaken in the dark.

Towards the end of *On Earth*, Little Dog describes a trip to Vietnam he and his mom take to bury Lan's ashes in her homeland. After the funeral, they return to their hotel room in the early afternoon, and Rose, inexplicably, turns off all the lights. Little Dog describes her apparent sense of confusion and dislocation:

> 'Where am I?' you say. 'Where is this?' Not knowing what else to say, I say your name. 'Rose,' I say. The flower, the color, the shade. 'Hong,' I repeat. A flower is seen only toward the end of its life, just-bloomed and already on its way to being brown paper. And maybe all names are illusions. How often do we name something after its briefest form? Rose bush, rain, butterfly, snapping turtle, firing squad, childhood, death, mother tongue, me, you.
>
> Only when I utter the word do I realize that rose is also the past tense of rise. That in calling your name I am also telling you to get up. I say it as if it is the only answer to your question– as if a name is also a sound we can be found in. Where am I? Where am I? You're Rose, Ma. You have risen (215).

Despite or alongside Little Dog's earlier reflections on naming as a form of abstraction and thus potential miscomprehension, a name as a traditional, human form of recognition

“is also a sound we can be found in,” a form of groundedness in the given that is particularly comforting for Rose upon returning to a conflicted homeland and burying her mother. Little Dog’s reflections on “how often we name something after its briefest form” return to Cheah’s understanding of culture as a form of improvisation within the reality of finite life. Rose’s double-function as both a name and a verb highlights the mutability of language even as it is given, its ability to adapt the needs of a given context. In the moment, Rose needs both to be named by her son and to be told she is capable of getting up and surviving her grief.

The scene continues:

> I touch your shoulder with the gentleness Trevor showed me back in the river. Trevor who, wild as he was, wouldn’t eat veal, wouldn’t eat the children of cows. I think now about those children, taken from their mothers and placed in boxes the size of their lives, to be fed and fattened into soft meat. I am thinking of freedom again, how the calf is most free when the cage opens and it’s led to the truck for slaughter. All freedom is relative— you know too well— and sometimes it’s no freedom at all, but simply the cage widening far away from you, the bars abstracted with distance but still there, as when they ‘free’ wild animals into nature preserves only to contain them yet again by larger borders. But I took it anyway, that widening. Because sometimes not seeing the bars is enough (216).

As a queer, Vietnamese immigrant whose home country has been torn apart by a nation that prides itself on its devotion to freedom, Little Dog, like Cheah, offers a different perspective on what it means to be free, a perspective grounded in the image of a calf

finding its only moment of escape from its cage when "it's led to the truck for slaughter." Little Dog's conclusion, that "all freedom is relative," points to the deceptive nature of the consolatory forms of agency offered to structurally debilitated subjects *but also* to freedom as a relational phenomenon: an intersubjective negotiation with what we are given and what we can give. Trevor, raised by a father deeply invested in a specific kind of American masculinity, raised to hunt and hide his softnesses, still "wouldn't eat veal, wouldn't eat the children of cows," because he recognized their form of unfreedom and refused to contribute to it.

An ascribed definition of freedom marks what we believe we are entitled to and thus implicitly draws the boundaries on what we believe can be taken from others. When we set wild animals on a nature preserve and call it freedom we are saying we can retain the right to destroy their natural habitats as long as we give them the slow death of a life held in reserve. As Little Dog watches his mother's grief over Lan's death unfold, a death that would, like all deaths, have to be given eventually but did not have to be given in the form of an undetected cancer in a country lauded for its advanced medical care, he turns once against to naming as a way of, like Wojnarowicz, claiming one's kin and the vitality of their lives even in the face of state-facilitated invisibility and death:

> I look at you and see, through the pitch dark, Trevor's eyes— Trevor whose face has, by now, already begun to blur in my mind— how they burned under the barn lamp as we dressed, shuddering quietly from the water. I see Lan's eyes in her last hours, like needful drops of water, how they were all she could move. Like the

> calf's wide pupils as the latch is opened, and it charges from its prison toward the man with a harness ready to loop around its neck.
>
> 'Where am I, Little Dog?' You're Rose. You're Lan. You're Trevor. As if a name can be more than one thing, deep and wide as a night with a truck idling at its edge, and you can step right out of your cage, where I wait for you. Where, under the stars, we see at last what we've made of each other in the light of long-dead things— and call it good (216-217).

Little Dog here intermixes two types of languages: the body language of shared glances and the verbal language of names. Notably, the examples of body language, "Lan's eyes in her last hours [...] how they were all she could move," "the calf's wide pupils as the latch is opened," are of language turned to in duress, in a moment of near-total debilitation, which could be read as the abjection of the animal body as it dispossessed of a 'higher' form of language; however, even within moments of 'health,' when one has access to full bodily and verbal capacity, body language underlies and sometimes even more fully determines the interpretive field between two communicating subjects. Together, Little Dog's paralleled reflections on bodily and verbal communications in fact undo a hierarchy of language through his emphasis on their kin functionality as modes of survival and recognition amidst the precariousness of creaturely life. The memory of Trevor's eyes preserves the specificity of Trevor's personhood and desires, even as his face had "already begun to blur in my mind," while Little Dog's naming of his lost and grieving kin creates a space for them "deep and wide as a night," a space where "we see at last what we've made of each other." The added dimension of Little Dog and his

mother looking at each other "in the light of long-dead things" and "[calling] it good" returns to a bittersweet utopianism that holds onto the life force of the dead in order to construct a more livable future not out of a shared denial of precarity but an understanding of the terrestrial conditions that engender precarity—- unstable environments, limited resources, vulnerable bodies, finite lifespans, difficult histories—as what provide the creative opportunity and obligation to learn to survive together.

*

## Feral Becomings: On Being a Metaphor

In the final pages of *On Earth*, Little Dog conjures a scene of himself running in a field. He appears to be recalling a memory from when he was younger, back home in the Midwest, but the spatiotemporality of the memory is once again rendered ambiguous by the poetic opacity of Vuong's writing. All the reader knows is that Little Dog is running "for no reason" (240). He tells the reader that he runs even though

> no one I know is dead yet, not Trevor, not Lan, not my friends with the speed and heroin nowhere near their scarless veins. Even if the farm is not yet sold to make room for luxury condos, the barn not yet dismantled, its wood repurposed into craft furniture or to line the walls of trendy cafés in Brooklyn, I run (ibid).

The explicit inexplicability of Little Dog's run expresses Vuong's interest in opacity as a zone of epistemological ferality rather than the absence of insight. The future perfect perspective in which his remembered self looks ahead while his narrating self looks back also recalls Morrison's future perfect introduction to Bottom as a town in which "there will be nothing left" (Morrison 3). Vuong in fact earlier describes Little Dog as having

"dog eared [*Sula*] so many times the tiny ear broke off" (222). In remembering himself running in a moment in time before his friends are dead and the barn where he and Trevor fell in love is culled for gentrifying resources, Little Dog animates the act of remembering and memorializing, or witnessing, with a feral sense of mobility. Vuong layers the scene with the specters of future violences at the same time as Little Dog exceeds their spatiotemporal confines. As with the protagonist of *Spill*, Little Dog exists in the ambiguous space "before that" (Gumbs 131). Moreover, like Morrison, Vuong uses the future perfect perspective to provide a tender gaze backwards at a community that would soon be left in ruins by state violence.

As he runs, Little Dog "[thinks] of the buffaloes somewhere, maybe in North Dakota or Montana, their shoulders rippling in slow motion as they race for the cliff, their brown bodies bottlenecked at the narrow precipice" (236). The passage references an earlier scene in which Little Dog and Lan watched a herd of buffaloes run off of a cliff. Watching the scene on screen, Lan asked Little Dog "Why they die themselves like that?" and "like usual, [Little Dog made] something up on the spot: 'They don't mean to, Grandma. They're just following their family. That's all. They don't know it's a cliff'" (179). Running off a cliff is not something buffaloes do in isolation; it is the result of a hunting technique in which buffaloes are herded towards a cliff en masse. The contemporary infamy of the buffalo run, however, is also layered with anti-indigeneity as the hunting practice is primarily associated with premodern Native American communities (National Park Service); its use as a televised spectacle on Discovery channel thus entangles contemporary Western views of Indigenous hunting practices as

barbaric, despite the barbarism of the contemporary Western slaughter industry discussed in the previous section. It is thus also reflective of the contorted nature of contemporary Western legal and cultural codifications of violence traced throughout this dissertation.

The improvisatory and sentimental nature of Little Dog's explanation that "they don't mean to […] they're just following their family" in turn returns to language as an interpersonal tool of care in the face of state violence, as well as the weight of opacity as Little Dog quietly intuits the knowledge he protects Lan from, the senselessness of the buffalo deaths. Later in the novel, when he lies under the rafters of the barn with Trevor in a postcoital embrace, he reveals his own uncertainty in "[asking] Trevor what Lan had asked me the week before. 'You ever think about those buffaloes on the Discovery Channel? I mean, how they keep running off those cliffs? […] You'd think one of them would stop, would turn around" (236) Trevor responds with feigned macho bravado, "Yeah. I seen 'em on the nature shows. They just tumble off like a load of bricks […] "Idiots."" (ibid). Later, though, after he and Little Dog take a moment to sit in stillness, "letting the buffaloes go on falling, hundreds of them trotting silently down the cliffs in our heads," (ibid) Trevor changes his answer:

> "It's not up to them […] It ain't up to them where they go. It's Mother Nature. She tells them to jump and they go on and do it. They don't got no choice about it. It's just the law of nature" (ibid). Little Dog "[repeats] under [his] breath," "'The law,' […] like they're just following their loved ones, like their family's just going forward and they go with them?' 'Yeah, something like that,' [Trevor] said with sleepiness. 'Like a family. A fucked family.' (236-237).

Lan and Trevor's improper grammar—- "die themselves like that," (179) "don't got no choice" (237) highlights their mutual dispossession from classed and racialized national standards of literacy. Their respective epistemic positioning in relation to Little Dog, Lan looking to him for answers and Trevor providing them, are more similar in function than they appear. In one Little Dog bears the weight of performing as the family's patriarchal figurehead, the source of translation and legibility, and in the other he bears the weight of playing the audience to Trevor's own insecure performance of masculinity. In both instances, Little Dog is attempting to stabilize a loved one's vision of normal relationality. Lan and Trevor's relative dispossession from state standards of personhood makes them dependent on Little Dog as a source of felt security and affirmation. Trevor gestures to the weight of state legibility when he describes the buffalo as conscripted into mass suicide by "the law of nature" (ibid).

Little Dog's reassurance to Lan about the buffalos, that "they're just following their family" in turn affirms that it's not in fact a form of idiocy to be shaped by what is given, by the people and environment one is born into. Trevor's kin conclusion, and its undoing of his performative bravado, that the buffalos fall into their deaths as part of "a fucked family" expresses the ruination of he and Little Dog's love as poor, queer men in a homophobic, neoliberal nation, as well as the ruination of he and his father's relationship due to his father's investment in a form of masculinity Trevor will always-already fail to achieve. Trevor's opaque acknowledgement of the ruined nature of his kinships through the metaphor of the buffalo as a fucked family represents a change in perspective from the self-righteous mockery of calling the buffalo "idiots" to a tender, if bitter, sympathy

that comes after a feral turning inward. A recognition of togetherness within fucked states of being.

Running, Vuong and Little Dog—- the lines between them are, of course, blurred—— re-imagine the morbid spectacle of the buffalo from a representation of an entire community of helpless animals being forced into self-obliteration into a moment in which the buffalos are outrunning the definitional boundaries between them and other displaced nonhuman animal communities in a shared, restless movement towards the obliteration of the world as currently known:

> Their eyes oil-black, the velvet bones of their horns covered with dust, they run, headfirst, together—until they become moose, huge and antlered, wet nostrils braying, then dogs, with paws clawing toward the edge, their tongues lapping in the light until, finally, they become macaques, a whole troop of them. The crowns of their heads cut open, their brains hollowed out, they float, the hair on their limbs fine and soft as feathers. And just as the first one steps off the cliff, onto air, the forever nothing below, they ignite into the ochre-red sparks of monarchs. Thousands of monarchs pour over the edge, fan into the white air, like a bloodjet hitting water.

In having the animals becoming each other in their most abject forms of self, the monkeys stepping off the cliff with "the crown of their heads cut open," (ibid) Little Dog frames the abject state of running from a zone of predation as always-already a running toward becoming something Other than the self who is hunted. This form of running, is, moreover, grounded in language: Little Dog runs

> as if my cliff was never written into this story, as if I was no heavier than the words in my name. And like a word, I hold no weight in this world yet still carry my own life. And I throw it ahead of me until what I left behind becomes exactly what I'm running toward—like I'm part of a family.

In running as if he "was no heavier than the words in my name," Little Dog highlights the subversive dimension of linguistic abstraction and symbolic mutability: the space between a name and a self holds the potential for feral fugitivity even as it can facilitate the violence of misrecognition. That throwing his name—- manipulating it like an object he possesses rather than a social stamp that possesses him—- allows "what I left behind [to become] exactly what I'm running toward" serves as a metaphor for how remembered histories of violence, the felt violation of being named as prey, can facilitate a feral awareness of the unsustainability of the social field as it is currently given and the necessity of writing a more livable future. Moreover, he analogizes the mentality of such bittersweet utopianism to being "part of a family," which, read alongside the rest of the novel and its critique of humanist language and paternalism, less naturalizes the nuclear family structure than speaks to the feral kinships languages he traces throughout *On Earth* as forms of relation weighted by the opacity that characterizes states of hiding from hunters but also the potentiality of traded secrets between the hunted, a space of flight both from and towards.

In her reflections on the racial and colonial politics of language use, Rey Chow considers the debates surrounding Fanon's famous naming anecdote. The anecdote, in which Fanon describes being called, fearfully, a negro by a young child who crouches

behind his mother, is meant to illustrate the totalization of Black ontology by white anxiety and projection. Like his scholarship generally, Fanon's vivid descriptions of his mixed shame and anger over his misrecognition as a predator by the young white boy points to the deep, psychosocial implications of hegemonic political structures, or the lived experience of the black man, as he titles the essay. Chow in turn considers the subsequent debates the essay has sparked over the relative totalization of onto-epistemological potentiality by racialization as a discursive structure. As discussed in the introduction and throughout the chapters, Black feminist critics have been at pains to outline the space of interiority that precedes the domesticating mechanisms of a racist and patriarchal society. Fanon has also come under significant critique for the misogynoir inherent to his dismissal of mixed race desire and relationality as a form of race betrayal (cit). Chow, however, takes seriously the larger point of Fanon's nihilism in terms of how language underlies not only one's affective sense of self but also one's affective sense of belonging. In response to the hypothetical query, "Couldn't the black man refuse to answer and thus refuse the mode of address that is imposed on him?" she argues that "naming establishes the "community" […] in which the named object is given a life other than muteness […] What Fanon is describing, therefore, is not simply an instance of what we nowadays call hate speech, but also an ontological subtraction and contradiction: the laying-out of a trajectory of self-recognition from which the possibility of self-regard (or self-respect) has, nonetheless, been removed in advance […] It is important to remember that this doomed trajectory does not amount to a simple negation or annihilation. *The*

*black man is not named as nothing.* Rather, he is given a place in the community of relations as performed by the name" (emphasis mine).

Chow's analysis points to the biopolitical stakes of naming as a speech event. A name is not only a personal signification but a positioning within a community that gives a person the sense of belonging and recognition integral to self regard and respect, to feeling appreciated and cared for, as well as worthy of protection. Recall chapter four's discussion of the historically gendered and racialized relations that undergird surnames and how acquisition of a surname was consequently considered integral to the acquisition of personhood post-emancipation, particularly for Black husbands for whom a surname signified the mobility of ownership rather than the immobility of being owned, as it signified for Black wives. Chow goes on to argue that what distinguishes Fanon's account of the naming/named social relation from earlier theorizations by Althusser and Benjamin is the way it centers the violence inherent to the act of naming a subject against their will and in possible contradiction with their own sense of themselves. Moreover, for Chow, within imperial landscapes the act of being named and of languaging more broadly is always already weighted by asymmetrical power relations for colonized subjects forced to adapt to new languages and modes of relation cit). Although the postcolonial experience of languaging is in part expressive of the inherently fraught nature of language as a faltering medium of communication between two creatures with necessarily non-identical perspectives on the world— the way, as Chow argues, no one is a native speaker—- for non-Western subjects speaking in Western languages like English,

the violence of speech is personal rather than philosophical, a reminder not only of unbelonging but of forced exile.

The overwhelming nature of Fanon's rage can perhaps be read as a too-swift resignation to the impenetrability of white supremacy but it should also be recognized as, like Wojnarowicz's rage from the previous chapter, equally informed by a deep sadness over having one's name spoken with disgust rather than tenderness. Moreover, frequently overlooked within discussions of the anecdote is the familial nature of the relational structure Fanon feels excluded from, the way it is a son clinging in fear to a mother. Indeed, that is the only way Fanon himself knows how to name the woman who is the target of his anger— "maman," French for mom. Fanon in the anecdote is thus feral in one of its most literal senses in being not only rejected from a traditional family structure but in being named as a threat to the security of it. A white boy clinging to his obliging, protective mother, like Machado's frail ex in chapter four, readily attracts cultural sympathy for their perceived fragility as well as the civilized non-potentiality for violence encoded by their apparent innocence and romanticized kinship. Nothing is more sacred, we are meant to believe, than the love between a mother and her child. But the fearsomeness of a feral creature develops in proportion to the obfuscation of the violence of structure of domestication it stands outside. Though "Negro," and the fright with which the boy speaks it, carries the weight of long histories of Blackness as a scapegoat for white fear of difference and abdication of historical responsibility, "maman" is also a violent word. The boy's father and mom's husband, if he exists, remains out of the picture, but we can imagine from the histories traced throughout this project that when

they get home he is unlikely to wield his power with tenderness, particularly in moments when the maman may attempt to wield her own power. To different degrees and purposes, both Fanon as a Negro and the woman as a maman are named with violence[40]. The violence of cultural expectations surrounding maternity and femininity is obscured by cultural mythologies of the purity and ease of a mother's love,,while the violence of Black masculinity operates through the making-spectacle of Black aggressiveness and physicality, the violence of falsely being turned into a predator. Both mythologies ultimately work to make the story of empire believable by making its subjects disbelieve their own sense of the daily violences that define their lives as coming from someone besides each other.

Perhaps the retaliative and somewhat misogynistic anger with which Fanon responds to the mother does buy into the very system of domination he recoils against, but we can also read *Black Skin, White Masks* in its demonstration of extended reflection and critical interiority, as well as the attention and weight Fanon gives to affect and particularly the emotional nuances of lived experiences of power and abjection, as itself a form of feral witness borne of displacement and exile. We can in turn see Vuong's Glissantian use of metaphor as a feral language of vitality and care informed by Black feminist and diasporic poetics that offers a way of speaking otherwise, of moving outside the dysfunctional relational network that entangles Fanon and the woman as they are named against each other. The metaphoric relations Vuong draws between his displaced human and nonhuman animal case studies are unstable and asymmetrical: although he

[40] For the woman, as the anecdote serves in part to illustrate, maman as a name also offers the right to protection facilitated by the cultural romanticization of white mothers. That protection just comes at the price of performing white femininity in all its domesticating criteria.

attempts to make space for nonhuman animal linguistic capacity, the audience *On Earth* addresses is exclusively human and the calf does not gain the same power of testimony as Vuong for all its vibrancy as a metaphor. In some ways, the solidarity between the calf, Little Dog, and Trevor, remains on the level of the imagination, and Vuong's imagination specifically. Equally, though, Vuong's point in writing *On Earth*, and the point of Black feminist critiques of Fanon, is that there is actually something perceptive about misperception, an opening to the need for a new way of seeing and being seen.

Western frameworks of relationality revolve around sameness and transparency, the ability to find and articulate commonalities between the self and the Other. Glissant's turn to metaphor to theorize a decolonial philosophy of relationality in contrast prioritizes the instability of metaphor: the way metaphor is *not* accurate in a traditional framework of truth-telling. The analogized object is necessarily being used for a purpose other than its own. A metaphor is always partly an appropriation but for that same reason it is also representative of the necessarily fraught nature of becoming with as Donna Haraway describes it in her ecological materialist framework of relationality, which uses inter-species relations to reconceptualize an exploitative capitalist framework of relationality justified by a fatalistic Darwinianism without then leaning on a liberal humanist romanticization of universal equality amongst self-reliant individuals. She argues that being used to aid another creature's survival is an inherent aspect of a functioning ecosystem; consequently, "to be in a relation of use to each other is not the definition of unfreedom and violation. Such relations are almost never symmetrical ("equal" or calculable) […] the ecologies of significant others involve messmates at

table, with indigestion" (74). Language, likewise, is spoken out of needs the self is unable to meet on their own. There is always a violence to symbolism, but there is beauty, too, in the need to connect to and be heard by another. To craft an imperfect relation that both expresses and moves outside the self. To be a metaphor, like being a listener, is to forgo a self-defeating investment in freedom from Others and Otherness. The beauty of metaphor lies in the simultaneous escape of becoming otherwise and the affirmation of becoming meaningful to someone else.

The potentiality of ferality as an historical subjectivity borne of asymmetrical relations of legibility in turn lies in how the weight of being Othered creates a state of heightened attention to the stakes of (mis)recognition. The Otherness of the feral stabilizes the wished for wholeness of an imagined community. The sadness, bitterness, and reluctance that characterizes feral affects speaks to the heaviness of being falsely positioned as a loner. But the wholeness of the community the feral stands outside is imaginary, too, and that reality contains its own sadnesses. The feral witnesses the pain inherent to imperial narratives of happiness that obscure the reality of empire as built on mass debilitation and it holds onto a belief that there must be a better, more honest way. If Fanon really acceded to the hopelessness of Black selfhood and community under contemporary imperialism he would not have written or published *Black Skin*, which testifies to the uniqueness of his perspective as well as the felt urgency of sharing it. Fanon's feral witness and his determination to communicate it in all its messy resentment and despair made space for other feral witnesses to offer their own imperfect—-sometimes angry, sometimes hopeful— critiques.

Through *On Earth,* Vuong asks his human readers to pause and reconsider their assumed role as the narrators of terrestrial life, as well as the connections between Western imperialism and anthropocentrism as mythos of a dysfunctional and false mastery. In his turn to precarious states of creaturely abjection, he embraces the beauty of tender ways of being and being with. Learning to speak and listen otherwise, he suggests, can transform the brevity of life on Earth from a burden carried by those relegated to silence into a shared reality made vibrant by the creativity of surviving unfavorable conditions and caring for each other however best we know how.

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Appendix A

Fig 1. The erotic chaos of Dr. Dibs

Fig 2. Tchemy and Black porosity

Fig 3. Monte and Willow in a moment of tenderness