THE BLACKNESSES OF BLACKNESS: FUGITIVITY, FEMINISM, AND TRANSNESS

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"The Blacknesses of Blackness: Fugitivity, Feminism, and Transness," recalibrates blackness, black feminism, and transness less as bodily endowments or "identities" and more as various inflections of subjectivities in excess of categorization, normativity, and imposed ontologies. It establishes a *gendered* account of black fugitivity, the purpose of which is not to argue that thinkers of blackness as proximate to fugitivity always fail to think race and gender simultaneously; rather, it is to argue that black fugitivity conceived through a trans/feminist theoretical lens makes clearer the ways in which blackness-as-fugitivity interacts with radical understandings of gender. To facilitate this, the dissertation read treatises of antebellum slaves and theorizations of blackness and gender to excavate how they converge with contemporary feminist and trans texts; the prose poetry of Alexis Pauline Gumbs in the context of women of color feminists and diaspora theorists; the cultural phenomenon of Rachel Dolezal and the "racial reassignment surgery" discourse of Jess Row's novel *Your Face in Mine* (2014) alongside black trans theories of the analytics of blackness and gender; and black feminist critical engagements with Afro-pessimism. What if, the dissertation queries, we think about blackness and black feminism not as the province of people with particular bodies but as ways of locating subjectivity elsewhere than how we have been scripted to be able to exist legibly? What if we bring the "trans"—movement in excess of an unchosen starting point to an

undisclosed destination—to bear on blackness?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Marquis Bey, an unruly and iconoclastic thinker of blackness, black feminism, and queerness/transness, received his BA in philosophy, American studies, and English from Lebanon Valley College in 2014. Advancing straight to graduate school in Cornell University's English PhD program, he furthered his interest and expertise in the areas of contemporary African American literature, black feminist theorizing, transgender studies, and critical theory. As well, his teaching—a vehicle through which he corrupts the youth (having learned from Socrates)—has included feminist essays, American literature, black women writers, and literary theory at Cornell, Syracuse University, Cayuga Correctional Facility, and Auburn Correctional Facility.

To mom.

We did it.

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I hate writing Acknowledgement sections. Do not misunderstand, I want to acknowledge those who have aided my journey—those proverbial accomplices along the way—and I want to give thanks, pay homage, give credit. But there are so many; indeed, one might say that *everyone* I've had a sustained interaction with has impacted me and my thoughts. To leave them out, consciously or unconsciously, would be a slight to them. And I don't wish to slight anyone. So I'll keep this brief, if I may, not because I did most of this on my own, which is, frankly, bullshit, but because I won't capture everyone. In no particular order, I will give myself a four person limit. Ready? Go.

I wish first to thank Jesse Goldberg. You were my mentor coming into Cornell. I remember the very lengthy email response you sent after I found out about my acceptance, my anxious mind curious about what the whole grad school thing was about. And you, as always, were generous with your words and time. And still, all throughout grad school, and I hope all throughout our careers, you have been my comrade, my cherished interlocutor, my confidant, my friend. I cannot possibly convey how critical you have been for my intellectual and affective transformation. You've shared so much with me; you've given me an incalculable gift.

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INTRODUCTION: BLACKNESS*ES*

> You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another.
>
> —Toni Morrison, Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*

My ever-elusive topic is Blackness. More specifically, what concerns this brief introduction, and indeed this entire dissertation, is a radically recalibrated understanding of Blackness as multiplicitous and, in that multiplicity, articulable through and by feminism and transness. I am interested, here, in Blackness's textures, it's various manifestations and unexpected looks and feels, its demands and interrogations. Specifically, my aim is to rummage around inside of Blackness and excavate how its inherent multiplicity lends itself to a gendered articulation of fugitive Blackness: that is, I aim to excavate the (Black) feminism and transness of Blackness. The very move to begin the task of writing about, or rather, with, Blackness is always spectrally haunted by what Rinaldo Walcott calls in *Black Like Who?* the "upheaval of 'blacknesses.'" We find many different iterations of what Blackness might mean, and we find those not by happenstance per se but by an upheaval, by a volatile force that thrusts all these different kinds of Blacknesses at us. Blackness's instability is fertile ground for another mode of conceptualizing coalitional politicality; that it is always moving artfully in a submerged

and subverting escape of regimes of capture denotes the slippery salvific avenue in which I want to dwell, and from which I want to mine nonnormatively gendered potentialities.

At base, this dissertation argues for Blackness's fugitivity, or more precisely, Blackness-as-fugitivity. In other words, "The Blackness*es* of Blackness: Fugitivity, Feminism, and Transness," begins with the fundamental pursuit of inflections of a political and politicized Blackness, which is to say a polysemous Blackness that marks a *political* identity in the first instance rather than, primarily, a corporeal one. I understand Blackness here as unfixed from a necessary epidermal sufficiency and more aligned with theorizations of flight from regimes of capture. On this score, I suture Black feminism and transgender theory to the question of/that is Blackness, making both constitutive of the very understanding of Blackness and its fugitivity. This is in short to take seriously and extend Cathy Cohen's reworking of queerness as not an identity but rather a subversive, disruptive relation to power; and to take seriously and extend Fred Moten's claim that "everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness."[1] I am mobilizing Blackness, feminism, and transness in a similar way that abandons the obsession with possessed identity and moves unapologetically toward political identities, coalitional subjectivities centered on how we seek to disrupt power and hegemonic regimes. Thus I proceed from a fundamental motivating force of how we put in the work of radical world transformation, thus this work is where I wish to locate how we come into being as subjects, and integral to this force is the feminism and the transness of it all.

[1] C. J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (January 1, 1997): 437–65, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437; Fred Moten, "Black Op," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1743–47.

The questions feeding this kind of Blackness, then, can be addressed only through multiplicity. Illustrative of this, in part, and illustrative of the Blackness*es* of Blackness, is Paul Beatty's absurdist meditation on Blackness's tiers. In Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015), a radically absurdist (his preferential term to "satiric") rendition of how Blackness operates in the contemporary world, he offers a telling meditation on Blackness's "stages." A novel that "whisper[s] 'Racism' in a post-racial world," *The Sellout* tackles the most taboo racial subjects (though "race" is not my specific content here). The protagonist, whose surname—the only name we are given—is "Me," is brought to trial in the Supreme Court for attempting to resegregate schools and implement slavery in his recently-disappeared city of Dickens, a majority-Black city in California. The son of a psychologist father who used him as the primary pawn of his racial experiments, Me takes the posture of rebellion and bucks sanctimonious social conventions and behavioral patterns. Me, being subjected to racial experiments his whole life, which is to say being made aware, forcefully, of the pervasiveness of (his) Blackness, rebels by deeply critiquing that upon which civilization rests. Me takes the posture, in other words, perhaps not merely as rebel but as "rebelator," as one who comes to undo, who has had enough, who "jay-walk[s] through" the interstices of hegemony and exposes the Blackest shades of sociality.[2] He is unnamed, a Signifyin(g)ly resounding echo of Ellison's protagonist, but revised with that "signal difference" of a last name—typically the most

[2] See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Mikey the Rebelator," *Performance Research* 20, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 141, doi:10.1080/13528165.2015.1071057. Moten and Harney write, in a section titled "The Rebelator," "In Upon Westminster Bridge, Mikey Smith is jay-walking through the language. It's 1982, the beginning of logistical capitalism. The assembly line is snaking out of the factory and into his mouth. And he cyaan believe it. He won't believe it. He won't go to work. He comes from the property. He's been there before. He's come to undo. He's moved to dissemble. The gathering in his mouth is out of line."

unique nominative identifier of a person—that is, in fact, all of us. We are made to enter into the protagonist, which, to proffer a reading, forces us to enter into Blackness—indeed, to show that we all can enter into Blackness, though not without going on trial for the fugitive behaviors it will cause us to commit.

One of the final scenes in the novel, a moment in which Me's attorney, Hampton Fisk, addresses the Supreme Court Justice is a textually rich moment in which to dwell. Fisk begins his response to the Supreme Court Justice thusly: "So let's get down to the nitty-gritty—what do we mean by 'black'?" "So what is blackness, your honor?" Fisk asks. "That's a good question. The exact same one the immortal French author Jean Genet posed after being asked by an actor to write a play featuring an all-black cast, when he mused not only 'What exactly is a black?' but added the even more fundamental inquiry, 'First of all, what is his [*sic*] color?'" Fisk then notes that Me's father, F. K. Me, hypothesized that Blackness comes in stages, a theory he termed "Quintessential Blackness": Stage I, the Neophyte Negro, in which the Black person is afraid of their own (and others') Blackness; Stage II, Capital *B* Black, in which one is hyper-aware of race and nuzzles closely to what might be called a Black supremacy; Stage III, Race Transcendentalism, those who believe in beauty for beauty's sake and seek serenity (notably, while Fisk is discussing this stage Me leaves, saying to himself "Fuck it, I'm out. I'm ghost"); and lastly, Stage IV, Unmitigated Blackness, an imagined stage by Me that "is simply not giving a fuck….Unmitigated Blackness is essays passing for fiction. It's the realization that there are no absolutes, except when there are. It's the acceptance of

contradiction not being a sin and a crime but a human frailty like split ends and libertarianism."[3]

By sheer virtue of the multiple tiers of Blackness Fisk delineates, Blackness is made inherently multiple and, in fact, open—as Beatty himself thinks all topics and language are (not to mention the non-epidermal Blackness of the "black folks" named in Stage III Blackness like Sitting Bull, César Chávez, and Ichiro Suzuki). Not long before this scene, too, Me engages in a conversation with King Cuz, a "homie" on the block who concerns himself not with Blackness per se, and certainly not with "post-Blackness," but what he calls "pre-blackness." King Cuz says, "Hey, look, fool, save that post-soul, post-black bullshit for somebody who gives a fuck, cause all I know is that I'm *pre*-black. Dickens born and raised. Homo sapiens OG Crip from the goddamn primordial giddy-up, nigger" (220). King Cuz-cum-Beatty echoes Kevin Young's preoccupation with "pre-blackness," which Young describes as that which "made and makes up blackness."[4] That which made and makes up Blackness, per Beatty's "primordial giddy-up," is what Fred Moten might call an "anoriginal lawlessness," a previousness that exceeds and perturbs the Law. It is a transitivity that serves as a beginning undifferentiated dispersal that gives rise to distinction, an argument for Blackness's transness.[5]

I want to simultaneously stitch and un-stitch this pre-Blackness to what might be a remixed Stage IV Blackness, a Blackness that troublesomely exudes its own multiplicitous undoing and elusion of itself. A Blackness that is pre- insofar as it exists

[3] Paul Beatty, *The Sellout: A Novel*, Picador edition (New York: Picador ; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 274–77.
[4] Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2012), 283.
[5] See Claire Colebrook's "What is it Like to Be a Human?" as well as C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides*.

before its epidermal consolidation, its refusal of confinement to imposed genre ("…essays passing for fiction"), but is also unable to sell and be sold in the current currency or legible modes of exchange, its existence in those potentially overturning moments between performative enactments.

Beatty straps Blackness to a multi-level wokeness producing variegated effects that bear on sociality, and indeed troublesomely implodes the Law by laughing at and making laughable the highest, perhaps most divine terrestrial instantiation of the nation's claim to authoritative law. Genet asks what is the color of "the Black" because, as a mouthpiece for Beatty, the fundamental attempt is to suture Blackness, to locate it, as that which exceeds the embodied skin. To ask "what is his [*sic*] color?" is to seriously consider that one who is Black may have a range of skin colors, which implies that Blackness is not that which can be epidermally measured on the corporeal surface. It is, in fact, something closer to a posture, a penchant, a consciousness, a disposition—that "primordial giddy-up" and ghosted "I'm out"-ness. Blackness for Beatty is an open secret that he is blabbing to everyone, airing the unclean laundry so sheltered historically. And yet, there is love for openness, a necessary condition for engaging with and recalibrating what Blackness can continue to become and do. Though the Stage I Blackness fears the perturbation that Black situatedness invokes, and Stage II Blackness too closely resembles myopic, nationalistic, androcentric saturation of the primacy of the epidermis in all realms of life, and Stage III Blackness gets too cozy with post-racialism and being "above it all," that Beatty illustrates Blackness's multivalency indexes the move I wish to make: thinking with and through the shifting shapes and colors and textures of Blackness. Blackness's Blackness*es*.

It is through here that an entry into the particular questions I seek to address can be tilled. I want to begin with a series of questions that provide entrée into my epistemic pursuits. Since the question of "What is Blackness?" has been rendered somewhat banal, my aim is to think the questions that are Blackness's valences. That is, not "What is Blackness?" but *where* and *how*? And more specifically, how is it gendered, how is it "ungendered," where is its residue on gender nonconforming bodies, or how does it (en)gender different modes of embodiment? The questions speak to the task I've set for this dissertation, alluded to in its title: what are the Blackness*es* of Blackness?

The feminism to be articulated is linked to Black fugitivity insofar as Black feminism marks what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls a "double refusal."[6] That is, Black feminism is at base "a refusal to comply and a refusal to disappear." From this understanding, I take Black feminism to index, inherently, fugitivity in its understanding of Blackness *and* feminism as affixed to fugitivity. By this I mean that to do Black and feminist work is to take fugitivity's axiomatic outlook that these are modes of politicality rather than somatic endowment, and that doing work in service of undermining regimes that subordinate those who rest at the nexus of Black and woman inaugurates one into a Black feminist subjectivity. The transness, in turn, integral to an understanding of Blackness-as-fugitivity bears an intimate link to it by way of transness's disruption of bodily coherence. If transness is distinguished from being transgender, and if transness marks primarily a *movement* away from an imposed starting point to an undisclosed (non)destination, then this emblematizes fugitivity. Since a paraontological Blackness expresses the inadequacy of a "given ontology," transness, too, bears a referential

[6] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique," *PhiloSOPHIA* 8, no. 1 (2018): 19–41.

relationship with Blackness because of both's refusal of enclosed coherence, imposed racio-gender ontologies, and movement away from captivity.

I want this dissertation to plunge into Blackness's Blacknesses, seizing and donning Rhinehart's "darkest lenses" and "plunging into blackness and moving outside." Only Ellison's linguistic richness can speak hear, our only choice being to listen. Plunging into Blackness with both feet means that *they will gag*. "Oh, but wouldn't they gag," Ellison's invisible "thinker tinker" says, tinkering with thinking, thinking-otherwise. It breaks laws (gag), sabotages (gag), says "Nah" (gag). I am utterly uninterested in thinking Blackness solely in terms of those who meet sufficient quanta of epidermal hue. That is not the Blackness with which I will concern myself, nor the Blackness which concerns this dissertation. Blackness, to quote Spillers' reading of Ellison, is to think disobediently.

> Ellison harnessed "blackness" to a symbolic program of philosophical "disobedience" (a systematic skepticism and refusal) that would make the former available to *anyone*, or more pointedly, *any* posture, that was willing to take on the formidable task of *thinking* as a willful act of imagination and invention. In other words, *Invisible Man* made "blackness" a *process*, a *strategy*, of culture critique, rather than a condition of physiognomy and/or the embodiment of the *auto-bios-*

> *graphe*; we had come a considerable distance in layering "blackness" as subject possibility.[7]

Contentiously, Blackness in this text is radically recalibrated, decoupled from "Black people" (the "paraontological distinction") and offered as a posture of disobedient disruption, as a fugitivity, as a feminist subversion, as a kind of transness. *This* is the texture, the Blacknesses, of Blackness.

Displacing ontology qua Ontology, Blackness takes up the critical legacy of Black feminist critiques of the capaciousness of what we mean when we cast terms over populations, revealing their inadequacies. In its feminist fugitivity and radical transness, its perturbing acrossedness, Blackness's Blacknesses won't sit still—"*It moves and changes from one kind of black to another*," Morrison says—and in not sitting still like an obstinate child bored of adults' goings-on, it promotes a particular analytic posture, one that "does something new to the black body—dislodging it as the only source of black knowledge (and therefore liberation)," dislodging Blackness from bodyness itself, unhoming subjectivities that enact the practice of escape.[8]

The above recalibrations of Blackness are fundamentally operative throughout the dissertation. To that end, Chapter 1, "Gendering Black Fugitivity," explores the gender-troubling nexus of Black and woman/femme. It has as its primary focus the question of how one might think about "otherwise" genders when understanding that, as bell hooks articulates in a conversation with Janet Mock on Black trans women, "black women have

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[7] Hortense J. Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5. Emphasis in original.
[8] Katherine McKittrick, "Worn Out," *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 1 (2017): 99.

always occupied the space that we can call queer." Hooks goes on to say that, referencing Black women, "rather than seeing ourselves as outside blackness, as outside the dialogue of queerness and trans, I think that we need to place ourselves…at the core of the dialogue." Chapter 1 is then interested in how theorizing that nexus of Black and woman/femme provides a space to think through not only the linkage of Blackness to fugitivity—which is to say, Blackness as indexical of a quotidian practice of refusal, Blackness as a name, in the first instance, for the breach from captivity and categorization—but also the ways in which such a recalibration of Blackness is embedded in and inflected by discourses of radical Black feminism and trans subjectivity. To do this, I draw on the fugitive slave laws, the escapeful practices of Harriet Tubman, Alice Walker's womanism, and the life and writing of Black nonbinary femme jayy dodd.

Chapter 2 meditates on Alexis Pauline Gumbs's 2016 book *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. The chapter argues that *Spill* is comprised of scenes of Black women and girls running from racial and gendered "given ontologies," running from the specter of death, which is all to say escaping and exceeding the violent scripts that are imposed upon them. *Spill* depicts Black women and girls simultaneously along a range of gender expressions as well as fundamentally critiquing the templates upon which gender expressions become legible. They are written by Gumbs as refusing racialized and gendered normativities, which incites the possibility of other worlds and knowledges. My work in the chapter, then, is to extend and particularize my argument in Chapter 1, and to articulate what feminist fugitivity is and does, where it dis/locates Blackness, and what kind(s) of life-worlds it engenders for others to inhabit. I discuss the Black feminist

critical posture that pervades Gumbs' work as well as the "waywardness" of roaming, fugitive Black women. Through a close reading of *Spill*, this chapter shows the radical call of Black feminist fugitivity and the radical ways it forces us to rethink the very modality of our living and thinking.

Chapter 3, "The Etc. of Negroes: Transfigurative Blacknesses," offers transfigurative Blackness as an analytic that operates in the space of transition. I advance the theorizations of C. Riley Snorton here in thinking about transfiguration as a site of implosion and continual destruction and recreation, and thus thinking of Blackness "[a]s always an unstable term." The chapter, which takes its title from a line in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, is intrigued by the possibility of Blackness being characterized by transfiguration—the penchant to change form. In this sense, I bring the "trans" to bear on Blackness. I examine a novel by author Jess Row titled *Your Face in Mine*, which concerns what is called "racial reassignment surgery," and the phenomenon of Rachel Dolezal. In this chapter I am concerned with thinking Blackness as and through this "transfiguration." The transness constitutive of Blackness and the Blackness constitutive of transness result in the troubling of how we understand where we locate Blackness. These cultural and literary points of departure provide crucial insight into transfigurative Blackness by way of their unfixing of Blackness from static bodily locations, their interrogation of racial discourses, and their radical rethinking of when and where and how Blackness means and matters. Both Dolezal and the protagonist of Row's book enact a transfigurative Blackness, a kind of Black "etc." that moves much further than the question "Are they Black?" and thinks through them as enactors of a Blackness that disorients one's encounter with the world through radical transness.

Lastly, Chapter 4 attempts to give an account of hope in the contemporary world. This chapter casts *fugitive hope* in tangential contradistinction to understandings of Blackness as mired in social death (even when affixed to "social life" post hoc) and presents a Black feminist and trans critique of Blackness as understood as deathbound. I first offer Black feminist Blackness as a critique of Afro-pessimism, showing how notable Afro-pessimist thinkers like Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton elide Blackness's gendered Blacknesses, and introduce to this body of work Black feminist readings of Hortense Spillers, Katherine McKittrick, and Terrion L. Williamson. Next, I meditate on what Kai M. Green, CeCe McDonald, and Treva Ellison call trans multitudes and read McDonald's poem through Black trans life practices and theorizing. Lastly, I end with Zora Howard's notion of Black folks being "won't die things." In refusing death, these won't die things implicitly assert that they, too, can somehow claim life in this world. They claim the life of their refusal of death—this is what is hoped in, this life in *refusing* death, a life that is not only a part, but constitutive, of this world too.

CHAPTER 1: GENDERING BLACK FUGITIVITY

> [T]he negative space blackness is constantly imagined and re-imagined as, demands an interrogation of the *gendered* ontology of the negative space blackness is imagined to activate and occupy.
>
> —Rizvana Bradley, "Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)Stain of Black Female (W)holeness"

> I want us to historicize the reality that black women have always occupied the space that we can call queer. That the moment "Ain't I a woman?" had to be addressed by Sojourner Truth, the moment she had to bear her breasts to prove that she was the woman, was already a queer, a trans moment. So that rather than seeing ourselves as outside blackness, as outside the dialogue of queerness and trans, I think that we need to place ourselves as black females at the core of the dialogue.
>
> —bell hooks, "Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body"

This chapter takes the preceding epigraphs as its force of motivation because they both, in different ways, move toward imagining the fundamentally *gendered* inflections of a Blackness understood as fugitivity. If Blackness is imagined both as fugitive multiplicity as well as a (generative) space of nothingness, this then marks only the beginning of the

question: what does such an understanding dictate that we subsequently do? What is necessary is Bradley's interrogation of the gendered ontology of this space. In this necessity, too, is the demand for the radical reconfiguration of where and how Blackness does what it does; that is, I take as a fundamental assumption that excavating, or imagining, the gendered valences of Blackness rework how Blackness is understood, looks, feels, etc. Blackness must operate on a different register when its gendered ontology is rigorously teased out. And that teasing out is the aim of this chapter. Furthermore, as will be detailed throughout the chapter, hooks' assertion that Black women have always occupied a queer and trans space—irrespective of their purported "cisness," itself a troubled term, especially when trying to affix to Blackness—requires sustained meditation when gendering Black fugitivity. That Blackness conditions the possibility of gender nonnormativity, of transness, means that not only must we discern the gendered aspects of Black fugitivity but, more fundamentally, understand it as gendered at *its* fundament.[1] The nexus of Black and woman *is*, hooks would say, a queer and trans nexus. Gendering Black fugitivity, then, might be conceived, among other things I will note, as an immersion in this nexus.

"The Blacknesses of Blackness: Fugitivity, Feminism, and Transness" assumes no seamless break between Blackness and feminism or Blackness and transness. On this note, Blackness pervades nonnnormative genders and gender nonnormativity pervades Blackness; that is, any radical project centering Blackness or gender must, by necessity, center at the same time the other. These projects concern radical work that interrogates varying identity vectors and aims not merely for their hegemonic destruction but a kind

[1] See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2017), 135.

of sociality in the troublesome terrain of becoming undone with and through one another. What is aimed for is a mode of cohabiting the world with others in coalition on the grounds of our penchant to subjectivate ourselves through an escape from hegemonic constraints rather than venerating an uncritically idyllic end of the world. The condition for that coalition is fugitivity, and that fugitivity is inflected through Blackness, Black feminism, and transness.

The work Blackness's proximity to transed genders and Black feminism does is foreground how a radical gender politics and how doing things with and to gender is a fugitive "line of flight"; it puts into relief that Blackness, transness, and Black feminism are, in the first instance, political moves—or a displacement of categorical imperatives—that reference motion and cultivate space to live in this movement. This is the gendering of Black fugitivity: fugitivity as understood through the vector of gender and fugitivity as itself bearing the residue of nonnormative gender's disruption; gender's disruption, or gender's loosening/leaking, as a mode of fugitivity; Blackness's troubling of gender as a fugitive practice. The "problem" posed by Black women's and femmes' subjectivities, which is to say their performative enactment of the disruptive nexus they occupy, references Blackness's gender nonnormativity and nonconformity. The gendering of Black fugitivity, then, is more than a "recovery" project; it is an immersion in the interstitial space of fugitivity that demands a gendered focus, that *is* a gendered focus.

My aim in this chapter is not to aver, as is often the case in scholarship, that thinkers of Blackness as proximal to fugitivity elide gender dimensions of racialization and thus must be castigated for reifying masculine notions of Blackness. My aim is to argue that Black fugitivity can be understood to be doing different work when

considering a trans/feminist theoretical lens as fundamental to an accurate analysis of the fugitivity of Blackness. In this is precisely the legacy of Black radical feminism and trans theorizing, troublesomely fissuring the insides of the order of purity of the category of woman, of cohesive gendered embodiment. If these inflections exist in all of these seemingly separate modalities of thought, what might happen when they are all theorized together? What might it mean to ground ourselves in the assertion that a fugitive force of trans genders when constituted in and through Blackness can never align, can never be "cis," is always in defiance of the normative order? Blackness as fugitive in fact is a testament to the fact that its force is a radical feminist posture of being insistent (cis)gender trouble. So from here, this chapter will analyze how antebellum documentation and figures provide evidence for the link between Blackness, fugitivity, and gender nonnormativity. To do this, I read the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 and Harriet Tubman. Then, an articulation of transness's fugitivity and feminism's fugitivity will be given in separate sections, thinking alongside Black/trans theorists' delinking of the terms from a strict understanding as adherence to some legible physiognomy. Each of these sections will utilize the work and experiences of Black nonbinary femme poet and essayist jayy dodd as case studies. Lastly, I theorize, via another sustained meditation on dodd, the *question* that is Black and trans and feminist fugitivity.

Fugitive Archives

The fugitive indexes something that has been simmering for a while now, bubbling up in the most and least incendiary of places. And where that happens is where/what/how/when

I called here Blackness, a connection I will try to make clearer later in this section. It is instructive, though, to excavate the historical archive for how it has tried to manifest fugitivity, though imperfectly, as all of its manifestations are. The flight is not engendered by some agitating carpetbagger but is in fact already here. It is the Blackness that has been here, simmering, that provides the conditions for flight. As Marion Gleason McDougall writes in her 1891 monograph on fugitive slaves,

> The conditions of the country, both physical and social, gave unusual facilities for flight. The wild woods, the Indian settlements, or the next colony, peopled by a foreign race, and perhaps as yet without firmly established government, offered to the slave a refuge and possibly protection. Escape, therefore, as a peculiar danger, demanded peculiar remedies.[2]

Pervasive is a wilderness, a vehicle facilitating ongoing escape from the boundedness of society. Inasmuch as Blackness can be figured as a condition for being and becoming otherwise, McDougall's description characterizes this. Those "foreign" people—unrecognizable people who reside outside of tenets of legibility—have not established governments, which is to say forms of governance and control. They are unruly, in a word. And their unruliness was given over to them, in fact, by a space that preexists bounded captivity, it is a freedom that is already given to us, an "us" that is capacious, and thus we must only commit to the exhausting task of occupying that space. The

[2] Marion Gleason McDougall, *Fugitive Slaves* (Cambridge: The Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women University Press, 1891), 1.

conditions of flight condition the world. In this flight there is a kind of solace, a "refuge" that shrouds the one in flight with a sense of being at home in that flight. The movement engenders safety from the terrors of fixity. The "true romance of America," or what subtends the terrain, giving it life, is in fact "the story of the fugitive slave," McDougall goes on to say. Escape happens in the worldly sociality that is already here and is to be claimed by anyone willing to do the work it demands. Historically, then, the onset of the fugitive slave laws (1793 and 1850) and the insurgence of runaway slaves demonstrate clearly fugitivity's proximity and indebtedness to Blackness, so much so that fugitivity might be said to name and be named by Blackness.

Approved by George Washington on February 12, 1792, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 articulates a preoccupation with stateliness and territory. In the burgeoning formation of a nation, boundedness in more ways than one—national, corporeal, intellectual—became prioritized. Fugitive slaves, then, were broadly conceived of as those who transgressed imposed boundaries: breached the geographic confines of the plantations, which they did not and could not call home; undermined the perceptual boundaries of the limits of Slave, or Negro, capacity; escaped the grasp of whips, horses, dogs, laws, and desires demanding their confinement; and stole themselves, demonstrated the capacity to autonomously steal that which was deemed property and lacking in agency. Fleeing the "State or Territory" effectively was an escape to life-in-freedom, as the status of slave dissolved on the run (to be a slave is, they defined, to be incapable of being otherwise than slave). Of note, too, in the amended Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 is, written in Section 6, that "In no trial or hearing under this act shall the testimony of such alleged fugitive be admitted in evidence," an extension of imposed incapacity onto the

very ontology of the slave, in this era (and, arguably, into the contemporary moment) synonymous with Blackness. But in all of this, the law cannot hold. The two laws were inadequate, as they could not ensure the fugitive's capture. (On some accounts, in fact, it became even more difficult to re-capture fugitives as they became more adept at eluding power's grasp.) Mr. Mason of Virginia, he who introduced the 1850 law because the previous one lacked sufficient severity, tellingly notes that under the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law "you may as well go down into the sea and endeavor to recover from his native element a fish which has escaped from you, as expect to recover such a fugitive."[3] This, I would argue, is what is engendered when captivity presumes itself a totality: a perpetual, fishy, escapeful slitheriness which power's hands cannot hold. The Law(s) engender a fugitivity that, in this context, affix to Blackness.

In both laws, fugitivity also extends to those who do the work of aiding and abetting a runaway, and more notably disrupting the capture of fugitives. Fugitive slave law enlisted everyone, claimed everyone, to make a dire choice: move toward the proliferation of captivity or move toward the proliferation of escape. With the historical mobilization of fugitivity through Blackness, I want to gesture toward it *as* Blackness, as extending to, or rather being defined by, not a corporeal fact but an entering into an ontological revolt. Fugitivity and thus Blackness is an openness that demands uptaking rather than natal possession. That is, Blackness/fugitivity is *entered into*, always, and thus the logic becomes Blackness-as-fugitivity is not possessed but is deployed, inhabited, taken up, mobilized in and around. As the 1793 law states in its second section, "if any person or persons shall, by force, set at liberty, or rescue the fugitive from such agent

[3] *Radcliffe College Monographs* (Ginn and Company, 1888), 31.

while transporting…the person or persons so offending shall, on conviction, be fined…and be imprisoned…"; and as the 1850 law says in its seventh section, those assisting runaways "after notice or knowledge of the fact that such person was a fugitive from service or labor as aforesaid, shall, for either of said offences, be subject to a fine…and imprisonment…"[4] I am thoroughly aware that, say, white abolitionists helping usher runaway slaves to the North do not occupy the same historical and abjective position as the escapees themselves, and do not wish to conflate the two. My interest lies in the thing, or non-thing, that is being punished—fugitivity—as the site of proximity to Blackness, which then serves as Blackness as such. It is Blackness that is the "criminality that brings the law online," a lawless force that, though named Blackness, "must be understood in its ontological difference from black people."[5] This is the distinction I am making: the Blackness linked to the corporeal surface, to "race"; and the more substantive Blackness I understand through this force of transgressing captivity, the gendered dimensions of which I will make more explicit momentarily in the following sections. But this is also to say, importantly, that Blackness is not completely and entirely severed from what has been deemed Black skin—as so, so many critics say—but that those deemed Black index that fugitive, criminal escape, and are called such on the grounds that Blackened skin (among other corporeal and behavioral and social characteristics) is made to act as the consolidation or proxy for this force. If as one runaway ad reveals, "*All Persons* are forbid to harbor or entertain [a fugitive slave

[4] "Fugitive Slave Act" (U.S. Constitution, 1793); "Fugitive Slave Act" (U.S. Constitution, 1850).
[5] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, 2013, 47. Further, though, they note that those who are deemed Black "are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it," this paraontologically distinct Blackness.

woman] at their peril," which means that it is the fugitive spirit and existence outside the tentacles of the law the law attempts, but always fails, to corral, what I am thinking of here is how its immersion in historical Blackness might then allow us to reconfigure Blackness around this fugitive spirit, opening it up to Blackness-as-fugitivity.[6]

All throughout the ads offering rewards for fugitive slaves there are copious descriptions to aid in their capture. The ads include physical descriptions like birth marks, moles, scars, skin tone, height, posture; descriptions of gestural idiosyncrasies like gait, the speed at which they speak, the feelings and emotions exuding form their faces; descriptions of their locations of birth or currently known locations of kin; descriptions of their demeanor and possible reasons for running away. Thorough description was presumed to ensure as much information that was needed for identifying and recapturing runaway slaves. But all of this fundamentally assumed the immutability of runaways. It assumed that they could not and would not change—that they were still slaves, simply out of place. But so often runaway slaves did in fact alter something about themselves, and indeed, that alteration occurred while on the run. To have escaped and run away, to be fugitive, enabled and engendered a necessary alteration. Being on the run engendered mutability; runaways changed their accents, speech patterns, gaits, habits, clothing, objectives, appearance, and the like as a way to continue their being on the run. Arguing that Blackness is endemic to the environment of fugitive escape, and arguing that this fugitive escape engendered mutability, we can then assert that Blackness is endemic to and conditions mutability.

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[6] Quoted in Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (Taylor & Francis, 1994), 88–89.

But in the spirit of this chapter, indeed this entire dissertation, there is the immense need to examine the *gendered* components of this fugitivity. What does it mean to think about how gender and fugitivity impact one another? What if to argue for Blackness's fugitivity is to already argue in and through the volatility of gender, gendering, and ungender(ing)? To illustrate this in a historical sense, it is imperative to begin with none other than Harriet Tubman since, of course, "there is no understanding fugitivity without citing Tubman," Alexis Pauline Gumbs says.[7] Like Blackness, Tubman has many names: Araminta "Minty" Ross, Moses, "Conductor of the Underground Railroad," "Moll Pitcher." She demands numerous nominatives precisely because one, or two, or three—or any—cannot fully capture her, that "mysterious woman whom no one could lay their finger on."[8] Tubman exceeds capturability, eluding captivity in her mysterious womanness. The point of richness becomes, How in that mysterious (Black) womanness is she engaging fugitivity? In her refusal of the institution of enslavement; her roles as cook, nurse, scout, and spy; and what might be understood as her transed gender, she enacts the gendered texture of Black fugitivity.

Sure, as a Black woman Tubman inflects fugitivity through this specific gendered comportment. But the reading is not to end here in a shallow acknowledgement of one read as, and who reads herself as, a woman enacting the penchant for escape. I want to mine Tubman's enactments for their quintessence and examine how she both did fugitivity through the specificity of her gender but also how fugitivity itself inflects subversive gendered capacity. At the start, what does it mean that a one Mr. Sanborn, in

[7] Johnson, "'We Need Your Freedom.'"
[8] Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W. J. Moses, 1869), 29.

1863, said, referring to Tubman, that "a poor black woman has power to shake the nation that so long was deaf to her cries"?[9] Black women, an uncapturable nexus figured here in Tubman, shake the nation through fracturing the integrity of gender. I want to read "poor black woman" as indexical for nation-shaking; Tubman, as poor Black woman, incites a national shaking that, I assert, is inextricable from—indeed, the product of—the disruption that is named by "poor black woman."

Tubman also expresses Blackness's effective gender indeterminacy, as her work as a field-hand "called forth the wonder of strong laboring men," indicative of the critique Black women pose to the process of gendering: a kind of transed gender. The process of gendering and ungendering—donning and doffing, mobilizing and reworking gender—was a fertile terrain in which fugitives moved because it enacted, or rather grounded, fugitive movement. Escaped chattel persons, through variegated guises saturated with gendered significatory power, as C. Riley Snorton argues, "made use of gender fungibility" (the potential for slippage into "gender *fugitivity*" is heavy here) "as a contrivance for freedom."[10] Tubman even disguised a Black man as a woman wearing a bonnet as a way to impede his capture, engender his escape, and stave off captivity. Transgressing gender (Tubman herself wore pants often) was integral to escape and in fact was a fertile site through which fugitivity was enacted. Or better yet, she deployed the gendered valences of fugitivity in her escaping.

As a hegemonic regime structuring how bodies become legible, gender undergoes an erasure and deconstruction in Tubman's enactments, thus extending her penchant for

[9] Quoted in Harry Bradshaw Matthews, *African American Freedom Journey in New York and Related Sites, 1823-1870: Freedom Knows No Color* (Africana Homestead Legacy Pb, 2008), 180.
[10] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 57.

escape into a fundamental interrogation of how gender and fugitivity interact. Tubman serves as the site of fugitivity in her Black womanness, and Black womanness—extended to, but not as the reduction of, Black feminism—operates as the enactment of fugitivity. That is to say (and I will expound upon this in the next chapter), the intersection of Black and woman marks a fracture of racialized and gendered integrity; that nexus denotes an unfigurable irruption of the cohesion that is racial Blackness's implicit maleness and woman's symbolic whiteness. Black and woman, in short, reference a non-representable nodal point of regimes of identity. In this sense, the flight that Tubman exhibits attunes us to how such flight was given over in her attempted figuration as racial and gender irruption. It is this irruptive flight mined from the nexus of Black and woman that I understand Black feminism as exuding from, an enactable and claimable mode of living.

This latter point, that of Black feminism's fugitivity, might also be crystallized through the Combahee River. The 1970s Black feminist organization is named after Tubman's military action on June 2 of 1863 in which she orchestrated and led a militant campaign that freed 756 enslaved persons at the Combahee River in the Port Royal region of South Carolina. This massive emancipation from bondage thus becomes the quintessential moment coloring one of Black feminism's most foundational documents (the Combahee River Collective's Black Feminist Statement). That Tubman's insurgency, the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman, gets linked to the fundament of Black feminism indexes a tethering of fugitivity to an irruptive moment of a coalitional Blackness and feminism. It is through Tubman that fugitivity can begin to be understood as imbricated fundamentally with Black feminism's interrogation and subversion of gender. Black feminism, in this context, becomes an

interrogative flight from imposed normative gender captivity; it becomes a constant refusal of how racialized gender becomes consolidated and inaugurates certain subjects. Tubman's excessiveness, her transing of gender, her implicit blending of escape and flight with (un)gendered specificity and feminist aims articulate a feminist fugitivity, a Blackness that inflects feminism.

Trans Fugitivity

I do not know precisely what Blackness and transness seek when they conspire together because their machinations of escape move in the shadows of legibility. But I may have some inkling as to what they might want of us. I gather, along with Fred Moten, that they want something like

> our resistant, relentlessly impossible object [a]s subjectless predication, subjectless escape, escape from subjection, in and through the paralegal flaw that animates and exhausts the language of ontology. Constant escape is an ode to impurity, an obliteration of the last word. We remain to insist upon this errant, interstitial insistence…[11]

They don't want a subject, and perhaps not even subjectivity. What they want is the impossible—fitting, you see, since those of trans experience might be understood as "impossible people" (per Dean Spade)—and that impossibility is the striven for that is our desired subjectivity: difficult to subject to subjection; or, difficult to be—to be

[11] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017), vii.

grasped by ontology, that philosophical term for being captured by normative subjectivity. What fuels all this impossibility is the open-secret-relationship between Black and trans. There is an overlapping referentiality between Blackness and its transness, transness and its Blackness, as Snorton argues throughout his foundational text *Black On Both Sides*; Blackness has a transitive function in its conditioning of differentiation, and transness is in appositional, coeval coalition with Blackness—they both index inflections of a fugitive force.[12] This is illegibility that thirsts for nothing specifically yet demands something other than this. The trans feeling of knowing less that one is definitely a woman trapped in a man's body, or a man trapped in a woman's body, than knowing more that one is not the gender that has been ascribed to them is an improvisation of phenomenological givenness, or a refusitive relation toward powers that subjugate but also subjectivate us.

Let's think Blackness's transness. Consider that Blackness is not to be found in or on the body. As a fugitive force, Blackness cannot abide the strictures of the body in its entirety. So it must be located—or dis/located—elsewhere. Blackness, in other words, is not reducible to a discernible materiality, nor is it beholden to the normative criteria for materiality (e.g. racial taxonomies, etc.). Someone like Hortense Spillers has termed this other place that exceeds the body *flesh*. Blackness's adherence to flesh rather than bodies delinks it from taxonomic racial classifications, which are the province of bodies, *but also* effectively troubles gender insofar as the gender binary has been consolidated onto bodies made to cohere around two purportedly objective sexes. Thus, Blackness's exceeding of the body is also a refutation of the requisite for adherence to the gender

[12] See Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 5.

binary: the body. If we are to live in and through this kind of Blackness, its unhinging from the terrain of encroachable racialized bodies opens up, also, to gender variance and nonnormativity. In short, to understand Blackness is this way—a fugitive way—is to understand Blackness as proximal to transness. In its fundamental transitivity, doing such fugitive work becomes unusual politics, an unrecognizable "transgender politics" that Aren Aizura maintains "invests *not in an identity category but in disrupting* the litany of injustices that comprise twenty-first-century capitalism."[13] Race and gender dictate larger social and institutional relations—relations that are often oppressive—so trans politics is the name for the pursuit to disrupt those oppressive social and institutional relations. It may, in other words, be aptly read as fugitive work. When we disinvest from the categories created by the State, we might then be able to inhabit the flesh.

So the interests of Black and trans lay more in those who align with and inhabit the philosophical and existential milieu of rebellion, deviance, nonnormativity, and subversion of power. We must operate in other spaces, via other modalities of thought; we must render Blackness as that movement otherwise. An otherwiseness subverts capitalistic ownership, opens Blackness to para-possession, an unpropertied deployment and call to coalitional fugitivity begotten by disaggregating it from institutional, normative, hegemonic investment and ownership. Capitalist tentacles are much less equipped to regulate purported strangers who create an ensemble on the grounds of unanticipated coalitional Blackness and threaten to create treason. And if an analytic understanding of transness marks it as movement from and refusal of imposed starting points, a nonnormative relationship to regimes of subjectivation, and a troubling of

[13] Aren Aizura, "Introduction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 2017): 609, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3961721.

sedimentation, then there is a kinship with fugitive Blackness. I want to, in short, highlight the transing effect inherent to Blackness-as-fugitivity.

As I've written elsewhere, my understanding of Blackness's transness stems from their inflections of a force of dispersal and differentiation. That is, to clarify, Blackness is inflected in and by transness (not Blackness *is* transness) by way of an understanding of transness as refusal of circumscription and transparent arrival/destination (or origin), and, too, by way of Blackness's "mak[ing of] gender trouble," to cite Che Gossett. "Black" and "trans" overlap in referentiality because Blackness "signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility" and transness "is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival"; Black and trans, as linked to movement, unfixation from normatively legible physiognomy, and a general refusal bear an intimate relationship and, Snorton might conclude, highlight that "there is no absolute distinction between" them under a racialized and gendered world, that "trans…finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness."[14] This is Blackness's otherwise identification located in the interstices, frictional relations, and rebellious communing with those we are not supposed to, and in this is a trans-inflected way of recomposing subjectivities in the name of liberation from imposed captivity in identificatory regimes, flight from what they told us we have to always be. It is a trans Blackness that is an ante-anti-category, a preceding and subverting predilection for opposing cohesive categorization.

This is not to reduce these historically and phenomenologically specific modalities to a homogenous understanding of what has come to be called fugitivity. In

[14] Che Gossett, "Žižek's Trans/Gender Trouble," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 13, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/zizeks-transgender-trouble/#!; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, x, 2.

other words, no, Blackness and transness are not the same under the helm of fugitivity; they are names that index escape and theft of life in and through the nonnormative, the subversion of hegemony, unbecoming. They are names for how history has consolidated the fugitive force into various corporeal and behavioral postures deemed deviant or unsettling. In short, I am making a similar claim as I make elsewhere about Blackness and transness:

> this is not to collapse blackness and trans*-ness, diluting their uniqueness and utility as analytics for different, though related, disciplinary fields. They are, rather, nodes of one another, inflections that, though originary and names for the nothingness upon which distinction rests, flash in different hues because of subjects' interpretive historical entrenchment. That is to say, they are differently inflected names for an anoriginal lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology. Manifesting in the modern world differently as race and gender fugitivity, black and trans*, though pointed at by bodies that identify as black and/or trans*, precede and provide the foundational condition for those fugitive identificatory demarcations.[15]

Okay, now let's think transness's Blackness. Because "transgender phenomena" attune us to gender normativity's contingency and unnaturalness, there is an intimate link

[15] Marquis Bey, "The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017): 278, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3815069.

to Blackness, or an intimate Blackness itself, simmering within transness. Both Blackness and transness are queer postures that, with different textures and histories, de-norm gender. Trans, and the bodies that summon it, "exceed[s] or elude[s] capture within the gender apparatus"—becoming-fugitive—and flickers between and across bounded states of legibility.[16] Trans's Blackness attunes us, additionally, to feeling and disrupting as a methodology, an interrogative methodology that leads to questioning recalcitrance in all its forms. The colonial record does not have the last word in constriction. Trans's propinquity to Blackness, their kinship, develops different kinships for us all, kinships that do not and choose not to rest inside typical understandings of kinship. Transed kinships make things a matter of proclivity, affinity, with whom we dwell and breathe, how we fight and love. This kinship demands that we ask "What if we breathe together as queerly connected, as trans*historical kin?"[17] And we know, at least since July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, but also so much longer before that, that breathing is of vital importance. How can we breathe together, find ways to inhale oxygen as well as, say, water, smoke, blood, any readily available material to sustain ourselves? How can those with an abundance of breath give that breath to those whose reserves are nearly depleted? Breathing oddly together, looking for different breath, impossible breath—airless air to saturate our lungs—is the pursuit that puts us in sync with one another.

The cohabitation of Blackness and transness creates space for the unknowable to emerge, the force of this cohabitation often felt by Black trans people. Kai M. Green sees the nexus of these two forces filmically, since they ask us "to develop new optics, a new

[16] Susan Stryker, "Biopolitics," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 40, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399542.
[17] Joseph M. Pierce, "Feeling, Disrupting," *Biography; Honolulu* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 436.

way of seeing that is less reliant upon categorical delineation" and more reliant on escape from categorization, escape from normative conceptions of who we are permitted to be. Black and trans trouble narratives, especially the "trapped in the wrong body" narratives, and urge for existence in transition. Transition becomes a space in which to live and study. The wrong body narrative sees transition as a frustrating means to an end, buttressing two distinct poles of a binary, the end of which is untroubled situatedness in an identifiable norm. But a Blackened trans, so to speak, unproduces this narrative and thinks about the multifaceted ways we can, as Green concludes, be "unpredetermined movement."[18]

Hopefully, we can become the ghosts they can't catch, specters on the run from their ghostbusting. Or further still, in the world that attempts to expel us we become those who refuse to leave, and refuse to let the world be what it wishes for itself and us. The trans/gendered fugitivity in and as Blackness is borne out of an understanding that the capacity, which is to say the revisable performativity in excess of categorization, of transness is conditioned by Blackness. Put differently, the "kind of being in the world where gender—though biologized—was not fixed but fungible," was not immutable but able to move and escape fixity, is enabled by its inhabitation of Blackness's Blacknesses, as it were.[19] The trans fugitivity that this section titularly describes is one in which transness expresses an assemblic rearrangement of how gender operates, and Blackness expresses the troubling of gender's reiteration, indexing trans and Blackness's referentiality, fugitive Blackness's transed gendering. Black and trans fugitivity: a radical

[18] Kai M. Green, "The Essential I/Eye in We: A Black TransFeminist Approach to Ethnographic Film," *Black Camera* 6, no. 2 (2015): 191.
[19] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 59.

comportment to the world and insurgent subversive politics, refusing the imposed ontologizing forces of constricted racial identity and binaristic gender. I want to lovingly, painstakingly, move toward Blackness and transness, in this instance, naming alternative relationalities of escaping various modes of captivity. Inextricable are Blackness and transness, Black and trans life generatively folding into one another and speaking a transient, transductive, and transformative recalibratioon of social categories. Black and trans, then, put in *werq*, drawing on Treva Ellison, and it is my contention that Black and trans are differently inflected names for that werqing, the deformation and denaturalization of racial and gender categories that grip our ontologies. Werqing, indexical of the paraontological force of Black and trans, is the destabilization of the purported homes of race and gender, the excessive fissures of the project of Man.[20]

To round out this section I want to use jayy dodd and their work to capture what the overlapping of Blackness and transness might look like, and I will do the same in the next section with dodd's relationship to feminism. Dodd is not approaching Blackness in the typical way. The way that dodd writes the word "Black" raises insightful questions which can cultivate grounds for generative inquiry. They write the word in a number of places as "blxck," supplanting the "a" with an "x." A peculiar practice, indeed, but what does it mean? What if we read "blxck" as a significatory marker of Blackness's interruption? That is, "blxck" could function as a discursive denotation of the *work* dodd intends for Blackness as commingling with their femme nonbinariness. "Blxck" becomes an invitation to think Blackness differently insofar as it subsequently contains no vowels,

[20] See the *brilliant* chapter by Treva Ellison, "The Labor of Werqing It: The Performance and Protest Strategies of Sir Lady Java," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 1.

as is regulated for every word in English, making the term a breach of vocabularic constraints, which is further to say semiotic and normative constraints; and, furthermore, insofar as it suggests an interruption of typical ways of coming to an understanding of what the very word means. To read "blxck" and its solicitation of interruption, indeed *dis*ruption, is to solicit readers into Blackness's effects.

It is a Blackness that cannot contain or abide its description. To pen Blackness on the page, as dodd does, necessarily, in their essayistic and poetic writing, is to commit it to fixity. But "blxck" gestures toward a Blackness that exceeds itself as written; "blxck" posits right within its center the incompletion of the word being able to express itself fully when written or, more specifically, inscribed with the intent of exuding transparent meaning. Thus, placing the *x* there alludes to a different semiotic terrain in which one is alerted to the inscription's inadequacy in capturing the word's meaning; indeed, alludes to a terrain in which the inscription's meaning is one that is located in an otherwise realm, a realm that refuses the meaning-making pillars of a binary opposition, a realm that might accurately be understood as trans.

And why wouldn't it be such, as dodd's Blackness—or "blxckness"—is inextricable from their nonbinary trans femmeness. Their "blxck" is, I would assert, a mode of inscribing, or making graphemetically apparent, Blackness's gender trouble, its indexation of the departure from normative gender symbolics. I will speak more at length about the specificity of dodd's transness, but here I simply want to note that dodd's *blxck* makes plain the manner in which Blackness operates as a disruption, too, of gender. Dodd's Blackness is one that, following, without direct but certainly subjective and lived

citation, Denise Ferreira da Silva, possesses the profound "ability to disrupt the subject and the racial and gender-sexual forms that sustain it."[21]

What dodd's understanding of Blackness culminates into is their perpetual curiosity with the "Black condition." Constantly they inquire into the texture, the gizzards and guts, of the Black condition. Consider their poem "Ask Two Different Niggas 'What is the Black Condition?'" They write:

> Black control,
> govern Black,
> meaning the Black
> be uncontrollable
> or Black be
> ungovernable
> condition the
> governed Black
> controllable.

This passage is more than a simple meditation on governability, that Black people are subject to unjust forms of governance. While the aforementioned is true, dodd interrogates the very fundamentality of governance to Blackness's conditioning and subsequently subverts such a definitive characteristic of Blackness. They, in other words, seek to rework the understanding of Blackness as that which is given to us by way of the

[21] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique," *PhiloSOPHIA* 8, no. 1 (2018): 21.

thing subject to oppressive control ("Black control," the opening stanza). While we often understand Blackness as the "govern[ed] Black," the corralled image of how Blackness has been made legible, what we quickly come to instead is the "meaning [of] the Black": it "be uncontrollable / or Black be ungovernable." This is dodd's Blackness. Or rather, I would submit, this is the Blackness dodd wishes to proliferate. If dodd's interest in the "blxck condition" is one that seeks to examine the current state of things, such is an examination of the governed Black, the controlled Black. It is this preoccupation with the Black-as-abject that in fact leads dodd outside of this toward the ungovernable and uncontrollable Black. Fixation on the condition of Blackness in the white gaze, as it were, conceding to how Claudia Rankine has elsewhere described the condition of Blackness as "one of mourning," in fact for dodd precipitates a more profound (un)fixation on the various subterranean ways that Blackness reveals itself as ungoverned or controlled. It is not conceded that pervasive anti-Blackness should lead one to frameworks of cynicism, pessimism, or nihilism. A depth in the study of the "blxck condition"—a condition that indexes the uncapturability and elusiveness of that signifier that serves, in the first instance, as a problematizing fugitivity—reveals not merely *anti*-Blackness but the inextinguishable insistence of its breach onto the scene of sociality *regardless* (that Black feminist Walker-esque signifier) of the purported pervasiveness of anti-Black oppression.

There remains the question of dodd's own Blackness, how their Blackness comingles with their trans nonbinary femmeness. At the start, taking seriously the *my* in dodd's "My Black Condition," we can think from the vantage of it insisting on "an obsession with language for the impossible." It is the impossible that brings together Blackness and, for dodd, its abiding transness, as impossibility is the precise thing that

these two analytic terms signify: that which, in the current state of sedimented and congealed hegemony, is disallowed. To identify the impossible as that which characterizes the Black condition, and more specifically dodd's Black condition, which is always and already a gender-troubling trans femmeness that refuses the gender binary, excavates more of the heft present in dodd's poetic and essayistic theorizations. Blackness for dodd is inextricable from trans and transed genders in a way that exceeds trite intersectionalist axioms. Blackness foundations the mutability endemic to transness, dodd noting that "The Black body is, in many ways, always capable of being non-conforming." Blackness, then, becomes a conditioning analytic for *all* of those "who find themselves presently & actively on the outside of the restrictive gender binary."[22] If Blackness is always already gender nonconforming, which is to say that Blackness always already excites a mode of transness (not, it must distinguished, the *being* of transgender necessarily), it requires a more sophisticated understanding of precisely what is meant when the word "Black" is uttered.

This different understanding is captured in dodd's notion of being "presently & actively on the outside of the restrictive gender binary." One must not only be cast by hegemonic forces to the outside, the product of a pathologically ontologized corporeal accident; one must be present and active on that outside, moving toward it as an ethically subversive praxis. That is what trans indicates, a trans that is in an intimate relationship with Blackness: the active movement toward an outsidedness with respect to the gender binary. dodd's articulation of this relationship—this theorizing of, as their essay title

[22] jayy dodd, "Gender Non Conformity as Peak Blackness," 2016. https://medium.com/@jayydodd/gender-non-conformity-as-peak-blackness-7834a901dc1d

describes, gender-nonconformity as peak Blackness—is expressed in Snorton's description of Blackness's and transness's relationship as a Fanonian "real leap" in which they describe the convergence of radical analytics that "[constitute] being to the degree that it exceeds it."[23] Actively and presently on the outside.

Feminist Fugitivity

It is 1983. Alice Walker, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, gives her now famous and off-the-cuff quotable definitions of womanist. Her second entry of the definition, emphasizing love for women, concludes with a telling conversation between a child and the child's (the child's gender is uncertain) mother. "'Mama,'" the child asks, "'why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?'" The mother answers: "'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.'" In the wake of monolithic understandings of Blackness, Walker presents a radical disruption of such thinking, and the thinking of what constitutes "the colored race," read "Black." What does it say that the "colored race" can be, in a word, any color? What does it say that one's colored family can be not only Brown, Black or "high yella" but also pink and white? Walker seems to be unfixing Blackness and familial affiliation with it from set epidermal measurements and locating Blackness, coloredness, somewhere else. Walker, in this anecdote that one can hear in the voice of their own mama, advances a Blackness that pervades various shades, a Blackness echoing an artistic axiom that all colors of the spectrum can be found in blackness. It is a commitment to the many-coloredness of Blackness that allows one to enter into

[23] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, xiv.

Blackness from a variety of positions, giving Blackness a radical openness unanticipated by logics of hegemony; it is Denise Ferreira da Silva's "unmoored" Black feminist Blackness which moves "in excess of the objects and subjects it creates," resisting definitive racialized bodies said to be Black.[24] Blackness's openness, its ability to claim various unanticipated subjects, is fundamentally indexed to Black feminism because it is in the *mother and mothering* being done in the anecdotal moment that is of note. The unfixation from racialized logics is expressed in the maternal; the fugitive Blackness, in its animative heft, is delivered through the ani*mater*iality—the agential and animating maternal valences—of movement.[25] "We are the African and the trader," Walker notes. "We are the Indian and the settler. We are oppressor and oppressed." "We are the mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are 'white,' too, and we are red."[26] We are fugitives to purported immutable and imposed identities. Unification, or coalitional subjectivity in Blackness and feminism, is assemblic; "we" can live in this undercommon space because it is open, but only if you dare.

My point here is that Walker's remixed and extensive Blackness is saturated with

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[24] Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (April 2014): 86, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413690. Da Silva also, I would argue, echoes Barbara Ransby's Black feminism which is less about the politics arising from one's identity, "not a kind of essentialism notion that your body determines your politics" which she remarks in the context of a panel discussion of the Combahee River Collective's foundation Black Feminist Statement (https://shadowproof.com/2017/07/10/authors-combahee-river-statement-profoundly-influenced-black-feminism-mark-40th-anniversary/).

[25] For this I am of course drawing on Moten's usage of the ani*mater*ial, Hortense Spillers's work, Patricia Hill Collins's work, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

[26] Alice Walker, "In the Closet of the Soul: A Letter to an African American Friend," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 545, 540; see also Antonella Corsani, "Beyond the Myth of Woman: The Becoming-Transfeminist of (Post-)Marxism," trans. Timothy S. Murphy, *SubStance* 36, no. 1 (2007): 113.

and in her Black feminist, her womanist, vernacular theorizations. In short, this remixed Blackness is necessarily womanist. (I am aware, of course, of the analogical relationship between womanism and [Black] feminism. I am timidly conflating them here only to utilize womanism's close proximity to Black feminism in order to reveal how we might extend an excessive fugitivity to Black feminism.) Indeed, her definitions of womanism concern less mere natal corporeal or cultural happenstance and concern more proclivity, preference, politics. Womanism is to *act* grown, to act audacious, outrageous, to exert "*willful* behavior"; to *commit* to the survival of the genders; to love in the "struggle." Tying a pervasive, almost rhizomatic Blackness to a deeply Black feminist politic inflects it in a way that refuses being hemmed by hegemonic seductions from white *or* cis male supremacy. Black feminism is and must, for Walker, be integral to a capacious, multivalent understanding of Blackness.

The history of Black feminism is underlain by its insistence on the inadequacy of the gender binary and its symbolic whiteness. What has come to be termed Black feminism has drawn on how Black women interrupt racialized and gendered assumptions, how Black women leak from such categorizations. This leakage, then, comes to characterize Black feminism as such—as a leakage, a seepage (or, in Gumbs' language, a spillage) out of categorization qua categorization. Thus, it names a potent mode of getting outside of things via subversion and interrogation; Black feminism is a radical disorientation, a rupture that will call forth new worlds and new peoples that we do not have names for, and that we may never have language for. It is because at base, as Denise Ferreira da Silva notes, "Black feminism is a double refusal: the refusal to disappear and

the refusal to comply."[27] That is, underlying Black feminism is a refusal to leave and a refusal to abide by normativity: it is a fugitivity. This fugitivity, via Black feminism, is not an imperative to leave behind; it is a flight, yes, a running and escape, certainly, but one that, in Morrisonian language, flies without leaving the ground and thus without leaving people behind.

The perhaps expected distinction underlying my claims is that between Black feminism and Black women. Black feminism is not the sole province of Black women; Black feminism is a commitment to inhabiting, disseminating, becoming, and choosing a disruptive and excessive posture of gendered critique, one that has been historically, but contingently, rooted in those subjects deemed Black women. Though Black women think and act in ways that reveal their "distinct angle of vision" of the social world, Black feminism is not reducible to an amalgamation of the ideologies, thoughts, political leanings, proclivities, etc. of Black women, a line of reasoning that concludes that only Black women can do and create Black feminism. Rather, Black feminism is an epistemology—"knowledging" the world-as-world and becoming imbricated, habituated corporeally and linguistically, in the production of renegade knowledge—that historically indexes Black women but is not reducible to them. Indeed, Black feminism stages an entrée into onto-epistemic sociality, exculpating Black women as bearers of the onus of representation and responsibility. A trans/feminist understanding of this might be to reconfigure Black feminism as an approach which allows for an epistemological breadth that is not generated from the assumption of a certain kind of body that qualifies for

[27] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism, Refusal, and the Limits of Critique," 2015.

"womanness" and instead out of a struggle coalitionally dispersed to and from a subjective irruption. With Black women's feminism as the troubling of the category of woman, such a category becomes unreliable as an anchor for understanding the place from which Black feminism stems. This, then, requires that we understand Black feminism as such as categorical trouble; again, subjectless subjectivity with the aim of disruption and fugitive capacity in its circumvention of the racial and gender forms/underpinnings that sustain legible subjectivity.

It is precisely the goal of Black feminism to decouple anatomical medicalized markers of gender (e.g. genitalia) from sociogenically gendered subjects (an incredibly potent transness is then inherent to Black feminism), *and*, I would argue, from epidermalized markers of Blackness. Biologically grounded understandings of Black feminism cannot hold, so it demands reconfiguration as a radically open interrogation, a suspension of knowing race, gender, sexuality, etc. in advance and instead a deep critically insurgent posture that puts all of those vectors into question. The critique focuses on processes of sociogeny and political subversion—relations to power—rather than (mis)readings of anatomy, physiognomy, and genitalia. Black feminism is thus a radical destabilization of racialized and gendered subjects, their transfiguration, as Snorton would say, and about which I will say more in Chapter 3. If somatic readings are inadequate to racial and gender designations, it is perhaps an illegible anteoriginal force motivating the consolidation of bodies into categories that index such forces. Hence, my interest lies in the excavation of the texture of that force, a force that Black feminism cites in its racial and gendered inflections of fugitivity. Therefore, Black feminism is not merely a history of Black women critiquing white men, white women, and Black men but

a citation of the fissuring besidedness of that primordial mutiny.

What if Black feminism redux, or simply an archival reading of Black feminism as it has been demonstrated, is less a matter of who is Black and woman and more a kind of subaltern non-location that necessarily resides outside the grasps of hegemony? This radical inclusivity is motivated by the unfixing of immutable "identities" from what we are said to be able to do and become. Thus Black feminism becomes, here, what Eric A. Stanley calls the dream of an "insurgent trans study that refuses its own complicity in the brutality of exclusion."[28] Black feminism is radical openness to anyone who uptakes the work of Black feminism, its Black and trans and fugitive work. Let me now turn to jayy dodd again as a case study for giving texture to the relationship between fugitivity, Black feminism, and transness.

"Now, for the record: I'm not a feminist. Never been. Never wanted to be," dodd writes in their essay "Stop Dude Feminists." The essay is an admirable one, detailing how the United Nations' #HeforShe campaign centers men as the gate-keepers of feminism and reduces gender social justice to a violent biological dichotomy. dodd insists that feminism is much more nuanced than simply "gender equality." But the claim that dodd is not, and never wanted to be, a feminist is a peculiar claim. Their claim does not seem like the typical gesture often made, where Black people distance themselves from feminism because of its association with whiteness—as if whiteness has sole claim to feminism, which is demonstrably does not; rather, dodd's never being and never having wanted to be a feminist is a temporal claim. This essay was originally published in

[28] Tom Boellstorff et al., "Decolonizing Transgender A Roundtable Discussion," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (August 1, 2014): 425, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2685669.

November of 2015. In a December 2013 essay, however, dodd, in writing about the simultaneous Blackness *and* feminism of Beyoncé, says "Beyoncé is the reason I can call myself a feminist now."[29] This is not to mention passages from dodd's other essays that span 2017–2019, all of which, in their radical gender politics and insistence on centering race via Blackness, engage feminism. What is to be made of this?

Though dodd does not unequivocally and consistently claim the title of feminist, that is of little matter to me, quite frankly. The kind of feminism advocated here is one that emphasizes dispersal and engagement, praxis and deploying, rather than declaration and position. Conversant with Imani Perry's feminism as a verb and focused on the dismantling of patriarchy as a force of sovereignty, property, and personhood, I am reading dodd as fundamentally a feminist, even if they have a temporally vexed relationship with it. In other words, I care very little about dodd's declaration of themselves as a feminist or not, but rather am interested in how dodd enacts tenets of feminism, does, as it were, feminist work.

Coming to feminism as a critical praxis alleviates the requirement to consider as feminist only those who declare themselves feminists. It becomes in fact a modality of inhabiting the world, deploying one's subjectivity in nonnormative ways, and interrogating hegemonic patriarchal edifices. Following Perry here, dodd is ripe for gleaning what Perry calls "the vicar of liberation," which expresses feminism as "a call to pursue becoming different kinds of subjects from that demanded by the political

[29] jayy dodd, "To Wake Up Flawless: Beyoncé as Black and Feminist," 2013. snakesonmccain.blogspot.com/2013/12/to-wake-up-flawless-beyonce-as-black.html

economy."[30] Given an ontology of gendered embodiment from the hegemon, it is imperative that, if we are to dismantle the violences of the hegemon, we discard those ontologies in favor of something different. Becoming something different is to become something that is not what we have been given, to not accept whatever gendered legibility has been imposed upon us. It is to become away from that, beyond and across and to the side of that; it is to become through an animating transness. That is what dodd does, and it is the start of perhaps one of the only forms of radical feminist engagement.

Such is the texture of dodd's feminism, their Black and trans feminism. This is a feminism that does not need to proclaim that it is feminist because its feminism exceeds proclamation; its feminism resides in the radical praxis of illegibly inscribing otherwise modalities of subjectivity. A feminism that is Black; a feminism that is trans; a feminism that is Black and trans—it is a feminism that is interested in dissolving gender's normative hold and creating something else that might be a more just and ethical way to form subjectivity. It attends to violent histories that have supervened along lines of what have been consolidated into race and gender by seeking a way to live in excess of these still normative identities, these given ontological skins we have come to love so dearly. Because of their normative and at base hegemonic bestowal, they cannot be the home in which we dwell for the duration of our lives; we demand something more capacious and of our own coalitional choosing. Here is a specifically *Black and trans* feminism. It is a commitment to alleviate violences in all of their forms, chief among which are the violences done by whiteness's racial taxonomy and gender's unbreachable binary. The feminist work dodd is doing rests on a foundation of refusing to "reproduc[e] a

[30] Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 229.

biologically violent dichotomy of *HE* and *SHE*," as they say later in "Stop Dude Feminists." Inherent to trans feminism is both a radical skepticism of the efficacy and validity of the gender binary as well as an ethical commitment to refusing to reproduce violence, which the binary serves to proliferate. Their trans feminism does not adhere to the reproduction of biologized genders forced into a "he or she" nor does it even concede that such a biologized understanding of gender is anything but a fundamental violence.

The above *trans* feminist argument dodd makes is also a *Black* feminist argument. As has already been shown in the previous section, dodd's gender nonbinariness—that, as they say, "ya boy is non-binary"—is endemic to their Blackness. To operate at "peak Blackness" is to inhabit gender nonconformity (or to *ex*habit gender). The peakness of Blackness cannot not be excessive of the gender binary. It is because Blackness, especially when peaked, operates under a (gender) nonconformance, yes; more, too, it is because the mechanisms that respond to the fugitivity of Blackness must also maintain a strict hold over the gendered law that maintains the integrity of (identificatory) law qua Law, thus to *do* Blackness is to fracture the law's various load-bearing vectors, gender chief among them.

Dodd demonstrates that a trans-inclusive Black feminism is a radical liberatory posture for fugitive racialized genders. It has always been such, and as being such it offers "vast possibilities for rethinking 'questions of identity' in its ability to formally dissemble identities' 'static limitations'"—and in this sense, too, it becomes clear that what Che Gossett, Tourmaline, AJ Lewis, and Nat Raha have argued is decidedly true:

"Black feminism has always been trans."[31]

The Question of Black and Trans and Feminist Fugitivity

More of jayy dodd.

> This dude at a party asked, "Are you a man or woman?" I'm like, "I'm your question." That's as whole as I can be right now….[S]o whenever someone asks, my response is, "I am your question." It is yours. I don't have a question. You do. And your question, that is who I am.[32]

I am your question. The question "Are you a man or a woman?" is reconfigured in and by and as dodd, the question serving, now, as an/other gender. dodd's gender is the non-answer to the question, which becomes a problem since it is, indeed, not an answer to the question that demands an answer. Crafting a gender in the space of the unanswered question, we now have a problem: the gender that has been crafted. What arises, then, is an/other kind of gender that is fundamentally problematic, that *is* a problematic. That is the gender attempting to emerge, and in its inchoate emergence is the problematizing of the general order of things, expressing disdain for closure. In the dissolution that occurs in the problematizing is where this gender, a *fugitive* gender, peers through.

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[31] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 184; Nat Raha, "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 1, 2017): 640, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3961754.

[32] This and all quotes in this paragraph attributed to dodd are from Claire Schwartz and jayy dodd, "An Interview with Jayy Dodd," *LA Review of Books* (blog), July 27, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-interview-with-jayy-dodd/#!

Indeed, gendered Black fugitivity is the analytic that encapsulates this recurrent encounter between dodd and "This dude at a party," which can be any dude, any party, as dodd is not describing an isolated moment in their life but the texture of the social world predicated on gender binaries and transparent gender ontologies. The question is the space that refuses to adhere to the logics embedded in syntactical possibility. If the only legitimate question to ask of dodd is locked in the binarisic logic of "Are you a man or a woman?" then dodd becomes a mobile precipitation of the question's unresolvability. The question is threatened by imminent erasure engendered by dodd. jayy dodd. A "blxk question mark," a "volunteer gender terrorist."[33]

Fear. "Recently, I was afraid of leaving my house," dodd says, echoing a sentiment so many trans and non-binary and "post-gender" folks (to use dodd's preferential term) feel when occupying public space. Transantagonistic violence pervades dodd's inhabitation of the world, invoking fear, a fear, I want to highlight, that is as much about the transantagonism as it is about the anti-Blackness saturating the world; indeed, the transantagonism and those given ontologies of gender *are* an anti-Blackness, considering the transversal referentiality of Blackness and transness. dodd's fear was one "of being caught." This catching is one of optics, "under a gaze," dodd says, that makes them "feel like a wild thing in eyes-locked cage." The gaze that dodd always feels promotes a wild thingness. dodd is not a wild person, nor a wild one, nor simply wild; dodd is a wild thing, a non-one that troubles oneness and Man. Wild because of dodd's obstinacy, dodd's gender trouble, dodd's troubling of gender trouble insofar as Blackness and transness exponentiate one another in their relation to troubling what gender is and

[33] I take these from their various bios online.

what gender does. We have already been told, in fact: this might be what dodd means by "blxk question mark."[34]

What mitigates the fear is a face. dodd searches for faces that look like theirs. The face here is more than a Levinasian affective relational interruption; the face, it seems dodd is arguing, stands in for more than itself and the being on which it appears. To search for a face that looked like dodd's signifies something other than their attempt to find other Black or non-binary people with whom they could be in shallow solidarity, if only fleetingly. No, this facial recognition is in search of another "face that looks over its-own-back, too." It is a face that does something, that signals something in excess of what it "is"; it is a face that is on the lookout and, because it is looking out, poised to escape. Yes, this is the kind of facial kin dodd seeks, a face "smiling-watchful-escaping capture." This is what molds a face into its faceness for dodd, how is it looking out, when and at what does it smile, to whom does it look, how does it keep an eye out for the ways it is forcibly positioned in order to flout that positioning? Smiling at the face that comes into its own face via its watchful fugitivity is how dodd might be offering an embrace of those ready to flee that won't slow them down.[35]

The fear that pervades dodd's life on the grounds of their Blackness and transness, and dodd's feminist unsuturing of regulative gender regimes, is not to be understood as abject. To the extent that dodd's body—unruly as all hell—is subjected a priori to render dodd a "he," and the extent to which this subjection is the predicate for dodd being encountered in the world violently, the fear stemming from this subjection is being

[34] jayy dodd, "The Impossiible Outside (Or, a Zumbi's Autopsy)," *Awst Press* (blog), August 29, 2016, https://awst-press.com/essay-series/jayy-dodd/zumbi.
[35] Ibid.

weaponized. dodd writes: "Been weaponizing the fear that makes my body subject," an asubjective (i.e. it is not "*I have* been," just "Been") bellicosity embedded in the constant, gritty struggle of escape that characterizes dodd's living-in-the-world. A perpetual striving—*hear the Du Boisian echo*—that is the asubjective subject of/that is dodd's existential and paraontological torsion. It is an unruly striving, a "*Trying to*," dodd says, that works toward the aim of "not get[ting] caught"—an ongoing fugitivity. Engendering this unruliness is that dodd has "Been feeling antagonistically Black as of late." Importantly, the omission of "I have" from both dodd's weaponization of fear and their antagonistically Black feeling syntactically instantiates dodd's otherwise mode of thinking when it comes to ontology. The syntactic omission is a paraontological syntax of sorts, a way to think through agency without subjectivity, or an agency that has as its subject a radically different, a radically elsewhere locus. The subject might be in the realm of the "impossible outside," a subjectless subjectivity made possible in the radical impossibility engendered by the convergence of fugitive genders.

Which amounts to something quite profound: "i'm like both the lady & man but i'm killing him & showing up to his funeral. i expect i'll leave me everything in the will," dodd writes.[36] First, dodd is here making a claim. This is not an ontological claim that presumes one is some*thing* in one's entirety. dodd is *like* the lady and the man; dodd is not *the* lady and the man. This opens up being "identified" to something more mobile: a subjective plenum where one moves through always-shifting iterations of who they continue to become. This is an insistence on transed gendered ways of living, never

[36] Devin Kelly and jayy dodd, "INTERVIEW WITH JAYY DODD, AUTHOR OF MANNISH TONGUES," January 23, 2017. https://entropymag.org/interview-with-jayy-dodd-author-of-mannish-tongues/

settling on a gender that is fixed. A refutation, of sorts, of ontological gender. dodd then goes on to kill the man—or rather, kill "him" and subsequently show up to "his" funeral. "He" is dead, killed, because "he" is a signifier materialized, a materialized signifier, that points toward a performative gendered violence. To actualize their trans/nonbinary/femme subjectivity, dodd must kill "him." It is the killing of him that allows trans and nonbinary femmeness to emerge, as they are, in a sense, the analgesic mitigation of the ontological violence that is "he" and "Man." The funereal scene that comes after becomes a recalibrated funeral unlike those historically occurring in the long Black tradition of death. We do not mourn at this funeral; we celebrate the death for which this new funeral commences. We kill the violence imposed upon us, a killing that is, recalibrated too, nonviolent since it eradicates (gendered) violence. The last thing that readers must wonder is who is this "me" that shows up to the funeral and is left—curiously, left by itself—everything in the will? I am interested in "me": who they are, where they get their understanding of their gender, what they might call that gender, and to what end they enact their gender. It must feel lovely, "me," to have gotten outside, basking in the sun, having been given nothing that you did not give yourself.

(And a bonus final thought: what is written in the will?)

~

I meditate on dodd because their ultimate goal is "to rupture gender," actualized by "[being] called elusive" as they swing from "ungovernable vines," all of which might be to say the result of a gendered Black fugitivity. Their disinterest in boundaries

("*uninterested in boundaries*," dodd claims) presents a radically open opening of subjectivity, where the incessant critique of boundedness calls into question a variety of things; the "mad black, mad queer" maternal inculcation they had from their mother, a mother who both mothered and other-mothered dodd into the madness—which is to say, the deep commitment to radicalization—of Blackness and queerness; the refusal of the purported facticity of the body ("Even when I'm in my highest femme, I know I'm a black man to somebody on the street. So I think that our bodies fail us…"; yet dodd is unwavering that "I'm not a black man"), understanding that the body can be and is, and might become, something other than body, something fleshier; and the "gender work," as dodd calls it, that "Is alive. Is black. Is here. Is now."[37] This gives expression to a gendered Black fugitivity. Dodd articulates a way of living that escapes racialized and gendered boundaries, that finds freedom in being on the run, and understands it through the vector of nonnormative gender or the ways that Blackness is always wrapped up in troublesome and troubling notions of how gender is done. In short, gendered Black fugitivity is a consolidated analytic for being and becoming "blxck questions marks," for volunteering to be and become "gender terrorists."

[37] dodd, "The Impossiible Outside (Or, a Zumbi's Autopsy)"; jayy dodd, "Gender Non Conformity as Peak Blackness," *Jayy Dodd.* (blog), November 28, 2016, https://medium.com/@jayydodd/gender-non-conformity-as-peak-blackness-7834a901dc1d#.tydx3c5qe; Schwartz and dodd, "An Interview with Jayy Dodd"; jayy dodd, "A Poetic Beyond Resilience," *Poetry Foundation* (blog), November 20, 2017, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2017/11/a-poetic-beyond-resilience.

CHAPTER 2: *SPILL* AND BLACK FEMINIST FUGITIVITY

> If you stand still too long, they will put chains on you, so you want to keep moving….The true freedom in the slave narrative is at the point of deciding to escape and the journey north…the freedom that people experience is actually when they are on the road, in flight.
>
> —Harryette Mullen, "Interview with Harryette Mullen"

As a kind of mouthpiece for Black women poets, Harryette Mullen knows very well that "they will put chains on you," and poetry is an attempt to be released from those chains. This is an invitation for what one scholar calls her "fugitive run," but this running is to be located not in an achieved state of freedom but in the particular moment of "the point of [the slave's] *deciding to escape*" as she says in the epigraph above. Freedom and fugitivity remain "elusive, momentary, and a state of mind; it is discursive rather than related to the location of the body."[1] Freedom, in other words, occurs at the moment of escape. It becomes an on-the-run-ness, indexed by those who eluded capture in myriad ways. Such an understanding is characteristic of the Black feminism of Black women poets, their racial and gender specificity giving their poetry over to an inflected mode of escaping captivity. To inhabit this Black feminism becomes an elusive space.

This is what Alexis Pauline Gumbs takes up explicitly in her book *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Gumbs' *Spill* is certainly poetry, in the sense that it uses the

[1] Robin Tremblay-McGaw, "Enclosure and Run: The Fugitive Recyclopedia of Harryette Mullen's Writing," *MELUS; Oxford* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 73.

aesthetic and genric forms of what has come to be identifiable as poetry; but, too, it is not poetry insofar as *Spill* marks an attempt to dissolve categorical demarcations of content and aesthetics, of which poetry—or "Poetry"—is one. In other words, *Spill* overflows its own paginated and bounded borders, traveling outside itself and running from the confinement of genre, of textuality, of singular embodiment. It depicts scenes of Black women and girls running from racial and gendered violence, from "given ontologies," from the specter of death. Composed of poetic episodes, each poem arises from a line from Hortense Spillers' *Black, White, and In Color*. It is, then, a conversation—a dialogue, if you will—that inducts Spillers' Black feminist intellectual corpus in service of creating glimpses into another (kind of) world in which Black women can, finally, live.

Spill, written in a poetic open form or free verse, spills over itself. Having no consistent metrical pattern, inconsistent and occasional rhyme schemes, and lacking in regular structure, *Spill* is written with the making and breaking of narrative in mind. In this sense, we can say that it is not simply written by a Black woman but, more substantively, written through Black womanness, or even more specifically written through Black feminist fugitivity—*Spill* makes and breaks narrative in its fundamental poetic subjectivity as an instantiation of Black feminist fugitivity.

A self-described "queer Black troublemaker and Black feminist love evangelist," Gumbs sets as her task in *Spill* to depict "what every moment of my life is": it is "Freedom wanting to be free. Life wanting to be life. Love wanting to be love," she

describes in our interview.[2] Black feminist fugitivity, unapologetically gendered, is the spillage of historicity and sociality, as the various definitions of the title allude to, which Gumbs enumerates: to kill or destroy; to flow over the edge; to empty, a kind of fugitive *kenosis* that renounces the hegemonic chains of the omni-sovereign; to move out (escape) quickly; to reveal; to drop; to fall; an incendiary surface. These various definitions demand more room to explode that which curtails Black women's subjectivity, room to imagine otherwise. Gumbs's "scenes" demonstrate a specifically *Black feminist* fugitivity by way of both an urge to expand racialized and gendered lexicons of possibility, and an urge to abolish their categorization while simultaneously excavating these categories for their untrackable generativity. The former I want to theorize, via Gumbs, as an unfixation from tenets of race and gender as they confine one to replaying scripts imposed by normative forces. Urging for an expanded lexicon requires opening up, say, Blackness to those who may not even be understood as adhering to its historical requisites; it requires opening up gender to be vitiated by those who refuse its normative hold and seriously considering organizing our worlds around that expansion. The latter definition, in turn, finds expression in this particular passage from *Spill*: "on her back she can see everything. . . .she can see what the air isn't saying about stretch about need and the sky" (99). If air—that ubiquitous, life-sustaining resource—does not say all that can be said, "on her back" she can see its insides, the parts others don't see. While on her back, which signifies the marginalized position of abjection imposed upon Blackened and femmed subjects, she receives the "gift" of an acute sight that allows for entry into the things that

[2] Marquis Bey and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "A Spillage of the Fugitive Variety," *Social Text Online* (blog), March 17, 2017, https://socialtextjournal.org/a-spillage-of-the-fugitive-variety/.

can't be seen, the internal mechanisms at work. If fugitivity marks an escape from and subversion of normative modes of seeing and knowing, Gumbs' Black feminist fugitivity takes the Motenian "(under)privileged" position of Black women as a non-exclusionary angle that denotes the illegible edge poised to find how we "stretch" meaning and open things up so vastly that they explode the sky. In brief, her Black feminist fugitivity hitches to Kara Keeling's understanding of the Black femme, as it describes not an identifiable subject but a subjective posture, an illegible "figure that exists on the edge line, that is, the shoreline between the visible and the invisible, the thought and the unthought."[3]

Spill is thus a refusal of racialized and gendered normativities, which incites the possibility of other worlds and epistemologies. It is fuelled by a fugitive impetus: "love, it is freedom, it is older than me, it has not stopped, despite all of the physical and ideological structures we could mention."[4] The escape is constitutive of love, and love is constitutive of escape, as it is precisely because of the impetus of love—love for self, love for other, love for life, love *regardless*—that one must escape. Escape is the only solace, to whatever extent it can be called "solace," for the practice of fugitivity, as flight is a kind of freedom.

In this chapter I want to extend and particularize my argument in Chapter 1, to articulate what feminist fugitivity is and does and what kind(s) of life-worlds it engenders for others to inhabit. Through a close reading of *Spill*, I will show the radical call of Black feminist fugitivity and the ways it forces us to rethink the very modality of our

[3] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight the Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
[4] Bey and Gumbs, "A Spillage of the Fugitive Variety."

living and thinking. Via a meditation on the nuances of *Black feminist* fugitivity; unmappability, or untrackability; and waywardness this chapter seeks to give discursive flesh to the kind of world Gumbs writes toward.

"Let's go"

"apparatus tear shit up and

always.

……

some stateless folks

spurn the pleasure they are driven

to be and strive against."

—Fred Moten, "Fugitivity is immanent to the thing but is manifest transversally"

"[B]eing flight…" (103), she writes, which launches us into the terrain of fugitivity. Fred Moten, a student and votary of Hortense Spillers—who saturates *Spill*—echoes throughout Gumbs' work, indeed influencing her use of Black feminist fugitivity. He was, after all, one of her dissertation committee advisers and mentor. Blackness for Moten is a fugitive operation of "situated volatility," an "emergent poetics" affixed to a

penchant for escape. It is to claim a Blackness that preexists as an "appositional, run away" modality "expressive of an autopoetic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other."[5] In other words, Blackness is, as Moten is wont to say, a socio*poetic* force, one given to the jettisoning of grammatical dictates as in poetry. Blackness is a modality that is volatile, on the run, and fleeing, a flight that is the ground where we inhabit our subjectivity. Flight is the fugitive's phonic and haptic ensemble, located in that elusive flesh, improvising dissident movements—wayward movements—to the rapturous tune of lawlessness.

Flight pervades *Spill.* It's a running, an incessant escape un/sutured to Black women. This flight is Black and feminist. This specificity denotes a simultaneous immersion in what pervades Black women's lives and a disruption of racialized gender's coherence. This is one register on which to read how "flight and inhabitation" modify one another: it is a dance between racio-gendered specificity—what Black women do, what happens to them, what they think and do and live (inhabitation)—and an unfixation from such implicit essentialisms toward otherwise ways of being (un)raced and (un)gendered (flight).

> the walls want her. they are telling her something. the wood pattern on the floor is dancing. move. could her skin burn out the truth or would she need the release of stomach acid to let go what she never should have had to know. this chair is sharp and wrong and bruising. the ceiling is melting. get up. is her brain boiling up a remedy or a riddle. how many lightbulbs

[5] Moten, "Black Op," 1743, 1745. I reference also his talk "A Resistant Previousness" at the 2017 Sound of Resistance: Improving Agency Conference at Columbia University.

> does it take to change a black girl. what cumulative caloric steam of sugarcane stolen rice, new jewel cinnamon and nutmeg. what oracular fever. (40)

Bounded walls want her, want to confine her and limn her spillage. What they might be telling her is what she doesn't want to hear. Or what she's heard her whole life. But when she looks on the floor she sees another way to be that doesn't have to listen to the walls. Floors, after all, do not need walls to be floors. The floors she sees dance, "move." And then there is the question of skin. I am reading her skin that might burn out the truth as indexical. To clarify: to ask if her skin could burn out the truth "would she need the release of stomach acid to let go what she never should have had to know" alludes to the insufficiency of the (Black) skin's surface to hold the Blackness it has been made to consolidate. The question ponders, then, whether there is another substance more volatile that needs to be released in order to move toward truth. The thing she should have never had to know is, perhaps, the violence tied to Blackened and gendered corporeality because of its fugitive excess. Thus, Gumbs is raising a paraontological question of whether skin and the corporeal surfaces that have been made to hold inflections of fugitive force are adequate in doing so.

But then there is a shift toward liberation, the (glass) ceiling melts and ushers in a posture of "get up." From the historical violences that have betided Black women (racio-gendered specificity) we move toward the melting of those circumscriptions, toward "get[ting] up." Freedom takes on the texture of an enigmatic, unanticipatory, feverishness *both* by way and in excess of—or in excess of precisely by way of—"her," "a black girl."

This all conditions the enigmatic "boiling up," caloric steam," "oracular fever," which strike one as modes of flight. It is a conditioning specificity that engenders the transmogrification of that specificity into a general Black feminist fugitivity.

Only a page before the above passage Gumbs highlights Harriet Tubman. She opens a poem, introduced by the words "*for Harriet Tubman*," with a radical singularity ("this can never be equal to this") and tallies monotonous practices given to the enslaved. But it ends in a flourish. She writes: "so she renamed herself after her mother, left her dirtbag husband, looked up at her north star god and said 'let's go'" (39). Tubman's flight is tied to the claiming of her mother and the rebuking of that masculine instantiation of the patriarchal ceremony: the husband. Flight in this way has a distinctly gendered texture; indeed, her fugitive flight is enabled by the gendered decisions to rename herself by way of the mother and refuse patriarchal masculinity. The "let's go" is particularly of note, as it, on my reading, is polysemous. It marks a demand to move. "Let's go" beckons one's subjectivity to become full of motion, to engender their subjectivity through a go-ness that in a sense interpellates, or rather inaugurates, that subjectivity. Too, though, "let's go" can be broken down into a "let *us* go." Expansion of the contraction reveals another intention: it is a demand to free "us," an undetermined demographic inclusive of which is, perhaps, all those who wish to engender their subjectivity through go-ness. It is a liberatory call for the cessation of captivity from external chains—a demand, as it were, for a validation of fugitive subjectivity, via Tubman.

Such a flight, too, is indexed to joy. I understand Gumbs importantly intervening in historical accounts of the less statistical occurrence of enslaved women running away and more contemporary accounts of Black women understood as being rooted in a

particular place because of a responsibility to mitigate movement in the interest of caring for children. Women's, girls', and daughters' flight are rewound around joy, around the smile. "[W]hen her youngest daughter finally escaped she smiled to herself. she knew" (38), knew that maybe the escaping is the condition of possibility for her smiling. We might smile only when we successfully, though momentarily, escape. Those Black women who bear the "hieroglyphics and calligraphies of neglect" (82), constituted through such inaugurative violence and terror, need the joy of the smile. That is, Gumbs might argue, and I am confident in this, why escape is affixed to smiling joyousness: it is the gesture around which another kind of subjectivity—a Black and feminist subjectivity—is woven. If the nexus of Black and woman is that Hartmanian unredressed injury, redressing that injury leads to healing, and in healing we find joy. We smile once we don't hurt so much anymore. It all hinges on escape, which is then to say freedom. So what is being theorized by way of Gumbs is another way to be that is gotten to via joyous escape; another way to be is, quite simply, to be free.

But as Gumbs said in our interview, "The escaping isn't easy." And damn is she right. In the pursuit of the joy that will lead to the Black feminist fugitive life one seeks, they will come for you, as they have been doing this whole time. It is true that "when she escaped she was fully free" (43), but that freeness amounts to an illegibility that, while the aim of the one in fugitive flight, invites various means of capture. We, and Gumbs too, already know from Spillers that not everyone knows our name. So they create them as a way to make legible the illegible, as a way to capture the runaway: "her nickname changed to nutcase. no-name. that crazy bitch." (43). The nutcase, the crazy bitch, the no-named are all demonstrations of the ways that Black women break narratives. Black

women's subjectivity poses an imminent threat to the order of hegemony, so the aforementioned names are attempts to nonconsensually interpellate their unruliness into negative foils for hegemonic order. Language gets broken when trying to ensnare Black women, and the nutcase, for example, names not the illegible being onto which it tries to attach itself—indeed, the being it tries to inaugurate into a knowable (pathologized) subjectivity—but the event of language disintegrating. This is the Black and trans, the radically Black feminist, effect of Black women's anagrammaticalizing (per Christina Sharpe) of language that tries to make sense of volatility. That language is the manifestation of untrackability—like, yo, the names they're coming up with are showing us, clear as day, that they can't keep up, that they can't track that which runs so fast it doesn't leave tracks. What they're serving is nutritionally evacuated. Don't consume it. So "drop the spoon, girl. run" (40).

Gumbs' notion of revolutionary mothering is a crystallized articulation of her Black feminist poetics and demonstrates her reworking of gender around an untrackable, uncategorical praxis, which I speak to more in the next section. Mothering concerns the *work* of nurturing and is a performativity that can be taken up by anyone who commits to working that love. Gumbs shows that mothering is done by immigrant nannies, or by house mothers in underground ball culture, and a centrifugal array of many-gendered other-mothers. "Mother," thus, gets retooled as less a gendered identity "and more as a possible action, a technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labor are teaching us right now."[6] As this manifests in *Spill*, "she" takes on a

[6] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "M/Other Ourselves: A Black Queer Feminist Genealogy for Radical Mothering," in *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, ed. Alexis

meaning that is not exclusively what we understand as a being bearing the symbolic integrity of the category of woman. She is not, strictly speaking, a feminine-woman-female because "she is going to have a sun. not gender but starburst…" (95). This is not about stultified understandings of gender but about bursting categories. We give birth to suns not sons, to transitive and dispersive differentiations not genders. And Gumbs describes the sun elsewhere as "that renegade, that open threat" (58), so birthing this gives what was formerly understood as binaristic gender over to a renegade openness. We give birth to, we mother (as verb), renegade openness now in lieu of gender: this transgression of the gender binary, a fugitive reworking and abolition of hegemonic gender, is precisely what is meant by *Black feminist* fugitivity.

Mothering precedes and exceeds "women," too excessive for such a constricting category. The reconceptualization of motherhood as mothering, particularly for Black women, stems from the Black mother being a threat that precedes its pathologizing narrative, reminding us of a queer possibility that the narrative of pathology struggles to foreclose. Black mothering works childcare, refusing singular ownership of children, fixed identity, biological determinism and confinement, and heteronormativity. As Black feminist nurturance, mothering arises in the refusal to reproduce possessive ownership (how can fugitives own locatable property when they are constantly, manically nomadic?) and reimagines a sociality in which normative ownership is disintegrated.

But how, specifically, is gender wrapped in flight? Fugitive flight in Gumbs' corpus inflects its Black femme iterations because the one who is "being flight" is "she," the pronounial, metonymic Black woman. It is crucial that we understand how the nexus

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Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 22–23.

of Black and woman constitutes a queerness by way of contesting and reworking gender categorization. The process of gendering, or more specifically the subjects that gender attempts to interpellate, is always given to leaking, as subjects always escape being totally captured by the process, always bearing some mark of refusing full immersion—the Achilles heel of never completed gendering. But Black women, historically, are the locus of *being* the Achilles heel, their gendered subjectivation itself inaugurated by inversion, contestation, contradiction, and violation. As Saidiya Hartman argues, the gender category Black women un/occupy is that of "unredressed injury," a subject-formation begat by "the erasure or disavowal of sexual violence" which "engender[s] black femaleness."[7] Black women's gender, then, arises via a multivalent confluence of contradictory gendered expectations and impositions, but is also, Hartman might say primarily, the demonstrable site of sexual transgression and violence. On these grounds Black women constitute and manifest queerness, a queered gender category itself because of their constitutive transgression. Gender categorization vitiates itself when trying to affix itself to Black women, thus I am mining this dynamic to understand how Black women's subjectivity can act as a fertile site for deconstructive inhabitation. That is, if gender can be said to be an imposed narrative, and if indeed "black women…break narrative," as Gumbs writes, then Black women *break gender*. They transgress the purportedly untransgressable (naturalized) transgression of the constitutive violence of gendering by virtue of mobilizing a subjectivity, thus creating a space of habitability in uninhabitability.

[7] Saidiya V. Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 556, https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.1996.0050.

In this space Gumbs is thinking deeply about a different way to do and be gender. She is breaking that narrative to open it up and dig around inside it, discard things, add some seasoning and sauces, or scrap it entirely. But it starts with a mirror, or at least "she thought it was a mirror" (11). Women's literary history, and trans literary and cultural discourses too, have lengthy lineages of looking into mirrors. Mirrors are often understood as objective reflective surfaces that occasion one's assessment of themselves, whether that self is erased or obscured or in flux or a combination of the three. The mirror, in a world that throws your image around making it difficult to see it for what it is, has long been believed to be the unmediated mediator of you. But even when we look at, or think we are looking at, a mirror there is still the omnipresent possibility of seeing something else, or of misreading the mirror itself even when "it had always been a mirror" (11). We might look and something will be off, something might be in the mirror "that wasn't back here." Like "that woman" (11). That woman in the mirror may be no woman at all; she may not be the being that is back here looking, because, Gumbs inscribes, this is another woman. No really, another kind of woman. This is a woman whose "eyes [are] on fire, smile almost inviting." And then it is asked: "what *is* she doing with my only face?" (11). How can another woman, who is you looking into a mirror, be not-you but have the only face you've got? Well, when that other woman is the woman that might be said to emerge when one's gendered subjectivity is altered, opened, while not changing a thing. What this early section of *Spill* is offering readers is the possibility—and it is a radically open one, so non-presumptuous it cannot even know when it arrives—of a kind of feminist fugitive flight without moving, Morrison's flight without leaving the ground. It's that critical "part" that Gumbs says "doesn't leave the

ground, slides under…" (7). This is an/other woman that is the same woman but is not a woman.

It might be that Gumbs' experimentalizing of gender here by way of Blackness's and womanness's nexus is the beautiful mess that "spills" out when breaking and bending gender, when making gender do what it thought it couldn't/wasn't supposed to do. This other woman, then, is "split open like achilles" and her (their? its?) "body" cannot be said to properly be a body. This body that this other woman has is "only pores, only wet spaces, vessel, opening" (15). What is an opened, porous body when body-ness, properly speaking, is a closed entity? This uncertainty is reflected in the text, Gumbs writing "was she possible?…was she real?" (15), leaving the questions open. We are left with something strange; we are left with Gumbs' articulation of what gender *might* be: "the new female being, first of her kind, couldn't believe herself" (95). She is unbelievable. And that's the kind of gender that might be her salvation. When all the baggage, all the symbolics predicated on cisness and whiteness and maleness, are breached we emerge into something else. Spillers might say we emerge into flesh, others might say we emerge into a queer utopia. But for Gumbs, this new female being that indexes the categorical critical analysis that is Blackness, the gender vitiating penchant that is transness, is perhaps a term for a subjectivity that arises from engaging Black feminist fugitivity.

In *Spill*, Blackness can be read as the precipitating motivation to run. This is the engendering force that gives itself over to the various scenes of the text. Late in the text a kind of lawless anoriginality emerges:

> 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. (131)

"That" can be read as a that-ness. It is the materialization of distinct things, a baseline raw materiality for all existent things. Gumbs' (Black female) "i" precedes it, which marks it as what Nathaniel Mackey might call an insistent previousness that is excessive of definitive thingness.[8] Too, it notably precedes the genesis of Blackness as abjection; Blackness, here, is not "born…when you wake up in fear" nor is it created at precisely the moment when one needs a negative foil in order to assert their superiority. Blackness, in short, is "before that." The "i" of the text, intentionally lowercased to move away from individualistic modes of subjectivity toward more coalitional ones, exerts the rhythm that engenders movement, since it is "the drumbeat that dramatizes the heart" (131). Not the beating heart but the drumbeat that ignites it. *Structure* of bone, *contour* of clay, *paradigm* of play: these are all missing a "the" that would fix the "i" in definitive shape and materiality. The absence of a "the" is a telling one because bone, clay, and play are the differentiated existents that come into being as structures or contours or paradigms by

[8] Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1997).

an open dispersal, by a rhythmic drumbeat. To put it simply, not placing a definite article before structure or contour or play indexes that there is an indefinite, intangible, anoriginal something that forcefully propels structures and contours. It's the undifferentiated force from which differentiations like structure, contour, and play stem. A vast space and openness whose fugitivity comes from its refusal to close.

Too, the anaphoric repetition of "i am" recalls political speeches. Yes and no: speeches made by politicians, sure, but more interestingly speech that is political; political speech acts. The "i am" is a performative speech act that takes on a political valence by way of its reinventive—its Spillersian "logological refashioning"—attempt to inaugurate another kind of subjectivity in excess of what has been imposed. "i am…i am…i am…" moves toward speaking oneself into a different kind of self that preexists the given ontology. Thus, when this Black feminist subjectivity is made to be stood in for by the people who are said to be Black and woman, it remains that this skin, a skin always indexed by Gumbs' "her," "was space space space space space" (48). Such a subjectivity is a conceptual one that hinges on "The disruption of race[-and gender]-biopolitics," as one scholar put it in thinking about Gumbs alongside others like Moten and Harney, James Bliss, Katherine McKittrick, and José Muñoz, and "requires a seizure of the biopolitical arsenal, and a queering of the future through decolonial, abolitionist, and fugitive practices…to undo the grammar that binds us to a narrowly defined human future."[9] Fugitive Black feminism becomes less an epidermal or gender descriptor

[9] Sara Smith and Pavithra Vasudevan, "Race, Biopolitics, and the Future: Introduction to the Special Section," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 216–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817699494; see also Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996" (Ph.D., Duke University, 2010), 61, 1,

located in measurements of sufficient melanin or codified sex characteristics and becomes more a critical, subversive, fugitive praxis. Black feminism is what holds us together in coalitional solidarity, in conspiratorial anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist, anti-imperialist communion, not particular ontologized identities. This hold is an intention, a willful act that rhizomatically affiliates itself with others on political grounds in excess of normative subjectivities. Exceeding these normative subjectivities is fundamentally a pursuit of liveable life otherwise.

And who is seeking this life? What kind of subject pursues this other kind of life, making it another kind of subject? Gumbs theorizes, succinctly, a specific Black feminist fugitive gesture of subjectivity. Hers is an alternative interpellative call, the, as she writes, "you had me at hell no" (105). If Louis Althusser offers interpellation as the manner through which subjects come into existence as subjects, Gumbs fashions a critique by way of a refusal. Such is her fugitivity, and notably the feminist fugitivity at the fundament of an otherwise subject formation. Interpellation in the traditional sense

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http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/docview/250765331/abstract/F3047F1BA54D48F6PQ/1. This can also be linked to her mentors Cheryl Clarke, June Jordan, and Barbara Smith, as Gumbs seems to extend their deployable and capacious understanding of lesbianism, bisexuality, and Blackness. In "New Notes on Lesbianism," Clarke writes that "I call myself 'Black,' too, because Black is my perspective, my aesthetic, my politics, my vision, my sanity." Blackness becomes something that exceeds the epidermis, not to its exclusion but to its radical recalibration and opening. Blackness is dispersed into perspective (a way of seeing and reading) and politics (a way of relating to power). Or June Jordan's use of bisexuality as a prefigurative "queerness" meaning not a certain sexuality but "a critical relationship to existing sexual and social norms." (Cathy Cohen's queerness bears strong resonances here too.) Clarke's lesbianism, too, is imbricated with her understanding of Blackness. Lesbianism operates similarly, Clarke thinking with Smith's definition of lesbian as an interruptive "negation of identity." In Gumbs' reading of Roderick Ferguson (who is himself reading Smith's reading of Toni Morrison), she writes that "lesbian" is "a way to interrupt the reproduction of identity…[that] trouble[s] the process of identification itself," and "a particular critical practice [that] could disrupt the reproductive narrative of patriarchal family providing, in Morrison's words, adopted by Ferguson 'something else to be.'"

can be thought of as the romantic cliché upon which Gumbs is Signifyin(g): you had me at hello. The traditional call to subjectivity—interpellation—is the being "had" at the "hey you," the "hello." It only takes a space and an additional letter for Gumbs to shift this. "You had me at hell no" reconfigures how one inaugurates themselves by way of and intimately through a quotidian refusal. It is the refusal of interpellation, the refusal to be insofar as being is predicated on normative, legible norms of recognition. The inaugural call here is refused and traded in, as it were, for an inauguration through refusal, through fugitivity.

The "me" that is "had" is constituted through a "hell no," which begs the question of what a hell-no-subjectivity might mean. At the very least, it is the "her" and the "she" throughout the text that is metonymically indexical of Gumbs' Black feminist fugitivity. One continues to ask while reading *Spill*: who *is* "she"? It is my contention that "she" is the name Gumbs uses as proxy for, or rather volatile nominative nexus of, the one that "know[s] not what you are" (71) and the one who "was inventing a language. herself" (20). The former is in fact what L.H. Stallings calls the "trickster trope" Black women use to exceed regulative norms, as claiming the "I'm not what you say I am," Stallings says, is a way that Black women "unname" themselves in order "to deny oppressive regimes."[10] In other words, knowing not what one is, here the existential habitus of Black women, is the condition for being and becoming something else. It is a kind of trans encounter of the imposition of racio-gendered ontology: rather than being given an ontology and simply wanting the "other" one, this more fundamentally refuses to concede

[10] LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*, Black Performance and Cultural Criticism (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 37.

to the "gendered" terms, opting out and suspending oneself, holding ontological description in abeyance *as* one's subjectivity—a suspended, always incomplete subjectivity; radically open to the otherwise, the "not what you"—or anyone—"are." The latter quote from Gumbs on inventing a language of/as "herself," advances Spillers' claim that Black women, historically, serve as the invented necessity for the West as the negative foil for the nation's superiority. "Herself" becomes the new, unknown thing that Black women might invent themselves out toward. Interesting terminology, "out toward," rather than into or as. I want to maintain the unknowability, the unsettledness, of this invented "herself." The point is to insist on the invention without the presumption of knowing what the invented is, knowing who "herself" is.

Black feminism is a task: to love, to do and undo, cause discomfort, to live-despite, to dwell with the breakers and saboteurs. A Black feminist fugitive subjectivity is open and opening, inhabitable by all who commit to the radical task of doing and thinking its inhabitability; open is Black feminism to radical women of Color who are not epidermally Black, to anti-racist epidermally white feminists, to cis and trans men committed to rendering the destruction of patriarchy's tentacles—because it inherits the Combahee River Collective's refusal of all "biological determinism" that says one's identification begins and ends at any asocial, biological characteristic. Black feminism holds as "sacred" a "trans-inclusive non-exclusive understanding and practice of womanhood" (to be a woman is indeed a practice), "challeng[es] woman as a category, [and] chang[es] the meaning of woman as a category," as well as questions Blackness as an epidermal measurement, recognizing that these categories as endowments of a physical body are insufficient, exclusionary, and will, in a liberatory world, ultimately be

discarded.[11] When we conspire together and insistently disrupt the consolidating powers of normativity (gender and racial especially) with Black feminist force we inhabit a milieu with one another, and it is in this Black feminist milieu that we become-together: become queer, become trans, become Black, become fugitive. And that's who we be when we do that work.

"She no longer needs the ground"

> "Which is, what is it like in the interstitial spaces where you fall between everyone who has a name, a category, a sponsor, an agenda, spokespersons, people looking out for them—but you don't have anybody. That's your situation."
>
> —Hortense Spillers, "'Whatcha Gonna Do?': Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book'"

When Gumbs says that "she no longer needs the ground," lying between the statement is what I understand as an unmappability, or untrackability, and a fugitive transness. This section, then, will tease these out, articulating how Black feminist fugitivity describes an inability to track and map gendered expressions.

[11] Check out Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Be: Black Feminism and Embodiment (Part 3 of Can Black Feminism Be Quantified)," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), March 22, 2012, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/03/we-be-black-feminism-and-embodiment-part-3-of-can-black-feminism-be-quantified/; and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "One Thing: Toni Cade Bambara in the Speaking Everyday," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), November 23, 2014, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/11/well-being-of-the-community/.

Readers of *Spill* are first greeted, as with most books, by the cover. The image on the cover of *Spill* depicts Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle's *Now There Are Three Ways to Get This Done: Your Way, Their Way or My Way* (2014). It shows a figure spewing a map from one of its mouths. It is uncertain how many faces the figure has (two, perhaps three?); it is uncertain how many breasts the figure has (three, maybe four; or more, as it is uncertain whether the things atop the figure's heads are breasts); it is uncertain what gender the figure is; it is uncertain what this figure looks like below its breasts, as the rest of the figure is obscured by blackened scribble. The figure, quite simply, spills all over the place. The map spewing from the figure's mouth is distorted and gestures toward mappability writ large. It becomes incumbent upon us to note our inability to "map" the figure as "woman" or even human, and, too, our inability to track where the figure begins and ends, or where the map leads/what it depicts. We have no metric, no ground by which to anchor our encounter with the image. So if Sylvia Wynter warned us again mistaking the map for the territory, the cover of *Spill* alerts us to how the scripts we receive for interpreting something are always spilled over by the territory those scripts, as maps, attempt to bind.

With this, Black feminism becomes a way to highlight the generative heft of being and doing unmappability. Having no ground on which to stand marks the beginning of a more just sociality. The Black feminism poetically inscribed in *Spill* is in fact an excribing, a delinking of the map that is "The Black Woman" from perhaps not even Black women—as if we can know what this nexus entails—but Black feminism itself as a mode of thinking and living and doing. This excription, this escape, then, is constitutive of Black feminism. By way of the cover art, *Spill* is an interrogative posture toward

believing the maps of racialized gender. It is a skeptical eye toward racialized gender's unfettered hold on us. The text demands its refashioning, expansion, and abolition.

All the ways society tries to catch Black women in legibility are suspect. Even when it is said that Black women are seen or known, it remains that "they could barely see her" (43). Why? Because there is an unrepresentability present, an inability to map the nexus of Black and woman because that nexus fractures the optics and rubrics at our disposal to corral legible subjectivity. We have, societally, made various attempts to reign that nexus in, and Gumbs describes these attempts: from gendered interpellations while fetuses are still in the womb ("her name inexorable in the mouths of the barely knowing, received right when her mama started showing") to various accusations of standoffishness ("surly," "chunky," "clunky") to being the negative foil that buttresses white and cis and male superiority ("she was who they imagined they needed her to be") (43). Emergence from all of this, though, means that "she was fully free." The emergence from the aforementioned thinking characterizes full freedom, and that emergence, once taken up, would then shroud her ontology in emergent escape because, Gumbs pens, "that's how she would always be" (43).

Toward the end of *Spill* when Gumbs is reaching a sort of crescendo, she pens a striking passage that characterizes unmappability via tilting. She writes,

> and the townships who had lost their tilters questioned their own straightness, shaped themselves to questions, curved in other ways. they didn't think to wish that their crooked fools had stayed, they just looked up to the sky and asked and listened to the ground and didn't realize that

> their angles grew acutely towards the sound of walking sideways and they found themselves leaving town down the same routes that had erstwhile always led them home. they roamed out of earshot of the talking drums and bells that had forever held them well and they found music that made them doubt and made them jump and tilt and shout. they found each other. (143)

The passage is inspired by a fragment in Spillers's "Formalism Comes to Harlem": "an element of radical waywardness." Tilting serves as an analytic term for a waywardness and inability to be tracked, which then becomes a desirable modality of living. The townships—bounded and bureaucratic confinements subject to laws—began questioning the utility of straightness once the tilters left. A posture of questioning arises when met with tiltedness. It came to pass that looking to the sky or the ground would not deliver them, but tiltedness, untrackability, was the non-direction in which they began to grow because only there might a kind of salvation be found. Such luscious language, "the sound of walking sideways," depicting a non-material ambulation toward unboundedness which lies outside of the township. They found new ways to use the roads; they roamed outside the reach of aural rubrics, rubrics that kept them still. The tilting made them move, "jump," and they found another way to be-with, finding each other in their common tiltedness.

So what happens when one of "them" shows up, when Gumbs' "she" shows up? We know not what to do with her when she arrives, if she ever does; we don't even know sometimes that she has arrived, or that she was expected (spoiler: she wasn't), or that she

knew how to get here, or that she existed. She defies trackability. We ask, so very often, "what is she doing here?" (14) because we had no way of planning for her arrival. She becomes an unwanted guest who has crashed the party—so she bears a referential relationship to jayy dodd from the previous chapter—and now we don't know what to do with her. Good. That is what is wanted, what is aimed for: the recalibration of the terms and conditions of the social(ity) contract to the point where we don't know what, or how, to move on now that she is here (or now that we see that she has always been here, has been the reason we were here). We ask, so very often, "how did you get here?" (71) because we were not privy to the clandestine and subterranean highways and unbeaten paths she used. She has revealed that the paths we thought existed were not the only ones, not by far. Her movement indexes other ways to move that we didn't know of, because we defined movement on those other paths, not knowing that people could move in other ways. And how was she able to move that way? Well, by "the part of her that doesn't know how to walk with the full sensation of the particles on the floor" (7). "She" is a fundamental transgression. But more, she does not know how to accept even the fundaments of physics: the materiality of particles that make up the solidity of he floor. And what enables her transgression of physics axioms is a "part of her," implying that she is made up of something, some other kind of subjectivity that bypasses what we have long understood as materiality. She, in other words, underwent a reconfiguration of subjectivity; she might be said to exude a transed subjectivity that does not abide normative rules of physics and science writ large. She walks, she *moves*, via other means that are not (just) scientific particles in the floor, and that movement is engendered by

some unknown part of her subjectivity. That node of subjectivity is a transed subjectivity, the onset of an otherwise way of being.

The final move I want to make in this section is to meditate on how Gumbs' text makes me think about how maps always attempt to place subjectivity in a particular location and temporality, and thus a Black feminist fugitivity must refuse such attempts. Inherent to this, I want to assert, is a fundamental transness that refuses this locatedness. To this end, Nael Bhanji is useful in his disdain for settling into an identifiable location, what he calls "homing desires." Bhanji's essay "Trans/scriptions: Homing Desires, (Trans)sexual Citizenship and Racialized Bodies" takes up the question of "home" as it has been deployed in trans theory and casts it in a more critical light, colored by his own identity as, on his account, an East Indian and Arab immigrant trans man of the diaspora. Finding problematic the production and uncritiqued normalization of whiteness and Anglophone bias in trans theories of home, Bhanji interrogates the very utility, shape, and location of home for trans subjects. To what "home," Bhanji asks, does the trajectory of transition lead, particularly for the trans subject who is already diasporic, already in liminality, already (and always) in transgressive motion? Gumbs's yearning for a new kind of female being who is illegible to extant maps is, in Bhanji's terms, what transness must do—refuse the desire for a home in legible situatedness.

Bhanji's framework problematizes unacknowledged "homing desires," desires for home, within trans theory. In other words, he argues, it is critical to attend to the assumptions undergirding how "home" is conceptualized, which too often results in a romanticized edifice of constancy and normative safety. There is a pressure to pass and "arrive" at a destination in trans communities, Bhanji asserts. Often emphasized is not the

transition but the destination, the getting to a kind of bodily, gendered "home." In his own words, the pressure to get to one's destination as quickly and seamlessly as possible, to zoom "from transgressive to trans*fixed* results in the transsexual forever rushing onwards to find the space beyond, 'the promise of *home* on the other side.'"[12] Furthermore, simmering just beneath this "politics of home" for trans subjects is the urge for normality and to belong, without complication or trouble, to a normative framework. This urge for normativity is a move away from fugitivity, and seeks to subvert transness via its quest for the normative, its quest to be found on a map. Trans homecoming, then, is marked for Bhanji as a fantasy. "Trans" functions necessarily for Bhanji not merely as movement across a particular schism but also evokes the transgression, transmogrification, and transmutation of norms. Trans by necessity must trouble and destabilize fixed location; or, in other words, it must disarticulate the operative assumptions of fixity in conversations surrounding space and place.

Bhanji is describing fugitive dreams, dreams of autonomy, not nationalistic territory. A transgressive, potentially dangerous stateless non/state; an elsewhere that we might inhabit. Those refusing to be mapped and tracked yearn for another way to be and become something that has not yet been said to be possible. They are something else because they yearn "for another life" (96), a life that is not this and perhaps cannot be held by what we already know of ourselves. Those who practice living that other life destabilize the tenets of existence inasmuch as they are unrecognizable, living elsewhere under different terms. They have uncontainable "wilding bod[ies]" (57) which index other ways to live in this flesh. Wilding bodies: imperfect names for untrackable, tilted

[12] Bhanji, 515. Emphasis in original.

subjects. When living otherwise, one inevitably engages in illegible, disruptive acts of sabotage to normative frameworks. One becomes, ontologically, a problem; one breaks narrative, yearns for abolition, vitiates binaries, and rests their head on the "infinite infinite through" (117). Inhabiting this infinite through causes trouble because it refuses complacency and seeks to destroy complacency's normative reach.

"Prismatic possibilities"

> "But his [*sic*] imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly
> from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries,
> leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric…"
>
> —Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

> "A light A thousand watts
> Bright and also blinding
> And saw my brothers cloddish
> And me destined to be
> Wayward"
>
> —Alice Walker, "Who Became Someone Overheard"

In the context of pervasive surveillance, which takes the form of literal biometric regulatory regimes as well as metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, historical, documentary, interpersonal, and social mechanisms, Black feminist fugitivity demands

that "no…frame could contain her" (29), because Black feminism's historical (though not only) archetype, Black women, exceed the axioms of representation and exceed full capture within a frame. Black women, or rather, more specifically, fugitive Black feminism, cannot be fixed in representation; it refuses being cordoned, being framed, because it "def[ies] and escape[s] all our elaborations."[13] Fundamentally transformative, Black feminist fugitivity enacts a perpetual tilted being-and-becoming-in-the-world. This movement references Sarah Jane Cervenak's "black movement" because it is "*read* as disruptive physicality," but not merely because in its corporeality it disrupts; additionally, it is disruptive *of* physicality *qua* physicality. This disruption of/as physicality indexes what Cervenak calls a wandering, a response to the logics of "appropriate public (read: visible) kinesis" and a pervasive "antiwandering ethos targeted particularly at the nonnormative"—the Black, the feminist, the trans, the fugitive. To wander, or to be wayward as I'll express throughout this section, is "the errancy of queerness and the queerness of errancy"; it is "Unruly bodies. Unruly desires."[14]

Thinking with Cervenak's wandering, I want to posit waywardness as a synonymic supplementation by way of Gumbs' work. Waywardness serves as a disorienting way of moving throughout the world, a critical ambulatory posture that provides insight through wandering into the uncharted and epistemologically rich terrains, the undisclosed locations. Waywardness is a disposition to gainsay the proper and rational, to enact intractability through self-will (or -determination), to disobey refractorily. Gumbs' metonymic "she" is "sharp refracted everything" (29), a parrying

[13] Bey and Gumbs, "A Spillage of the Fugitive Variety."
[14] See Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 5–6, 26.

disposition that causes impositions and forces of power to change course, fail at their task, get out of her face. Too, "she" offers "prismatic possibilities" (101), multi-layered and –faceted potentialities indicative of the titular magic of that famous hashtag for Black girls. They can't contain or capture her; she refracts as if a prism of diffusive possibilities. She is wayward. Waywardness is a practice of refusal, always a (Black) queer, wanderlust nonnormativity, sutured to a failure (that is not a failure) of maintaining the integrity of (hetero)normativity and gender conformity. It lives in a domain of a social otherwise, what Saidiya Hartman calls a "heterotopia of the wayward," an embrace of the disorder and anarchy attributed particularly and perhaps archetypically to Black girls; a form of being in the world, marked by negating abjection and exceeding it.[15] Such a waywardness is epitomized by Black woman subjectivity; such a waywardness is epitomized by those who choose to enact, or have enacted upon them, Black feminist fugitivity; such a waywardness is epitomized by Gumbs' "she" who punctuates "the groove and hands of god herself" and "moves and moves and moves." Why, "some would even say she is slick" (145). The Black femme reverberates. Gumbs' "other mothers" reverberate. My grandmother reverberates, with her "She think she slick!" Well, Grandma, she *know* she slick.

The book's dedication reads, to "Black women who make and break narrative." At the outset, not only do Black women cast a presence over the text but a disruptive and wayward Black woman presence. Black women fracture the linearity of normative narratives. They sabotage, that Black feminist practice of life and living, of "disruption,

[15] The latter half of this paragraph draws from Saidiya Hartman's presentation, which itself is an excerpt from her forthcoming book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. (Saidiya Hartman, "Saidiya Hartman Reading from WAYWARD LIVES" (Black Queer Ontologies, Princeton, New Jersey, October 24, 2015), https://vimeo.com/144305401.)

rupture, and imagined futures."[16] Such a claim necessitates, at least in part, the troubling of all kinds of narrative. So certainly the narrative form of *Spill* in many ways defies typical linear storylines; but, too, what the poetic "scenes" of *Spill* also produce is a troubling of racial and gendered narratives, particularly for Black women. Black women (re)make and break these racial and gender narratives and produce other ways of coming into subjectivity that are not predicated on such frameworks. Immersion in the Black feminist subjectivity of Black women is to inhabit another racialized and gendered world in the world, a Black feminist *trans*versal world begotten through the possibility Black women engender. A wayward movement across and beyond imposed boundaries of racialized gender marks how Gumbs is inscribing the iterations of "she" throughout the text. Her scenes are glimpses of what life might become if we listen to the fugitive whispers begotten by Black feminism and Black women. If we, that is, listen to how their waywardness teaches us another mode of living life, a waywardness that Saidiya Hartman beautifully articulates: "To inhabit the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable, to be deeply aware of the gulf between where you stayed and how you might live. Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police."[17] That this is given to us in *Spill* by Black women, Black feminism's fugitive scenes are angles of vision into *that*.

It is also the very pages that follow the dedication to the narrative-making and -breaking Black women that speak to a kind of waywardness as well. Gumbs writes:

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[16] Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 200.

[17] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, First edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 227.

the wide-eyed women the walking women the worst

the water washes the war wrung women

the wailers the whistle the first

the water waists of the undrowned women

the hope floats women the strong…

the fast-ass women the fall-in-love women the freaks

the fire is full of the all-out women

the walk-out women the sweet

the fire is finding the love-lost women

the worth-it women the ones

fire is blazing the brash blues women

the black-eyed women…

our work here is not done

These women, undoubtedly these Black women, inflect a multiplicity of Blackness, inflect a multiplicitous gendered Blackness. The alliterative /w/ sound brushes through one's lips, puffs of air escaping, whooshing on as miniature instances of that escaped air from the vestibule of one's mouth. The aestheticization of these brief puffs of air used to adorn the polyvocality of Black women escape the body but engender the flesh, necessitating fugitive flight. All of these women—fast-ass, wailing, undrowned, wide-

eyed, walk-out—are nodal points of how multivalent the very category is, and thus offer a profound critique of its meaning. Black women have historically set as their proto-Black feminist task to interrogate the capacity of the category "woman," and that this task has continued into 2016 (and no doubt long after the publication of *Spill*) shows that, indeed, our work here is not done. But the descriptions of these women, too, are descriptions that all attest to a kind of fugitive posture: women who walk, and walk-*out*, perhaps in protest of domestic confinement or in general protest of gendered carceral logics; women who wail and whistle, making noise and vocally flouting decorum; women who hope, perhaps hope fugitively (as I'll discuss in Chapter 4), despite historical conscriptions of their liveability; women who go undrowned, refusing to go gentle into that oceanic abyss of death; women who are fast, who demonstrate, in other words, sexual autonomy; women who are brash, caustic, fire-tongued. The polyvalent, repeated (Black) women of this opening cascade of what might be a Black-girl-magic augur of the feminist fugitivity to come indexes a reiterative, incantatory chant that calls into being the constitutivity of fugitivity, Blackness, and feminism. All of this operates, textually, in a non-space, an unlocatable and unfixing fugitive space because it is *unpaginated*. There is no page number for this section, no way to cite it, maybe because it plunges outside the historical ledgers of legibility, maybe because pagination cannot hold these women, maybe because these fugitive enactments cannot be located. The refusal of pagedness implies a non-linear, wayward lineage, an unlocatable and dislocated ante-origin that is an anarchic dispersal rather than a singular origin from which each page progressively reveals more through a teleologic. These fugitive Black women were never meant to survive, so they escape being fixed by numerics.

This is a bold display of waywardness. The Black feminist fugitive is indeed "destined to be / Wayward," as Walker says. Gumbs illustrates waywardness as a life practice. It is a practice that Black feminists inherit. To imagine that "*i be that walk a piece of the way home wayward woman*" (116; emphasis in original) is to inhabit a wayward lineage. Not a lineage fixed to straightforward causation or linear historical trajectory with identifiable foremothers but an inherited lineage from the disparate tremors of the underside of history. The "i" of the declaration refuses the comfort and stasis of home, as she only walks *a piece* of the way home, resting in the between, on the unstable and ebbing and flowing shorelines, in the transgressive interstitial and refusing the "homing desires" Bhanji critiques above. This wayward woman partway home will inevitably meet other wayward women, and they will commune together in their waywardness. Coming together is conditioned by waywardness, by "refusing the straightness of railings or streets," and it is this refusal that makes them "the asphalt community of black enough to dance stretch flex" (147). Their Black enough-ness contingent upon how they refuse straightness, how they dance and stretch; their Black enough-ness always enough when they get outside of things and subvert normative gestures. When they, in other words, spill, where such a spillage is characteristic of the Blackness and feminism of fugitivity. They are "sidebody," ecstatic reconfigurations of corporeality around a corporeal waywardness, their "wings" poised for flight (147). So yes, "we perceive no one to be where they belong" (138), but that's right where "i," where "she," is going to stay.

One also notices that *Spill* is slathered with descriptions of women walking out of doors. The outdoors and out-of-doors look off into the wilderness as an unsettleable

settlement. The women about which Gumbs writes refuse to be contained and confined to the sphere of domesticity, indeed to the sphere of property. Their very bones say "this house would not win she was free she was getting out" (35). As one of the most potent manifestations of propertied ownership, given to allusions of mortgages, wealth, and territory, houses and housedness in the text are gotten out of. Her freeness is contingent upon getting out of house. Out of the house is where she achieves her fugitive freedom, the house's exit the threshold of such freedom. To get out of this house she must naturally walk out of its door. Ultimately, then, "she decided to walk out the door barefoot, hands empty unburdened by everything" (36), the emptiness indicative of an openness rather than a barrenness, a sloughing off of all the Morrisonian "shit that weighs you down." She carries nothing, so she is refusing to possess anything. Too, digging into this reading seems to yield the conclusion that she refuses possession itself, both possessing things contained in the house as well as the ways in which she was possessed in and by the domestic sphere of propertied confinement. She will neither be the subject she was said to be nor carry the things that are said to be meaningful for recognition outside of the house. The door is indeed one of no return, but going through it outside into the wilderness is where one can finally subjectivate oneself while unfettered by the normative baggage of legibility tellingly "housed" indoors. Inside those houses might be undesirable specters, spooky astral projections we don't have time for. They get in the way sometimes, those boogeymen. Getting out of the house, then, is less a running away due to fear and more an "inherited swiftness" trained in the wilderness. Those "boogeym[e]n didn't," and couldn't, "quite catch her. so thanks" (47) because they

brought online the penchant to leave, to get out there with the others who are getting out there by getting out of here.

The walking out extends even to her social network. Or rather, if *Spill* as a text contains the boisterous sociality of all the various instantiations of "she" and "her," the walking out extends to all those doing Black feminist fugitive work—that work *is* walking out of doors. When "she" "decided to call up everyone," they were not home. And I imagine she smiled too, knowing that missed calls meant breached doors, the outdoors where she'll see them all again. So once she hung up the phone, smiling about the missed connection that was in fact a made connection, she too "walked out the door to see where they were and that's how she started to roam" (36). Roaming, or waywardness, is the condition for "see[ing] where they were"; it is integral to sociality. Sociality happens when you walk out the door and roam, amble about in the wild and begin to understand what me-ness is like when you're free. What do you look and feel like without being reflected back to yourself by gazes that can't caress you and result in your deformation? What do you look like to optics and haptics that don't break on you? We know that walking outdoors and out of the door meant that "she walked out the door over mirrors she broke" (33), so the question becomes what do wilderness mirrors look like? Is it the reflection of a river, the pupil of another wilderness woman, the glimmer of raindrops, the shine of a star? She won't recognize this person staring back at her, and that is good, because her unrecognition is perhaps the first time she'll be recognized.

This is all with the aim of an otherwise than what is and what one is said to be able to become. Wandering as a world-making ambulation refuses to refuse Jefferson's pejorative claim that the "Negro" "escapes incessantly from every restraint…" The

question Jefferson foregoes is to *where* does his "Negro" escape? Or rather, because waywardness has no set destination, the imaginative escape *is* the where that is in fact a no-where. It is a motivation without end or destination committed only to "the sense to want something else" (7)—something else is the subjectivity of the wayward, and no-where is her location. They may attempt to find her, capture her; they may, and perhaps will, attempt to name her in order to fix her. In the context of pervasive surveillance in which "we are policing wandering" (138), waywardness is an existential commitment to exist in the world fugitively, to subvert who is permitted to exist in the world. That, we know from Juliana Huxtable, is the nastiest shade we can throw.[18] When we live in the world despite the world, we live as a tremulous, unlocatable, unmappable nobody. Gumbs' "she" is barely captured by the pronoun, because when she stomps through waywardness, making a ruckus as she goes and goes, she "unshackle[s] somebody" (37). The somebody she unshackles is *she*; living of/as the weight of Spillers' "locus of confounded identities," which subjectivate her as somebody (i.e. recognizable and locatable), she rebukes this somebodiness. "She," then, becomes a non-name for a nobody.

Moving waywardly thus brings with it a different epistemology. They call us crazy because we might be talking to ourselves out there when we amble. We "[walk] around whispering *vroom*" (81), unsure of whether we are describing or hoping. Either way, or both ways, it's fine. It's all knowledge. We come to know through how we move in and out of space, so to move in ways that one is not supposed to, to go where one ain't

[18] A reference to Juliana Huxtable's response to a question she received. A Black trans and intersex woman, Huxtable was asked, "What's the nastiest shade you've ever thrown?" to which she responded, "Existing in the world."

got no business going, leads to different forms of knowledge. Gumbs' "sideways dancers," being off-kilter, being and becoming wayward are all commitments to the "enduring rejection of straightness and a constant reorientation to alternative space," which is also to say the possibility of a Black feminist space.[19] In alternative space, in the non-destination of wayward movements, planning happens. Rap sessions and openly secretive cyphers go on over here with the wayward and the wandering. We are learning and studying, prepping and "mobiliz[ing] against the heat" (119), readying ourselves.

[19] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "In Praise of the Never Straight: Cheryl Clarke," *The Feminist Wire*, October 4, 2012, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/10/in-praise-of-the-never-straight-cheryl-clarke/. In 1982, Clarke wrote a letter to June Jordan that said "No there is nothing wrong with your eyes, my letterhead is indeed crooked," which Jordan saved, the letter ultimately ending up in Jordan's papers at the Schlessinger Archive at Harvard University.

CHAPTER 3: THE ETC. OF NEGROES: TRANSFIGURATIVE BLACKNESSES

clear the law

of

order

cause

delay

of question

&

opinion

of the etc of negroes

the no is proved

—M. NourbeSe Philip, "Dicta" in *Zong!*

If you'll permit me to speak through Jess Row's novelistic claim as an unequivocal assertion of multiplicity, this chapter operates under the axiom that "The house of blackness has many doors. Not everyone chooses the same way in" (158). Row cribs this quote from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which James writes, the "house of fiction has many windows and many doors." "I was being ironic," Row says. "What I was pointing to was that, yeah, blackness is a fiction; whiteness is a fiction. When we live

according to these categories, we're living within a fiction."[1] Fictions are compilations of fashioned inventions, narratives woven around the aim of coherence. Racial categorizations codified through variegated hues of the epidermis and other physiognomic characteristics are ultimately fictions. But of course this is not news, or at least shouldn't be, especially after the postmodern turn in the Humanities. That even laypersons fleetingly deploy the phrase "race is a social construct" in admittedly frustratingly shallow effect, might suggest that the arbitrariness of "race" demands revisiting.

My aim in this chapter is to think Blackness through "transfiguration." A transfigurative Blackness, which I want to argue as the primary modality through which Blackness's understanding becomes manifest, exceeds the "actuality" of the purported cohesive and knowable body. The transness constitutive of Blackness and the Blackness constitutive of transness refocus our attention away from purportedly transparent racial identities and toward forces of ontological sedimentation and disruption. It is this which interests me here, and I specifically enter it through the questions of Blackness in the Rachel Dolezal affair and Jess Row's novel *Your Face in Mine*. These cultural and literary points of departure provide crucial insight into transfigurative Blackness, as I'll define in detail below, by way of their unfixing of Blackness from corporeally immutable loci, their interrogation of racial discourses, and their radical rethinking of when and where and how Blackness means and matters.

Transfigurative Blackness. If "negroes" can serve, at least in tentative capacity, as a synecdoche for the disruptiveness of Blackness—or, following Sylvia Wynter,

[1] Yahdon Israel, "White Bodies, Black Faces," *The New Inquiry*, February 17, 2016, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/white-bodies-black-faces/.

"function as the Chaos to the new Norm of the human," as a "mode of Nigger Chaos";[2] or, as demonstrated by a rather epithetic name Dolezal was called, to be deemed a "transnigger"—the "etc of negroes" is meant to allude to the radically disorienting and volatile multiplicity of Blackness(es). Negroes'-cum-Blackness's "etc" is a transfigurative space, "a space of transition…that allows us to understand the queer relationship" between Blackness as paraontological and bodies deemed Black that takes seriously the perpetual instability of Blackness and further radically destabilizes it. Transfigurative Blackness is an advancement of C. Riley Snorton's theorizations in thinking about transfiguration as a site of implosion and continual destruction and recreation, and thus thinking of Blackness "[a]s always an unstable term." Snorton's interest lay in the space of transition, in which "feminist transformation and action" occur, and productive reworkings of gendered (and racial) subjectivities can be scrutinized, put forth, and rethought. To transfigure Blackness is to move toward, but never settling on, its capacities to undo. It is to change form, and finds its (non)identity in the very movement of form changing. In short, following Snorton, I find it imperative to bring trans subjectivities to bear on Blackness.[3]

Though Snorton acknowledges but is uninterested in the theological connotations of transfigurations, I find them to be fruitful here insofar as its theological uptake is a deeply generative modality through which to offer my theorizations. The biblical moment of most relevance is Mark 9:2 aptly titled in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) "The Transfiguration," in which it is written that Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James,

[2] Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 36, https://doi.org/10.2307/302808.
[3] See Snorton, "Transfiguring Masculinities in Black Women's Studies."

and John. Jesus is transformed on the mountain with his apostles before YHWH, a miraculous phenomenon in the eyes of his onlookers. Jesus's transfiguration can serve as a template for the tranfigurative, the *trans*, of Blackness and its fugitivity. Transfiguration follows, again citing biblical precedent, Romans 12:2's demand to "not be conformed to this world but be transformed," which, by extension, might mean to refuse normative frameworks of legibility, to transform and transfigure them.[4] In short, then, this chapter is taking Dolezal's enactment of Blackness and the racial reassignment discourse in Jess Row's *Your Face in Mine* as instances that stage overtly how Blackness is always an unstable term, and that the space of transition—transfiguration—is the proper understanding of Blackness's effects. This marks the onset of the multiplicity of Blackness, the Blacknesses of Blackness, with or without what has been verified and validated by regulatory racial optics as "Black" skin, with or without what has been verified as immutable racial affiliation. Transfiguration's changing form is not to refute the purported "brute facticity" of a given racial (or gendered) world, as detractors of Dolezal, for example, cite (e.g. "She wasn't *born* Black, so she can never *be* Black"); the world and its material sociality is not abolished in transfiguration. I intend it as a refusal of conformity to *this* world by way of hoping for Blackness's dis/location somewhere else: in transfiguration.

[4] I am following scholar Cary Howie's meditation "On Transfiguration," in which he understands Jesus's transfiguration as a poetic and theological template for how bodies (particularly transgender bodies) transform. Ultimately for Howie, transfiguration names the question of the space between facticity and possibility; it names the space of transition that "refuses to accept the strict dichotomy between what I have been and what I will be," and instead finds volatile solace in the "the interstitial character of our being-and-becoming-in-the-world." (Cary Howie, "On Transfiguration," *L'Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (May 28, 2013): 159–60, https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2013.0002.)

The "Dolezal 'Affair'"

> "I don't think that blackness is tied to any specific kind of racialized body."
>
> —Fred Moten, "A Humbled Inquiry On Fugitivity" (unpublished)

> "Not all black people relate to the category or are marked by the category in the same way. Your blackness might not be legible in certain places…"
>
> —Kai M. Green, "'Race and gender are not the same!' is not a Good Response to the 'Transracial' / Transgender Question OR We Can and Must Do Better"

C. Riley Snorton asks in "Referential Sights and Slights," "how does one know that she is viewing a trans body? (And relatedly, how can one really be sure that she is viewing a cisgender one?)." To dwell in the profundity of a seemingly simple question is to severely trouble the assumptive logics undergirding recognition. I ask related to Snorton's question, then: How does one know they are viewing a Black body? (And, relatedly, how can one really be sure that the body before them is not Black?) As Snorton argues, cogently, in a different context on gender, I argue something similarly for Blackness: "one should not readily imagine that [Blackness], in this instance (or any, for that matter), can be adjudicated by making recourse to the visual."[5] This does not collapse the differing histories that bear on the respective meanings of race and gender but

[5] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 2.

introduces a sociogenic provocation. To ask the question, a question that it seems few ask and even fewer enact in social interactions, queries fundamental logics of recognition. To ask the question places one tentatively in a transfigurative space, a space in which transformation and transition are always intimate proximity to Blackness.

"Rachel Dolezal" was a scandal. Her being "found out" caused the racial brouhaha of 2015, engendering humorous, passionate, and steadfast commentary of race in the U.S.—though much of it shallow and, frankly, sloppy to my mind. Numerous people on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media websites, not to mention the think pieces on blogs and online magazines, added their two cents to the offering dish of racial currency. Perhaps inevitably, right-wing conservatives took the overwhelming invalidation of Dolezal's Blackness from the Left as fodder for pointing out their hypocrisy in rejecting Dolezal's "transracial" identification, yet supporting Caitlyn Jenner's transgender identification. How, they asked, is Jenner's transness legitimate, but Dolezal's not? Or, as Adolph Reed Jr. put it in the title of his essay on the matter, how is "one trans good, the other not so much"?

Dolezal's biography is telling in a number of senses,[6] but foregoing an extended meditation on it yields more space to delineate the various ways in which Blackness

[6] Rachel Dolezal was born to Larry and Ruthanne Dolezal, both of whom were Young Earth Creationist Christians, and adhered to religious tenets of salvation through adoption, and thus adopted four African American children after birthing two children themselves, Rachel and her birth-brother Joshua. The Dolezal family, in the late-'70s through the '80s, lived in penurious conditions. The family was poor, forced to grow their own food because they "were nearly destitute," both Larry and Ruthanne having no higher education or dependable jobs. After leaving such an environment, which consisted of physical and emotional abuse, gendered disciplining, sexual violation, confinement, and labor exploitation, Rachel gradually began dwelling in communities of Black people, braiding hair, and making Black art. While attending college in West Jackson, Mississippi, she lived "in a Black neighborhood," and rather than missionizing the

operates. There are two overarching iterations: structural Blackness and communal (or sociogenic) Blackness. Structural Blackness describes Blackness as a positionality, one in which "the Black" is hemmed by a historical/institutional abjection. Such gives the Blackened subject over to an immobilized position of circumscription by way of skewed life chances, predisposal to death, lack of access and resources, and the like. Communal or sociogenic Blackness describes the ways in which one's identification as—from within and without—Black is predicated on social recognition. Blackness in this vein becomes what it is by virtue of an other that understands it as such, a way of becoming a subject by being given over to the other by recognizable tenets of social legibility (I am Black because I am understood as Black).

These two understandings of Blackness are deeply crucial, for sure. Transfigurative Blackness is an attempt to emerge from both of these insofar as it cites, as noted in Chapter 1, the trans and fugitive force that engenders pursuits of capture (structuration and abjection) and community (on the grounds of boisterous sociality). If the structural is how normative history has seen one, and if the sociogenic principle is how one grapples with being seen and seeing oneself, what emerges in Dolezal's enactment of Blackness is the refusal of that normative demand and tarrying in the space between seeing and being seen in order to groove in a different space, in order to move outside of this space. Too, she corporeally allegorizes transfigurative Blackness, demonstrating the limits of the structure. Structuration cannot encompass and foreclose Blackness's breadth; she allegorizes how there's something ethereal in how we come together with one another in ways that exceed what we are said (made?) to be. This is to

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community as a "white savior" or white "ally," her dwelling amid Blackness, so to speak, is "where I felt most comfortable."

say, readers should note that while this is a meditation on Rachel Dolezal, it is more specifically a meditation on what "other speaking" (etymologically allegory, *allos* + -*agoria*) Dolezal does as symbol of racial interrogation. The concern is not on her as an individual subject but on how she offers a different, contestatory narrative of how the "truth" of race is always troubled. What other ways to be (un)raced does she speak?

Attending a Black church regularly, communing with Black people, participating in the Black Students Association, attending the HBCU Howard University, making art depicting Black life and history, marrying a Black partner, having a Black child: Dolezal immersed herself in Black culture, Black people, Black histories, and Black institutions, all practices that surely would bolster the perceptual "authentic" Blackness of one recognized as epidermally Black. Dolezal even identified an African American man—Albert Wilderson Jr.—as her father, a chosen parentage that surely brought with it teachings fueled by his life as one read as Black. Though this made her claims more suspect, as it fit the narrative of her being motivated by pure prevarication, this in fact is a practice firmly rooted in Black and other racially marginalized cultures: the refashioning and expanding and rethinking of kinship networks, full of "play cousins" and "brothers from another mother" and aunties and sisters sharing no "biological" connection. Kinship is not an a priori fact; it is a praxis, and perhaps even a strategic way of relating. Black folks have long been refashioning our biographies and family trees, subverting normative understandings of kinship. It's a different way of expressing community. The variegated registers inflected by this community do not, and cannot, rely on selfsameness or transparent understandings of physiognomy or ancestry, nor a common history of

enslavement. The formation of Black community stems from intentional relations to power and coalition building in subversion of power's consolidation.[7]

If one wishes to think Blackness in terms of subjection to white supremacy, Dolezal still answers the call: being accosted by the microagressions of hair-touching and –commenting (which I, too, can viscerally attest too), exoticization of skin tone, the dreaded "you people" comment, racial profiling in the form of traffic stops, having nurses test her incessantly for HIV because of the higher rates of the virus for Black women, complaints by estheticians about her stubborn "African American hair," a Latinx beauty consultant's comment about her "nappy" eyelashes. She has even met the ire of white supremacists, being threatened verbally and physically, having her home broken into, being sent racist packages, all because of the subversive racial justice work—which is to say, the enactment of Blackness—to which she committed herself. And after all of this, if her Blackness was mere artifice that she could don only when convenient, she refused this; she did not, because, for her, she could not, doff her Blackness. "If I was looking to live an easier life, this would have been a great time for me to opt out of being Black. Simply by untwisting my braids and staying out of the sun, I could have crossed back over the color line. This assumes, of course, that Blackness describes little more than racialized physical features," Dolezal writes.[8] She chooses Blackness because she engages in the constant ethical gesture of "paying the cost," committing herself to

[7] See Hartman's discussion of "the sense of black community" and how it is expressed in excess of race in Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[8] Rachel Dolezal and Storms Reback, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2017), 164–65.

dispossession and making life with others in "this radical poverty-in-spirit."[9] Life in the struggle, living in and through struggle, might characterize Blackness. Blackness exceeds phenotype and refuses epidermalized or ontologized categorization. In short, Dolezal refuses to refuse Blackness.

In a frazzled panic, Dolezal had so many dope scholars—whom I have long, and still, respect for their intellectual rigor—on some troubling racial essentialist type stuff. No doubt it was easy to tell ourselves, in nationalistic fashion, that Dolezal was merely another white person appropriating Blackness instead of considering that she might be wishing to reject whiteness. Folks wanted her to be white; folks wanted her to continue to be white, and when put this way I am troubled even more. How disturbing it is that we wish her to remain a doer of whiteness, when we know the violence by which it is constituted, by which whiteness itself lives. If we are calling for the abolition of the terrors of whiteness, it is imperative that one inhabits Blackness, that alternative groove that may be the nega-Edenic salvation of the world. We want radical world transformation. And yet, frustratingly, when the radical possibility of this being enacted is actualized, we become fearful. Detractors of Dolezal's rebuking of whiteness, her sociality-in-Blackness, in fact hold on desperately to normativity, and their thinking is predicated on a bio-logic that presumes the "truth" of racial identity as natural and transparently corporeal and readily available to the socio-historically calibrated gazes of others.

It was easy, too, to legitimate Caitlyn Jenner's transgender subjectivity like the good, tolerant liberals we are, but reject Dolezal's "transracial" subjectivity. The analogy

[9] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 774.

between Jenner and Dolezal, like all analogies, is analytically weak, as "a better-known case is compared to one that is lesser known, and thereby offered as a model for understanding something that is not yet well understood," ultimately obscuring the complexity, nuance, and differential departures in the textures of each analogized phenomenon.[10] The analogy allowed Zeba Blay to offhandedly say that "transracial" was "not a thing" despite it in fact *being* a "thing" with a long history. Here I am not speaking of transracial in the adoptive sense, wherein parents adopt children of different races—in which case Dolezal *would* be considered under its definitional helm, as she grew up in a transracial adoptive household, and herself parented a Black child—but rather in the sense of transing racial identification, crossing racial boundaries in one's corporeal vessel.[11] Trans transitional space of Blackness, or put differently the mutability that

[10] Susan Stryker, "Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal: Identification, Embodiment, and Bodily Transformation," *AHA Today*, July 13, 2015, http://blog.historians.org/2015/07/caitlyn-jenner-and-rachel-dolezal-identification-embodiment-bodily-transformation/. Stryker goes on to note that any claim on another's "true" or "real" identity is always "an ethically fraught act." Additionally, she productively interrogates intersectional discourses that maintain the distinctness and coherence of each identity, which she argues, cogently, disallows us to think identity vectors together and of similar trajectories. We "have internalized the intersectional social-constructionist mantra that gender is not race is not class is not ability is not *x* nor *y* nor *z*, that each vector of embodied difference must be accounted for according to its own particular histories, material circumstances, operative logics, and experiential consequences," she writes. "And yet, this very imperative *not* to substitute analogy for analysis risks foreclosing an opportunity to explore *how* claims of race-change and claims of sex-change might be alike, as well as how they differ."

[11] Notably, there are other scholarly uses of the word. Andrea K. Newlyn deploys it to "describe narratives in which characters are unaware that they are white when they are 'really' black, or black when they are 'really' white"; Michael Awkward describes it as a "mode of masquerade [that] necessitates the radical revision of one's natural markings and the adoption of aspects of the human surface (especially skin, hair, and facial features) generally associated with the racial other"; and Susan Gubar says that "transracial performers seek neither to become the Other (blending into or integrating with the Other's community like a passer), nor to flaunt their alienation from the Other

Blackness conditions and engenders, is a trans experience. Crossing racial identification, "passing," being "misread" as one race over another are all instances in which racial identifications are transed, disrupted, and interrogated for their purported coherency. That "transracial" is seen as "not a thing" consequently made transrace and transgender "not the same," as Black trans woman Kat Blaque argued, a line of reasoning beautifully debunked by Kai M. Green, and also by my colleague Theodora Sakellarides and I.[12] Simply because two identificatory phenomena are not the same does not mean that they have nothing in common or that they cannot productively illuminate one another. (Trans)race and (trans)gender, though indeed not "the same," have much in common—namely that both are "cultural processes that transform physical attributes of bodily being—phenotypes, on the one hand, and morphology and reproductive potential, on the

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(ridiculing the Other's mores like a poser)," opting instead for the term "cross-racial" to describe the actions of someone like Dolezal.

[12] See Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides, "When We Enter: The Blackness of Rachel Dolezal," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 4 (October 2016): 33–48, doi:10.1080/00064246.2016.1227197; more specifically, see Kai M. Green, "'Race and Gender Are Not the Same!' Is Not a Good Response to the 'Transracial' / Transgender Question OR We Can and Must Do Better," *The Feminist Wire*, June 14, 2015, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/06/race-and-gender-are-not-the-same-is-not-a-good-response-to-the-transracial-transgender-question-or-we-can-and-must-do-better/. Green presented one of the most cogent and unwavering responses in support of Dolezal's Blackness, writing things like, "It seems as though people have forgotten what we already know, which is that black has always been a porous entity"; "We are all responding to the question: Is she black or nah? We have too easily answered this question with a resounding NAH! But I think that's the wrong question. The question we should be asking is when was/is she black?"; and in response to the quip that "race and gender are not the same," "Gender is also historically (re)produced. THIS IS a major point that must be reckoned with. For as my friend and colleague Michelle Wright noted in an email conversation, '…we understand race as historically produced and gender as "natural" [but it is not].' This is one of the most important places we need to go because this is the place where many are marking the distinction between race and gender, but it is an unproductive move. Gender like race has a history or multiple histories and it changes over time."

other—into guarantors of social positionality."[13] They hierarchize differences and, on the grounds of that hierarchy, mobilize the bodying of bodies in ways that subordinate some to others. Race and gender share this biopolitical stratagem of posturing toward biological axioms that forecloses the possibility—indeed, instantiates the impossibility—of mobility across, between, and within various kinds of categories.

It is indeed true that where our mobility has us end up is important to note, as the very possibility of mobility as well as the destination of that mobility is culturally hierarchized. While surely one's phenomenological experience of this betweenness will be shaped by what is deemed to be doable and liveable, what intrigues me is the very move outside, the plunge, and more specifically the force that motivates that plunge, which romps around in various valences of transition and transformation. My intention, then, is not to imply that Dolezal's transfigurative Blackness exists outside of hierarchical racial taxonomies or is bereft of troublesome notions of valuing particular lives over others. Nor is it to suggest that Blackness's openness means that shallow racial electivity is the desirable end. Rather, not only is Dolezal's "transracial" performance "from" "white" to "Black" a telling one, as it critiques typical reactions of transitions *toward* positions of relative privilege; but as well, transfigurative Blackness, like H. Samy Alim's theorization of "transracialization,"[14] interrogates taxononomic gestures themselves, refuses the hierarchy inherent in taxonomies, and instead of mere proliferation of "racial" identities seeks instead a recalibration of "identities" themselves

[13] Stryker, "Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal: Identification, Embodiment, and Bodily Transformation."

[14] Alim, in his chapter "'Who's Afraid of the Transracial Subject?' Raciolinguistics and the Political Project of Transracialization," writes that "I am interested in transracialization as a political project performed by those whose racial enactments and commitments challenge racial hierarchies" (34).

while privileging the *space* of transition—a generative, disruptive, critical space—as the aim. We may, to be sure, experience our outsidedness in normative ways (e.g. one may transition, say, from Black to white, deconstructing the categories themselves, and yet still *feel* whiteness acting on them via interpersonal interactions, material benefits, etc.) but the dis/location of that force, that urge, that desire *to go outside* is the generative, productive place that has caught my eye.

Dolezal's Blackness came neither from ancestry, as if it *ever* does in some kind of genetic bestowal of biological characteristics, nor from a spray-on tan. It is neither chromosomally fundamental nor surface level. DNA becomes meaningless—and is *always* meaningless—outside of the social, ergo the depthless deployment of superficially connoted "spray-tan salon and hair weaves" should be, not superficial, rather stitches of the performative quilt that constructs all of our deeply felt identities. These are attempts to superficialize Dolezal's enactment of Blackness by referencing the mutability of her skin tone and hair—as if this is not also the case with "Black" people—and in fact troublesomely index transphobic logics, e.g. that one is less, say, a trans man because he removes his chest binders when not in public, or that "living stealth" and forgoing the demand that one announce one's identificatory status is cause for reprimand and suspicion. Dolezal's racial identity, *like all racial identities*, is performative. They say Dolezal is merely, inadequately (now) passing for Black. Okay, sure, y'all, but so then does Cornel West, Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Claudia Rankine, and any other "Black" person you can name.[15] That is to say, maybe she wasn't "born Black"—

[15] I understand, too, that there is a particular way that, though I maintain the aforementioned are all "passing" for Black, there are some who pass as "authentic" and others who pass as passing. In other words, there are perceived degrees of passing,

but no one is; we are not born but become Black, refusing a beginning or end to Blackness and making it an ongoing open transfiguration. To be "born" Black, as Dolezal aptly argues, is "hardly the only way to define Blackness."[16]

The other way, the better way—if I may be so bold, so Blackly unapologetic—is to say that she was compelled by fugitivity and its precipitation of getting outside of things in order to get at them differently. Her transformational transition was mobilized by the urgency to become otherwise than the normative circumscription imposed upon her. She did not flippantly choose the costume of Blackness from her minstrel closet, wear it, then place it back neatly when she retreated home for the day. No, *what had happened was* the process of reiterating and repeating postures and proclivities,

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making some people's passing appear as less, if you will, passy than others, less worked at than others, implying a kind of "realness" by virtue of how much less effort they are thought to be exerting in their passing.

[16] Dolezal and Reback, *In Full Color*, 4. Dolezal quotes Melissa Harris-Perry's now-cancelled show:

> "Is it possible that she might actually be Black?" she asked in a discussion about me with the author Allyson Hobbs on her June 13 show. "The best way I know how to describe this—and I want to be very careful here because I don't want to say it's equivalent to the transgender experience but there's a useful language in trans and cis, which is just to say that some of us are born cisgender and some of us are born transgendered—but I'm wondering can it be that we can be cisBlack and transBlack, that there's actually a different category of Blackness that is about the achievement of Blackness despite one's parentage?" (232)

I want to argue, partially at least, that this "different category" of Blackness *is* Blackness, a Blackness-as-trans, which is to say a Blackness that transes and exists transfiguratively and transgressively. Harris-Perry thinks Dolezal's Blackness as an openness and a thing that happens and does rather than is had and gets done to.

Too, that Dolezal cannot be Black because she wasn't born Black indexes deeply transphobic arguments. The discourse attempting to essentialize Blackness into an originary and immutable natal hue echoes transphobic discourses of delineating "women" as "women born women" (or "womyn born womyn"), a logic addressed and dismantled by feminists of Color like Raquel Willis and Sara Ahmed.

subversions and excesses, that then subjectivated her through them. These cannot be thrown off at will because they work us, they worked her, to emerge through them into her subjectivity. And these are the tools, refashioned though they may be, by which she—and we—can give ourselves to resistance and subversion.

To the extent that we presumed the natal fixity of racialized identity, it seems clear that Dolezal, put colloquially, had us all "fooled"—we got got, y'all—and that says something very telling both about how Blackness is always a slippery concept as well as how enactment of Blackness troubles optical racial logics of sedimentation. My interest, though, lay most profoundly in how Dolezal acts as an archetype for thinking with transfigurative Blackness, what its effects can be, and what it makes possible. This manner of reading Dolezal disavows defining epidermal Blackness in particular as nebulous measurements of biologically determinative hue, reductively consolidated "lived experiences," or accusations of white privilege. Rather, this is a commitment to reading and analyzing how we read, when we read, and what we read, all of which index profound instability and fissures. This mode of reading, when brought to bear on Dolezal's enactment of Blackness, asks how we may mobilize the instability and think about it as a habitable, transformative/transfigurative space *engendered* by the volatility of Blackness.

Dolezal refused caputurability and exceeded logics of racialization. She exposed the limits of this logic, escaped it, refused it, and made a subjectivity through the site of transition. To accept Dolezal is to open ourselves up to radical openness, which is at base a pursuit of a nonviolent encounter with otherness that aims to put pressure on and expand the encounter with humanness. This radical openness to radical openness is the

doing of transfigurative Blackness, as it is to live and embody insurgency—the explosive opening up of totalizing systems—through highlighting what Sandy Stone calls the "myriad of alterities" that are trans embodiments. A Black transfigurative posture "advocate[s] *for* the intelligibility of (un)becoming other"—that undone and undoing transitional/transfigurative space of fugitivity.[17]

In the "excruciating and beautiful moment" of Dolezal's transfigurative Blackness, the most fruitful perspective to take might be the "wild and liberating possibilities [that] might open up," possibilities that, if we wish to have them (because they are necessary for the realization of social justice change), means we will need to embrace the fact that they may be terrifying and unsettling.[18] They may be radically different than what we expected, which is to say that taking social construction seriously and moreover taking trans seriously might look like Rachel Dolezal. We cannot wish for fundamental, radical change without also putting at imminent risk our own assumptions and, indeed in a very real sense, our deepest tethers to our bodies.

Your Face in Mine **and Assuming Racial Identity**

> "You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as

[17] Patricia Elliot, *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites*, Queer Interventions (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2010), 67. Emphasis in original.
[18] See Crispin Sartwell's chapter "Wigger" in George Yancy, ed., *White on White/Black on Black* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself."

—Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage"

"In other words, passing confounds our visually privileging cultural logic. It confuses the real with the artifice, and often even after a careful social excavation, it is hard to determine which is what."

—C. Riley Snorton, "'A New Hope': The Psychic Life of Passing"

Thankfully Jess Row published *Your Face in Mine* in 2014, a year before the Dolezal affair came to light, because on his account he is not sure he could not have written the novel if Dolezal had been "outed" while he was writing it. *Your Face in Mine*[19] is a useful juxtapositional text for thinking with Dolezal, trans/transfigurative Blacknesses, and "changing" racial identification. The novel follows Kelly Thorndike, a white Jewish man who, after two decades, bumps into an old high school friend and bandmate, Martin Wilkinson. In the opening scene of the novel, Kelly recognizes Martin on a visceral, ambiguous level, an ambiguity that is justified, namely because Martin, a fellow white kid growing up with him in Baltimore, is now epidermally and phenotypically "Black."

[19] Jess Row, *Your Face in Mine* (New York: Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA), 2014). All references to the text will be indicated by paginated parentheticals.

After some expectedly shocking conversations, Kelly learns that Martin has undergone "racial reassignment surgery" for Martin's self-described "Racial Identity Dysphoria Syndrome": in short, troublesomely (a trouble which I will unpack later in this section), being "born in the wrong physical [racial] body" (41). Kelly, a 37-year-old polyglot, widower (his Chinese wife and daughter died in a car accident only three years prior to the novel's opening), Harvard doctoral defector of Chinese Studies, and recently-laid off manager of a troubled public radio affiliate, is hired by Martin to be his biographer. At first his motives seem to be centered on crafting a narrative for the validity and non-weirdness of racial reassignment surgery, but readers discover later in the text that his rationale is a bit more mercenary than initially admitted. After having already paid upwards of $100,000 for the surgery, Martin enlists Kelly to craft his story for the world with an enticing $20,000. Kelly reads journal entries Martin wrote pertaining to his racial identity, prepubescent narratives of racial identification, listens to hours of recordings of Martin's conveyance of his racial bildungsroman, and asks murky questions of Martin and his wife, Robin (an African American woman). So because conclusive events of the novel virtually quash any chance of the story getting written, perhaps a preliminary bio of Martin Wilkinson would read as follows:

MARTIN WILKINSON'S LIFE trajectory is, on his account, "the story of the fucking century" (36). Self-diagnosed as having "Racial Identity Dysphoria Syndrome" (because he believes "it is in many ways similar to the gender dysphoria that is so commonly reported in the news" [41]), which he says has caused many "psychological problems, including depression, agoraphobia, and involvement in illegal activities" (41), Martin has

the "inarguable" and "unquestionabl[e]" (32) appearance of a Black man, never in his seven years as epidermally Black having been read or understood as any racial categorization other than Black. His first encounter with a Black person came when he was four-years-old. It was his clearest memory, he recalls. A Black woman "was sitting at the picnic table on the back patio, where we had meals in the summer," he recounts.

> She had been crying. There were tracks of tears on her cheeks. But when she saw me her mouth split into this enormous grin, the widest mouth, the friendliest mouth, I had ever seen in my life. A slice of the sun. She laughed, and she said, where did you come from? And I just wanted to run to her. Hell, maybe I still am running to her. (106–7)

The racist and minstrel-allusive imagery (the "Smiling Darky" caricature is certainly present) of the Black woman should certainly give us pause and cause us to question any latent fetishistic understandings Martin had of Black women. Nevertheless, that he is running toward a Black woman, or at least her image, is consequential, especially in light of Martin's birth mother's absence. Martin remembers little of his birth mother, Katherine. "[S]he's just a shadow," he says, "an afterthought. [But] I was born, wasn't I? Though sometimes it doesn't feel that way. It seems almost like something to mention in parentheses. Oh, yeah, her" (107). Katherine was a non-figure, unsubstantive, lacking even a last name: "she never told anyone her last name. Straight up refused. It's not even on my birth certificate: Katherine Doe" (109). Since non-persons, which is effectively what lacking a name renders one (in the sense that a person is a possessor of a name),

cannot be said to "properly" *exist* Martin had to be birthed by other means. Those means, those "other mothering"[20] means, was a Black woman. This alternative kinship is something we've seen with Dolezal and her father Albert Wilderson Jr., and like Dolezal's "other fathering," this is a practice that might be said to have rhizomatic roots in Blackness.

In addition to this childhood introduction to Blackness, Martin attended the virtually all-Black El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Elementary. He was, in fact, "the first white kid to enroll there in eight years, since they'd changed the name from Paul Revere" (111). Shabazz—the surname of the nation's most prominent Black Nationalist and thus, in other words, one of its most potent sites of *a kind* of Blackness—was Martin's "gateway into the world" (112). At Shabazz is where he indeed came into the world and its sociality, which is the condition, arguably, of recognition, itself the condition for social existence. In short, Martin socially existed for the first time via Blackness. It is arguable, then, that because the Black woman, sans white birth mother, is the maternal figure to which he is running, and because of Shabazz's hold over him, Martin was birthed in and through Blackness. That he came into the world, one could argue, through a Black woman shrouds him in Blackness, and his intellectual, social, and even linguistic inculcation (Martin notes, "I spoke, effectively, black English" [150]) was mired in Blackness, all of which are constitutive nodes of subjectivity and engines of politics.

It was not until the Spring of 1993 when his best friend, Alan, committed suicide, however, that he began to do the "radical rethink[ing]" (43) that fomented his decision to

[20] "Othermothering" is a concept that Patricia Hill-Collins defines as "women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities," which describes the Black woman that assisted, if you will, Martin's absent mother by bearing the responsibility for his subjective (racial) formation.

undergo racial reassignment. This radical rethinking culminated in radically rethinking racial logics and porosity. His racial phenotype is "based on a carefully created medical procedure that was carried out in Bangkok, Thailand, from 2001–2002, by Dr. Binpheloung Silpasuvan and his medical associates," in which Martin underwent "a series of facial surgeries, scalp surgeries, body-sculpting procedures, and pigmentation treatments, transforming me from my original appearance as a Caucasian-Jewish 'white' male into a convincing African American" (41). With a change in appearance, he also changed his familial lineage, telling others that he was the child of two now-deceased Black parents and no knowledge of his "biological roots" (41). With minor daily maintenance practices, his transition to/in Blackness is complete. What Martin is calling for is the abandonment of the pretense that biology is at all determinative of one's subjectivity. He is urging us to unlearn normative familial networks and to radically trans the familially constitutive aspects of subjectivity. Martin's "real" birth parents, or Larry and Ruthanne for Rachel Dolezal, do not finish, and perhaps do not even begin, one's racialized, *Blackened* becoming-in-the-world.

Interestingly, upon learning all of this, Kelly describes Martin as "unhinged"—fugitive, I might say—and, even more interestingly, as "a question mark" (26) (jayy dodd reverberates; that dodd was a "blxck question mark" might signify the transfigurative Blackness present here). Martin, at base, is a question, and one that foments the recalibration of our assumptions.

THE BASIC PREMISE of *Your Face in Mine* is not new, as we've seen such racial reassignment in Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal*, John Howard Griffin's *Black Like*

Me, George Schuyler's *Black No More,* and C. Thomas Howell's *Soul Man*, and Row's writing style—a subdued satiric meditation on racial identification and its discontents—echoes that of other contemporary novelistic satirists like Percival Everett and Mat Johnson. What I find most useful in *Your Face in Mine* is its fraught meditation on the assumption of an identity, that is, the pre-judgment of a state of affairs without evidentiary basis—or by way of uncritically examined "evidence"—as well as the taking on or possession of an identity. Though internal critiques of the validity of racial reassignment abound within the novel, and are used as argumentation against the validity of racial reassignment by reviewers of the novel, my interest lay in what the novel depicts as a transfigurative critique of assuming (pre-judging and taking on) identities, both in its general plot as well as in the interstitial, perhaps unintended spaces between the literal and proverbial lines of the text. In other words, I am reading Row against himself, against his own intentions. Though Kelly also ultimately undergoes racial reassignment to become the Chinese Curtis Wang, and is perhaps a much more interiorly complex character, and there are other more minor characters that may well be ripe for analysis, my focus will be largely on Martin as he seems to be the most rich site of thinking transfiguratively.

I want to focus, here, on a quote that is in the text but are not spoken by any of its characters, a quote by James Baldwin, which serves as the novel's epigraph. The novel's epigraph reads, "And I suggest this: that in order to learn your name, you are going to have to learn mine." From a conversation Baldwin has with Studs Terkel, the quote ends here as epigraph but continues in the conversation, "In a way, the American Negro is *the* key figure in this country; and if you don't face him [*sic*], you will never face anything."

It is important to understand that this characteristic pithy statement comes immediately after Baldwin says, "Now, there is always something in this country, of course, one cannot think about—the Negro."[21] For Baldwin, the figures of whiteness and Blackness are always intimately bound together, tied to the same nationalistic fate of overcoming detrimental categorizations. So here, whiteness *depends* on Blackness and, without it, withers, is only a hollow shell of subjectivity. But to tie this to what it seems Baldwin says is unthinkable (the Negro), I would assert that we cannot think about the Negro because the Negro, a synecdoche for Blackness, is the "etc." The etc. that is Blackness goes without thinking because, by lexical virtue, it goes without saying (the "etc." marks the very thing which is not, or perhaps cannot, be said—the "yada yada," the "and so on" [i.e. "the rest"]). The Negro, Blackness, cannot be thought here because it eludes the fixation of definitiveness. It is the name for the unnameable. So, as Baldwin says, to learn this name-that-is-not-a-name is to return us to ourselves; it is to return us to ourselves, the deepest recesses of our becoming, which is the space of transfiguration. This underlies the novel and more specifically underlies Martin's urge not merely to change his race or "appropriate" Blackness but to *transfigure* his race, to cite the transfigurative Blackness simmering on the undercurrents of sociality.

I challenge reviewer Emily Raboteau's claim that "Of course, Row's key figure isn't a black man but a white man in blackface." The very opening of "Of course" is a totalizing, no-room-for-interrogation claim that precludes any entry into the otherwise of racial transfiguration. I also challenge David L. Ulin's similar claim that Martin "is, after

[21] James Baldwin, *James Baldwin: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations* (Melville House, 2014).

all, a white man *masquerading* as African American."[22] If Martin's Blackness is a mere masquerade, a mere mask, then it is a damn good one as I presume, quite seriously, that when Kelly sees him at the beginning of the novel "still bundled in a black lambswool coat with the hood up" (3), he is, like any other non-masquerading Black man, subject to the murderous whim of white supremacy, given potency by that hooded "sign and…screen th[at] conditions an expectation (criminality)" that "implies the qualities of thugness, or criminality"—that signifier of Blackness that has become so potent after February 26, 2012.[23] He has entered into Blackness in space and time. Though he certainly has not entered the door that most have been thought to enter, he has nonetheless entered—maybe through the secret entrance in the basement—and does Blackness, though troublesomely, as Blackness always does. There are those who note that Blackness is a phenomenological and existential inhabitation of a positionality, which is to say subjection to white supremacy, one in which those merely masquerading as Black do not experience and, if they do experience it, can choose to remove when they wish. This, however, is not the case with Martin Wilkinson (nor, I would argue, Rachel Dolezal). Martin has effectively checked the existential boxes of *feeling* Blackness under white supremacy: surrounded by Black folks since his formative years, speaking the language of Blackness, being shot due to inhabitation of a geographical location and

[22] Emily Raboteau, "'Your Face in Mine,' by Jess Row," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/books/review/your-face-in-mine-by-jess-row.html; David L. Ulin, "'Your Face in Mine' a Bold Take on Race, Identity by Jess Row," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2014, http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-jess-row-20140817-story.html. Emphasis added.

[23] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force," *Signs* 40, no. 4 (2015): 792, 804, https://doi.org/10.1086/680326. The date, of course, is the death date of Trayvon Martin.

condition the result of redlining and white flight;[24] he has been in prison, he is married to another Black person, he attended a Black church regularly (and met his wife there). To be sure, "Blackness" is not to be reduced simply to a series of experiences (or is it?), nor is experiencing Blackness—the oft-said "lived experience" of Blackness—determined solely by the dictates of white supremacy. Blackness is many, no doubt. My assertions aim only to insert Martin into the very discourse others would use to deem a person who was "born white" unfit for a valid Black identity, troubling the very qualifications for the proverbial Black Card. To revise James Baldwin, I ask: If Martin Wilkinson isn't Black, then tell me, who is (and why)?

Inevitably, such racial reassignment, because race is a relational concept, affects those around Martin in visceral ways. When Kelly is thoroughly convinced of Martin's cracklessness (he has "no cracks, no fissures" [32], no doubt a testament to his "cisBlackness," to cite Harris-Perry's meditation on Dolezal), he immediately notes, "All at once I feel an intense, pressurized pain in my sinuses, my forehead, eye sockets, across the bridge of my nose: as if my own face has become inflatable and is about to lift off" (32). Why, one asks, is Kelly so viscerally affected? I would posit that it is because Blackness betides us all; Blackness lays a claim to Kelly as well and, when accosted so corporeally with it, is forced to feel its force. Kelly is forced to concede the

[24] Slow it down: yes, Martin was shot as a kid. Accidentally. "Walking home from school," he says, a "Guy opened up on his girlfriend right across the sidewalk, in broad daylight; killed her, her new boyfriend, I guess he was, and Dwayne Pierce. Dwayne was in third grade with me. I got caught with a ricochet. My leg was a bloody mess" (114). In this moment, too, he further redacts his familial parentage, imagining that the Black police officer who carried him and drove him to the hospital was his father: "I fell asleep and dreamed my father was carrying me. My *real* father, not the one back at home. I dreamed up a black man to be my father, right then and there. Tall. Kept his hair in a close Afro. People called him Eight Ball" (224–225).

constructedness of his own identity when seeing what he shouldn't be seeing in Martin: the refashioning of a racial identity that is said to be immutable. Kelly's sutures are exposed in this moment, and the pressure comes from that "anarchic womb," implicating him in the all of transitivity.

Just as "the surgically constructed genitalia of trans people can be transphobically viewed as at odds with the genitalia that nature intended"—which Talia Bettcher calls "moral genitalia"—Martin's surgically constructed epidermis and phenotype can be transphobically viewed as at odds with his "natural" or "god-given," and thus morally obligatory, racial identification. He and those like him are then forced to undergo some kind of "reality enforcement" in the form of comments like, "But you're *really* a white man" or the commentary of David Ulin and Emily Raboteau above, or more fatal ones like murder.[25] But it is this very reality being enforced that Martin wants to in many ways supplant. Even he succumbed to it when he first went to Bangkok to have his surgery, encountering a transsexual woman who, to prove the expertise of Dr. Silpa, allowed him to look as closely as he wished at her naked body to see that, as Martin tells Kelly, "she seemed one hundred percent….It was complete" (119). What I find most interesting in the same conversation, though, is Martin's plea for Kelly to believe his Blackness.

> So this is what I'm saying: what do I have to show you, Kelly?
>
> To convince me it's real? I believe it's real. How could I not?
>
> To believe it was *always* real. I'm not talking about etiology. I'm not talking about *cause*. We can speculate about the circumstances all we

[25] Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 393.

want—later. Right now I'm just talking about the fact of the phenomenon. I was a black boy in a white boy's body. I was a black *man* in a white man's body. Can you accept that, Kelly? Can you really believe it's possible, when it comes down to it? I need to know. Before we go any further, I need to know.

I believe you.

No, see that's not the same. You *believe* it because I'm *saying* it. I'm not asking you to accept the words. I'm asking you to accept the thing itself. The possibility that—

Yeah, I get it. You don't have to repeat yourself. (119–120; emphasis in original)

Martin is interested in the anteorigin of Blackness, the Blackness of before that has engendered his subjectivity. It is not a Blackness that comes after the fact, or a Blackness that is merely epidermalized at a definitive point in time; it is a Blackness that causes, Nathaniel Mackey's "insistent previousness" that is always doing the work of perturbing ontology. The final statements as well mark a rich site of entry. At face value Martin is simply interrupted by Kelly who wants only to hurry the discussion along by interjecting with his ultimate belief in the probity of Martin's claim to a kind of racial authenticity. But there seems to be more operating here. In other words, I want to read the exchange as Martin's request for Kelly to believe "The possibility that—" *period*. That is, to believe in possibility, the openness of possibility. We cannot assume Martin was going to finish the sentence; we cannot assume he was going to close his sentence. If he is asking Kelly

to accept his transfigurative Blackness, we must in fact maintain that he could not finish the sentence because what he is asking of Kelly is to accept, simply, the space of transition, or "possibility that—." The em dash may in fact fall outside of (legible) time, an assertion supported by Kelly himself. "You don't have to repeat yourself" because possibility and openness cannot be repeated; they can only be discerned in the interstices of the failure of one's fugitive Blackness—the space of transfiguration.

As he talks to Julie-nah about his motivations for going through with Martin's racial reassignment biographical exposé, Kelly divulges, "This isn't really happening…That's how I feel. It isn't really happening" (299). This feeling arises not via some kind of obfuscation of "reality" or stress-induced misjudgment, but something more complex, something more temporal—queerly, Blackly temporal:

> What's the word, I ask her, what's the tense, for an experience that happens neither *then*, nor *now*, but out of time? An experience that never should have happened at all? Isn't there a word for that?
>
> We'll have to make one up, she says, smiling. She likes a game. We should try Scrabble. Not subjunctive, but anti-junctive. Contra-junctive.
>
> Contra-conditional.
>
> Yeah. Good. Contra-conditional. (299)

We might argue here that, in conversation with Calvin Warren and Michelle Wright, they are describing *Black Time*. Whereas Wright would argue that we are "Black in time,"

meaning that Blackness is always conceptually a spacetime identification, a when and where rather than a what; and Warren would argue for an operational "Black time," a "time without duration…a horizon of time that eludes objectification, foreclosing idioms such as 'getting over,' 'getting through,' or 'getting beneath,'" my understanding and interpretation of this altered notion of temporality is a refusal to adhere to temporal meaning.[26] Since their subject is Martin's transfigurative Blackness, it cannot be placed snugly and definitively in (legible) time, which makes it fall out of time. That Martin-as-Black-man "never should have happened" operates on the syntax of a phenomenological event ("happened") whose probability ("should") is negated ("never"). Thus, Martin-as-Black-man exceeds probability—he is in excess of the probable, of the possible because he is identificatory space that cannot be temporally mapped definitively. He is not to come ("contra-conditional"; in contradiction to a condition of possibility), or in other words, he is to unbecome. In two other words, he is transfiguratively Black.

No coincidence, then, that we have come to grammar, what it can do, what it can hold—or can't. Unspoken and assumed, grammar structures and subtends speech, action, and legibility—it foundations that which is deemed possible. Grammar underwrites all that is conveyable by affixing it to readable and interpretable logics. Within hegemonic racial grammar, Martin is "temporarily invisible: a fugitive in your own place, in your own time" (16). Tellingly he is twice described as slippery: "I mean, he was slippery," Kelly says in trying to recall what Martin was like as a teenager (144); "He was

[26] Michelle M. Wright, "Black in Time: Exploring New Ontologies, New Dimensions, New Epistemologies of the African Diaspora," *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (April 2010): 70–73; Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen, eds., *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 56.

slippery…Always kind of a mystery," he says again when trying to make sense of the difficulty the hired private investigator had in tracking down Martin's past (145). Martin effectively undoes grammar, he "gives us a new grammar for the body" by indexing Alan, his best friend and catalyst for his radicality. Peculiarly, when Alan spoke to people on the phone he would "hang up in the middle of a sentence" because, according to sixteen-year-old Kelly, "he's opposed to time…And grammar. He thinks all periods should be replaced by semicolons" (93). Semicolons mark both a stoppage and an imminent continuation, a "to come," an *etcetera*. But even more open than this, at the "end" of Alan's life "there *was* no period, or semicolon; there was just silence. There was just:" (93)—openness, a space of always-transitioning. Alan's life neither stopped nor alluded to a continuation; rather, it was simply open, other than itself, other than grammatical being. And Martin is just like Alan. "Part of his mind was always elsewhere, she says. But in that sense he was just like Alan" (145). Both Martin and Alan are always in grammatical elsewhere. The space of transition is an elsewhere, a space that troubles grammar and time (and space) because it refuses their logics. Elsewhere. Or put differently, etcetera.

Living the Etcetera

> "In order to envision and create this new world we sometimes have to suspend our notion of reality, which is always steeped in history. What we have experienced can sometimes confine our imaginations, so we have to work against that non-creative force. This work requires intentionality."

—Kai M. Green, "Fast"

> "I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction. I must constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life. In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself."
>
> —Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

According to that authoritative tome that is the *OED*, "etcetera" stems from the Latin *et cētera,* meaning "the rest" or "the other," and used "as substitute for a suppressed substantive, generally a coarse or indelicate one." Seeing transfigurative Blackness as liveliness in the etcetera indexes the openness of its fugitivity. Dolezal and Martin Wilkinson actualize the rest that is the other, embodying the other-than or the unknown dormant presence always within. To be "the rest" is to always be becoming, to always be extending beyond oneself into an open to-be(come), while to be "the other" is to always be unbecoming, to constantly be dismantling the consolidation of self, again opening oneself which is necessarily an undoing of oneself. The etcetera is that simultaneity.

What Dolezal and Wilkinson do is show up to the call of Blackness when it is presumed (by whom?) that they should not. Authoritative calls of racial interpellation interrupt the intended narrative by answering a call purportedly not for them. As what James Martel calls "misinterpellated subjects," Dolezal and Wilkinson present radical potential because they show up anyway to calls "not for them," thus challenging interpellative force. They are "uninvited subjects" that show "up and refus[e] to go

away."[27] For Dolezal to commit herself to Blackness even after being "found out," to continually affirm that "I identif[y] as Black," she rejects detractors' interpellative call to subjectivate her into whiteness. And is this not what Blackness, at least in part, is—the rejection of whiteness's seduction? Both Dolezal and Wilkinson externalize the anarchic multiplicity, the anoriginal lawlessness, of the heteronymous self; both Dolezal and Wilkinson expose the inadequacy of the interpellative call by showing up "out of place" and thus critique normative ordering.

If we wish to make the world anew, to dislodge all the normative, and hence violent, frameworks from their hold over us, then we must commit to the terrifying work of radical thinking. Such a radical world, a radically undone world, would necessarily look very different than it does now. Refusing to open ourselves to the openness of gender and racial self-determination can only be a troubling attempt to hold on to normativity when it seems convenient or less scary. Only in the unrecognizable and unintelligible do we have chances to escape the grasp of captivity. It is captivity and the subjugation to legible logics from which we are running, after all. Living in the space of becoming other than what we were is where living unbounded happens.

Existing ontologies of Blackness capture it in the epidermis by way of thinking it in terms of a historical condition, effectively obscuring its unruliness and transfigurativity (to fix it in a historical trajectory by definition disallows it from being other than it was). What might be so radical in this chapter is that Blackness is dis/located in the transgressive interstitial space that escapes history; in the space of the "unthought," the outskirts of history's order(ing) is where we might find the Blackness about which I am

[27] James R. Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

speaking, the Blackness of the "born white" who nonetheless do Blackness unapologetically, or the Blackness of the refusal of being fixed by logics of sedimented racialization. Dolezal and Martin Wilkinson, as manifestations of transfigurative Blacknesses, incite the monstrous, the feared unknown and unknowable. Because they transmogrified their bodies, which is to say gave themselves in the service of grotesque, transgressive disruption, they are monstrously queer. And is this not transfigurative Blackness does, render strange and "unnatural" what we thought was set in proverbial stone? It is the unknown of what can arise, what can queerly arise. "Here be monsters" cartographers would write on unvisited territories. But what happens when we listen to and open ourselves up to the monsters? Let us listen to them—but "Be forewarned, however, that taking up this task will remake you in the process."[28]

[28] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (January 1, 1994): 250, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237.

CHAPTER 4: FUGITIVE HOPE

Guide Quotes (After Sylvia Wynter)

come celebrate

with me that everyday

something has tried to kill me

and has failed.

—Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"

They will not claim me

Today

Will not

Find my body

Strewn

Like so much offal

Across the pavement

Will not

Mark the way I move

For death

I

Mean to survive

Live

Love

Thrive

—Morgan Robyn Collado, “I”

…the great difficulty is to say Yes to life.

—James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*

…the even-so and as-yet of living, as black and trans life does.

—C. Riley Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

—Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to be Colored Me”

My joy is revolutionary.

—Lyrae Van-Clief Stefanon

trans (which is always, here, about the conditions of trans life).

—Eva Hayward and Che Gossett, “Impossibility of *That*”

> if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call
>
> us dead, call us alive someplace better.
>
> —Danez Smith, "summer, somewhere"

Here we are. With the theorizing done in the previous chapters, the theoretical abstractions and academic intellectualizing, I write this, here, to try to bring it all to our lives. Or, actually, to *life*. Central to this chapter is the question: how does an understanding of Blackness's Blackness*es* as feminist and trans inflections of fugitivity necessarily shift how we live in the world, how we understand the world, how we, as Tina Campt's definition of fugitivity dictates, quotidianly *practice* refusal? It is necessary to lay out a way to live this life. What does this life of fugitive Blackness's feminism and transness look and feel like? These are the questions animating what I ultimately want to assert as a specific kind of hope that engenders a will to life and living.

More pointedly, it is a fugitive hope that concerns this concluding chapter, one that cites the Black and trans feminist fugitivity of those who live in places where there is "no life to be lived here," a "radical hope" that Junot Diaz writes "is our best weapon against despair" because it "demands flexibility, openness."[1] It is my contention that

[1] Junot Diaz, "Under President Trump, Radical Hope Is Our Best Weapon," *The New Yorker*, November 21, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/under-president-trump-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon. I want to quote Diaz's article at length, as it crystallizes some of my sentiments:

> Because let's be real: we always knew this shit wasn't going to be easy. Colonial power, patriarchal power, capitalist power must always and everywhere be battled, because they never, ever quit. We have to keep fighting, because otherwise there will be no future—all will be consumed. Those of us whose ancestors were owned and bred like animals [a proxy, perhaps, for the Blackened] know that future all too well, because it is, in

fugitive hope rests not in a belief in the essential goodness of the political sphere, but rather in the "possibilities with which 'all reality is fraught,'" and its fomentation of "room for imagining the world differently and in doing so, for transforming the scripts of gendered [and racial] embodiment."[2] In this sense, it is rooted in a kind of transness—a psychic and phenomenological (Black) trans *life*—that bets on the revolutionary and proliferative possibilities of that which we are and have been given. Because we have more than simply those who have been slain and wronged to propel our political commitments, there is always a lively elsewhere in which to place our hope. So, far from conceding Blackness and its affiliates solely to an ontology of social death, imbuing a constitutive fugitive hope into Blackness—or merely revealing its presence therein—enables the possibility of understanding how those Wildersonian "dead relations" formed relations nonetheless, how sociality flourished, how love proliferated, how hope persisted.

> part, our past. And we know that by fighting, against all odds, we who had nothing, not even our real names, transformed the universe. Our ancestors did this with very little, and we who have more must do the same. This is the *joyous* destiny of our people—to bury the arc of the moral universe so deep in justice that it will never be undone….
>
> But all the fighting in the world will not help us if we do not also hope. What I'm trying to cultivate is not blind optimism but what the philosopher Jonathan Lear calls radical hope. "What makes this hope *radical*," Lear writes, "is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is." Radical hope is not so much something you have but something you practice; it demands flexibility, openness, and what Lear describes as "imaginative excellence." Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible. Only radical hope could have imagined people like us into existence. And I believe that it will help us create a better, more loving future.

[2] C. Riley Snorton, "'A New Hope': The Psychic Life of Passing," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 89.

On this score, this chapter casts fugitive hope in contradistinction to understandings of Blackness as mired in social death (even when affixed to "social life" post hoc) and presents a Black trans and feminist critique of monolithic, pessimistic, hopeless Blackness. I am arguing here against the claim of the world's anti-Blackness, not in that I refute such a claim but rather posit that *there are other worlds* in the world that exist and persist in what Snorton calls in one of the guide quotes above the "even-so and as-yet of living" endemic to Black and trans, and feminist, life. What animates my claims is this: I refuse to concede that the world, irrevocably and fundamentally, is anti-Black (and this is to say nothing of the elision of anti-transness, anti-queerness, anti-womanness). My refusal, and thus my fugitive hope, operates under the assumption that the world is in fact a volatile, shifting network of affiliations and connections rather than an immutable, hegemonically imposed template for existence. The subterranean and submerged queer kinships, the clandestine circles in which things are "as quiet as it's kept," the other-mothered nurturances we receive are all ways in which we do and can connect meaningfully with one another. And those connections matter a great deal; those connections, too, are the world in which we (can) live.

Black Feminist Blackness

> "Perhaps the Negro has been able to enact itself as a 'problem for thought' but the black woman will always be a problem for the Negro. We are the problem for thought that goes unthought because we have the potential to undo the white patriarchy that constitutes thought."

—Kumi James, *Letter from a Black Woman to the Students of Black Studies at UCI*

Afro-pessimism marks a thinking-and-being-in-the-world wherein Blackness is perennially hemmed by its social death. The Afro-pessimist is pessimistic because Black suffering becomes the sole vehicle through which the world comes into being; indeed, "the Black's" nothingness becomes the condition of possibility for Being. The entire "game" of life and living is antithetical to Blackness, and violently so. Sing it, Mike:

You cain't win, you cain't break even
And you cain't get out of the game
People keep sayin' things are gonna change
But they look just like they're stayin' the same[3]

Afro-pessimists are firmly rooted in the writings of Frantz Fanon and have aptly been called by Rinaldo Walcott "Fanon's Heirs." The "position of the Black," as Frank B. Wilderson III would argue, is "a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed, in the world, in other words…a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject."[4] As ontologists of Blackness, Afro-pessimists like Wilderson and Jared Sexton—who will be my primary interlocutors on this topic—assert that their theorizing is less concerned with "biological" locales of Blackness or cultural celebrations of it, and

[3] Sidney Lumet, *The Wiz*, Adventure, Family, Fantasy, 1978.
[4] Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.

more aptly theorists of Black positionality. This structural positioning is akin to that of the slave in the U.S. It is important to note that this position is markedly different and distinct from, say, a Marxist proletariat insofar as the "position of the Black" is not merely driven by an exploitative labor relation. Forced labor does not define the slave; rather, "whereas [forced labor] explains a common practice, it does not define the structure of the power relation between those who are slaves and those who are not." This distinction rests on a differentiation between experience (events) and ontology ("the capacities of power—or lack thereof—lodged in distinct and irreconcilable subject positions").[5] Slavery and the social death of/that is Blackness for the Afro-pessimist connotes an ontology for Blackness, Blackness's sole purview; the constituent elements of slavery are not Marxist exploitation and alienation but, in Saidiya Hartman's terms, accumulation and fungibility—the ontological condition of being owned, traded, and exchanged. Blackness becomes the exclusion, the abjection, upon which ontology and the Human rest because history reveals that Blackness's ontology is engendered in the moment of slavery. Blackness, definitionally, is that which is anti-human, that which is enslaveable. It is a veritable non-ontology.

It is my aim, contra the above, to think differently than a certain strain of Afro-pessimistic thinkers if Wilderson and Sexton can serve as archetypes of this strain. I take as axiomatic the claim M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard make in their lengthy introduction to *Theory & Event*'s special issue on Black feminism and Afro-pessimism: "black feminism theorizes black sociality and relationality *independent*

[5] Wilderson, 14; for a discussion of accumulation and fungibility, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

of social death."[6] Black feminism gives my reading of Afro-pessimism a way to think Blackness in excess of death, and that excess is a fugitive hope insofar as it thinks possible the impossible: Black life and sociality thoroughly unbeholden to imposed death, violence, and terror. As theorists of ontological positionality, Wilderson and Sexton theorize Blackness as always poised toward a singular history solely constituted by hurt, to echo Spillers' echo of Jameson. It seems that one of the binds present is the commitment to theorizing positionality. Positionality comes with it a kind of structuralism, a fixation on fixation, which shares the limits of Althusserian structuralism insofar as thinking *movement* and *becoming* pose problems. It posits a rigid ahistoricity unable to theorize how, at the level of the phenomenological and existential, to transform itself, to become, or unbecome, other than itself. For all the talk of radical revolutionary thinking, such a rigid structuralist mode must always defer the event of revolution itself because it is, in fact, an impossibility based on these immutable positions.

The sweeping and at times opaque claims Wilderson makes come from a macropolitical collapsing of Blackness's Blacknesses, namely gendered imbrications of Blackness. As an example, when discussing the protagonist's abortion in *Bush Mama* (1976), Wilderson says, "Dorothy will abort her baby at the clinic or on the floor of her prison cell, not because she fights for—and either wins or loses—the right to do so, but because she is one of 35 million accumulated and fungible (owned and exchangeable) objects living among 230 million subjects—which is to say, her will is always already

[6] M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, "Notes from the Kitchen, the Crossroads, and Everywhere Else, Too: Ruptures of Thought, Word, and Deed from the 'Arbiters of Blackness Itself,'" *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (February 13, 2018): 7.

subsumed by the will of civil society."[7] Here, and elsewhere, he does not note the specificity with respect to, not a monolithized gender—e.g. "women"—per se, but those who possess wombs. Dorothy is a *specific* kind of Black person, one who is gendered in a way that subjects her to policing of her reproductive capacity—indeed, who has reproductive capacity at all. She is not "one of 35 million accumulated and fungible" objects, but one of roughly half that. This is not a phenomenon that Black people without wombs will endure, thus flattening differentiation within Blackness. He does not allow for, as my dissertation's title suggests, Blacknesses of Blackness. He thus loses analytical specificity and reveals his gendered blindnesses, not to mention removing any agency from individual Black people. She very well could have gone through with the pregnancy, succumbing not to the will and rule of whiteness but in fact, at least based on the logic of the film, to the demand of her Black community, Dorothy having been virtually commanded to not get an abortion by Simmi. Too, she was subject to the internal wavering the product of various forces, one of which was indeed white supremacist law but others of which included her relationship with her husband T.C. or the desire to have or not have another child. (Not to mention patriarchal will and expectation, the desire of T.C. being operable in a patriarchal sense of his will his way, so to speak.) Civil society may decide one thing for her, but Black people have always opposed the rule of civil society whether refusing to remain enslaved, not doing what their (male) partners or the church or the medical industrial complex demand of them. And Black women have subverted and opposed civil society, rebuking respectability politics, the demand to adhere to certain aesthetics, or the expectation of Black women to

[7] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 128.

behave in specific gendered ways (one may think of Toni Morrison's *Sula* or the Convent women in *Paradise*). Though curtailed, Dorothy's will is not subsumed; skewed life choice is not *no* life choices. She always has the capacity, limited as it may be, to be and do something else. In such an attempt to make Blackness the radical bedrock of abjection, Wilderson refuses to think both the possibility of will or capacity (however small) as well as gender and thus mitigates the reach of his theorizations, refusing to note how Blackness is inflected in and through different kinds of Black people and genders. And that is in part my aim: to unveil the trans and feminist inflections that bear on a fugitive understanding of Blackness.

For such focus on how "the" Black body is terrorized, there is little excavation of what Sarah Haley calls "gendered racial terror," as in the case of her brilliant archival mediation on the specific terror that betided incarcerated Black women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—very nearly the *only* women incarcerated at all.[8] If Afro-pessimists are theorists, first and foremost, of ontological positionality, Wilderson at least fails to excavate the complexity of differently positioned "Blacks" (indexed by his troublesomely phrased and constant usage of "the Black"). He makes his living (or, his dying) on a monolithic Blackness, something long critiqued by Black feminist traditions. To put it as simply as possible, Black feminist Blackness approaches homogenized, untextured Blackness (Blackness without Blacknesses) and asks, in its deathly face, "What do you mean *we*, black man?"[9]

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[8] See Haley, *No Mercy Here*.

[9] Kathryn T. Gines, "Black Feminist Reflections on Charles Mills's 'Intersecting Contracts,'" *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 1 (January 9, 2017): 27. In this meditation on Charles W. Mills' "racia-sexual contract," Gines interrogates Mills' assertion that "race usually trumps gender," bringing a feminist of Color critique to his theorizations.

What is also worrying about Wilderson's thought, among other things, is his refusal to acknowledge different conceptions of the human. He refuses to entertain the possibility of how his proverbial, literal, and positional Slave *thinks itself as a different kind of human*. A narrow view of sociality indeed, Wilderson's archetypes of the White, the Slave, and the Savage as the only legible roles of engaging the social suffer from his extreme investment in Western humanism, in Wynter's ethnoclass "Man," as the only modality of being. There is no way out of Wilderson's archetypes; there is no way to think of or enact oneself differently. It is this different enactment of oneself that fugitive hope aspires toward, an otherwise enactment that is in fact engendered by Blackness's and transness's creative, generative capacities: living otherwise by way of what Snorton, following Wynter, articulates as those "strategies for inhabiting unlivable worlds."[10] There is another kind of sociality that comes to the fore when entering into Blackness's and transness's fugitivity which refuses to concede to hegemony's sovereignty. This world has only begun to see its breadth; in this world, there's always something else going on. The something else is what fugitives hope for.

This other sociality, this something else, for me, is given through Black trans and feminist social life. Abjected positionality indeed looks back and thus stakes the claim that how things are is not the only way they can be; or rather, as Hortense Spillers writes, "The [Black] subject is certainly seen, but she also sees. It is this return of the gaze that

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Central to feminists of Color's intersectional analysis is "the necessity to push beyond a singular, additive, comparative, or competing analysis of intersecting identities and interlocking systems of oppression that assume race trumps gender." At base, Gines notes, "nonwhite men can be patriarchal, too," necessitating a textured conveyance of Blackness and gender analysis, indeed gender constitutivity.

[10] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 7.

negotiates at every point a space for *living*…"[11] This capacity to look back and advance another way constitutes fugitive hope. It negotiates the presence of (Black and trans) life by hoping in the dark, precisely because the darkness has engendered our thoroughgoing life. In the shadowy darkness, we fugitively hope, peering back at the world, looking at it, too, with subjective presence, making it quiver.

If you'll allow me one more proxy for Afro-pessimism, Jared Sexton, I will conclude my dialogue with Afro-pessimism via a meditation on the insufficiency of Afro-pessimism's incorporation of Black feminist critiques. Sexton's nuanced articulation of Blackness to account for queerness and Black feminism in "Afro-pessimism: the Unclear Word," though admirable, is still wanting. I part with Sexton's attempt to appropriate Black Lives Matter (BLM) in and as Afro-pessimism, and by extension Afro-pessimism's inherent queerness and Black feminism by virtue of BLM's queer and feminist propositions. The queer Black women at the inception of the hashtag-turned-movement are explicit about its feminist necessity, even its trans feminist underpinnings, for sure.[12] On Sexton's account, BLM "would not seem to require modification or specification or

[11] Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 163. Emphasis added.

[12] janaya khan (who uses the first person singular "they" pronoun, and who now goes by Future Khan-Cullors [they got married to BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors]) writes that "Queer and trans Black people have the skills and tools necessary for the liberation for all Black peoples. None more so than Black trans women." Furthermore, they assert, unwaveringly, that "Black trans women are the fulcrum of Black liberation." janaya (j) khan, "Black Trans Women to the Front!," *The Feminist Wire*, February 4, 2015, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/02/op-ed-black-trans-women-front/. As well, in Alicia Garza's "Herstory" of the movement, she writes that BLM "goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum."

expansion against a presumptively male and heterosexual victim of anti-black violence precisely because it *is* that insistent modification and specification and expansion" (para 21), but it seems that Sexton suffers from an urge to make Afro-pessimism a totalizing, all-encompassing theoretical apparatus. Sexton's tenor is one of Afro-pessimism's *subsumption* of Black feminism rather than a textured, genuine, and rigorous *constitutivity*. In other words, if Sexton's Afro-pessimism claims BLM as a site of Afro-pessimistic theorization, he seeks to rebut the critique of Afro-pessimism's androcentrism through arguing for BLM's always already Black feminism and thus the always already feminism of Afro-pessimism. If BLM is, from the jump, a queer and feminist enterprise (which it in many ways is), and if BLM is a manifestation of Afro-pessimistic sentiments, then Sexton sidesteps the critique of Afro-pessimism's need to account for, and incorporate, Black feminist intellectual productions and the qualitatively different history and sociality of Black women ("cis" and, even more urgently, trans). But Sexton obscures these critiques by refusing to address them, instead opting to blanket all the fractures and distinctions of Black life under his iteration of Afro-pessimism. Sexton commits to the fallacious belief that merely "bringing in" women and gender, or queer identification for that matter, obviates any feminist critique of his position. Add women to an existing framework and stir to yield a feminist framework; he presumes that mere incorporation is sufficient. It is not. Simply bringing in women does not render a framework feminist; including women, trans people, queer people, and the like is not, in itself, a feminist move.

All of this is simply to say that Sexton marks the Black feminism of BLM in the identities of its creators. But what Sexton lacks is Black radical feminism's qualitatively

fundamental alteration via its constitutivity in Afro-pessimism, that is, the gendered deconstruction of Afro-pessimist assertions and undoing of the monolithic "the Black." Bringing Black feminism to bear on Afro-pessimism refigures how abjection vis-à-vis Blackness is understood, namely insofar as Black feminist thinking concedes that, as Rizvana Bradley succinctly articulates, "black femininity…disrupts the general economy of incapacity," and "black suffering and pain are emphatically gendered."[13] How is the social life amid social death of Blackness experienced and theorized differently for Black women, for Black trans folks? What does the necessary violent revolution look like not only for the implicit Black men who largely advocate Afro-pessimism—and who are mired in Fanon's noted androcentrism—but for Black women, trans, and queer people?

More generally across that mode of thinking Blackness called Afro-pessimism there exists a disdain for revolutionary abolitionist acts that don't in their singularity topple the acropolis of slavery's many afterlives. Such smaller acts are dismissed as either capitulations or ineffective faux acts of abolition. These "forces of mitigation that would transform the world through a coalition of a thousand tiny causes," seen disparagingly, are subordinated in Wilderson's and Sexton's thought to more macropolitical conflagrations that will spectacularly disintegrate contemporary slavery in a fiery blaze. Until this happens, it appears that nothing will qualify as real subversive abolitionist politics. An oversight is present here though, namely David L. Kline's critical query of "what the proper level of abolition could possibly mean *other than* a pragmatic coalition—or a micropolitics—of a thousand tiny causes," a simple yet trenchant

[13] Rizvana Bradley, "Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity's Lyrical Surplus, and the Cinematic Limits of 12 Years a Slave," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (January 9, 2016): 164, 166.

acknowledgement of how abolition can only occur: in the processual making and tinkering.[14] And further still, revolution or radical abolition, in these micropolitical moments, might look unlike revolutionary radicality. If one of the critiques of Afro-pessimism is an understanding of it as "a retrograde and isolationist nationalism, a masculinist and heteronormative enterprise" (para 4), it is because in Sexton's formulation there is a missing account of how Black feminist legacies of recalibrating the look and feel of liberation and its rhetoric bear on Afro-pessimist frameworks. When Sexton notes the "nagging burden of proof of abolition" (para 5), for which he is still waiting, it seems that he cannot understand abolition outside of a grand gesture of freedom. Thinking with the Black feminist fugitivity articulated by Alexis Pauline Gumbs in Chapter 2, it becomes necessary to recalibrate the look and feel of abolition. A Black feminist Blackness stemming from fugitivity must believe in life and in that visceral network of making that meal, planting seeds in that garden, getting off that bus, staying *on* that bus, saying that "Good morning," or whatever, even if its efficacy is not legible. The small decision, the minutiae that is feminist fodder, insists on all those miraculous tiny breaths we were not meant to breathe, insists on living—insists, always, on life. This is to say, overt, explosive abolition so couched in masculinist terms is a tired and ineffective way of understanding what abolition can be. Revolution must follow the unanticipatory trans that Jack Halberstam imagines, "not as a masculinist surge or an armed confrontation" but as and in "a form we cannot yet imagine"—a trans form that refuses capturability in, as Halberstam concludes, the "wild beyond."[15] Revolution can

[14] David Kline, "The Pragmatics of Resistance: Framing Anti-Blackness and the Limits of Political Ontology," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 1 (January 9, 2017): 66.
[15] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 10–11.

be, and perhaps must be, something that steadily grows. If Gumbs asks "What if abolition isn't a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event?" then perhaps inhabiting the fugitive space of Black feminism means that abolition might be "something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you."[16] Abolition, which is to say the world-making of fugitive hope, occurs in the mundane places of our subjectivity, or the minutiae of our living, the little acts of refusal.

To think Black and trans social life is to stand unwaveringly in the assertion that they are not reducible to, nor understood best primarily through, a history of violence and terror. It is, in fact, "the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience" as Terrion L. Williamson argues. Black feminist understandings of Blackness and gender necessitate a pointed feminist recalibration of how Blackness has been fixed in death, even if those claims of Blackness's death attempt to account for a kind of life. Here, and in how I read Black feminism, Blackness is always lively and immersed in life. Death is of less concern that so often given. The hope arises precisely in our not trapped and precisely in the *working* of the trap and trappedness. It is life that ain't got time for the purportedly validating gaze of whiteness, choosing instead to imagine itself through itself, its own rubrics, and creating something else. Black feminist legacies have long been concerned not with whether one is seen as fungible or deemed a "dead relation" by State powers but with Black interiority. The concern has been on, say, what those living Black life think about the life they are living.

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[16] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina," in *Abolition Now!: Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. CR10 Publications Collective (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008), 145.

Williamson's specific Black feminist critique of Afro-pessimism—or more closely, the thinking of Blackness as proximal to (social) death—deems it impossible to align Blackness with death. The cogency of her argument comes not merely from a sustained treatment of scholarship but more from the experiential, the unapologetic love for the (Black women) folk that have edified her for decades, who live the most potent counter-argument to social death theory. When she discusses her "Grammy," how she took care of her home as an act of love and rejection of the idea that her life was "circumscribed by the conditions of its possibility"; or when she conveys how her Black women friends of various ages would "go *in*" in a "slain-in-the-spirit takeover" kind of way—these women vitiate the very possibility of social death even daring to timidly rap on their doors. These women, disseminators of Black feminist theory, make a profound argument that "black social life, the *primary* measure of black subjectivity, is…fugitive." This social life, Williamson says, "coheres, accumulates its sociality, in the wild. Black social life is therefore irreducible to the codes of (white) civil society that it brings into being; the *outside* of value is *its* tabula raza."[17]

Williamson misattributes the theorizing of Black social life's fugitivity to Sexton, who is in fact disdainful of fugitivity, or at least wary of its efficacy. He notes, "Fugitivity is not freedom, or not yet." Further, he links this unenthusiasm to a reserve stemming from the historical positioning of Black women who, he argues, have an "especially troubled history of…claims to mobility and movement."[18] I part with his argument on two fronts. First, I part with his claim that fugitivity is not yet freedom in

[17] Terrion L. Williamson, *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life*, First edition, Commonalities (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 4–9, 66, 18. Emphasis in original.
[18] Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes*, 2016.

that, while I think I understand he thinks one will not be saved via constant escape, I would argue that the practice of escaping, getting outside of things, exceeding regimes of capture is in fact the means by which freedom is actualized. Fixity and categorization, destinational desires and circumscription, are various apparatuses of capture that only excessive escape can subvert and translate into what might be called freedom. And, too, this freedom cannot even begin to materialize if one does not yearn for another way to be in the world—in other words, a fugitive hope, a hope that exceeds circumscription. (I am curious, too, about where Sexton might rest Blackness in relation to freedom, considering that he understands "free black" as an "oxymoron" [para 3] since Blackness, for him, is akin to enslavement and fixity. How can one unapologetically, lovingly, *simply* be and become Black in this formulation? If one wishes to be free, they must troublingly wish themselves anything other than Black. Have we not yet learned from Pecola Breedlove's ultimate insanity?) Second, fugitivity does not have to look like it has been historically construed along lines of physically running away, leaving everyone behind. If we are to seriously consider Black women—who, I must reiterate since Sexton seems to be guilty of this, are not reducible to "Black feminism"; Black feminism is not, simply, to say Black women and their incorporation into existing frameworks—we must rethink what fugitivity looks like. As if, Sexton, stillness or not moving precludes flight, precludes movement and fugitivity. It does not; we escape often without moving a muscle. It can look like the illegible thought occurring as she knits on the sofa. It can look like kneeling in the dirt planting seeds, watching flowers grow. It can look like the flaxen pages of a centuries'-old recipe book. It can look like laughter, like making jokes, like sleeping, like taking a five-minute break from everyone else. It's, again, Pilate's flight without leaving

the ground; the moving without movement of Harriet Jacobs. These other modes of life and living flew under your radar, Jared, and you didn't even see them.

If it hasn't been clear by now: this is about life. This is about what propels Ashlee Marie Preston's survival guidelines for trans women: the urge "to surthrive instead of survive."[19] To do more than simply stay alive but to thrive in life, to *go in* on life even amid pervasive extermination, is to declare profoundly that living is the best counter to forces that have as their aim your demise, indeed, that have as their foundational condition of possibility your contentment with their deathly valuative rubrics. Relegating an implicit whiteness and thus anti-Blackness to the realm of the social a priori disallows Blackness from touching the social realm. Blackness and the life it lives, when it is even said to live life particularly without affixations of some kind of death, is written off as something that must leave and live out of this world, in outer space. The sentiment compels marginal understanding, as the history of the world is one not too chipper with the presence of Blackness. But we have heard this before: the Negroes cannot stay here, it was said, send them elsewhere so they do not seek vengeance upon the whites for crimes past. Send them to Liberia, to Ile a Vache. But whatever you decide, they do not belong, nor do they deserve to stay, here ("Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in…"). We are indeed living in the afterlife of slavery. Too, we are living in the afterlife of its para-sentiments, the residual debates and discourses running alongside that "Great War." But I must make a plea, if I may, that Blackness lays claim to this world. I want to believe in the world; I want Blackness to pervade the world of which it too takes hold.

[19] Ashlee Marie Preston, "A Transwoman of Color's Guide to Survival," *Afropunk* (blog), July 7, 2017, http://afropunk.com/2017/07/a-transwoman-of-color-s-guide-to-survival-self-care-is-key/.

Only when one concedes to the utter ineffectiveness of Blackness to infect sociality does one think only in outer space can Blackness thrive. Nah. I do not make that concession, that Blackness cannot do the damn thing right here, goin' in right where we be at, where we stay at. I do not concede to the luminous, overwhelming whiteness of the world because, as Baldwin says, "The world is not white. It never was white. It cannot be white."[20] Blackness lives here. Blackness ain't goin' nowhere, and has been here from the jump. I possess a persistent optimism because it is the posture of fugitive hope that must refuse the theorization of colonization and emigration efforts, as if Blackness must leave. I want the world, because it is mine too. I want the world because I cannot not take it; the world has made and unmade me, and I refuse to disown its inhabitation of me. Messy as the world is, I heed Hortense Spillers because we are here, right here, "everywhere *in* it and *of* it—the world's mess."[21]

Multitudes

> "We have to show the world that we are numerous."
>
> —Sylvia Rivera

There is, to my mind, a profound hope in thinking multitudinously. To think multitudinously—the –es of Blacknesses—is to think in excess of the singular and the

[20] See James Baldwin, "Black English: A Dishonest Argument," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).
[21] Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 40. Emphasis in original.

abject because a multitude's many-ness offers possibility. And in possibility is where another kind of life might be found. The multitude does not abide implicit coherences and discrete categorization, nor does it abide binaristic thinking that disallows the in-between or the outside (i.e. the nonbinary). The multitude, in more ways than one, illustrates the space of the trans.

Using Kai M. Green, CeCe McDonald, and Treva Ellison's forum on Trans Multitudes as a theoretical apparatus, and CeCe McDonald's poem "Death Reality" as an object of analysis, this section will dwell on how the nexus of Black and trans expresses a fugitive hope. At the outset, I want to quote McDonald's poem:

I've come to accept that I will die.
I know this.
And frightening it is
But I refuse to live in
Fear.
You try so hard
To make me deny
Myself
To inherit a lie.

McDonald begins with a fundamental acceptance that she will die. This, however, is far from conceding that her life, as resting at the intersection of Black and trans and femme, is deathbound. She will die, yes, but it is not because an external force will deem her dead,

socially or literally. She will die but she is not dead. Death is a living in fear, or a life constituted by fear. Even more, she will not deny the life that saturates her. There are various ways that the world attempts to have her inherit a lie—a lie of her "biological maleness," a lie of her non-right to defend herself, which is to say to live boldly. She will commit to living, to hoping that her next day will come even when she is surrounded by white and cis male supremacist vitriol, accosted by it even. That which is dead has no reason to fight for its non-life, so each moment of fighting off the onslaught of her demise is an intentional fugitive hope. Fugitive hope as constituted by an insistence on Black trans life looks like when you are sentenced to 41 months in prison for second-degree manslaughter after defending yourself from the racist and transphobic vitriol being lashed at you, which is to say refusing the given ontology of abject Black trans womanness in favor of one that agentially decides that it "won't die," as I speak to below; it looks like a self-defense that is radically transformative. That is, CeCe McDonald's self-defense was an instance of a praxis that seeks to regenerate Black trans womanness—that fugitive, ungendering force of disruption—through agency and life rather than imminent death. This self-defense is indexical of one's ability to imagine oneself possible and alive in another way. Since the violence faced is ultimately about controlling unruly movement, by extension the alleviation of violence is that unruly movement. Trans and feminist Blackness become our ability to handle the excess of women's role as "pain porn and totems and mammies," to handle alleviation of violence against women, as Shaadi Devereaux argues.[22]

[22] Shaadi Devereaux, "Trans Women: Live and in Color," *The Progressives* (blog), March 7, 2015.

McDonald thinks "beyond identity" into a space where her subjectivity as Black and trans and woman—though this nexus is defined hegemonically through abjection and death—is imagined beyond this legible identity as something that is yet to exist: Black trans life, through and through, unfettered by terror. McDonald imagines herself in excess of Black trans deathboundedness without jettisoning how violence pervades Black trans experience. As Green, McDonald, and Ellison write, "the re-memory work Black trans, gender non-conforming and gender fluid writers, artists, dreamers, thinkers, performers, and activists are doing is multifaceted: we have to remember against modes of remembering that forget how transgender…is grounded in the materialities of anti-black racism and Black resistance." There is a shift, however, a shift toward something that I might argue is more foundational: "We *also*," they say, "have to actively forget ways of seeing and remembering ourselves and communities as nothing: we have to practice being as an active attempt to forget what we look like through Western eyes."[23]

I am alive.

And I have died

An infinite death.

I am here.

McDonald is alive even though she has died an infinite death. She is still here, an echo of Black trans woman Miss Major's oft-quoted assertion that she is "still fucking

[23] Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, and CeCe McDonald, "An Introduction: When Remembering Forgets, What Forgetting Remembers," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), November 20, 2017, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2017/11/introduction-remembering-forgets-forgetting-remembers/.

here." Green, McDonald, and Ellison's commentary on the poem notes that "life and death are written and re-written through struggle and articulated via praxis," making death and life always malleable, always shifting in meaning.[24] Death only wins, so to speak, when the work ceases. They write further, "If death is a lurking shadowy presence that attempts to parameterize life through the metric of time, then how are we living outside of time and the quantum logics of civilization?" Fugitive hope is the living outside of time and civilization because it yearns for something not legible in current frameworks. Gleaning this from Black trans life—how those who navigate sociality through an experiential and analytic Blackness and transness—makes fugitive hope an articulated expression of Snorton's epigraphic reminder to consider the even-so and as-yet of living found in Black and trans life.

And that happens in what Treva Ellison calls "an anti-social social" created by transgender, gender non-conforming and gender-fluid people: non-biological and non-nuclear kinship formations, "crafting ranges of genders and vectors of desire and pleasure that vex binaristic and explanatory logics," imaginative remembrances and critically fabulated memories, and "trying to forget and outlive the strictures of life, death, pain and trauma." This is all, as Ellison concludes, neither living nor dead nor living-dead—it is "deathless."[25] We fugitively hope for a deathless world.

This rejection of the necropolitical frame motivates Erin Durban-Albrecht's trans* Haitian narrativity. Durban-Albrecht's intentional movement "alongside and

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[24] "Trans Multitudes and Death Reality: A Coda," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), November 27, 2017, https://thefeministwire.com/2017/11/trans-multitudes-death-reality-coda/.
[25] Treva Ellison, "Day 1: When Remembering Forgets, Forgetting Remembers," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), November 20, 2017, 1, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2017/11/introduction-remembering-forgets-forgetting-remembers/.

beyond" death-read narratives of Blackness understands Blackness and its constitutive transness as excessive of death and violence, constituted by and through life—those "life-building strategies of survival" specifically for trans Haitian lives. Durban-Albrecht indexes a fugitively hopeful outlook by focusing explicitly on "unsettl[ing] the proximity of black and death," the living archive, and thinking Black trans subjectivity through this frame.[26] She hunkers down in the life of fugitive hope, as it reaches for the vestiges of life that are themselves worlds and reveal that this world must recognize that we are not going to lay down and die.

McDonald again:

And whether it be.

By me.

The world.

The love of my life.

I push.

To live.

Seen and unseen

Thriving.

Striving.

[26] Erin Durban-Albrecht, "Postcolonial Disablement and/as Transition: Trans* Haitian Narratives of Breaking Open and Stitching Together," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017): 196, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814997.

No matter where the specter of death comes from, because it can come from anywhere, she still pushes to live. It does not have be seen, or unseen, because its efficacy is not predicated on optics that we know. It is a living that thrives and strives, a living that comes about in escaping the very logics of life and death defined by normative rubrics; it is a living that comes from multitudinous rupture, as Black and trans only know how to do. Multitudinous Black and trans life "script[s] that alternative/surprise ending," an ending that must be capped with a question mark (as it is in the original, as it is asked as a question) because we cannot know what it has in store for us. Black and trans *being* is somethin' else, you know, because "It is a simultaneous living in spite of and in intimate partnership with death, premature and otherwise, that we Black Trans, gender non-conforming, and non-binary writers, artists, thinkers, makers, and doers, be. We be making ways out of no way, rising as the phoenix do and bowing knees prayin' like granny too. We believe that we can do all things, *all the things*, through our Black radical feminist fierceness…"[27]

Won't Die Things

> "These bodies, even lynched, still are thinking."
>
> —Rickey Laurentiis, "Of the Leaves That Have Fallen"

> "If you were to hang yourself, you wouldn't die, you don't know how to die."

[27] "Trans Multitudes and Death Reality."

—Dawn Lundy Martin, *Life In a Box Is a Pretty Life*

What is a thing that does not die? No: what is a thing that *won't* die, that refuses to die, that, perhaps, cannot die? This is not to slander the axiom of pervasive Black death, the legitimacy of Black mourning, but rather to assert *that Blackness lives*. I want to insert fugitive hope as designation of a Blackness that *won't* die—an agential, volatile refusal of death, combating of death, belief in itself as that which will not submit to or be acknowledged by the logics of death. We, Blackness's various incarnations, are won't die things.

Zora Howard's poem "Won't Die Things," a veritable praise song for Black excessive life, discursively manifests Black bodies as in possession of "rebellious lungs" and "riotous blood." Won't die things have a "beef with death" because it is death that seeks to lay claim to them and subjectivate them.[28] They are poetic illustrations of the ether that Blackness's excess, its inherent generativity, always reveals. Insofar as corporeal extermination via legal and extra-legal means is a profound regulation of Blackness, the fugitive hope I affix to Blackness indexes "blackness's very deregulatedness," a life in/on the run J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak designate as a "queer generativity" that arises with a being accosted by the inadequacy of regulative forces.[29] The profound fugitivity of won't die things is enabled by their subjectivation outside of power. Inasmuch as power bears not only a subordinating

[28] *Won't Die Things* (The Strivers Row #BlackLivesMatter Benefit Show, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbtxa1XJ7gA. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes in this section reference Howard's poem.
[29] J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak, "Black Ether," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 16, no. 2 (2016): 205, 212, 221n11.

relation to subjects but also an enlivening relation, a relation that makes subjects recognizable as legible subjects, I want to think here about the (im)possibility of subjectivation outside of the constitutive dynamics of power. Power dictates what lives and dies, so perhaps the fugitive hope I am describing is a kind of wish for that impossible subjectivity not predicated on power and thus the onset of a life that does not adhere to the tenets prescribed by power. Death and the State's regulated iterations of "life" are inadequate to these things that are things that won't die. In refusing death, these won't die things implicitly assert that they, too, can claim life in this world. They claim the life of their refusal of death—this is what is hoped in, this life in *refusing* death, a life that is not only a part, but constitutive, of this world too. Fugitive hope, epitomized by these won't die things, is the rejection of the foundation of the tenets of the socio-political landscape, and the belief in and love for a Blackened world, a socio-political landscape that is rendered unintelligible as a socio-political landscape, a world-in-Black, which is not to say a world that is not here, but an intensification/apocalyptic outbreak of the Blackness already in, and a valid owner of, this world. Blackness "won't die" because it has met death already, and it has refused death, surthrived.

Howard's poem is an elegy, but it is one dedicated precisely to those who will not die, those who "defy the grave." She distills what the Black elegy does and dramatizes Black life even in Black death, nullifying the very possibility of Black death—Blackness is that which will not die, so to elegize Blackness is to always speak of life. Here is an impossible hope, a fugitive hope: even in the face of "objective," demonstrable death, still, Blackness refuses death; Blackness "won't stay dead," per Howard, which is to say will continue to live. The elegy can be said to respond to James Baldwin's 1963 threat,

but from the position of Blackness. That is, if Baldwin, citing the Negro folk saying, threatens that "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, [but] no more water, the fire next time!" Blackness responds to this threat via Howard: "Fire won't end us!" Bring the fire next time, it will not end us; bring your best divinely-ordained death and we will escape because, sure, "we know the fall, but we know better the flight." And I understand Howard's "we" here through Snorton's "temporality of sociogenesis," a "prayer" summoning absent (or absented) interlocutors who might be living somewhere better demanding that we enact "a different future to begin now."[30] I mean, what is this other than fugitive hope? Howard's won't die things as expressions of fugitive hope will always survive and thrive, as the colloquial saying goes, and makes clear that instead of concerning the "death-bound subject" it concerns the almost impossible liveliness of Black subjectivity, of Black *life*.

At the level of aspiration, how we breath and how our heart beats, we must maintain a "stubborn heart and indignant breath," a heart that beats even after its been pierced by smoldering lead, a breath that sucks in air as we are choked. I am speaking of the impossible, yes, I know. I am speaking of a dream, a fallacy, that has been shown yet again—and again, and again—to be untrue, our hearts stopping when we plummet to the earth after our John or our intimate partner "discovers" our transness, our breath ceasing when the State is fed up with the loosies we sold. I am speaking, though, supplementarily, of the only possibility we have. I am speaking, of course, of the possibility of us living. And I will not stop speaking of it. We, as Howard says, "don't stay dead somehow." I am speaking of that, of the ways in which we won't stay dead and

[30] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, ix.

exceed in and as life. I hope, against hope, fugitively I suppose, that we won't stay dead even when they kill us. Fugitive hope demands this, at least of me; it demands that we live here, otherwise, refusing to remain dead because we have to live. We have to live right here because, as Howard concludes, "We ain't goin' nowhere." To go nowhere when the demand is that we leave permanently implies that "here" cannot remain what it is, especially if we stay precisely because its hereness is predicated on us leaving (or being forced to/willing to leave). That Howard responds unwaveringly that "We here, still. You hear me—we here, still" is a double-pronged response: we are here and will not leave, and we are here, which disallows "here" to stay the same. It subverts racial and gendered demands to play by the rules if one chooses to stay or leave if one is unhappy with the way things are—the right-wing "If you don't like it here, then you can get out." As an iteration of Denise Ferreira da Silva's Black feminism that "refus[es] to disappear and…refus[es] to comply," Howard expresses, implicitly, a fugitive hope that operates along specific lines of race and gender.[31]

Is it (im)possible to unwaveringly maintain that those who fugitively hope become "endless"? Without end, we live and live, we "is endless," Howard says. Our is-ness is constituted through endlessness, which is to say a fugitive refusal of closure; our is-ness is "boundless bow." How illuminating, Zora (your namesake is showing). The bow, or synonymously, the hold, of the ship—the ship's underbelly—is an endlessness. It is not confinement, nor is it capture. The bow is endless, and parts of us got made there. How can one not hope, grittily so, when we've become through endlessness?

[31] Ferreira da Silva, "Hacking the Subject."

My concern is oriented not through a social life of social death, a syntactical formation which subordinates the life to a death implied to be more fundamental, but through the fundament of social life. My concern is oxymoronic: "I'm a surviving, walking oxymoron / Obviously I can say that I am alive and I'm tryna die this way," raps hip-hop artist Royce Da 5'9".[32] Life remains even in dying; Black life persists even in death. Life pervades, but not to the naïve exclusion of the numerous instances of fatal violence against Black bodies. Blackness through the analytic of fugitive hope has a profound (un)fixation on the excessiveness of Black life, on how it saturates even in death. Even as forces of fatality via the hands and guns of whiteness exterminate the aspirative breath of Black bodies, they speak back. Decomposing bodies beneath the ground, underground, still, always, speak back from within death—because they still live, they continue Black life. In taking up M. Nourbese Philip's call to "defend the dead," the dead, in fact, speak through us and thus refuse, always, to die. There is profound hope here. This is fugitive hope.

On this score, we might apply fugitive hope by citing the things that won't die. Won't die things live in the flesh, flickeringly, as fugitivity only can. The flesh cannot die; it is the surplus to death that escapes all attempts to fix and capture it; a transfigurative volatility that remains subversive to and in spite of the violent act(s). Flesh can do nothing but live; flesh can do nothing but stay. And that is what we will do: we will live, we will stay—in the flesh, moving, "worship[ing] agility," per Joshua Bennett, or transitively, following David Wolach, flesh is the body's afterword—or maybe even more accurately its foreword—that "desire[s] to be and to become as: on the move,"

[32] Royce Da 5'9" and Slaughterhouse, *Monsters in My Head*, 2012.

making a transgressive and transmogrifying (para)ontological un/home in that movement.[33] Even in what has come to be deemed a kind of social death the flesh carves out a sociality and forces us, ultimately, to give primacy to sociality itself because it ain't goin' nowhere—or maybe, in an additional, simultaneous sense, that is *exactly* where it's going, because nowhere is the fantastic, oceanic, social hold of the Middle Passage ship; the pulling and disavowing Elsewhere-that-is-here; the decolonial terrain of errantry; the horizon of going, going, never-gone, still going.

Ceasing to struggle, to love, to continue to hope is not an option. Struggle must be fundamentally joyous; one must have that joy in struggle, a joy that, I would say, is constitutive of the persistent struggle. When accosted with those forces that fetter us, kill us, how and why do we continue? Quite simply, because we must. The political realm extends far beyond the institutional, the governmental, and into the generative and volatile space of the underground, the undercommons.

~

I do not believe in social death. I refuse the validity of the very claim that Blackness dies. They cannot kill Blackness, y'all. Blackness cracks jokes in terminal cancer's face; like that Christian messiah who did not die, who is said to live perpetually in the all of the

[33] See "On Extinction" in Joshua Bennett, *The Sobbing School*, National Poetry Series (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 2; see Wolach's "Poetic Statement," in which Wolach writes, "*The body* is an afterword for what has yet to exist….for many friends, to be trans is to be more overtly manifesting transition than I am currently—to be enacting the life and death struggle of desire through a physics of risk. The desire to be and to become as: on the move," in T. C. Tolbert and Tim Trace Peterson, eds., *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat books, 2013), 131.

world, Blackness rises and moves boulders, Jesus-like because the only people who can feed that many people with such paltry rations are "big mamas"; like double-dutch in the streets, making the passing cars wait until you trip up—but you never trip; like laughing at cartoons, your body and the TV on the floor so the bullets flying inches above you from drive-bys don't interrupt Spongebob's and Patrick's shenanigans; like cookouts where your niece is telling everyone how awesome her dark skin is because the sun loved her so, so, soooo much, or where you uncle is acting a fool, talking about how he "still got it" even after his six decades of life. You cannot kill Blackness. We are won't die things. "Despite every reason not to, we still smile, we still laugh, we still love, we still Black, y'all. We still."[34]

[34] Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism.* University of Arizona Press, 2019. 7; Javon Johnson, *Black and Happy*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0pposi4rlE.