

Quantum Blackanics:
Untimely Blackness, and Black Literature Out of Nowhere

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VITA

John Murillo III was born in Los Angeles, California. He earned a B.A. in English from the University of California, Irvine in June 2011. While at the UCI, Murillo worked as staff, and briefly as Co-Editor, of *Umoja News Magazine*, and held the position of Director of Communications for UCI's Black Student Union. During his tenure at Brown University, Murillo taught literature and writing courses, and counseled and mentored students in and beyond the classroom. This carried over to his work as a WISE Mentor for Black students the University of California Irvine, beginning in 2015.

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INTRODUCTION:

Turning To The Dark Side

Black “life” and “death” do not matter. This is the structural truth of the antiblack world, and this truth (or “fact”¹) telegraphs an unethical, gratuitously violent antagonism between Black folk who “live” and “die,” and the antiblack world that sanctions, desires, and demands the meaninglessness of even those quotation marks.² The most attentive and radical Black thought and action works to examine the forces that drive the antiblack world, and contend the destructive, terrorizing manifestations and effects of those forces as they position Blacks in space and time. My dissertation attempts to map these forces *from* a Black position through a careful examination of twentieth century Black literature. Specifically, I am guided by this set of questions: How do the forces that position Blacks in the space and time antiblack world affect the kind of (literary) creation we might produce? How might we engage Black (literary) creation? And what is at stake in both

¹ Pace Frantz Fanon, this is an explicit reference to the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), “The Fact of Blackness.”

² Pace Hortense Spillers, this is a reference to “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” in which Spillers writes of the dereliction of the idea of “freedom” or “liberation” for Black flesh: “Even though the captive body/flesh has been ‘liberated,’ and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise” (68). I carefully dissect this passage among other key passages from her groundbreaking text in chapter 1, but her work is integral to my thinking throughout and beyond the dissertation.

Black (literary) creation, and our engagements with it?

“Living,” “dying “ and creating in the “afterlife of slavery,”³ the undying, haunting and structural subjection of Blacks that seals us into “crushing objecthood,” (Fanon, 82) is to “live,” “die” and create in relation to an antagonism that is temporal, spatial, and political-ontological in nature. As Dionne Brand writes in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, slavery violently disfigures time and space, creating a rift or “tear in the world...a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being [and] a physical rupture, a rupture of geography” (Brand, 4-5). Time and space shatter in slavery’s unending wake, such that slavery persists as an afterlife, framing and disfiguring the scenes of subjection⁴ we endure and to which we bear witness across time and space. My dissertation reads time and space in and through Black literature, and draws from Physics—from modern and emergent theories in quantum mechanics, astrophysics, and general relativity—to help develop a nuanced, unique approach that both merges my interests in Black Studies and theoretical physics, but also illuminates what I understand to be two, underthought—or uncritically thought of—fundamental features of *being* (time and space).

On the one hand, it is as if time “shows no movement,” slavery’s persistence in “endless disguise” (e.g. see: footnote 3) throwing the idea of linear progress (read: temporal movement away from slavery) into violent disarray.⁵ On the other, it is as if all possible temporal movement and “all moments” in the antiblack world “somehow gesture

³ From Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, in which she writes: “This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery” (6).

⁴ See Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*.

⁵ Spillers, 68.

back” (24-5) to this inaugural “tear,” creating a series of endless, overlapping loops entangling all of time with the time of enslavement. This untimely problem is what girds the *longue durée* of social death: that slavery creates a problem that halts and loops time disperses the political-ontological position of the socially dead across all temporal moments and movements in its wake. Blackness and Slaveness collapse into the same political-ontological position, in part *because* of a distortion, or warping, of time as we know it.

So when Fanon writes, “the problem to be considered here is one of time,” (Fanon, 176) I take this very seriously. In the first chapter of the dissertation, “Black (in) Time: Untimely Blackness,” which bears his words as its epigraph, I aim to read Black literature that meditates on this untimely force. I begin by engaging extremely recent work by Michelle M. Wright who, in *Physics of Blackness*, examines the prevailing assumptions about time’s relation to Blackness in and outside the academy in order to suggest that a novel understanding of this relation might produce deeper and more inclusive investigations into what it means to *be* Black in an antiblack world. I contend with her theory of “epiphenomenal time” on the grounds that although it is founded on a proper critique of the way Black thought (and all thought) takes its understanding of time for granted by uncritically clinging to an outdated, “Newtonian” theory of time⁶, it is too easily and carelessly recuperative. Specifically, she must set aside or ignore the *violence* at the heart of the relation between Blackness and time in order to present “epiphenomenal time” as a corrective to this problem.

In order to suggest my own theory of the relation, called unethical time, or

⁶ For more on Newtonian’s theory of absolute time, which theorizes time as purely, uniformly linear, see pages 5-6 of my first chapter, “Black (in) Time.”

“untime,” I read a range of literary and theoretical works that unflinchingly center this violence. I also draw from Physical concepts (e.g. Blueshift) and theories (e.g. of Black holes) to enrich my readings of the mechanics and effects of “untime.” This must accomplish two things: first, it must provide a map of time’s violent relation to Blackness; second, this map must provide a new way to understand the Black position in its untimeliness. In terms of literary work, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* provides useful insight into the persistence of slavery’s violence across generations. Jones mobilizes the violence of time to produce questions about relationality and generation—in a double sense, procreative and creative—sustaining a meditation on untimely Blackness creates problems for the relations between and among Blacks, and between Blackness and the possibility of (pro)creation. Through David Marriott and Frantz Fanon, I extend my engagement with these problems into a theorization of the “deathliness” (Marriott, 231) that characterizes what I call “untime” as a way of naming the force behind the violent relation that Jones traces. And I end with a reading of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, which seems to take untime’s force very seriously, mobilizing it as a real and serious problem in the novel, and so rendering it more readily available for our attention.

Untimeliness characterizes part of the Black position, and this has consequences for the possibilities of Black creation. The second chapter, “Untimely Wor(l)ds in the Key of Love,” seeks to examine the kind of (literary) creation this “untime” renders available to Black folk. Animated by Christina Sharpe’s recent essay in *The Black Scholar*, I read untimely Black creation as a form of “wake work,” a kind of work in the ceaseless wake of Slavery that seeks to “care for, comfort, and defend the dead, the dying, and those lives consigned, in the aftermath of legal chattel slavery, to death that is

always-imminent and immanent” (Sharpe, 59-60). I aim to unpack Sharpe’s conceptualization in order to examine how Black literature, Black literary *work*, inhabits the untimeliness of the “wake” and *works* from the Black position of that inhabitation. Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division* wields untime’s force while metafictionally meditating on questions about the connections between Black “life” and Black “death,” Black words, and Black (literary) creation. I read his text as asking: How do we write and string together sentences while Black in an antiblack world? And how does Black writing relate to the untimely relation between Blackness and time? I then turn to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which provides an interesting set of questions about “narrative” and the way these stories never “pass on” (Morrison, 323)—never die, become ghastly and ghostly—are, or must not be, “passed on”—either avoided or dismissed—and must be “passed on”—shared, distributed, dispersed.

In that last sense of the phrase, I ask: “Passed on” to where? To turn back to Dionne Brand’s quote, and how the “tear in the world” also produces a spatial problem for Blackness. Slavery’s mutation of time into a violent, antiblack force, comes with a similarly violent distortion of Blackness’s political-ontological, imaginative and physical relation to space. Being relegated to a deathly space, a “zone of nonbeing,” precipitates in a displacement of Black *being* from the antiblack world of the living to a veritable “underworld” of the dying, the dead, and those who “live” in inescapable proximity to death. Black *nonbeings* lose “all bearings,” and so vertiginously⁷ lose a relation to “geography” or place, which problematizes the possibility of a Black “Diaspora” that takes for granted this relation. And Black nonbeings suffer a violent loss of a *sense* of

⁷ See Frank Wilderson’s, “The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents.”

being, subject to a psychic shattering (Fanon describes this as a “split” and a “dislocation”) that violently disperses Black being’s fragments across a psychic, or imaginative, space that, itself, is “a sterile and arid region.”

I am particularly interested in the creation of textual space from this displaced position. The third chapter, “From Out of Nowhere,” reads Black literature as it exemplifies and meditates upon the creation of Black space. With my interest in theoretical physics, I read the creation of Black spaces in relation to theories about parallel universes. Crucial to the chapter is an engagement with Lisa Randall’s *Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs: The Astounding Interconnectedness of the Universe*, which, in language accessible to both professional and lay persons with scientific interests, helps explain the nature of the mysterious “dark matter” and how it might function in relation to large and small structure formation—e.g. of galaxies, galactic clusters—and how this relation might offer us insight into how “we” exist in relation to each other and to the universe and its structures. More specifically, I am interested in what Randall writes and says about her book as well, as she utilizes metaphor to make plain some of the more complex concepts she’s elaborating. In one article in particular, “Seeing dark matter as the key to the universe—and human empathy,” she make a direct, if misguided, but useful, analogy between Black people and dark matter, suggesting that the characteristics of dark matter in the universe parallel the treatment and positioning of Black people in the structure of the world.

Around this useful-but-problematic connection made by Randall, and wielding dark matter and this question of universal structure formation as lenses for how we might come to understand the nature of Black spaces, their formation, and their destruction, I

read the work of Anthony Paul Farley, “Behind the Wall of Sleep, and revisit the work of Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* alongside Paul Beatty’s most recent novel, *The Sellout*. The novel tracks an unnamed protagonist, addressed by some of his compatriots as “Bonbon” and others as “the sellout,” whose last name is Me, and whose hometown, Dickens, CA, is quietly, unceremoniously “erased” from the map of Los Angeles, CA. His mission becomes “reanimating Dickens,” and his strategies, in relation to Dickens’s agrarian society, reveal a disturbing entanglement between the way we imagine and construct “space” in an antiblack world, and deepens the import and difficulty in answering the question, “what even is a Black space?”

The fourth and final chapter of my dissertation, “Dark and Black Matter – The Gravity of Being Together” turns more directly to what “making space” to perform literary “wake work” might actually look like. Specifically, I am guided by a question undercutting a comment Kiese Laymon left in response to a piece entitled “Masa, Massa, Matter” I wrote for *Out of Nowhere*, a blog cofounded by myself and Nicholas Brady: simply, “so much ‘we’ in your work.” The question was/is, “who, and/or what, is ‘we,’ anyway?” In terms of the questions raised and analysis contained by the third chapter, what is the nature of a communal space for Black folk—a Black space—and how do the Blacks that occupy it move, think, create, and destroy in relation to one another? What is at stake in that relation, that kinship, and what might it mean when considering the possibility of making time and space for Black folk, collectively, to do the “wake work” with which Christina Sharpe tasks us?

In this chapter I juxtapose Tina Mabry’s *Mississippi Damned* and Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*. Each creator creates an aesthetic space that stages these questions,

dramatizing and textualizing the way Blacks kinship looks and works and fails. The former offers us insight into the devastating failures of kinship when what Christina Sharpe might describe as “monstrous intimacies” between horror and pleasure, care and terror, love and trauma go on uninterrogated, compelling us to unflinchingly witness how these intimacies violently warp the fabric of intramural relationships, and the possibilities they might have afforded. Mabry does offer us a glimpse into what “we” might look like if “we” becomes a space of kinship that is maintained in the name of protection, resistance, and selfless sacrifice, but even this space is imperiled by the tidal forces of the gravity of irremediable trauma and structural violence that position the characters of the film in relation to one another. The latter offers us insight into what might be possible if we read Black space as a space for the kind of loving mourning that is “wake work,” and if that space is rent open so that it might become a sight for confrontation with not just the deathliness that positions Black people from without, but also with the kinds of devastating repetitions of that deathliness’s violence between and among Black people.

My dissertation is a project that aims to reorient our relation to Blackness, Black “life” and “death,” and Black (literary) creation by *inhabiting* the problems that emerge when we recognize the “fact” of Blackness’s unethical relation to time and space. I am aiming at the foundations of “all thought,” which, “insofar as it is genuine thinking, might be best conceived of as Black thought” (Sexton, 1), and by firing, I hope to dislocate “all thought” from some of its most limiting assumptions, and bring into full

view the revolutionary and creative capacities of a more “genuine” Black thought, more wholly and unapologetically on “the dark side.”⁸

⁸ From Lewis Gordon’s 2010 article, “Theory in Black: Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture,” from which Jared Sexton derives

CHAPTER 1

Black (in) Time

Untimely Blackness

“The problem considered here is one of time”
---Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*⁹

The truth is: Blackness is untimely. Time is of a particularly disturbing essence relative to Blackness, and this was, is, will be our problem. Lapses, ruptures, loops and repetitions, dispersals, erasures; afterlife, deathliness, ceaselessness, belatedness, earliness—in the antiblack world, virtual and real, imaginary and actual, the descriptors tell us what time tells all about Blackness, and how time might be, as David Marriott writes through Frantz Fanon and Steve McQueen, “the originary constitutive category of race.”¹⁰ Time as not just a fundamental feature of how Blacks, and by extension all others, are positioned in the universe (this, I will address later, is part of the analytical power of Michelle Wright’s very recent work, *Physics of Blackness*), but also as a *force*—and an arbitrary and violent one, at that—that positions Blacks *as* Black.

How time terrorizes and dominates Blacks, usually as it encodes different orders of trauma—physical, psychic, historical, political, metaphysical—in, and so as, its force, demands attention. Access to what’s encoded by the disturbing feeling of too-long or too-short durations, like the 4.5 hours Michael Brown’s body lay, overseen by officer Darren

⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 176.

¹⁰ Marriott, “Waiting to Fall,” 194.

Wilson, splayed out, bullet-riddled, and bloody on asphalt in the hot Missouri sun, or the 1.854 seconds between when officers Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback leap from their vehicle and when Tamir Rice's body deathly folds to the concrete, might allow us deeper access to the heart of the (dark) matter of what's so unethical about time's passage. Or to the kind of unsettling loss felt in lapses and (black) holes in time, like the missing time between Renisha McBride's car accident and Theodore Wafer's shotgun shooting through the screen door. Or to the trauma of repetitions, like the strained and fatal refrain, "I can't breathe," cried out by Eric Garner eleven times during his murder by officer Daniel Pantaleo, and then again and again by we who, time after time, are forced to encounter our own breathlessness. Or all, and most certainly beyond, in which time's force is felt, and its mask over what is a more sinister problem—a fundamental problem between Blackness and time—that has what I understand to be unthought, and possibly unimaginable, consequences, is "seen."

Reading time is imperative; we always have time to read. Specifically, reading the problem of time's force in relation to Blackness (e.g. how Blacks experience and *feel* that problem and that force) might enable us to *read* Blackness. Time, then, as part of a master code, a code of codes, operating to encode Blackness in the "undecipherable markings of [Black] flesh,"¹¹ the too-late-and-too-early¹² capacities, movements, and

¹¹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 68.

¹² I'm summoning Fanon, here. He famously writes this phrasing in *Black Skin, White Masks* and, in doing so, "begins" a—or at least reveals an already ongoing, if hidden—conversation about the "untimeliness" of Blacks and Blackness. I'm also summoning Marriott's reading of this particular phrase as he attempts to dissect and diagnose the complex relations between time, Blackness, image, representation, meaning and meaninglessness, and cinema in his essay, "Waiting to Fall." At the crux of the problem this set of relations "unveils," is a time that suspends Blackness into a time of flux and

creations of Black imaginations, and the simultaneous paralysis and vertigo of Black nonbeing. Which positions time as a kind of stitch, or suture, rupturing, looping through, and binding Black flesh, to Black imaginations—and Black imaginative work—and to a Black position relative to the universe. Given time, examining the how, why and so what's of this temporal force that both marks the entanglement *and* entangles might clarify, or decode, or *read* what is at stake in, at least, Black literary imaginative work, and so how we might “begin” to approach its existence and possibilities (with, against, and across time).

Time in at-least-the-literary, though, and because, the rigorous attention to time as a *force* and a *problem*, as basically a fundamental feature of the universe that should not be taken for granted, for Black imaginative work and Blackness' relation to imaginative work seems to be trained on film. Scholars like Marriott, Frank Wilderson,¹³ and Kara Keeling, among others, differently attend to the structural problems of filmic representations of and in relation to Blackness, and how time is central *to* these structural problems, and their work figures here with different degrees of prominence. Part of that figuration draws from how their work demands a recognition of the kinds of masks

waiting, a time of inescapable belatedness and earliness, an interminable time in which Blackness is never on time, and always untimely.

¹³ Though, I know, Frank's interest is not exactly in film, specifically, but in using it as a medium to stage an intervention with Blackness as something impossible to represent, in film or otherwise. This impossible representation, this unthought—and unthinkable, so unimaginable—position, of Blackness, reveals the antiblackness that undergirds the very logic of representation itself, but also, and more importantly, that undergirds the very logic of life, freedom, the Human, and the world. Film becomes a substrate for the demonstration of this thought experiment that is experimental in the sense that, relentlessly, in a way begun by scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and Frantz Fanon, among many others, centers Blackness, rendering all else orbital.

masking how time positions Blackness as untimely by way of “the flaw”¹⁴ in perception preceding and polluting the interplay between seeing, screen and representation. I am interested in the written word and the kinds of screens it erects, the masks it makes. Mostly, I am interested in how time stitches Blackness and words together in an untimely manner, and how that untimeliness emerges in and as Black literary creation.

This chapter takes Fanon’s claim completely seriously. It attempts to think through time as a problem in relation to Blackness. More precisely, it attempts to take the question of Blackness in relation to time and center it at the foundation of a larger question about what it is to be, live, and think while Black in an antiblack world. Two things have to happen: the problem has to be traced out in relation to the way these questions have been taken for granted or inadequately addressed thus far; and the corrective to this problem must be developed. The first part of this chapter attempts to engage Michelle Wright’s *Physics of Blackness* as a way of opening into a discussion about how thought—in and outside the academy—takes time for granted, and wields Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* to begin to uncover the problems that taking-for-granted veils. The second part of this chapter begins to thoroughly map out what actually characterizes the relation between Blackness and time, extrapolating from David Marriott’s *Haunted Life*, its afterword, specifically, and reading Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* to expand upon the consequences of this ‘new’ understanding of time.

I/We need time. Time to read Black literature both *as* Black and as it thinks *about* Blackness in untimely manners and matters; give me time. And we might find and read

¹⁴ I’m using this with Fanon in mind, but specifically I’m interested in David Marriott’s reading of the flaw as just before and beyond the frame; something that precedes and is outside the bounds, but constitutive to the notion of bounds in the first place/instance.

the Black in it, and Blacken it, or reveal how it is always necessarily Blackened in the endless wake of slavery, the “interminable time of meaninglessness,”¹⁵ and the ghostly, but never invisible, *deathliness* that gives not life breaths, but kisses of death, to Black imaginations and the work they produced, produce and might (possibly) produce. I consider this a tense matter, so we must think and move with caution.

Taking our time, we might, after all, “begin.”

I *All the Time*

“The tighter I held him, the quicker he slipped away; my arms were always reaching out past his sturdy flesh for those shapes and silhouettes far in the moving distance, *in a time as old and liquid as the ocean, and as cold.*”
---Bristol, “The Liquid Plain”¹⁶

Michelle M. Wright shares some of this sentiment with me. In her very recent book, *Physics of Blackness*, she seeks to address a shared tendency in the Humanities (and beyond) to take time for granted in a way that is limiting and exclusionary. “Mainstream”¹⁷ thought and theory (and, I would argue, most thought and theory not considered “mainstream”), in and outside the academy, depends on a “mistranslation of Newton’s laws of motion and gravity into [a] linear progress narrative” that depends on a

¹⁵ Marriott, *Haunted Life*, 231.

¹⁶ This is from a Naomi Wallace play and script, but the particular performance of the play I’m (solely) interested in is that under the masterful direction of Dr. Jaye Austin Williams, which played at the University of California, Irvine, just last month (early February 2015). Williams blackens what was otherwise a play loaded with mystifications that decentered blackness from the enslavement and fugitivity it takes as its subject and context. Wallace has also been influenced by the changes Williams has made to her script.

¹⁷ I only use this word as Wright uses this word throughout her text. I read it as an attempt to preempt any critique of her work that might zone in on what would otherwise be a blanket, generalizing claim that, in fact, would go against the motivations Wright expresses for researching and writing the project—namely, an attempt to move away from a generalizing rubric, to one that includes otherwise marginalized identities.

“cause-and-effect framework” (Wright, 37). Professor of Anthropology Muhammad Aurang Zeb Mughal neatly describes Newton’s theory of “absolute time” in an entry in

The Encyclopedia of Time:

According to this model, it is assumed that time runs at the same rate for all the observers in the universe, or in other words, the rate of time of each observer can be scaled to the absolute time by multiplying the rate by a constant. This concept of absolute time suggests absolute simultaneity by the coincidence of two or more events at different points in space for all observers in the universe. So, absolute time has been discussed in two senses of absoluteness. In first sense, absoluteness means independent of events, while in second sense, it means independent of observer or frame of reference...Newton regarded time as something absolute, true, and mathematical, of itself and by its own nature, that flows uniformly without relation to anything external, and by another name it is called duration.¹⁸

Newton treats time as an absolute truth of the universe; time acts as an independent feature or *force* of reality, structuring the order of events and defining the relation between event (as a temporal marker) and observer, a phenomenological relation as much as it is a structural one. However observers experience the structure of time, *all* experience of time is structured by the fact of time’s defining characteristics: it “flows uniformly” independent of any “relation to anything external;” this is the notion of “duration.” This translates into the understanding of time Wright finds at the center of how “all disciplines and laypersons organize knowledge as *progressive*,”¹⁹ and all developments as moving forward—as *chronological*.

This characterizes Black Studies writ large, “mainstream” and not. Specifically, it

¹⁸ Mughal, *The Encyclopedia of Time*, 1254.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

characterizes what Wright calls the “Middle Passage Epistemology.”²⁰ a dominant historical narrative that moves from the violence of the Middle Passage, through the dispersal across the Atlantic, and through the developing and scattered histories of Blacks in the Diaspora this violent dispersal produces; all of the movement is forward, so inherently progressive, and all developments along the continuum are interpreted in relation to the origin point of the timeline (the “beginning” of the Middle Passage itself). While acknowledging the nuance and situational necessity of this epistemology, Wright goes to great length to reveal the limitations of the applicability and inclusivity of systems of knowledge that privilege, if not use exclusively, a Middle Passage timeline to string together the thoughts and experiences giving flesh and form to those systems. Conceptualizing Blackness as a “collective identity” that is as constructed, “implicitly or explicitly defined as a set of physical and behavioral characteristics,” as it is phenomenological, “imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context,”²¹ Wright recognizes that constricting (at least “mainstream”) the narratives of Blackness that inform academic and lay discourse to the finitude of a *linear* and *progressive* timeline with a *fixed* origin point inherently excludes identities that do not fit neatly onto this timeline. Most often, the Western Black heterosexual cisgender male most neatly aligns with the rigid plane of the timeline (and this is evident

²⁰ I would just like to address the fact that Wright addresses an earlier use of this term in the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., while making sure she distinguishes her own take from it. My understanding is that while Gates only describes the Middle Passage Epistemology as a system of knowledge, he does not dissect the spatial and temporal features of this system of knowledge in a way rigorous or suitable enough to meet Wright’s criteria for analysis. Hence, her term *depends* on what she feels is a careful, meticulous attention to the temporality of the Middle Passage in relation to “collective identities” like Blackness (I will discuss my issue with thinking about Blackness this way later in the essay).

²¹ Wright, 4.

throughout academic discourse and lay, everyday thought); Blacks who identify any other way, with some other origin point or history, as a member of the LGBTQIA community, as a womyn, are marginalized and cannot so neatly weave their narratives into the dominant thread—they fray. This is prescient: in the most “mainstream” academic, activist, and lay discourse concerning the Black Lives Matter movement, the slip of the tongue makes overt reference to a label for or list of Black (hetero, cis) boys and men, and often fails to pay equal (or sometimes any) attention to the Black girls and womyn, and Black trans folk who suffer *at least* comparable orders of brutal antiblack violence.

As the alternative that forms the answer to her critiques of work and thought that too easily accepts, if not completely reinforces, the singularity of a Middle Passage Epistemology, Wright presents “epiphenomenal time,” a more fluid time of the ever-shifting “now” she draws from philosophy and quantum mechanics. Rather than a straight line or arrow, epiphenomenal time appears more like “a circle with many arrows pointing outward in all directions;”²² presumably, the center of the circle houses the observer as the circle encircles the “now” the observer occupies, while the arrows move toward the many (possibly infinite) “times,” past and future, inextricably bound to the shifting “now.” As the differences between the two representations of time, in conjunction with the critique of linear progressivity, suggests, what Wright seeks to do is simple in concept, if difficult in execution: depart from the exclusivity of a limiting understanding of the relation between Blackness and time; seek out, or (re)create, and adopt a radically different conception of time that can account for “the greatest number of

²² Wright, 20.

Blacknesses that are possible and viable”²³—that is, that can be inclusive of a Blackness that is complex, multidimensional, of different identifications, histories, and origins. This is why, of the thinkers she credits with being emblematic of crafting analyses dependent on a Middle Passage Epistemology (namely Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, and Paul Gilroy²⁴) she aligns herself most closely with the latter who, unlike Gates and Du Bois, at least frames his understanding of Blackness as transitory, “rhizomorphic,” complex, and fundamentally untethered from the fixedness of a single origin, identification, or destination.

At its most radical, epiphenomenal time means to eliminate the foundation for inherently exclusionary and limiting problems spanning the whole of at least “mainstream” Black Studies discourse, academic and not; and, at best, it turns on the desire to include in the center of Black Thought the otherwise marginalized “Blacknesses”—or, rather, it turns on the desire to disperse the notion of “center” altogether, not cramming all the complex “Blacknesses” into a limited space, but scattering a multitude of centers, or temporal nodes, “now” nodes, from which the past and future might be interpreted through differently Black—but unquestionably *Black*—

²³ Wright, 25.

²⁴ She chooses their most famous works for analysis: Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*; Du Bois’s, *The Souls of Black Folk*; and Gilroy’s, *The Black Atlantic*. She categorizes all three works as works of Middle Passage Epistemologies, but she spends the most time and shares the most affinity with Gilroy’s work for its attention to a “rhizomorphic” Blackness: one of many roots, outstretched in all directions (across time and space). Gilroy’s ability to infuse complexity and multidimensionality into his thinking about Blackness in the wake of the Middle Passage, to consider the Diaspora and the multitude of identities and histories that must comprise it, and that must, thereby, be taken seriously, distinguishes him from Gates and Du Bois; his analysis is treated as more self-aware in its approach and broad in its implications. Even still, no matter how nuanced and compelling, the limitation of the adherence to a Middle Passage Epistemology each shares is inescapably limiting.

lenses. In essence, this is a very timely meditation, given the prescient issues of inclusion paralleled in Black Lives Matter organizing and representation, and given the ongoing history of Black Thought's inability or refusal to question, let alone depart from, its limiting concept of time. But for all its aspirations, Wright's concept is too neat; or, if it is messy, as this waxing infinity of "Blacknesses," embodied by countless Black "now" nodes, encircled Black "nows" in constant relation to the innumerable pasts and futures of its own existence and of the many other "now" nodes it inevitably intersects, might imply, it is too neatly and easily messy. And in being so neat, the concept and what Wright believes its implications to be mask the unchecked assumptions about Blackness, time, and their relation that Wright must make in order to make the (quantum) leap to replace linear progressive time with another time, epiphenomenal time, in the first place (or instance).

What happens when we do not center "identity" in a way that displaces the structural position, or "political ontology?"²⁵ Differently, what happens when our analysis shifts its framework to a higher level of abstraction, from an analysis that privileges (to the point of exclusion) intersectional analysis located at the level of "identities," collective or otherwise, to an analysis that frames those intersections and identities *structurally* in a way that does not forget the structure? If we understand that structure to be something like the universe, of which time is a *force* and a fundamental *feature*,²⁶ and we understand this structure as it is for Blacks everywhere and always, as violently *antiblack*, then what happens to time and our capacity to relate to it, let alone in

²⁵ Use the "Social Life of Social Death" quote here for ease/convenience.

²⁶ This is actually a topic of serious debate in the world of theoretical physics, and has been since the advent of relativity displaced Newton's notions of a rigid, absolute, and "pure" time.

a neat way? Differently, perhaps more sinisterly, what happens to Blackness as a *structural position* with a *phenomenological* relation to time's force, then what happens when that force, that time, helps define the universe's antiblackness—is, by extension, antiblack, itself?

Only time can tell, or inscribe, but what it communicates it encodes. In 1987, Hortense Spillers publishes what might be a fragment of a key, or a cryptovisible,²⁷ and so a partial means to a small opening into how time's force acts in relation to Blackness, and how Blacks bear and experience this force. Spillers is “a marked woman”²⁸ writing about markings. This is a loaded summation: the many names that converge on Black flesh in the name of a collective, global project of ongoing Black subjection, to use

²⁷ The difference between “key,” the language of lay and technical coding and cryptography, and “cryptovisible,” the language used by the NSA, is the overt reference to surveillance and state power not-so-deeply-coded in the latter term. Since what we are dealing with is something cumbersome, spectral and violent, and since decoding what this *force* does to Blackness and Black folk in an antiblack world might not just uncover, but also *perform*, its own order or kind of violence—this is a twisted, but logical, extension of Saidiya Hartman's argument in “Venus in Two Acts,” which I address later—making at least reference to an institution that works at the nexus of, at least, antiblack (state) violence, in the form surveillance/policing and all it produces, and technologically advanced cryptography, seems timely.

²⁸ From the introductory paragraph of legend, in which Spillers writes of the many kinds of names borne by Black female flesh, which opens us into the scope of essay's argument: “Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God's “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (65). So much here, especially given how quickly and deftly Spillers introduces and entangles the central concerns her essay will explore—Blackness, gender, naming, marking, valuation, the “symbolic order” (68), and knowledge—but of profound importance to me is the way she begins to explore this opening and entanglement as a set of problems that should be thought in terms of Blackness and time, Blackness over time, Blackness in time (hence the immediate invocation of “the color line” and Du Bois that begins the very next paragraph). This all, I will try to explore as time goes on.

Spillers's word, *telegraph* a "larger" or more sinister problem that escapes historical, symbolic, and metaphysical singularity. Spillers appears to be in the business of decoding the signal of the marks to better grasp the peculiar and horrifying antiblackness violence of the *structures* behind the historical, symbolic and the metaphysical: the "historical order," the "symbolic order," and the human²⁹ (as a political ontological construct). By gesturing toward how these names and/as marks gesture toward something "larger," something structural and perhaps timeless, she begins to "clear the field of static"³⁰ that has developed, accumulated, "over time."³¹ And "over time" in a number of ways: "over" as in "during" the *longue durée* of Black subjection to the force of time, and to the force of social death, which is a more superficial reading; "over" as in "governing" or "controlling/defining" as a kind of (over)determining feature of antiblackness, which is a recognition of the structural; and "over" as in "covering over" or "concealing," which suggests that part of what will be uncovered by clearing away the "static" is *time itself*.

For Spillers, it is the flesh of the Black womyn that provides the (necessary

²⁹ This specific point is drawn from Saidiya Hartman's take on "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in a roundtable discussion meant to revisit the essay and discuss its growing legacy; included in the discussion, entitled "'Whatcha gonna do?'—Revisiting 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,'" are Spillers herself, Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelley Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan. Hartman's take is important to my own, and to the project of afropessimism as a whole, as it reveals that what Spillers is concerned with, really, the Human as a metaphysical construct that can only be read via an analysis of the specific antiblack violence that names, marks, and positions the black womyn (and she confirms as much in her response to Hartman's reading). This reading heavily influences afropessimism's framework: part of the profound and terrible necessity and power of Frank Wilderson's work, especially in *Red, White and Black*, is that it firmly situates antiblackness as foundational to the Human as a political ontological construct; that is, antiblackness creates the founding distinction between Human and Anti-Human, or, importantly, Non-Black and Black. Of course, this reveals part of what is a large debt afropessimist discourse owes to Black feminist scholarship.

³⁰ Spillers, et al, "'Whatcha Gonna Do?'" 301.

³¹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 65.

fragment) of the key/cryptovvariable we need to perform this clearing away, this deciphering: “the materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’—offers a *praxis* and a *theory*, a *text* for living and for dying, and a *method for reading both* through their diverse mediations.”³² Black female flesh, specifically the vulnerability of that flesh, the materiality and *actuality* of the wounds that divide and scar (“mark”) that flesh, and the way gender does not “happen” on/to Black flesh the same way as it does for all others³³, as well as the “scene” of violence that frames it—so, Black female flesh *in the context* of gratuitous violence—is (part of the) key. Not only does it reveal the “text,” which is the flesh as a “primary narrative” comprised of “undecipherable markings... a kind of hieroglyphics”³⁴ that must be *read* (or, given its undecipherability, *deciphered*), but also a *praxis* and a *theory* and a *method* to perform that reading. Spillers wields, or reads, Black female flesh in order to examine the entangled structures—historical, symbolic, and metaphysical—in part because the invisibility of Black womyn (and Black feminism) in the academy, let alone in considerations of what founds the very structures of knowledge on which the academy claims to be built, but also because the human category remained largely uncritically thought; put differently, because the human *being*’s inextricability to Black *nonbeing* had been unthought, *especially* relative to Black womyn and the specificity of the violence

³² *Ibid*, 68.

³³ Spillers writes of “pornotroping” (67) just prior to this, as a specific kind of violence that reduces Black bodies with any defining “human” characteristics and relations to fungible flesh that can be accumulated and used however the antiblack structures of domination and terror see fit. It is this distinction, between “body,” as a site at which gender might be applied and read, and “flesh [as] that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67), that separates Black anti-humans (to use Frank’s word) and all others (who are thus recognized as Human bodies, or Humans with bodies).

³⁴ *Ibid*, 67.

that positions them.³⁵

It is violence without end. The continuation, or ceaselessness, of this narrative and its orders of violence, as well as the undying need for its deciphering, across time, passed or transferred “from one generation to another...[via] *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that *repeat the initiating moments*,”³⁶ appears to be a foundational problem. As Spillers writes:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated,” and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise.³⁷

The readings of “over time” all seem applicable, here, in describing the vexing relation between “dominant symbolic activity,” or “the symbolic order,” the “dynamics of naming and valuation” and also the names and marks channeling and embodying those dynamics, and time. The “so that” implies a causal link, in which the symbolic order, and the naming and names it makes possible, at least influences, if not outright determines, the movement of time for Blacks and in relation to Blackness. The “primary narrative” of Black flesh precipitates in “undecipherable markings” and “hieroglyphics” written as the

³⁵ Toward the end of the roundtable with Hartman, Griffin, Eversley, and Morgan, Spillers reveals the rage and the frustration that haunt every line of the essay and all its arguments, which, on a personal level, added a kind of thickness and reality to the essay and its implications—for Blackness, for Blackness in the academy, for Black feminism, and for Black womyn. It is a kind of feeling that Dionne Brand discusses in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, a feeling in the omnipresence of the titular “door;” I plan to address this feeling and its structure more deeply later on.

³⁶ *Ibid*, emphasis on “repeat the initiating moments” mine.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

flesh's "seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard,"³⁸ or "resting" burned and shot on a couch after a police raid (like Aiyana Stanley-Jones), or (s)lain on asphalt in Missouri sun (like Michael Brown), or bullet-riddled and overlooked (like Penny Proud). Names and marks are illegible in relation to the violence of actual and symbolic orders carving them onto Black flesh, so that Black flesh becomes a kind of Black hole warping time (and space), disfiguring it. Time, in relation to Black flesh, does not "show movement," appears to stall, but is really also a series of repetitions, "over and over again," so loops, and in looping and stalling, *murders* Black human subjectivity; time kills any "dimension of ethics, [or] relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions" (68).

Time provides "another angle on the divided flesh," or two. In one sense, it appears to act as a force through which the symbolic order and its dynamics act, murdering Blackness' relation to humanity (Blackness becomes antithetical to Humanness). In another, it reaffirms, via apparent 'textual' permanence (time showing no movement) and repeated inscription (the murder happens over and over again), the violence of the name, the naming, and the order(s) (structures) they telegraph; put differently, time *rewrites* the "primary narrative" of Blackness on Black flesh, via a series of "symbolic substitutions," into an apparent timelessness, "over time" (in all senses), an "anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise," the undying past masked again and again in new names and with new marks, from "Sapphire" to "Ursa" to "Dana." The relation between the reduction of Blacks to fleshy objects, the destruction of

³⁸ *Ibid*, 67.

Blackness as a position with identifiable human features, and time becomes a timelessly *unethical* one. Time tells unintelligibly, unethically, without end—across generations—its relation to Blackness, and it does so anonymously—it, or it in precise relation to Blackness, has no name, or too many. If at least part of what Spillers reveals, or *deciphers*, in this violent relation between Blackness, marked and named Black flesh, and the symbolic order is a problem between Blackness and time grounded in violence and illegibility, how might we (re)discover time's names, and all their static hides and telegraphs?

For Gayl Jones in 1975 “Black time's” name, or one of its names, is *Corregidora*. *Corregidora* becomes another element of the key, another piece of the cryptovisible, and as such complements the previous piece, the pieces of Spillers's argument touched so far, while advancing it into new form. The structure and operations of the force of time in relation to Blacks and Blackness grows and its shape changes, twists; to what venturing into *Corregidora* confirms about how “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe” theorizes about time, Blackness and Black flesh—Black female flesh in particular—Jones adds another set of horrors, and so another set of menacing and unbearable questions,³⁹ that clarify our

³⁹ In the introduction to Frank B. Wilderson III's *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson writes that the Slave narrative is an “oxymoron” (Wilderson, 41). Slave narrative not just as a genre of work specific to those works written by slaves in what most understand to be the “historical moment” of slavery, but also as a designation of work produced by the Slave, the Black, that might be considered to depend on or turn on “narrative,” and as a recognition of the problematic narrativization of Blackness in, or over, time. This oxymoronic status depends on the impossible application of a generalized equilibrium-disequilibrium-equilibrium restored narrative progression to Blacks, who begin, and continue ad infinitum, in a state of disequilibrium. This is a problem entwined with an ontological problem; narrative, as a kind of temporal force, begs a question, which Wilderson draws from a reading of Ronald Judy's *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*: “For if Slave narratives as an object field have ‘no ontological status’ such that the field's insertion into the field of literary history can disform not just the field of literary studies

problem, and might better orient us toward an “answer” of sorts.

The fourth generation of a bloodline of Black womyn, Ursa Corregidora sings the blues in Kentucky from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s. Her “veins are centuries meeting,”⁴⁰ the fleshy channels through which the life-force and times of the previous three generations of Corregidora womyn interact with her own, and with the undying force and time of the surname they share. The surname originates with a Portuguese seaman, slave owner, and whoremonger whose proper name becomes a mystery. He was the master, and likely father, of Ursa’s great-grandmother, and the father of her grandmother and mother, who all transfer his surname from generation to generation, each daughter tasked with retaining and transferring the name, as well. In fact, it is this generational transference via generational (pro)creation that becomes the subject and question of Ursa’s lifetime, of the intimate relationships that influence that lifetime (between and among the Corregidora womyn, between them all and Corregidora, and between the womyn and other men), and of the way these relationships signal another level or kind of horror at the nexus between Black flesh, time, desire and (pro)creation. Great Gram, Gram, Ursa’s mother, and Ursa bear the name as a kind of *raison d’être*: they must “make generations” in order to “bear witness” to the *actual* violence of

but the field of knowledge itself (the paradigm of exchange within the political economy of academia), and (dis)form the hegemony of Reason’s genealogy, then what does this tell us about the ontological status of the narrating slave her/himself?” The oxymoronic status of “slave narrative” reveals, or confirms, an ontological problem to which the Slave is subjected; it turns on the Slave’s nonbeing, such that Blackness and narrative become antagonistic to each other, the latter’s impossibility for the former reaffirming the former’s violent subjection. And so the question, and what it reveals, “*is menacing and unbearable,*” and “the intensity of its ethicality” against an unethical temporal construct like narrative, “is terrifying, so terrifying.”

⁴⁰ Jones, *Corregidora*, 46.

enslavement, and the actual *specificity* of the trauma that constitutes their bloodline.⁴¹

The (pro)created flesh becomes a kind of conduit for the lifetimes traumatically bound up with and by Corregidora because it embodies a kind of “evidence” less subject to arbitrary destruction or loss than the passed-down photograph of Corregidora, as Gram reveals: “They can burn the papers, but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa” (22). Jones entangles the flesh with consciousness: to “make generations” is to make flesh that can “bear witness” by consciously accounting for the traumas of previous lifetimes telegraphed by Corregidora’s name; all—the name as a loaded, telegraphic marker, the flesh bearing the name and housing the mind, and the imagination that houses the traumas—become inextricable. What would be *generated* is an entanglement between name/naming, flesh, and consciousness, all sutured to and by the undying (timeless) trauma of sexual violence and coercion, itself inextricable from enslavement.

So Ursa bears the name and the duty of this complex (pro)creation, but the novel wastes no time throwing this into crisis. As Ursa leaves Happy’s Café after a finishing a set, her husband, Mutt Thomas, drunk, pushes, throws, or causes her to fall (it is recalled differently throughout the text) down the stairs, hospitalizing her, causing her to miscarry, and ultimately resulting in a hysterectomy (all this before the first time “make generations” appears in the text). The novel begins with an impossibility of which we do not know the full implications until later, but we “begin” with “rupture” (pace Spillers).⁴² No longer able to “make generations” to continue to “bear witness” to Corregidora’s

⁴¹ Jones, 10; 72.

⁴² Spillers writes: “The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an “American grammar,” begins at the “beginning,” which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation” (68).

horrors in the flesh (and blood), and perhaps never willing to do so in the first place,⁴³ the bodily and psychological trauma of Mutt's violence dislocates Ursa from her flesh and blood timeline as she cannot, at least via (pro)creation, give continued life and form to her family history in enslavement, and to the name that marks and telegraphs it. Her own flesh, the flesh and blood of her womb removed, embodies, or 'enfleshes,' a temporal and familial rupture, past, present, and future familial ties to traumatic history halted, severed, and rendered impossible *in the flesh* and, by extension, *in the imagination*. The undecipherable hieroglyphics printed on, or in, the absence of Ursa's uterus illegibly signals to a loss of time, or a kind of timeliness interrupted and thrown into crisis. The *possibility* of an infinite lifetime for Corregidora, for his sexual violence, and for the brutality of enslavement falls away, vacuumed into the void of her sex. It is a flesh and blood dereliction of the otherwise legible continuum between past, present, and future, opened into by the "door...between [her] legs," the "hole" she "still got,"⁴⁴ literally and figuratively a Black hole, warping the time (and space) of those caught up in Ursa's orbit, and perhaps a portal to a traumatic nowhere.

And it is an opening into carefully considering a set of problems with relationality, and how Ursa as a temporal problem, and a conscious, sentient one, relates to the possibility of kinship between Blacks, to the possibility of a relation between Blackness and an identity or set of identities, and to Blackness and Black flesh relate to creation. Specifically, I am interested in how Ursa *(re)creates* these relations, and how

⁴³ We learn this later on in the text: Ursa had, for some time, been questioning whether or not she would pass down this history of Corregidora to the next generation even if she were (able) to have children (60).

⁴⁴ Jones, 41, 75, 100, 138. In each of these, someone—Ursa, Mutt, Corregidora, and then Ursa, again—describes Ursa's vagina as a "hole," with the exception of the last instance in which Ursa describes it as a "door."

she *creates* (or *makes*) in relation to them. All of these are entangled with a lifetime, a bloodline, and a timeliness that have been mutilated; examining the strings—here, through the lens of creation—might open into a deeper understanding of the nature of the knot.

In the wake of the novel’s initiating trauma, and so warped by the gravity of that trauma from the singularity of Ursa’s subjection to it, Ursa’s voice temporally and sentimentally shifts. In the time with Mutt prior to the ‘fall,’ Ursa sings “songs that had to do with holding things inside you. Secret happinesses, a tenderness,”⁴⁵ songs of a serenity she hides somewhere behind the words she sings, somewhere “in the tune, in the whole way [she] drew out a song...the way [her] breath moved, in [her] whole voice”.⁴⁶ Something in the *text* of the song, but also something in the *praxis* of the song’s performance, the scene of the performance placing a demand on the *method for reading* (or *decoding*) the song and all its secrets, which perhaps ushers in, or at least requires, a radically different *theory* to frame how we (or anyone in Ursa’s relation) might read the song. In an imagined conversation with her mother, she thinks that if only her mother “understood” her, she would “see [Ursa] was trying...to explain what was always there” (66), the “secret happinesses” *and* the traumatic, undying history of Corregidora “they squeezed...into [her]” (103). Her voice, the way she sings and breathes behind the words, and the songs themselves become their own sorts of “[texts] for living and dying,” in which the timeless narrative of the sexualized brutality and violence of enslavement becomes entangled with the serenity Ursa hides with it. The deathly force carried with/by the undying past melds with the happiness sought in the future from the present, marking

⁴⁵ Jones, 154.

⁴⁶ Jones, 103.

and making an inextricable connection to Ursa's creation (her songs, her performances). It is an amalgamated temporality, a complex one oriented through the stage presence of Ursa's blues in the 'present' before the fall;⁴⁷ prior to the trauma that disjoins Ursa from her neater temporal orientation, the songs (as the novel's presentation of a relation between Blackness, creation, and time) seem to sing to the tune of Michelle Wright's argument; we might describe Ursa's songs as articulating on an "epiphenomenal" frequency before Mutt subjects her to physical violence with traumatic effects for her imaginative and temporal positions.

The trauma that disrupts Ursa's relation to time via rendering her generational duty impossible ruptures the entanglement. It alters the motive behind the singing, and so shifts the frequency and alters the 'shape' of (the entanglement of) the song and its performance. During or thinking about a performance, Ursa thinks to herself: "I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, too my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he'd done, hear it. All those blues feelings... That's what I called it... My voice felt like it was *screaming*."⁴⁸ Screams coded in the songs fill the void vacated by the now-collapsed temporal entanglement hiding behind them, and seem to displace the secret happinesses for the sake of a singular kind of enunciation: an account of this interruptive violence that has traumatically moved Ursa into a (more) problematic relation to time, and all the severed interpersonal connections that relation produces.

What "he'd done," the totality of it as a foundationally temporal violence sutured to and

⁴⁷ I'm presenting this aware of how the text is structured, with the trauma Ursa experiences (which I will regard as changing the frequency of her voice) coming first (on the second page of the novel), and the remembrances of how her voice was prior to this trauma are littered throughout the text, in imagined or recalled conversations and thoughts.

⁴⁸ Jones, 50, emphasis mine.

borne by the flesh, *must* be expressed and *heard* screaming violently through her singing in the form of a kind of strain on and in her voice. Something hardens (in) her voice, the frequency of its expression changing texture, tone and color due to the interaction of multiple layers of violence in Ursa's imagination and flesh. Those for whom Ursa sings seem to key in on this loaded 'hardness,' recognizing it as a hardness that hurts as it is heard (96), that there is a "something" Ursa's been through that performs this desublimation of her voice's essence from an airy, indeterminate, perhaps unnoticed "something" to a tactile, if cumbersome, more solid "something" more capable of damage. The solidity of the complex, fractured "something" promises a new kind of resistance; the condensed frequency of her voice's sound becomes more resistant to decoding, to *hearing*. Her blues have become bluer, denser, and the screaming suggests both an urgency to be heard, but also an unintelligibility to others—which is really an incomplete intelligibility—against which that urgency *strains* and grows in force.

There is an unwieldy blueshift in the blues Ursa sings; something moves closer, grows darker, warped by the gravity of the trauma initiating the text. A Doppler blueshift is the result a condensation of wave frequency when an object moves toward an observer. In terms of light, it is the decrease in wavelength (and so increase in frequency and energy) of electric and magnetic fields traveling through space; based on the temporal measurement (frequency), the light exists on an electromagnetic spectrum that, between 4×10^{14} Hz and 8×10^{14} Hz, spans what our eyes perceive as visible color, the former marking the red end and the latter marking the violet end. A blueshift categorizes a change in frequency moving in the direction of the violet end of the spectrum, which, if the object emitting or reflecting the photons that render it visible moves at a relativistic

speed toward the observer, means that that object should appear *bluer* to the naked eye than it was at a larger relativistic distance. A Doppler blueshift is relativistic in a *phenomenological* sense: the object's motion in space and time relative to the observer's dictates how the blueshift is perceived or experienced (though it can also occur beyond the visible wavelength). In general relativity, gravity becomes an additional factor, generalizing the effect on photons to being *independent* of the observer; all that matters is how deep into the gravity well (the gravitational field around an object) a photon falls, and that it is falling into the well; this effect is "real," or *structural*.⁴⁹ I discuss this with some degree of detail because the phenomenon and its mechanics finely complicate the kind of structural shift in Ursa's voice and the kind of phenomenological consequences of that structural shift.

For or from Ursa, the shift in frequency (and the shortening of the wavelength) is structural, and, so, "real" in relation to the gravity of the traumatic temporal dislocation she enfleshes, itself enfleshed by the literal and figurative Black hole that she "still got." What her relation to time prior to the fall looks like, a neat (or at least neater) temporal entanglement of past, present, and future, which is an "epiphenomenal" relation, warps in the violent gravitational tidal force of the black-hole-trauma. What might have been composed of decipherable hieroglyphics, legible markings and names (Corregidora,

⁴⁹ For more on Doppler blueshift and redshift, see Theo Koupelis, *In Quest of the Universe* (2004), 122-3; for more on gravitational blueshift/redshift, see R.J. Nemiroff's article, "Visual distortions near a neutron star and black hole" (1993) in *American Journal of Physics*, 619-32. I'm drawing from these, but giving as cursory an explanation of the phenomena as possible (which is reductive relative to the detail of the research that analyzes these phenomena), accepting the limitations of performing something in a "cursory" fashion.

Great Gram, Gram, Mama) spaghettifies or atomizes⁵⁰ in relation to the black-hole-trauma, broken down into fragments of letters or lexical symbols; legibility becomes impossible. These atomized remnants stream into the black hole, squeezed and pulled toward oblivion; this is the new singing, the new blues,⁵¹ of Ursa Corregidora. A reorientation of shattered timelines, rendered unrecognizable and non-orientable to her, into a stream of illegibility caught up in the time (and space) warp of the gravity of unthinkable trauma, made all the bluer by a general blueshift of the broken-up as it falls

⁵⁰ Spaghettification is the term that physicists use to describe what happens to matter and energy in relation to a Black hole. Acclaimed astrophysicist, director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York, author, and science popularizer, Neil deGrasse Tyson speaks on this in the simplest, but also most interesting, way I've encountered in a 2008 conversation with Ryan Watt, a science visualizer for the American Natural History Museum in New York, in San Francisco, CA. Drawing from his popular book, *Death by Black Hole*, he describes how one would die by 'falling into' a black hole: "You don't just die because you disappear—you die long before you disappear. As you fall in, the gravity at your feet becomes rapidly greater than the gravity at your head... So, your feet start falling faster than your head does. That's a bad situation to be in... And you reach a point where—and they're called the tidal forces, tides on your body, basically—the tidal forces become so great that the *exceed* the intermolecular forces that bind your flesh. And so the point comes when you snap into two pieces, likely to happen at the base of your spine... So, these two pieces then feel tidal forces, and they snap into two pieces. And then they snap again into 8, into 16... That will continue until you are a *stream of atoms* descending toward the abyss. And it turns out, that's not the worst of it... The fabric of space and time funnels down towards the black hole, so the space that you occupy 'up here' is larger than the space you occupy 'down here.' So while you're getting stretched, you're getting *squeezed, extruded* through the fabric of space [and time] like toothpaste through a tube... We have a word for that. It's called 'spaghettification.'" (Tyson, emphasis mine) I quote that at length both out of perceived necessity and pure interest in the imagery. Important to note in particular is that this is a particularly violent, and extreme kind of dying, one that reduces the flesh to its atomic constituents. I italicize "stream of atoms," because of the extremity of this violence on the flesh, and because I think this process best captures what Spillers means when she describes the violent metaphysical, actual, and symbolic reduction of Black bodies to (flayed, popped open, seared apart, and otherwise marked) flesh as "atomization" (Spillers, 68). I'll spend the third chapter meditating on this in detail, since it's unwieldy and demands an extensive engagement on its own.

⁵¹ A friend and colleague, Nicholas Brady, is at work on a massive project concerning a theory of Black sound, which he calls "NuBluez." The work is unreleased, but his work and thought plays a heavy influence on how I'm conceiving Ursa's work.

into the gravity well. For others, this blueshift is relative, subject to their movement relative to her movement, and so to their hearing relative to her singing; how well they are tuned to her singing, which is a singing “with [her] whole body,”⁵² and so how well they are tuned to her *flesh* and what illegibly springs from and marks it, determines whether or not the blueshift will be visible or audible to them. Perhaps this explains the illegibility of the music in its essence, *as* the blues, and now as a *bluer* blues, to her mother.

Perhaps it accounts for what the men who ‘listen’ to her sing encounter when they “mess” with her “with they eyes;” they engage in attempts to decode without really tuning in, a kind of reluctance to fall into the black abyss of Ursa’s gravity, and so their looks fall away.⁵³ In more detail, it is unclear that there is a marked shift in how many and what kind of looks and ‘messing with’ the many peripheral men of the novel perform, whether prior to the trauma (written in memories) or after it occurs. Max Monroe, the owner of The Spider, Ursa’s new stage after catching Tadpole cheating on her, describes her voice as “hard,” and Ursa, by extension, as someone “hard...to get into.”⁵⁴ Her voice is hard (to others) in a double sense: crystalized, like ice, and impenetrable, resistant to the kind of messing the men do with their eyes; and difficult, a problem and a quandary that, given that Max describes it this way after Ursa’s resistance

⁵² Jones, 50.

⁵³ Jones privileges looking and looks throughout the text. An earlier draft of this chapter spent (too much) time looking into this looking, which ultimately rendered the reading of the songs and her voice secondary, and muddled the reading of time that depends on the blueshift of of Ursa’s blues. In general, looks appear to be “warped” by Ursa’s gravitational tidal forces—looks from Cat, looks from Mutt, looks from Tadpole, looks from men throughout. But looks are also, from instance to instance, differently and uniquely communicative, which required an extensive detour that only ended up confusing, rather than extending and illuminating, the reading I’m putting forth.

⁵⁴ Jones, 96-7.

to his sexual advances, produces a failure of both decoding and entry. The “door” between her legs is closed to them, and so is her voice, and the violent illegibility of the trauma channeled in and as its frequency. For Ursa, it is a resistance to being totally consumed, or devoured, by the looking and ‘messing’ “eyeteeth,”⁵⁵ a kind of challenge to the violent relationality imposed on her by the men that hurt (Mutt, Tadpole) and want to sink their “eyeteeth” into (men watching/listening at Happy’s or The Spider) her flesh. It is a kind of counter devouring, an unintelligible and illegible demand “behind the music” for a hearing and seeing that telegraphs a willingness to be devoured, a willingness to bear witness to the blueness of her blues, a willingness to fall into and for her, “to the bottom of *her* eyes,”⁵⁶ as she was made to fall.

Taking all of this seriously, how we must read the ending of the novel unnerves. After twenty-two years, Ursa reunites with Mutt at the Drake hotel where they once lived together, but in a different room, a shifted context. Ursa’s desire for an intimate reconnection lines up with Mutt’s, and she performs oral sex for him. In the process she reaches a kind of epiphany, a singularity of moment marked by a “split second” (184). It is a moment of overlapping entanglements, “a moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin.” It is an uneasy and monstrous intimacy that picks at the still-open wound of non-orientable, non-relational trauma that has taken Ursa out of the neatness of time, or at least crystalized Ursa’s blue and cold antagonism to the neatness of time; it is a moment outside of time that stops just before breaking, and maybe breaking open, the undecipherable hieroglyphics of the

⁵⁵ Jones, 135.

⁵⁶ Jones, 51.

trauma that constitutes Ursa's flesh, and a moment outside of time that affirms, rather than denies, Ursa's sex (and the desire that telegraphs it). It is a temporal entanglement, of Mutt with Ursa, of Great Gram with Corregidora, and of both relationships with each other such that Ursa cannot tell "how much" of the untimely knot of their strings belonged to any one part.⁵⁷ At the nexus of this moment outside of time is an unnerving bondage between death and desire, killing and love, "pleasure and excruciating pain" that forms the novel's final song. It is a short song, and it is a duet, Mutt's, "I don't want the kind of woman that hurt you," met with Ursa's, "Then you don't want me," repeated in a bittersweet refrain, culminating with Ursa, shaken and in tears, finally responding in kind, "I don't want the kind of man that'll hurt me, neither," and a final embrace. It is a bluer blues that seems to suggest a dual willingness to fall (into each other's arms) into the abyss, to grasp the full extent of the blueshift, and to succumb to the tidal forces of an illegible, undecipherable problem, in flesh, blood, and being.

To Michelle Wright's "epiphenomenal time," Ursa's time after the fall (and into the kind of fall that culminates the novel) presents a serious problem. There is no neatly messy relationality to be found, neither between Ursa and Mutt (her most intimately connected 'other'), nor between Ursa and time itself. What we discover instead is a demand for a willingness to fall into the abyss. It is a traumatic fall, caught up in the immeasurable tidal forces of the black (w)hole of black flesh, into the illegibility and unintelligibility of the names, marks, symbols, and 'narrative' constitutive *to* black flesh, and into a violent warping of time (and space) that is inescapable. "Time" becomes resistant to the ease of any kind of definition beyond its violent relation to Black being

⁵⁷ Jones, 184.

and Black flesh, let alone one that claims to define it as a promise for greater legibility—one that promises a more legible set of relations between Blacks and time, and Blacks and each other—and leaves us unable to present a neat “solution” to the problem of the Humanities (and by extension all thought that takes time for granted): a presumption that time is linear, progressive, and can be read as in anything less than an antagonistic relation to Blackness. At least, we might now understand “time” as a *force* and a *problem* for thought in relation to Blackness; at best we might only be able to think of time as “wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey, [n-word-n-word] stuff.”⁵⁸ Further, however unsatisfying, this still-not-quite-nameable time begs a question of (pro)creation in relation to this kind of temporality: how might we create songs, words, desires, relations—how might we *make generations*—in the ceaseless wake of the violence of enslavement that lives on in, on, and as our flesh, and the repeated and new traumas that crystalize that ceaselessness? And how might we *hear*, or *read*—or develop a *method*, a *theory*, and a *praxis* for reading—those (pro)creations? *Corregidora* provides a bit of insight, but, more than anything, reveals the inescapable abyss of this line of questioning, and rather than offer the certainty of reprieve or reconciliation, demands we fall deeper, and bluer, into illegibility, unintelligibility, and impossibility.

⁵⁸ I borrow this from two places. In reverse order: I use this phrase in a piece also entitled, “Black (in) Time,” which won the Indiana Review’s nonfiction contest of 2015 and takes a more accessible approach toward opening us into thinking about this problem of Blackness in relation to time. The piece draws from a much more diverse range of media (manga, film, television, and ‘current’ events—namely, police brutality cases involving Black bodies being subject to the gratuitous violence of the police force); one of these is the sci-fi television program, *Doctor Who*. In the season 3 episode, “Blink, the Doctor (David Tennant, at the time) describes time from his perspective as a time-and-space-traveling alien known as a Time Lord. The original phrase is, “time is like a big ball of...wibbly wobbly, timey wimey stuff.” I merely add the n-word, n-word (to quote Kiese Laymon, “That mean ‘nigga’”) to ‘blacken’ the idea.

At, or at least toward, the bottom of the well, we must face this problem and pursue these questions more deeply. Where and when time is at its most violent in, and to, the gravitational singularity of Blackness, where/when its warping shatters and illegibly melds the time and violence of enslavement (Great Gram and Corregidora, and sexual violence) with the time and violence of its wake (Mutt and Ursa, and the ‘fall’), desire with hate, unknowable pain with irresistible pleasure, and killing with loving, into a “text for living and for dying,” an undecipherable arrangement of symbols and marks inextricably entangling death and life in Blackness—we must go to there and then. We must go deeper into the *deathly* nature of the destructive and violent entanglements that happen when we no longer understand time’s relation to Blackness as linear, neat, easily thinkable, relational, and so on; when, instead we understand that there is an unthought, and perhaps unthinkable, antagonism between Blackness and time, a relation that is violently untimely. At the bottom of the well, or at least moving toward it, expressing a willingness to fall into crushing the abyss, we might find and face what we seek.

Down the deathly rabbit hole, we brokenly and boldly go.

II. *A Matrix of Deathly Hallows*

“But this is not the sun about to rise in “the sky of history,” more the intermittent flashes from an underworld of images *that happen and keep on happening*... My belief is that what is being witnessed here—the scene recalls Louis Rutaganira in Kibuye—is a death that cannot ever die because it depends on the total degradation and disavowal of black life. Ipso facto: death emerges as a transcendental fact of black existence but without transcendence (similarly, black existence is one condemned to live without the possibility of being). This is no longer death but a deathliness that cannot be spiritualized or brought into meaning. This is death as nothing, less than nothing; as such, this death is never assumable as possibility or

decision, but remains *the interminable time of meaningless, impersonal dying.*"
---David Marriott, *Haunted Life*⁵⁹

If this is the case, what do we do with this? What can we *make* of it?⁶⁰ I want to suspend these questions around us, like an aural presence, like submitting us to a haunting; a ghost of what's to come stretched back as a specter haunting the argument's 'presence.' We leap, fall, submit.

David Marriott writes of deathliness and its untimeliness in "Ice Cold," the afterword to his dark tome on Blackness and visual culture, *Haunted Life*. Reading a letter Fanon sends to his friend, Roger Tayeb, from his deathbed, Marriott meditates on the horror that is the relationship between Blackness, death, and time. In Fanon's letter, he writes "death is always with us," an interminable, spectral presence *ethically* framing

⁵⁹ Marriott, 227; 230-1, emphasis mine.

⁶⁰ In part, I parrot questions dismissively lobbed at afropessimism and the thinkers who work within its framework—questions more often meant to "leap" toward solution, toward ends—a kind of disavowal that, if it's an attempt at disavowal, is meant to displace the theoretical with the practical. Often, this inheres in two assumptions. One is that afropessimism does not allow for any kind of action because it seems fatalistic. This is a misreading that projects a kind of disillusioned sentiment onto afropessimism from without, something like: if everything is this bad, and we can't hope to imagine a solution, and we have no agency, what's the point? How does this help us? Which leads to the other: that afropessimism cannot be used to mobilize action of any kind, since it seems to inherently deny the effectiveness of "movement" and movements. It is another misreading (and a general lack of awareness). Both of these assumptions behind this question, which is usually posed as disingenuously as I'm reading it to be posed, deny the motivation of afropessimism's "founder"—some describe this as some kind of cult, or religion, in which he is "guru" and we are "disciples" or "acolytes"—Frank B. Wilderson III, whose history is in militant activism (see, *Incognegro*) and who, most recently, along with Jared Sexton and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard and others, has been an important source of guidance and experience in Black student activism at the University of California, Irvine. And they deny the work of activists and scholars around the world mobilizing around ideas that are either avowedly afropessimist at their foundation (e.g. in South Africa, or at UCI, or through BYP 100), or afropessimist in their grasp of the structural position of the Blacks being mobilized. I'm taking these questions seriously as a "leap" or fall into the black hole, the abyss—so in the opposite direction. I think this is the only way.

the possibilities (rendering them possible in the first place) of “the life of the mind, the life of reason.”⁶¹ “Life,” and all its features and capacities, must be “answerable to death,” and “political thought,” rather *all* thought,⁶² bears an “ethical responsibility” to the “nonrepresentable, *working* of death;” death frames, and so binds “life” itself, *and* death works through the “workful” life, demands that life work *with* and *within* its haunting ‘presence.’ This is an interminable presence—“always with us”—characterized by Blackness’ “endless proximity” to death; “endless” as a spatial recognition of boundlessness and immeasurability, something like the unimaginable vastness of the ever-expanding cosmos, and “endless” as a temporal designation of ceaselessness, or timelessness, and so *untimeliness*. If “life” and “thought” are ethically to be redeemed (‘in the end,’ or, ‘at the end of (one’s) life,’ as Fanon’s letter embodies), it is *within* and *with* death. Pessimistically, the nature of this death’s force (with which it frames, through which it works) renders this redemption impossible, and impossible to *imagine*.

The *untimeliness* of death in relation to Blackness secures this impossibility.

Death haunts life as “the afterlife of slavery,”⁶³ as a “legacy” in which the defining

⁶¹ Marriott, 228-9.

⁶² This is a claim derived from Jared Sexton’s, “Ante-Anti-blackness: Afterthoughts,” which follows up his essay, “People-of-Color-Blindness” (2010), originally published in *Social Text*. He opens by reading a passage from Lewis Gordon’s, “Theory in Black,” extending it into the following two part claim: “I am guided in the following task by a two-sided idea derived from Gordon’s arguments: 1) all thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought and, consequently, 2) all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies. Blackness is theory itself, anti-blackness the resistance to theory.” It’s a brilliant claim with paradigmatic implications: it radically places Blackness at the foundation for all genuine inquiry, all *thought*, in an academy and a world that refuses to think Blackness at all, with very violent consequences.

⁶³ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6. I suspend a thicker engagement with this phrase until the next chapter, in which a reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* stages a chance to

feature of Black existence is a timeless truth: “that black life is meaningless and so black death is meaningless—a legacy in which death is nothing.”⁶⁴ This is a meaningless death that structures and works with and through a meaningless life, so the ethical “obligation” to think and live in “endless proximity” to death becomes impossible, or at least impossible to *make* meaningful; living becomes a kind of bearing witness to impossibility, and so a working to bear witness to death as it signals this impossibility; it is a living subject to the ethical demand to “look” upon, and perhaps to *read* and *hear* death’s impossibility, however meaningless, which might signal an illegibility and an unintelligibility that creates or secures meaninglessness as such. In that sense, Hortense Spillers’s search and desire for a *vocabulary*,⁶⁵ a key, a cryptovisible, for what it “means” to *be* Black in an antiblack world, strongly resonates. It is a meaninglessness, and a denial of decipherability—hence “undecipherable markings”—of an “interminable time” that suspends death such that it “cannot ever die.” A meaninglessness in and as a death that keeps on working, and so happening, and so *killing*, “over and over again” (Spillers, 68), ‘illuminated’ by the dark horror revealed in “intermittent flashes from an underworld,” a cosmos of the socially dead. Death is an undying, “transcendental *fact*” (emphasis mine), and so a political-ontological *fact*, manifesting as the “arbitrary visitation of catastrophic violence” on repeat; Blacks “exist” beneath the force of this undead fact, dispersed (atomized) throughout this “underworld,” which might be analogous to Fanon’s “zone of nonbeing,”⁶⁶ in relation to the suspension, and so

expand the temporal implications of the phrase into thinking about memory, or “rememory.”

⁶⁴ Marriott, 230.

⁶⁵ Spillers, “‘Whatcha Gonna Do?’”, 301.

⁶⁶ Fanon, 6.

timelessness of death, suspended by it, and so open and vulnerable to the ceaseless repetition of the arbitrary orders of violence (physical, psychological, political, economic, sexual, ontological, ad infinitum). Death, and its untimeliness become *infinite*, and so impossible to imagine, impossible to wholly heed, or read, or live by. We are “obligated” to an inherently incomplete “life” in the derelict cosmos of death, the dead, and the dying, “without transcendence” or meaning, without *time*⁶⁷—to be, to think, to live.

Blackness is a time crisis. A theory of Blackness in time, and also a praxis, and a method for reading time, *ethically* requires this same, impossible-to-redeem, bearing witness—seeing and hearing included—to *death*. The deathliness that haunts and works through us, with which we are compelled or *forced* to work, mutilates, or telegraphs a mutilated, temporality characterized by infinities and impossibilities, arbitrariness and gratuitous violence. It resists naming in its indeterminacy. And yet it manifests in ways that, at least, telegraph its mechanics. Through the everyday murders of Black folk by police *force*⁶⁸—Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Oscar Grant, Michael Brown, Yazmin Vash Payne, Anna Brown, Trayvon Martin, Penny Proud, Dionte Green, Tamir

⁶⁷ Marriott writes, “...the death of blacks, as utter abjection, is a nothingness without history and so indistinguishable from the unhistorical nothingness of a people without time” (240).

⁶⁸ From my “Black (in) Time” essay published in the *Indiana Review*: “We hoped, or maybe we did not, but we knew and know the facts of Blackness in relation to the police force, double emphasis on force, as what we mean is not reducible to “police brutality” in a conventional sense because “Blackness is always-already criminalized in the collective unconscious” (Wilderson, 6), and so subject to orders of policing that include, but cannot be simplified as, gratuitous violence by uniformed officers. Whites and nonblacks, or Masters and their junior partners, are deputized by civil society to wield police *force*: the *force* to violently constrict, monitor, control, and punish, preemptively and without need for “evidence” beyond the supposition of Blackness (a consequence of what Fanon describes as *being* “overdetermined from without”); the *force* of *being* able to submit a Black, and all Blacks, to *being* “guilty of being a nigger” (Laymon, 1), a “complete captivity from birth to death” (Wilderson, 7) because “there’s no time period in which Black police and slave domination have ended” (13).

Rice, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, ad infinitum⁶⁹—variously named, we bear witness to the way, time and time again, Black death repeats, and so telegraphs death’s infiniteness as a series of randomly violent and interruptive repetitions. Through the subjection to the constant disavowals of Black life that create an atmosphere, a miasma, of imminent destruction for merely *being* Black—sleeping on a sofa in one’s home in Detroit at age 7, playing in a park in Cleveland at age 12, knocking on a door for emergency assistance in Dearborn Heights at age 19, or defending one’s home from forced infiltration in Atlanta at age 92⁷⁰—a shroud of death’s *presence* that is *always* in waiting, we bear witness to the elongation or distention of death’s time across all ages (in all senses of the word). Through the familiarity of each interruptive intrusion into life and thought, through the feeling that these many times rhyme, we bear witness to the sense that death’s time does not appear to move, which telegraphs a deathly time in stasis, frozen, cold. Time, for Blacks, is dead and yet undying, a zombified force and feature of Black being, thinking, and living in an antiblack universe, which, to us, is a dead zone, an underworld, a cosmos of death.

This is Black time: dead, undying, and deathly time. This is *untime*. Time as fatally unethical. Littered with contradictions in which we are forced to wallow. Untime

⁶⁹ There is no way to name them all here in due time; they’ve been reduced to nominal exemplars, and this is disturbing, and seems to be a consequence of medium and imposed time more than my own desire to at least “mark” the deaths of the many slain that go overlooked and underthought, or unthought, in and beyond the academy. The names included were meant to span recent memory, landmark (highly publicized) events, and various identifications within the Black position (LGBTQ, womyn, man, child, etc) to at least show an attention to inclusivity, while knowing, given the inability to name even all the named (let alone the unnamed), this will result in failure. For the minimization of life and death into “example,” I have to, irredeemably, apologize.

⁷⁰ In order: Aiyana Stanley-Jones, 7; Tamir Rice 12; Renisha McBride, 19; Kathryn Johnston, 92.

is as the states of water: it is cold and shows no movement, frozen; it is also ceaseless, infinite, and ever shifting via its repetitions, so fluid; and it escapes seeing and hearing, resists the tactility of definition, and obfuscating, so like a mist, a vapor—but all as once. In all, and together, unwieldy, untime becomes another telegraphic name encoding the mechanics and characteristics of Blackness in time, but also inherently incapable of “fixing” time in a double sense: “fixing” time as in binding it to the singularity of definition, securing it; and “fixing” time as in repairing or remedying the deathly and violently indeterminate relations traced here (a distinction from the very impetus for Wright’s engagement). What’s in a name is anything but salvation. What’s in the imposition of new vocabulary is only a clarification of the fullest possible shape of the problem for thought, life, and being, *as* a problem; there is no solution. Our ethical obligation is to bear witness to the unethicity of this force and feature of the antiblack universe in its undecipherability; this is what it is to heed Ursa’s call, to see what she’s singing, to leap into the abyss, the black hole. Neither as a form of agency or resistance to manageable forces, nor a fatalistic and helpless sacrifice to the unimaginable and omnipotent powers that be, but a *bearing witness*, and so a *listening* and a *looking*, a kind of *taking account* and *surveying* of what is *as* (blue as) it is, and of *when* and *where* we “be” in relation to it. To brokenly leap, into the untimely abyss, is to go with the flow of gravity’s tidal forces, is to break (atomize, spaghettify) into the temporal rend, into the dark and crushing opening toward the black (w)hole of the Black position (its where and when).

I understand untime to be the unnamed⁷¹ force at work in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. How Butler mechanizes this force, and how her protagonist, Edana (who calls herself, and is called, Dana, throughout), a Black writer living in California in 1976, experiences this force might cast us deeper into the abyss that is grasping the phenomenological and structural features of untime. While moving into a new apartment with her husband, Kevin Franklin, Dana unpacks and organizes boxes of books into a bookcase—"fiction only." Kevin joins her, and Dana places a stack of nonfiction in front of him—to his disgust—but, as she playfully goes to push another box of it toward him, she bolts upright. As she experiences it: "I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees... The house, the books, everything vanished."⁷² Dana's being pulled back in time.⁷³ Dana's disorientation marks the effect of the tidal pull: the force denies a stable and comfortable relation to reality; the untimely destabilization, or disequilibrium, precipitates in dizziness and nausea for the Black being pulled by its force; reality blurs and darkens, or, becomes unintelligible and illegible and Blackens, as the interruptive force of untime takes hold of her capacity to orient to the room and world around her. In place of the time of her present in her California apartment, darkness and disorientation enter, creating an open temporal (and spatial) void, like a black frame between scenes of a film, a black cut severing continuity.

⁷¹ Butler, *Kindred*, 17. After returning from her first violent passage into the time of chattel slavery, Dana says, "I don't have a name for the thing that happened to me." The "force" at work remains unnamed throughout the novel—though, it seems, naming it seems less and less pertinent to Dana's survival.

⁷² Butler, 13.

⁷³ "Dana's being" both ways: "Dana is being" and "Dana's *being*."

In the vacancy enters another spacetime: the time of chattel slavery on a Maryland plantation, owned by Tom Weylin. Dana discovers Tom's son, Rufus, to be her ancestor, and each violent passage 'back' to slavery necessitates his presence. Every tidal pull is a "call" of sorts: Rufus finds his life endangered, often by his own foolishness and arrogance, and instinctively "calls" for help across time to Dana; a "hole" in the universe opens, through which Rufus's conscious or unconscious need reaches, manifesting as the forceful and disorienting "pull" that brings Dana, his descendant, to him to save his life. To which Dana, if time exists on a causal continuum, is obligated, since her existence presumably depends on his survival (at least until he procreates the next in her bloodline). Not only is the pull a force over which she has no control—she repeatedly remarks, frustrated and helplessly, on how she doesn't "have any control at all"⁷⁴—but is a force that appears to be contingent upon the *life* and *desire* (to live) of the master. Time's force becomes a kind of "power" (247) tied to the master's conscious and unconscious desire to continue to exist; it becomes another "power" inexplicably inherent to mastery, and is wielded to subject a Black to an inescapable and dizzying contradiction: cease to "be" by allowing the master/ancestor to suffer and die, preventing your own existence; or, continue to "be" by securing and protecting the life of the master/father, and by willfully occupying the position of the slave (which is to willfully accept a position of nonbeing) to do so. A choice between never having existed and not being 'while' existing. In either case, Dana's feeling that this force is outside her control and that "it could happen again

⁷⁴ She first remarks on this on page 23, and then on 49, and throughout the novel. On page 247, prior to the final action of the novel, Dana asks herself, and possibly Kevin, about how she returns to the present: "Is the power mine, or do I tap some power in him?" Neither the force of the pull or the push (until the final sequence of the novel) have anything to do with Dana's "agency," which, from the very beginning, is destabilized, if not outright denied.

any time,”⁷⁵ reflect a sense that Dana belongs irreducibly to this untimely force, *and* to the mastery of which it appears to be an appendage.

This contradiction produces a problem Dana must negotiate as she is pulled into chattel slavery for increasingly extensive durations. In the form of a ghastly and ghostly question that haunts the whole of the text through her: What is the distinction between Dana’s Blackness in 1976 and her Slaveness across the multiple spacetimes of slavery to when and where she’s yanked? She begins by refusing the imposition of Slaveness onto her being. During her second passage to the time of the Weylin plantation, Dana converses with Rufus about his understanding of her presence. Recounting Dana’s first appearance and disappearance, Rufus relays to Dana his parents’ confusion about her inexplicable existence; to Rufus’s mother, Dana might have been best understood as a “ghost,” an apparition of “some nigger”—some “strange nigger”—that “she had never seen before.” Rufus casually imposes his mother’s logic onto Dana’s existence: his repetition and casual acceptance claims render Dana’s being spectral, unreal, and suture that unreality to *being* “some nigger,” to having one’s being relegated to the namelessness that characterizes the slave position. Dana contends Rufus’s imposition, claiming she is “as real as” he is, that she *is* “a black woman,” and that, because she saved his life, he should “do [her] the courtesy of calling [her] what [she] wants to be called.”⁷⁶ Her attempt at a corrective signals a resistance that tries to undo the erasure of her name (Dana) and her identity (Black womyn), which codifies a resistance to the dissolution of her *being* via a disavowal of her “realness” (she is ghostly) into the unreality of *being* “some nigger”—some Slave. And she grounds her demands in a kind

⁷⁵ Butler, 17.

⁷⁶ Butler, 24-5.

of debt that must be repaid in this symbolic fashion: he owes, or should owe, her his continued existence, and so she demands *being*—telegraphed by a right to name and name herself⁷⁷—in suit.

What gives Dana's demands the force of cohesion and legibility is the temporal distance between her California apartment in 1976 and the spacetime of the antebellum Weylin plantation, which marks a temporal distance between Dana and the slaves Weylin owns. Temporal *distance* for Dana *founds* the *difference* in political ontological position. We see Dana transmute this logic into her language. To her, the matter of surviving on the plantation requires "playing the part of a slave."⁷⁸ Slaveness for her is performative, a deceptive guise or act derived from a need to survive, to go unnoticed as a "strange nigger." While captive to the force apparently under Rufus's control, Dana understands that she is "supposed to be a slave" (66), and she understands this in terms of an index of gestures she is "supposed to" perform to avoid the particular violence that tends to meet "strange niggers." Dana's language reveals a kind of conflation between the performative and the political ontological, between the performance and the position, of the slave. She transmutes this conflation into what she believes is a dual-layered defense. One layer consists in the performance itself, operating under the assumption that the more precise the performance, the less likely the gratuitous violence; it is an attempt at a defense of flesh. Withholding knowledge from and placating Rufus throughout; attempting to derive the mathematical function describing how whipping, pain and punishment relate to work

⁷⁷ Spillers, 67. I make this reference since Spillers considers the power to name and the power of names to be a crucial part of the symbolic order, the antiblack grammar that organizes thought and being. Dana's desire to resist this, to invert it, stands as a kind of radical resistance codified in a demand for this power.

⁷⁸ Butler, 79.

and exhaustion;⁷⁹ knowing to keep her eyes low as a sign of respect and obedience—all of these performative strategies to mask herself as slave, in service of minimizing the bodily trauma she would have to endure until her predicament ended. The other consists in the cohesion of Dana’s existence, which she might maintain under the destructive order of slavery if and only if she identifies her Slaveness as a performance; it is an attempt at a defense of *being*, an attempt to escape the gravity of the obliterating black hole.

To clarify, “black hole” is name characterizing a structure with variable forms, each with different characteristics. The shared, defining characteristic of “black holes” is the event horizon, which, simplified, is a point of no return beyond which escaping the tidal forces of the black hole’s gravity becomes impossible—neither light, nor any other slower-moving object can ultimately escape obliteration. Whether this is an absolute or

⁷⁹ We see this throughout, and the moments don’t always center Dana, as other slaves are routinely punished in unique and horrifying ways (e.g. Alice, Nigel, Sam), but I’m specifically thinking of her relation to the overseers of the plantation, Edwards and Fowler. There are two moments in particular. Edwards threatens Dana with a ‘real’ whipping when she attempts to defy his orders; he demands she goes to do the wash, and Dana attempts to wield Rufus’s name as a way of avoiding the work, to which Edwards responds by calling her a “lyin’ nigger,” and threatening her with violence. She goes to do the wash. Tom Weylin has a heart attack. During “The Storm,” Rufus calls Dana inside to save him, and she fails because she lacks the expertise, time, and resources to do so. After Rufus’s father dies, Rufus blames his death on Dana’s refusal to help him and her desire to see him dead, which, to him, is cause enough to send her to work in the fields. By this point in the novel, Dana’s avoided the “hard” labor in the fields by “playing the part” as well as she could; it seems not to have mattered. Fowler takes her to the cornfields to work, where she must chop down the stalks and collect them. Her inexperience immediately draws the lash of his whip, which becomes a staccato rhythm to her day: “He watched me for a while, urging me on, literally cracking the whip...He did that all day. Coming up suddenly, shouting at me, ordering me to go faster no matter how fast I went, cursing me, threatening me. He didn’t hit me that often, but he kept me on edge because I never knew when a blow would fall. It got so just the sound of his coming terrified me. I caught myself cringing, jumping at the sound of his voice” (Butler, 212).

apparent structure—whether the black hole is eternal, so the event horizon always marks a boundary, or the black hole is temporary, so the event horizon is temporally finite—is a topic of heated debate. The latter stems from Stephen Hawking’s theorization that black holes emit radiation over time, eventually evaporating entirely, which has certain implications for what happens to the “information” of the objects devoured by the black hole (more on that below). In this latter case, which Sabine Hossenfelder suggests we might call an “apparent black hole,”⁸⁰ there is a small possibility that the object beyond the horizon might *eventually* escape if moving at the speed of light because, as Stephen Hawking writes in a recent, very short paper, “The absence of event horizons means that there are no black holes—in the sense of regimes from which light can’t escape *to infinity*,” suggesting that there *are* “apparent” black holes, in the sense of regimes from which light can’t escape *to a point*, and so *can* or *might* escape at some other point. This appears to characterize Dana’s denial of a political ontological overlay or entanglement between her Blackness and the Slaveness she believes she merely performs. The black hole seemingly inescapably pulling her toward the crushing singularity⁸¹ of that

⁸⁰ See Sabine Hossenfelder, “If it Quacks like a Black Hole,” posted on BackRe(Action), a blog devoted to physics that she shares with her husband, Stefan Scherer. Sabine Hossenfelder is a theoretical physicist, and the Assistant Professor for High Energy Physics at Nordita, the Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics. Stefan Scherer is a physicist in the field of heavy ion physics, working in the field of scientific publishing.

⁸¹ I need to clarify that a singularity, as it’s thought in terms of a black hole, marks a site at which classical physics can no longer mathematically predict what happens. This is where it is theorized that quantum gravity might come into play, having the explanatory power to remove the singularity. Right now, however, the singularity seems to be a source of a paradox, as it suggests that information is lost after a certain point. If the black hole evaporates—since black holes appear to evaporate—what happens to that information? This “information paradox” surrounding what exactly happens to the information that ‘goes into’ a black hole is the subject of an ongoing and unresolved ‘debate’ in physics, having a number of proposed solutions (the cited Stephen Hawking paper stirred the pot a bit, portending a solution of its own, but one which is neither ‘new’

entanglement, if this is how we characterize the essence of her predicament, is merely temporary. Like Rufus's relevance to her existence, and so her need to "play the part of a slave," which is an obligation to be pulled—by him as Master, and by the political ontological force threatening to make her a slave—which will, at some point, evaporate; and, so, at some point, she will *be* and be able to escape, should she move fast enough (at the speed of light)—should she, in her mind, "play the part" well enough—for long enough.

But Blacks, like most objects, do not and cannot move at or faster than the speed of light. Dana downward toward this fact the less her performances seem like performances. The language shifts and the distance begins to collapse. As Rufus ages and his animosity waxes, his treatment of Dana increases her proximity to Slaveness. His preferential treatment of Dana as a "strange nigger," one "better than the ordinary niggers" (164) rapidly dissolves, a progressive confirmation of the illusoriness distance between Dana's position and her "performance" of Slaveness. Dana's ability to wield the performance as a role in and out of which she might slip as she feels needed—most often to attempt to manipulate Rufus's behavior—falls away because the fact is, as slaves of the plantation remind her, she's "still a nigger." *Still* denotes an ugly temporal element to this fact: "still" suggests continuity, the position persists from some prior point in time; "still" suggests stasis, the position persists and is unchanging, bearing the same essence

or groundbreaking), but no single, acceptable (proven) answer. Central to the paradox is the kind of inherent conflict it maintains between the laws of quantum mechanics and general relativity, ultimately creating a situation in which one or the other is incorrect, and throwing a proverbial wrench into any foreseeable attempt to unify the two. This is a(n over)simplification of the profundity and complexity of the issues at hand, but necessary and (hopefully) illuminating nonetheless.

(Blackness) of the same name “nigger.”⁸² The untimely nature of her *being* as “nigger” has existed, continues to exist, and will presumably continue to exist so long as her predicament persists; the time of her Slaveness-named-“nigger” continues endlessly. And this untimely position remains essentially unchained, the stillness of her Slaveness-named-“nigger” fixing her in spacetime, frozen (ice cold) in it. The untimeliness is apparently ceaseless, appearing to show no movement. It appears the black hole that pulls her might have a more permanent event horizon, promising a more absolute relation between Dana and the obliterating singularity of Black nonbeing marked by the Slave.

The question seems to lie with the indeterminacy of the “beginning:” when does Dana cross the event horizon; or, if Dana’s “*still* a nigger,” since when? The text offers no direct temporal answers, but if we understand “beginnings” as violent, inaugural ruptures (pace Spillers), and as “tears” in reality that mark “the end of traceable beginnings,”⁸³ we can at the very least recognize, without the possibility of reckoning, that this indeterminacy afforded us by Butler signals an irreparable and untraceable loss. *Still* reveals a temporal impossibility because Dana can no longer orient herself to time in a deterministic way, and the untimeliness extends her Slaveness-named-“nigger” indeterminately, so immeasurably, ‘backward.’ The temporal distance between Dana and Slave collapses into indeterminacy, and Dana can no longer “maintain the [political ontological] distance.” The strain against the tidal forces becomes too much to manage in the face of waxing terror and domination on the plantation; this appears to be a correlative process, the escalating gratuitous violence Dana experiences inversely

⁸² In a conversation on ‘the n-word’ on CNN, Marc Lamont Hill defends Blacks’ use of the word as a singular representation of what he describes of “a collective condition known as ‘nigga.’”

⁸³ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 5.

correlating with the capacity to “maintain” a distance between Dana’s perceived position and the reality of the Slave position, however illusory it might be. Dana’s awareness of this produces a vertiginous disorientation: “Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?” A loss of temporal bearings codified as or with a loss of reason comes with Dana’s recognition. The recognition produces a vertigo that signals Dana’s critical misrecognition of the political ontological distance as distance at all, which is a misrecognition of *being* (a Slave, or “still a nigger”).

Butler sutures this misrecognition to a fundamental misrecognition of the *flesh* (and all its illegible markings). Carrie, who cannot speak and communicates in gestures, clarifies as much to Dana after she speaks on the resentment she feels from other slaves who might consider her proximity to Rufus a kind of *life* or *being* by association: “She came over to me (Dana) and wiped one side of my face with my fingers—wiped hard. I drew back, and she held her fingers in front of me, showed me both sides” (223-4). Dana fails to understand; the performance is singularly (“for once”) unintelligible to her, even after Carrie repeats it. Nigel translates: “She means it doesn’t come off...The black. She means the devil with people who say you’re anything but what you *are*” (ibid). While intended as a dismissal of the possible perceptions of other slaves, it reveals a fact that previously remained illegible to Dana. The fact of her Blackness, codified in the permanence of its marking(s) on her flesh, was masked by Dana’s fantastic alchemy. She transmutes the temporal distance between 1976 and antebellum enslavement into the illusion of a political ontological distance between “Black” (“Black womyn,” specifically) and “nigger” (as a name for Slaveness). This mask is cracked and shattered via the imposition of gratuitous violence from Masters (e.g. Rufus Weylin and his

overseers, Edwards and Fowler) and the communication of fact from Slaves (e.g. Carrie and Nigel), revealing the fantasy for its fantastical nature, so the political ontological distance dissolves into the reality of a horrifying overlay between “nigger” and “Black,” between “Slave” and “Dana,” such that the temporal distance that gave the mask its cohesion falls away. Time becomes untimely in its two layers of indeterminacy, the indeterminacy of the origin of the overlay between Dana and Slave, and the arbitrariness of the violent passages Rufus coerces Dana to make. The only remaining certainty is the illegible fact borne in/as Dana’s flesh, and the flesh of all Blacks, on and off the plantation. After being brutally whipped, and while recovering, but in agony, Dana thinks to herself “*See how easily slaves are made?*” But she might be terribly mistaken: with no traceable beginnings, and only the fact of her Black flesh, it might not be that she was ever or easily *made* a slave, but that, as far as anyone was concerned, she always already was.

This all resonates with Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness”⁸⁴ on multiple frequencies. Butler initially makes the resonance available the moment Rufus, following her second passage, and so when he’s a (white) child, casually names Dana a “strange

⁸⁴ Let me point out that I’m citing the Markmann (1967) translation of *Black Skin, White Masks*. This is a conscious decision: peculiar omissions and translation choices in the more widely accepted Philcox translation appear to elide the depth and scope of Fanon’s choices in this chapter, producing misreadings and misuses of Fanon’s chapter. These misreadings/misuses are in line what I understand to be a general problem in and outside the academy, in which the specificity of Fanon’s corpus to *Blackness* and to *Blacks* can be forgotten for some generalizable, postcolonial discourse, or some justification of “all” or “most” anticolonial thought and activism. This tendency can only work by forgetting, footnoting, or tossing aside this specificity, which I believe would happen with or without the Philcox translation; the Philcox translation simply buttresses that tendency, and, as this project refuses to decenter Blackness, I choose Markmann’s work. Jared Sexton talks about this very openly and clearly in his talk, “People-of-Color-Blindness”/“The Color of the Sky,” and David Marriott’s upcoming master-text on Fanon should also, with excruciating detail, address this issue.

nigger,” channeling the force of his mother’s thoughts; it appears to be Fanon’s “Dirty Nigger!” manifest in another form, or “disguise” (however thinly veiled). We can deftly and swiftly observe the parallels between Dana’s treatment of the imposition of this *fact* of her Blackness and Fanon’s careful dissection of his own psychic negotiations of that fact. Fanon maneuvers through an array of meticulous refusals of the “dark and unarguable”⁸⁵ Slaveness-named-nigger and the “reason” that buttresses those refusals. Against the “unreason” of antiblackness that fixes him to his spatial and temporal “coordinates” (84), against the “crushing objecthood”⁸⁶ in which antiblackness seals him, Fanon asserts the (Black) wholeness of a “corporeal schema” under the monicker, in majuscule, “BLACK MAN” (87). It is an attempt to name and solidify himself against the “disappearance”⁸⁷ of his *being* into the position of the “dirty nigger.” In parallel, we recall Dana’s immediate reaction to Rufus’s casual imposition of the name and position of “strange nigger” onto her *being*, and her assertion of her identity as a “Black woman.” The initiating discovery of and violent encounter with the *fact* of Blackness encoded in the imposition of the variously modified name, “nigger,” reveals a crushing dislocation of this sense of *being* (a Black man, or a Black womyn), and that *being* is concurrently fixed to the unchanging coordinates of “nigger” in the flesh (Fanon describes this as a “racial epidermal schema”). Fanon and Dana—or, perhaps, Dana through an echoic relation to

⁸⁵ Fanon, *BSWM*, 88.

⁸⁶ Fanon, 82.

⁸⁷ Fanon, 84. Recently, I encountered a recording of an interview with author Kiese Laymon about his novel *Long Division*, growing up in Mississippi, and writing for Blacks. Of the many topics he addresses, he brings up the problem of being “disappeared” in relation to *being* Black. The impetus behind his novel, his essay collection, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, his writing in general, and his teaching, is a sustained resistance to the “disappearance” the characterizes Black “life” in an antiblack world. We will think more about this in the second chapter, which pays close attention to *Long Division* and the way it seeks to accomplish this.

Fanon—attempt to establish a footing, attempt to reason against the unreason of the dislocation, and attempt to ‘retain’ a name and an awareness of the wholeness of their flesh against the violence of this force.

But this discovery is really a “rediscovery”⁸⁸ of a fact “seated in the chair in the empty room”⁸⁹ before either Fanon or Dana arrive. As opposed to an initiating imposition of fact, a kind of locatable “beginning,” the imposition telegraphs a “definitive structuring of the self and of the [antiblack] world” (83). In this instance, rediscovery implies a temporal relation: the antiblack world structure exists outside of and ‘before’ the Blacks it positions as “nigger;” the Black is always already a “nigger” in the eyes of the world (because the world is always already antiblack), and must also in the eyes of whites (Masters) and nonblacks (Junior Partners), “the only real eyes” (87). Fanon and Dana’s attempt to ‘retain’ or (re)assert some kind of alternative position is always already compromised; in fact, more menacingly, there is no alternative position or name, or, at least, one that might undo or displace the factuality of the position imposed by the structure and the gazes of its agents. This places the disequilibrium as preexisting with a kind of permanence, with indeterminate temporal “beginning” beyond the fixedness of the flesh, which is to say that it does not merely inaugurate the escalation of Fanon and Dana’s encounter with antiblackness (and by extension, his chapter and Butler’s novel as “narratives” in a superficial sense). Fanon, Dana, and Blacks are perpetually “too late”

⁸⁸ Fanon, 99. Importantly, this is also a way Spillers, in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” describes the way in which the resurgence of even familiar trauma, in or outside discourse, never dulls trauma’s terrible force: “I might as well add that the familiarity of this narrative does nothing to appease the hunger of recorded memory, nor does the persistence of the repeated rob these well-known, oft-told events of their power, even now, to startle. In a very real sense, every writing as revision makes the ‘discovery’ all over again” (Spillers, 68-9).

⁸⁹ Brand, 25.

(91) because the antiblackness of the world is anticipatory, and so preemptively—without the need for “direct” imposition—prepares a position characterized by a fixed disequilibrium for Blacks who “arrive” into the world. Whatever trauma Rufus or the unnamed child Fanon encounters telegraph becomes *constitutive* as opposed to (solely) *intrusive*; the intrusion of the imposition of fact, and the traumatic dislocation that appears to come with it, only “intrude” insofar as the intrusion is a violent reintroduction or reminder of the way the fact always already constitutes the sense of being being intruded upon. The untimeliness of the fact and its ensuing trauma holds a permanence and a repetition, appearing to “show no movement” no matter its disguise.

This opens us into rediscovery’s second, equally menacing implication. In both Dana and Fanon’s “narratives,” neither the articulation of the violent imposition of antiblackness, nor the Black resistance with which it is met, occur “once.” The “initiating” trauma produces an indignance that manifests, for both, in an attempt to name, and in a demand for explanation; the “world” counters with another form of violence to reassert fact against the fantasy of humanity, so subjectivity, Fanon and Dana attempt to claim. Fanon remarks on this directly, expressing frustration over the escalation and evolution of the world’s responses to his responses to its violent displacement: “Thus, my unreason was countered with reason, my reason with ‘real reason.’ Every hand was a losing hand for me” (101). Like Dana’s resistance to Rufus’s violence, both discursive (her demands to be addressed or conversed with on her own terms) and performative (her preemptively protective attempts to arm herself with knives between passages), which are met with Rufus’s escalating gratuitous violence (beatings, whippings); like Fanon’s psychic resistance in the form of indignant verbal outbursts

(“Kiss the handsome Negro’s ass, madame!”⁹⁰), or reasoned analytical dissections of unreasonable claims against his own (his attempt to disavow Sartre’s patronizing misreading of *négritude*); like the “perpetual reversals and retreats,”⁹¹ every attempt at a strategic defense is met with a more forceful assault. “Rediscovery,” marks a resurgence, but importantly, it marks a reinvigorated resurgence, one that reemerges with undaunted, if not increased, force when met with resistance. The untimeliness of the fact does not “move,” but might demonstrate greater and greater, and so more and more violent resilience, the more the Black resists its factuality. After each encounter, Black *being* and Black flesh are returned “sprawled out, [and more and more] distorted” than the previous one, in what is at once an escalating reduction, as well as an increase in the depth and number of markings. Whatever remains of being and flesh violently shrinks; the undecipherable markings grow in number, and illegibility becomes all the more impenetrable.

What then? Is it all an exercise in futility? Is the logic, buttressed by the unwieldy evidence of experience and untimely facts, inevitably fatalistic? What to do with/from such a pessimistic position? I suspended a version of these questions at the outset of this section because attempting to map out the horrifying and violent entanglement between untime and antiblackness is constitutive to an engagement with them, and because Butler (through Dana) Fanon (and Marriott’s reading of him) lay the foundation for an intervention. Which is also why I suspended an engagement with the other side of untime. As Rufus arbitrarily wields its force to drag Dana through time, Dana must also

⁹⁰ Fanon, 86.

⁹¹ Brand, 29.

and repeatedly “return”⁹² to 1976 California. An examination of the mechanics of this “return” lends open our way.

Concurrent with Dana’s negotiation of the fact of her Blackness and that fact’s effect on her relation to (un)time—or, perhaps, more quickly than that—Dana constructs a theory of her “returns” by testing a hypothesis that emerges early into the text. During her second passage, and after encountering Alice at her shack in the woods for the first time, Dana goes to retrieve a blanket Alice left outside in the midst of being threatened and nakedly exposed by a slave patroller looking for a runaway. The patroller, returning to the shack as she does, blindsides her. Dana counters his assault by fleeing, and, when this fails, wields a tree limb to forcibly, if temporarily, end the encounter. Battered, bruised and fearing that he might kill her should he regain consciousness, experiences a darkening dizziness before finding herself “returned” to her apartment and Kevin’s company. They walk through what happened, and what, between her first passage and her second, catalyzed her “return,” and Kevin leads her to reason that her own “fear of death sends [her] home.”⁹³ But Dana, taking this hypothesis seriously, objects to its utility, even if proven correct: “seconds count when something is trying to kill you;” since her vertiginous passages take “time” to complete, these seconds leave her especially vulnerable, even more so if the danger must be ‘real,’ and so deadly, enough for her to begin to “return.” Butler presents this as a problem stretched between compromised and

⁹² With each “return” returning her flesh and psyche to her more “distorted” by trauma than the last, “the returns” might best be understood as inherently incomplete inversions as opposed to agential reversals; the former recognizes the way violence persists in the flesh and in the mind no matter the “return,” and the latter inheres in fantasy. This is the reason for quotation marks around the word. For a studied analysis in line with this reasoning, visit Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*.

⁹³ Butler, 50.

absent control: either Dana has absolutely no control over her passage across time, or she does, but at risk of death and destruction. This might explain why the first few “returns” occur in the wake of unexpected violence; Dana’s unwillingness to accept the risk elemental to embracing the proximity and imminence of death relegates “return” to arbitrariness, such that it appears out of control.

But as the violence against her escalates, giving the fact of her Blackness and its subjection to untime greater and greater force, her willingness to embrace, or at least risk approaching, death grows. Two “returns” interest me in particular. The first: Attempting to flee the plantation with Kevin after a long separation, Rufus, armed with a rifle, refuses to allow her to leave. Desperate for a reprieve from the violence of his presence, and recognizing Rufus’s willingness to shoot Kevin in order to coerce her into submission, Dana throws her body between the barrel and Kevin’s body. When she hits the ground, the darkening dizziness has been triggered, and a temporary “escape” is imminent. And the second: after Rufus hits her for protesting his sale of a slave, Sam, in front of his weeping family, Rufus commands her to return to the house. With resolve, citing a violation of an “unspoken agreement—a very basic agreement,”⁹⁴ Dana instead makes her way to the cookhouse where she warms some water, walks upstairs to the attic, and, in the water, slits her wrists in order to “return.” Taken together, what both of these demonstrate is the development of what is both a desperate and resolute willingness to embrace a proximity to death, *corporeal* death, in order to assert some form of control over untime’s force. And it is precisely that: a proximity to *corporeal* death, a risk with sentience at stake. Should she fail, mistime, or misjudge her actions, she risks death in

⁹⁴ Butler, 238.

this conventional sense.

But this leaves Rufus alive, and ultimately must relinquish even the illusion of control to the arbitrariness of his will. Though Dana risks her corporeal life, her sentience, in both instances, especially the second, Rufus lives on, as does her subjection to untime's force. It is only after a final escalation on Rufus's part that Dana raises the stakes, and the level of abstraction, of her actions. Rufus attempts to rape Dana. An absolute refusal of consent, and so an absolute disavowal of Dana's claims to her own flesh, let alone how she names or identifies it, Rufus's willingness to finalize and hyperbolize his position as Master through rape of his Slave violently raises the stakes.⁹⁵ Pinned to the bed, but armed with a knife, Dana must choose between submitting to "crushing objecthood," specifically the pornotropic reduction of her *being* to sexualized *flesh*, which *might* be to continue to "exist," but only as a sentient "object" that has been unimaginably violated; or, using the knife to kill Rufus and defend herself from the specificity of sexualized antiblack violence, which risks ceasing to exist, or never having existed.⁹⁶ It is a choice that raises the stakes and the level of abstraction from the

⁹⁵ For an essay that examines the need to center "racial rape" in our development of a Black Studies that radically examines and challenges the antiblack world, see Joy James's "Afrarealism and the Black Matrix: Maroon Philosophy at Democracy's Border."

⁹⁶ Two things. First, I am aware that—if we consider time to be linear, which we do not—Dana "never having existed" would create a paradox, since it turns on having existed long enough to choose to kill Rufus in the first place, perhaps, as so many science fiction films, novels, and television shows have suggested, "destroying the space-time continuum." Second, I am aware that at this point in the novel, Hagar Weylin, the next ancestor in Dana's bloodline, has been born, possibly rendering Rufus's continued life meaningless if not dangerous. But, like the mechanics of untime in the novel, at no point is this connection, or Dana's line of reasoning behind it, presented as a certainty; there is no guarantee that Hagar's existence will end this predicament. This is perhaps most evident in the fact that, though Hagar has been born and Dana has "returned" to her time, Rufus calls her to him once more.

corporeal to the political ontological: from physical death, and so a loss of sentience, to a death of *being*, a negation of *existence*, itself. The choice is an impossible one, but it must be made. Dana chooses to kill Rufus. She chooses to leap, or tumble, toward the black hole. As he lay dead before her, his hand still clenched around her forearm, a kind of corporeal echo of their struggle, the darkening dizziness burgeons, and Dana “returns.” Rufus’s hand never lets go, and Dana’s arm, from the point of his grip and below, remains with him; her arm looks as if it has merged with the wall of the apartment. Attempting loose herself from the wall and his grip, she pulls back a severed limb, and screams in agony; she “frees” herself from his grasp and the crushing objecthood of the wall, losing a bit of herself in the agonizing process.

Against the deathliness that characterizes a Black position subject to the arbitrary and gratuitous violence of untime’s force, Fanon appears to believe that violence might “be redeemed...by black revolutionary violence” (Marriott, 231). Fanon might describe this Black revolutionary violence an “explosion” that is, on the one hand, a characterization of the overwhelming and unrestrained nature of that violence, and, on the other, a willingness to embrace violent obliteration in order to *produce* or *make* a violent “upheaval” in the face. If Butler’s work maintains a resonance with Fanon’s thoughts here, what Dana chooses to do, and what happens to her as a result seems to be Butler’s speculation on what happens when we choose to run the risk of nonexistence by embracing the factuality of its presence. I read Butler’s inclusion of an epilogue to be the structural expression of a question: “What might happen if/once we embrace untime’s force, and in doing so willingly risk not only corporeal death, but absolute nonexistence?”

So to conclude, I turn to it.⁹⁷ After what's left of Dana's arm heals, she and Kevin travel to Maryland searching for confirmation of the reality of all that Dana and the slaves of the Weylin plantation suffered. On the surface, this appears to be a recuperative search on a few levels: on one, it is recuperative in the way that confirmation telegraphs a version of reason in the form of the preservation of sanity; on another, it is decidedly optimistic in its futurity, with Dana and Kevin together, on a shared journey, despite the political ontological rift between their positions, Kevin as White/Master, Dana as Black/Slave, recuperative as a subtle reconciliation of irreconcilable positions via a shared experience; and on another, it is recuperative in that it attempts to fill in the constitutive blanks in the historical archive, the many "what happened?" questions about the whereabouts and wellbeing of the people she encountered, which is an attempt at recuperating continuity and cohesion, which, fundamentally, flies in the face of "untime" and its constitutive features (which are antithetical to continuity and cohesion). But in the final line of the novel, Butler leaves a way to challenge this sort of reading. Kevin remarks, "now that the boy is dead, we have *some chance*" of recuperation. I understand this kind of recuperation to resonate with what Marriott reads in Fanon to be the redemptive feature of and impetus behind Black revolutionary violence, so what I read Butler to be suggesting is a speculative *possibility* for redemption grounded in Dana's recourse to an explosive, Black revolutionary violence at the novel's culmination.

Black revolutionary violence does not promise redemption, but *might* provide a

⁹⁷ On a personal note, this was a difficult element of the text to rein into my reading of the novel. This represents an ongoing problem I've had with this text; on the surface, I found this Epilogue to stand out as a kind of overly optimistic disavowal of the work Butler seems to do in the rest of the text, from the Prologue to Dana's screams at the very end of the final chapter, "The Rope." There is a key clue, though, a kernel of disavowal that displaces, or at least very much challenges, that optimism, and this is what I pursue.

way to render the impossible and the irredeemable available to the *possibility* of redemption, without really offering a fixed or clear image of what that redemption could look like. The deathliness that renders time untimely in relation to Blacks, the deathliness that characterizes untime and all its constitutive features and effects, *might* make legible the possibility of its own redemption via a Black revolutionary violence that has, as its stakes, *being*, itself. Taking the risk means making the leap or taking the plunge into the black hole, means embracing the inescapability of the tidal forces emanating from its central singularity—the antiblack imposition of the *fact* of Blackness. As I read him, Fanon describes this unimaginable spacetime as “the zone of nonbeing,” a derelict spatiality and temporality, “an utterly naked *declivity* where an *authentic upheaval might be born*.” Only “here” and “now,” or “there” and “then,” along the downward slope(s) of the “zone,” or the inward funnel of the black hole’s gravity well, an “authentic,” which might mean “redemptive,” upheaval might become available to thought. Specifically, this upheaval might be *conceived*, carried to term, and brought into being (born). The “zone of nonbeing,” the “black hole,” is the only site for the (pro)creation of redemption via an embrace of obliteration; but it is also an “arid and sterile region,” constitutively infertile, or at least, resistant to the kind of redemptive creation that stages or embodies “authentic upheaval” in the form and wake of Black revolutionary violence and its attendant risk of political ontological obliteration. To heed Ursa’s call, to leap into the black hole, to enter into the dereliction of *being*, is to fall into unimaginable contradiction in the form of an unresolvable paradox.

If Black revolutionary violence as a form of untimely, authentic or redemptive (pro)creation is what we might make, and if what we might make is constitutively

contradictory to the only spacetime at which this violence and (pro)creation can even ever occur, what might our (pro)creations *look* like? How might we *read* or *engage* this kind of (pro)creation, understanding what is at stake—Black *being*, itself—when, because of untimely fact—of *being* Black—we don't have time to do either?

These are the questions that frame our opening, tenuously holding it open; this is when we've arrived, and given that (un)time is of the essence, we might do best to (t)read carefully, but quickly, moving to make the leap toward utter destruction. There is no time for anything else.

CHAPTER 2

Untimely Wor(l)ds In The Key Of Love

“Wish I could rest, and open my eyes
But time ain’t finna fly down from the sky
A place where the lonely love
Not another soul’s there, only us”
—Black Thought, “Never”

“Your imagination can’t save you”
—Jerome Dent

I. *A Work in Progress*

What to do with and through the untimeliness of our position? What *can* be done? These are our entangled questions. The second is a question of possibility given the facts, with a hidden predicate: what are we able to “do,” given our relation to an unethical and violent time—or, when our relation to normative conceptions of time is so derelict that we occupy a position of “nonbeing” that destroyed, destroys, and promises to continue to destroy us? As I ask it, the first a question of practical, theoretical, imaginative and ethical necessity that complements, and comes both before and after, the second: if we know what we are capable of doing, “all things considered,” given that this is tense matter, and only a matter of time, what *have* we done, what *do* we do, and what *might* we build *toward* doing? To move forward we must work though “work,” which forms the terrain of our approach to semblances, glimpses and shards at the periphery of answers. We must map “work’s” terrain, what gives it depth and form, what renders its features,

and, in doing so, renders it meaningful to what, at its core, is our need to creatively “make a way out of no way.” And we must plot the conceptual landmarks and waypoints so that we might, however slowly and windingly, trace the best route. So, again, as always, it is imperative: (t)read carefully.

I pose these questions as questions of “work:” “work” as a process and a practice, and also “work” as a product of those processes and practices. In terms of the literary, I understand these “working” questions to open a route to thinking critically about the motivations behind, stakes of, and possibilities for Black imaginative creation given our unethical relation to the force of time. So when engaging Christina Sharpe’s recent, archetypal writing and speaking on “wake work,” I understand her to be thinking deeply about and attempting to map the terrain of these motivations, stakes, and possibilities for *all* Black “work,” including literary work, and recognize the gravity and urgency of her meditation. She describes “Black Studies: In the Wake” as “both the project I am currently working on and a call for, and recognition of, black studies’ continued imagining of the unimaginable: its continued theorizing from the ‘position of the unthought’”⁹⁸ (Sharpe, 59). “Imagining” and “working” imbricate, such that to work is, at least in part, to imagine is, at least in part, to work; the work of Black Studies is imaginative work, the product and process of the working imagination of Black ‘beings’ who imagine from their own unthought position—who do and do *as* the unthinkable. What is continuously unthinkably done, what is unthinkably imagined constantly over time (so in an untimely manner), is a working or imagining of the unthinkable. A working like a kneading of dough, like a shaping of clay, like the making of a construct,

⁹⁸ “The Position of the Unthought” is an interview between Frank B. Wilderson III and Saidiya Hartman.

and also like a machination, an inner working, a fundamental feature or component of a being, a thought, or a machine.

The unimaginable, malleable and developing machine of Black Studies and Black being moves doubly driven by death. The deathliness of its unthought and unthinkable position works and imagines only via its paradoxical animation by the force of death—we examine this at length in the first chapter. But Christina Sharpe works to reread, reinvigorate (reanimate), and reengage⁹⁹ how this deathly force animates Black being and imagining, grounded in a call from M. NourbeSe Philip in her groundbreaking work of poetry *Zong!* (*Zong!* 15) “to defend the dead.” Sharpe asks:

“How do we who are doing work in black studies tend to, care for, comfort and defend the dead, the dying, and those living lives consigned, in the aftermath of legal chattel slavery, to death that is always-immanent and imminent? How might theorizing black studies in the wake—and black being in the wake—as conscious modes of inhabitation of that imminence and immanence (revealed every day in multiple quotidian ways) ground our work as we map relations between the past and present, map the ways the past haunts the present?”¹⁰⁰

Working and imagining become, in part, the working and imagining of a deathly cartography of a haunting, on the one hand animated by the deathliness and untimeliness of the Black position, and on the other animated by a need and desire to protect and nurture those who, in various points along death’s orbit, occupy that Black position. To do this, “we must be about what [she is] calling ‘wake work’” (60). Wakes as “processes” and as “rituals” through which we think, and so imagine, and so work with, for, through the variously dead and deathly; wakes as a set of “observances” performed in proximity to the passed-on or deceased; wakes as the “tracks” left by ships on the surfaces of water,

⁹⁹ Sharpe, “Black Studies: In the Wake,” 59.

¹⁰⁰ Sharpe, 60.

the traceable echoes of a passing vessel, loaded with or evacuated of cargo; as “disturbances” created by bodies in or moved by water; the “air currents” trailing a body in flight; as being “in the line of sight of,” and so subject to the violent gaze of the eye, or the sight, or the sights; as being “in the line of recoil of (a gun),” attendant to all the forms guns take; and also as “being awake,” double emphasis on being, and perhaps staying “woke,” which is a description of a state of consciousness, or imagination.¹⁰¹

Sharpe moves us through these multiple meanings, and we move through them at length, in order to demand at least the cursory dissection we offer thus far because the kind of deathly and untimely work that “wake work” encodes and signals is complex both in its form, and in the demands it places those/we who seek to do it. If “work” and “imagine” overlap as the verb that describes the movement and thought of Black Studies and Black beings, and if this imaginative work is a shaping or kneading of the unimaginable into a construct that might best be thought of as an inner working or mechanical element of some vaster, unimaginable machine, then “wake work” situates this unimaginable process and product spatially and temporally “in the wake” of the shipped, mourning, gazed-upon, shot-at, flying, swimming, and drowning Black flesh of the ‘variously dead and deathly.’ And it also characterizes this unthinkable imagining of the unimaginable as “disturbing,” and as a waking and woken “disturbance” of the “flow” (read: cohesion; linearity; progression) of an antiblack world. All this might necessitate a kind of impossible condensation, which is really a kind of violent collapse: “wake work” might best be conceived of as a simultaneously fleshy and mechanical imagining of the unimaginable while subject to the ceaseless, violent, and deathly force of antiblackness,

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

animated by, in defense of, and, perhaps, with love for we who occupy the Black position.

Further, as Mackala Lacy writes, the features, demands, aspirations, and necessity of “wake work” orbit a central concern for the reality of Black self and communal care. Echoing Saidiya Hartman’s description of “the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”—and we do well to consider, specifically, limited access to drinkable water and technology,¹⁰² and premature death at the hands of the police and those they deputize¹⁰³—Lacy reminds us of the “very material and psychic results”¹⁰⁴ of being unable to *be* or *live* in an antiblack world. Locating her concerns in the materiality of Black *flesh*, she demands a reckoning with the problems of physical, psychological and spiritual wellness as we consider and (re)orient how we might perform some version of the unimaginable, unthinkable, and/or impossible, but certainly “nonnegotiable” “wake

¹⁰² Here we must look at recent and current developments in Detroit and Baltimore. Both cities, but certainly not only these two cities, severed access to water for tenants with delinquent accounts, owing more than \$200. This, while corporations and stadiums, which demand much more water than the residents, are allowed continued use of water resources *despite* having delinquent accounts with millions owed. What should almost go without saying is that the demographic of affected residents is almost exclusively Black. We can also think of California and Washington, both of which have declared states of emergencies with regard to historically severe droughts, which allow bottled water companies (e.g. Nestlé) and oil companies that frack to continue wasting and poisoning the limited fresh water remaining in both states while seriously considering and beginning to implement restrictions on water access to residents. The most horrendously affected are, and will be, predominantly Black and brown.

¹⁰³ The list feels endless, and with no logical hope that the list will stop growing, even with the growing Black Lives Matter movement gaining momentum, it likely is. Perhaps the most recent (at the time of this footnote) is Nephí Arreguin, 21, and he is survived by his mother, Carla, his uncle, Zachary, and his girlfriend, who is currently 5 months pregnant. He was murdered by a deputy on the 17200 block of Pires Ave, Cerritos, CA, 5 minutes from where I currently live.

¹⁰⁴ See: Lacy, “Wake Work – Self Care for the Black Community,” 2015.

work.” She asks not only how might we remain purposefully attentive to the physical, psychological, and spiritual demands of Black flesh as we “be about...wake work,”¹⁰⁵ but also how we might *meet* those demands with and through the wake work we must *be* about and do? In terms of the literary, how might we create and imagine in a way that, both, attends to the need for nourishment, and meets—if only in part—that need?

For Lacy, recalling a workshop held by Sharpe on the subject, this is in large part a question of what Sharpe calls “aspiration:”¹⁰⁶ of the capacity to draw breath, and, to extend phonetically, the capacity to rhythmically produce language as and through exhale. This is not aspiration *as* healing, and, as “a corpse cannot ever ‘breathe’”—as a socially dead being cannot (re)inhale social life, through music, art, or otherwise—not quite *as* breathing either. This appears to be aspiration as an intake of that which purposefully nourishes us as we occupy a deathly position. Lacy describes this as being purposeful toward, in one sense, survival—aspersion to energize the exhausted flesh, and terrorized mind and spirit—and toward a form of rising, distinct from “traditional idealizations of achievement or...upward mobility,” but rather a form of rising to the untimely occasion that turns on adequate physical, psychic, psychological, and spiritual nourishment. For Lacy, this might look like: routinizing meditation, crafting a “conscious pattern of breathing or mantra,” beginning or developing a bodily and spiritual practice like “yoga, running, or dance,” or ‘making time’ for interactions with loved ones,

¹⁰⁵ Sharpe, 60.

¹⁰⁶ I have to very clearly acknowledge that this concept emphasizes Sharpe’s work being “in progress,” meaning that my reading of it is produced from Kala’s account of it as it was presented or discussed at the African Black Coalition meeting at UCI in 2015. The concept is, as of the time of this writing, unpublished, and thereby, my reading might end up producing a very limited, and possibly redundant, take on what Sharpe has said on this thus far.

including the self, the living and the dead, and the named and the unnamed; “whatever feeds [one’s] soul.” The aspirational feature of “wake work” must seek to nourish the features and foundations of one’s *being*. And it must do so in order to ensure a multifaceted fitness for not only surviving in, but continuing to do, elevate, and *be* about the “wake work” Black folk must perform with and through every gesture. In a world in the wake, or afterlife, of slavery, an antiblack world sustained by its need and capacity to imperil Black being, this kind of self and communal aspiration appears to be a part of what is so unimaginable and impossible, and yet absolutely imperative, about working in the wake.

In their 2014 essay, “The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World,” Patrice Douglass and Frank B. Wilderson III allow us to raise the level of abstraction by meditating on what it might mean and what it might take to think through a Black “metaphysical violence.”¹⁰⁷ They demand a kind of Black thought rooted in a metaphysics wholly disfigured (or atomized, or spaghettified) by an entanglement with the singularity and unthinkability of “the violence that enables black (non)being...of blackness-qua-violence” (117-8). In the first instance, this is a disavowal of the prevailing tendency in conventional philosophical inquiry to forget, forego, or otherwise turn away from an engagement with what founds, and, in more ways than one, breathes life into *all thought* as such: antiblackness, and the Black death, or breathlessness,¹⁰⁸ it demands and

¹⁰⁷ Douglass and Wilderson, “The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World,” 122.

¹⁰⁸ I conjure the murder of Eric Garner on July 17, 2014. In the video of his murder, Garner, who is asthmatic, cries, “I can’t breathe,” as officer Daniel Pantaleo employs an illegal chokehold, strangling the life from him. His words become a refrain for the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement. The reference here conjures the specter of his death as, like all Black death, it haunts every word and thought, here and beyond.

ensures. In the second, it seeks to turn and think in a vector that travels away from this fundamentally antiblack tendency, a moving of the movement of thought *toward* the crushing abyss of Blackness—in other words, it seeks to shift the very foundations of thought, Blacken them, and wield them as what, elsewhere, Jared Sexton describes as the *work* of “genuine inquiry.”¹⁰⁹

Their argument turns on two complementary critiques, which perform this twofold “work.” First, against Jasbir Puar, who in *Terrorist Assemblages* “deploys anti-black violence” in and as “critique” of state violence that, by way of an “anxious intent to sidestep blackness”¹¹⁰—altogether, leaves the antiblack structure it fails to consider wholly intact, Douglass and Wilderson center Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, an unflinching and “world-shifting” meditation on Black existence in an antiblack world. Different than the namable, “direct relations of violence as a traceable force” (e.g. the violence of the state) that limit Puar’s attention, what Douglass and Wilderson seek and demand, through Hartman, is a Black philosophical inquiry that relentlessly thinks with and through “the infinite refractions of violence at the level of being and existence in the world” (119). This is a paradigmatic shift, and it “works” to open a route toward fully facing the Blackness that, in its deathliness and untimeliness, girds the capacities to be and think, and also to be rendered antithetical to being and unthinkable, in a reality with its fundamental features distorted and mutilated by Blackness and like Black flesh. Differently thought, it is a shift that, like Ursa Corregidora’s blues, demands we examine the kind of (pro)creation that emerges, or might emerge, from being and thinking

¹⁰⁹ See: Footnote 54, Chapter 1: Black (in) Time, p. 31.

¹¹⁰ Douglass and Wilderson, 118-9.

entangled up with Blackness, and all the pursuant violence.

Specifically, Douglass and Wilderson situate the being and thought of the titular violent, black “presence” or position in a question about what it means and looks like to suffer. In their second critique, they put pressure on the assumptive logic of Elaine Scarry’s groundbreaking book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, which uniquely and carefully examines the metaphysical violence of torture. While Puar, in addition to sidestepping Blackness altogether, and being blind to the importance of *being* to the nature of violence, Scarry works to sustain a focus on precisely what violence (e.g. the extreme violence of torture) seeks to destroy: “the violence deployed in acts of mutilation and the infliction of pain... attempt to annihilate metaphysical presence” (120). Further, such violence rips open a metaphysical void (where one’s being might once have been) available to being filled with “fiction:” on the one hand, the “fiction”—of being, of world, of being in/of the world—the victim must create to maintain (even an illusion of) cohesion; on the other, the “fiction” made available to the torturer that turns on the lie that anything other than being itself (e.g. information) was the “actual” target of the violence.¹¹¹ As Douglass and Wilderson read her, Scarry’s intervention is doubly important: it draws previously absent attention to the way “torture destroys the victim’s capacity to know herself as a relational being,” *and* it opens us up to a question about what might be the nature and purpose of “fiction” or “fictions” that necessarily, if not desperately, emerge in the wake of such terror and destruction at the level of being.

But also, as they read her, Scarry must incorrectly presume that “all sentient beings

¹¹¹ Ibid.

who are tortured are relational beings; and that all victims of torture enter the chamber with the capacity for psychic integration” (120). Against this assumptive logic, Douglass and Wilderson turn to an essay I wrote in 2013, entitled “Smile Undun, *Django Unchained*.” In it, I read Frantz Fanon’s “Dirty Nigger!” moment in an attempt to dive more deeply into the darkness and horror of what Fanon gestures toward in chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The Fact of Blackness.” Fanon’s account, or *recollection*, of the infamous hailing, “Dirty Nigger!” or “Look, a Negro!”

will be told and dissected as a piecing together of fragments, performed by another Fanon, one that is split from and yet internal to Fanon (BSWM, 89). Clarify further: He recognizes this on the train, almost jokingly, and familiarly, noting that this other him that is also him, the first person Fanon reflecting on the third person Fanon (which, I wager, alters the understanding of perspective when asking who wrote this account—I believe it to be both Fanons, simultaneously first and third persons)—noting that this other him collapses/splits/shatters/breaks again, “no longer in the third person but in triple,” and, the joke in the visualization of it, that “in the train, instead of one seat on the train, they left [him] two or three” (92).

This reading zones in on the temporal features of Fanon’s metaphysical and psychic destruction. The Fanon writing the recollection, distinct from but containing or contained by the Fanon that is being hailed and seen (and so destroyed) in the recollection, appears to be the product, perhaps the “work” of a metaphysical and psychic “breach” that fragments his being, and his sense of and ability to recognize that being as cohesive. It is a kind of splitting that, on the surface, as the authors recognize, appears to be analogous with Scarry’s reading of torture, as Fanon’s being has been broken from without by violence, and this breaking precipitates in a violent loss of bearings that denies him the capacity for psychic integration.

But on a paradigmatic level, how Fanon shatters differs from how Scarry's torture victim breaks. In the previous chapter, I dissected the temporal features of Fanon's encounter with the fact of his Blackness. Specifically, I described the "discovery" (pace Spillers) of the fact indexed by the hailing, "Dirty Nigger!", as a "rediscovery" of a fact that has always already been factual, prior to and independent of Fanon's (or Dana's, or anyone else's) entrance into the room where the fact waited, waits, and will continue to wait. The paradigmatic difference between Scarry's torture victim, whose metaphysics are broken by an encounter with the psychic, physical and metaphysical trauma indexed by "torture," and the Black, whose metaphysics were/are always already shattered prior to any encounter with "torture," or *any* form of trauma that might signal back to the fact of Blackness—and I believe it to be telling that Scarry must single out the gratuitousness of torture to make her generalizing claims—is fundamentally a temporal distinction, with metaphysical consequences. As the authors read it, while Scarry's torture victim moves from a metaphysical *status* of "equilibrium to disequilibrium" with the "promise of a third stage: equilibrium restored,"¹¹² the Black occupies a metaphysical *position* inextricably entangled with disequilibrium, which only appears to be magnified by each encounter with antiblackness. Blacks do not have access to what Douglass and Wilderson, extending a point made by Wilderson in his previous work,¹¹³ as a metaphysical, psychic and physical "narrative progression." Via a destabilized relation to *being*, which turns in part on an unethical relation to time, Blackness and narrative (as inherently progressive) remain oxymoronic, if not outright antithetical.

The call for recognition of the absolute "violence of presence" or position that

¹¹² Douglass and Wilderson, 121.

¹¹³ See: Footnote 31, Chapter 1: Black (in) Time.

defines Blackness' relation to the antiblack universe (and so to its fundamental features, including time and space) is in tune with the blueshift call of Ursa's blues: it is a call to move, create and think "beyond the event horizon." It is to move toward the inevitable obliteration (again, spaghettification, atomization) characterizing the singularity of the Black position. This is the trodden terrain of the first chapter. What I want to think more critically about next is the set of relations more implicitly addressed by Douglass and Wilderson's analyses: the importance of and consequences for "narrative" and "fiction" that the trauma of living (which is really "no life at all"), being (which is really a state of nonbeing), and creating (which is a form of "work") while Black. Part of their reading of Scarry attends to a dual point of interest: narrative, as inherently progressive, is impossible for, if not antagonistic and antithetical to Blackness; and the fictions we (must) create to fill the metaphysical, psychic and political void violently vacated by trauma are, on the one hand, the direct, fantastical, and creative products necessitated by our traumatic and untimely positions, and on the other, inextricable from the violent and destructive fiction(s) of the antiblack world. Trauma and violence bind our creations, literary and not; further, they are the constitutive forces that animate our creations, rendering them possible to begin at all.

We have been in orbit of a troubling contradiction: the antiblackness that renders Blackness unthought and unthinkable through any combination of forgetting, sidestepping, silencing, slicing, popping open, and shooting, or otherwise stealing the very breath from our flesh, imaginations, and beings, produces and reproduces the trauma that untimely and deathly positions us in the universe; and the untimely and deathly violence of that trauma is what founds and constitutes, or breathes nourishment into

(“animates”) our wake work and works. Black flesh, imaginations, and nonbeings become the conduit for the untimely and deathly force that positions them, and wake work becomes a kind of channeling of that force into “works”—literary and otherwise. And, to return to the intersection where Lacy and Sharpe meet, this work, if it is “wake work,” should and must purposefully, imaginatively, and unimaginably “care” for the physical, psychological, and metaphysical *wellbeing*—what is it to “be well” while not being?—of Black folk who do and engage or encounter this work. In terms of at least the literary, this is a demand to caringly narrate that for which narrative is somewhere along the spectrum between impossible and antithetical. And it is also a demand to create fictions to fill the void left vacant and Black, fictions that, even in their fantastic quality, must contend the violent fictions produced by the antiblack world (a more horrifying figure than Scarry’s torturer). All with, in defense of, and so *for* the variously dead and dying, this is a Black literature channeling the force of a bloody and traumatic haunting with and through impossibility; this is, then, a Black literature that is the textual and aesthetic conduit of deathly and untimely force, for the sake of the unimaginable aspiration(s) of Blacks.

As I interpret Sharpe’s concept, wake work consists of a strange and unthinkable alchemy. It requires an embrace of obliteration and the trauma that echoes in its ‘wake’ that might, since the exchange may or may not be equivalent (time, as yet, has not told), provide the force necessary to aspire toward the unimaginable reality of Black flesh nourished, cared for, and defended. Literature that might operate as a conduit for performing “wake work” must engage the untimely persistence and repetition of trauma, which suggests that we will benefit from an examination of the mechanics of Black

memory in relation to trauma. Memory as a means of holding onto, alchemically distorting, or hyperbolizing—even materializing—trauma; memory as an example and product of “untime,” and the way untime indicates a collapse of the past, present and future. Literature that might also create untimely spacetimes, “worlds,” or “universes,” must do so in a way that relentlessly channels the force of trauma—that moves deeper into trauma rather than flies from it. This is a kind of alchemy that is always in a process of nigredo, or cleansing decomposition, moving to clear away the refuse obscuring the dark or black matter necessary to proceed toward the unimaginable, or across the event horizon.

This chapter will work through Toni Morrison’s work: her magnum opus, *Beloved*; and also the way this novel interacts with her Nobel Prize lecture. These works examine what it is to engage critically with memory, forgetting, and trauma, and provide insight into the capacities and limitations of language to do the wake work of emboldening what is essential and nourishing in encounters with remembered and forgotten trauma. This chapter will also move through Kiese Laymon’s *Long Division* in relation to an essay on Trayvon Martin, love, and reason, in order to explore questions about what an “untimely universe” might look like if explicitly driven by an “unreasonable,” unimaginable love, or desire to love, Black folk.

In orbit, we return to the opening set of questions, having traveled a revolution around the abyss they telegraph. A journey toward the unknown of nowhere demands copious preparation, or at least a decent map with some semblance of a key. With aspirations of love in the untimeliness of death, and our work never finished, we must go deeper into the dark. There is no rest or shelter here, and our imaginations have yet to

save us.

II. *Into the Fissures with the Forgotten and (Mis)remembered*

With a careful attention to the way trauma asserts and reasserts itself in the psyches of the traumatically Black and Blackly traumatized, Toni Morrison tears rifts to literary spacetimes that become the untimely universes where and when we might imagine how trauma positions and teaches us. Differently, Morrison's novels, *Beloved*, specifically, are cartographies of the kinds ways trauma and Blackness entangle.

In the Fall of 2014, Toni Morrison reads her Fall of 1987 novel, *Beloved* for the first time.¹¹⁴ The novel is a multiplied entanglement; moments in time knot together, the ugly twisting of reality's strings. One segment of *Beloved*'s string spans the thread of Margaret Garner's fate. In an office at Alfred A. Knopf, Morrison's longtime publisher, she speaks of her amazement with the horror of Margaret's story after coming across it in a magazine from the Reconstruction era. A slave from the pre-Civil War era, Margaret fled from Maplewood, a plantation in Boone County, Kentucky, pregnant with a daughter, in a party consisting of her husband, Robert, her children and other relatives. Once the group reaches the home of Margaret's uncle in Cincinnati, the party disbands, and Margaret, her children, and her husband remain while the other slaves escape to Canada via the Underground Railroad. The Garners, awaiting movement to a safe house outside the city, are discovered by US Marshalls and slavers, and attacked. Robert attempts to return fire, and Margaret, refusing to return her children to slavery and its

¹¹⁴ In a 2014 interview with Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*, she claimed she'd only read *Beloved* for the first time weeks earlier, and only done so by chance—someone mailed her a copy to autograph, and in the process, she read the text. She thought it was “really good,” filled with “beautiful” and “lyrical” sentences that were also “strong” and “commanding.”

horrors, kills her two-year old daughter with a butcher knife and wounds the others, preparing to kill them as well. For Morrison's novel, Garner's story pauses in time, here. Morrison leaving Garner in temporal stasis means to be generative, the orders of physical and social death tearing an opening into a void that calls for creative invention—

I really wanted to *invent* her life. I had a few things. The sex of the children, how many there were, and the fact that she succeeded in cutting the throat of one and that she was about to bash another one's head up against the wall when someone stopped her. The rest was novel writing.¹¹⁵

Morrison's desire to "invent" life for Margaret Garner aspires for and toward a fiction that might fill in the void created, sustained, and widened by the traumatizing violence of the moment (of Margaret Garner's historical situation) and of the archive (that dulls, severs, and limits what can be accessed by imaginations). In the wake of the destructive force of the "afterlife of slavery," in the rift, Morrison "invents" the second segment of the string, the "narrative" time of Sethe as a temporal echo created by Morrison, is the product of a process haunted by Margaret Garner's story.

As Morrison lingers, or pauses, at the moment of Margaret Garner's story, we must pause here, at the thought of *imaginative invention*. Through Saidiya Hartman's vision we need to examine the recourse to imaginative invention in relation to the fact of historical (and political ontological) destruction or incompleteness. In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman writes honestly and openly about the desire to "invent" from or with the given and ongoing history of antiblackness, and the problems that desire, and any subsequent invention, reveal and create. Venus is a ghostly presence in the archive—mentioned, and so offered as a fragment or a glimpse, of enslavement, captured only in

¹¹⁵ Morrison, in Rothstein, 17, emphasis mine.

death, “as a *dead girl* in a legal indictment against a slave ship captain tried for the murder of two negro girls.” Countless Black girls and womyn—“hundreds of thousands,” (2) to Hartman, but we know the horror of the likelihood of underestimation—share her ‘name,’ and share the consequences of losing their “proper names” (Spillers, 75) to Blackness and time. The various Venuses do not have “stories” of their own—for them, narrative is impossible—but stories in orbit of (read: “about”) them. They are glimpsed in the periphery of “the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes” (2). Their “name,” which is an insult, and really a marker of *nonbeing* and being unnamed, displaces them from the center of the “narrative” of history, relegates them to the margins of time. Their story is “untimely,” a “death sentence” and a “tomb” that both kills (“over and over again”¹¹⁶) and holds the dead in place.

Hartman wants to “save” this incarnation of Venus, to detail and resolve her vague and unresolved death—she desires to flesh out the ghosts that haunt the elisions and fictions of the archive. But if to even “read the archive is to enter a mortuary” (Hartman, 17, cited in Hartman, 4), to step into its deathly and deadly untimeliness, where “the unimaginable assumes the guise of [the] everyday” (6), what might, or even can, we imagine to, to whatever—even tiny—degree, give “life” to the unimaginable dead? Slavery shatters time’s relation to Blackness and renamed (so, really, *nameless*) Blacks; untime deadens history, demarcating the boundaries set by Black bondage, rendering “newness” and so *invention* similarly unimaginable, unthinkable, *impossible*. What

¹¹⁶ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

Hartman wants to imagine—and I imagine, what we all want to imagine—“a free state” (11), a space and time “for mourning where it is prohibited” (8), given the “annihilating violence” of the archive, is impossible. The “conditional temporality,” the time of “what could have been,” is constitutively denied by the methods of available discourse (academic or otherwise), the symbolic order that sanctions them, and the imaginations that struggle to read and invent in relation to the archive. Retrieval and redress, whether in finding the names or reviving the dead or giving voice and sound to the silenced, is impossible. Echoing Lacy echoing Sharpe, there is no way to breathe life back into the death caused and demanded by the moment and the archive. Returning solely to Sharpe, the question becomes more “menacing and unbearable:”¹¹⁷ Is there a way to be made (even out of no way)—rather, is defending, caring for, comforting, and tending to the dead *impossible*, too? What might it mean, how, and why, to write or “tell impossible stories” (10), then?

Moving with Hartman, to write or tell impossible stories is to “(strain) against the limits of the archive...and, at the same *time*, (*to enact*) the impossibility” bound to it; further, it is to “*amplify* the impossibility of the telling” (11, emphasis mine). To do this requires “narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure,” as well as an ability to play with and rearrange “the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events;”¹¹⁸ to do this demands a recognition of the position of Blackness in time, as *untimely*, and an ability, or at least a desire, to amplify the defunct relation between Blackness *and* time by playing with it. The imaginative work of invention under these constraints plays with what is by testing and clarifying the violence of the

¹¹⁷ Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, xx.

¹¹⁸ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

boundaries set by enslavement in order to imagine, *from this position*, what *could* have been and what *could* be. In other words, the work it performs and produces ventures to cross the event horizon into the abyss, seeking to work with and through destruction, and reckoning with not only the inevitability, but the possible utility of the destructive force that gravitationally calls to and positions us. What Hartman desires to do—fill in the blanks, recover the the lost, “breathe,” and “breathe life into” the dead—stands in relation to what must ethically do against the unethically that characterizes our untimely position: venture into the absences and silences of the archive, and to read the emptiness, the fragments and the silence as they are.

In 1992, sixteen years prior to Hartman, Toni Morrison thinks in ink on the many times and the time of Black availability to imaginative invention in *Playing in the Dark*. The “blank darkness”¹¹⁹ Black objects collectively and individual create locates a vast opening, ready to be filled with the metaphysical, psychic, spiritual, corporeal, and limitless whims of nonblack imaginative invention—what Morrison calls “play,” a kind of inventive, pleasurable Mastery. There are two orders of play, bound to the same darkness, one of Masters writing themselves into life and light, and one of Slaves writing themselves deeper into the dark to better understand the fullness of its depths and death. Does the latter hold the dangers of the first? Do we, as Hartman fears, threaten the dead with new orders of violence, when spend time looking at and searching for them? These are questions that appear to haunt the relations between Blackness, narrative, and fiction that Douglass and Wilderson touch upon in their call for a Black metaphysics, and that haunt this writing as it ventures deeper into the void.

¹¹⁹ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 38.

Unlike the playing of Masters that seeks to construct “a history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks,”¹²⁰ a playing that creates untimely stories for the Blackened, the nameless, to *make time* for the named, the Human, the kind of playing Hartman demands does not play with the dead in the same way. It does not *make* corpses by disappearing Black beings to the fictions and annihilating forces of history, and then dismember those corpses and all their defining features to distribute their parts to wherever and whenever they happen to be needed—a name mentioned here or there, a character removed from the plot then or whenever, a set of teeth in George Washington’s mouth, an arm or a leg or a penis or a breast severed or serving, a husk emptied of its soul and humanity so it can be stretched into the right canvas for all sorts of texts. Instead, this is a kind of playing that plays with and within “narrative restraint,” that chooses to recognize that it *must* remain coated in the ink of reality and the timeless horrors of its names and stories, in order to imagine the impossible. Playing in the dark this way is creative only insofar as might make a way to what lurks in the Black hole that continues to threaten us with total annihilation.

We arrive, sort of, “not quite in a hurry, but losing no time” (Morrison 1987, 22), back in time to Morrison’s desire to “invent” Margaret Garner’s life from the fragments of her being recorded in the archive—the magazine articles, abolitionist periodicals and speeches, hints from Cincinnati’s archive, the slave ledger with Garner “accounted for,” all things “about” (in orbit of) her but not about her (her origins, her “life,” who she was—so, her *being*)—and we must wonder if *Beloved* is the kind of impossible story that restrains itself from the fantasies of escape or of bursting forth. We must wonder if it

¹²⁰ Morrison, 53.

seeks to do defensive, caring, and comforting “wake work,” or if it performs some other order of violence against the variously dead and dying. Does it amplify impossibility? Does it play in the dark of the unknowable, the unthinkable, and the unimaginable position of Blackness? Better, might it shed light *from* the brightness of her desire, and our desires, to save Black girls, Black babies, Black womyn, Black boys, Black men, queer, trans, cis—to make all Black Lives darkly Matter—and reveal something we’ve yet to spy in or in orbit of the Black (w)hole?

As noted earlier, *Beloved* and *Beloved* warp time in at least three ways. The first collapses the time between the text, the ghost, and Margaret Garner’s archival fiction, that positions Margaret as the “haunter” haunting the text. She acts as a ghastly, ghostly reminder of the “actual” horrors of slavery. Margaret’s haunting *is* that of the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, 6). The second shares or translates that haunting in to the ghostly flesh of *Beloved*, who haunts House 124 with the histories she wears in her name and in the flesh, and who simultaneously hides and reveals the Margaret Garner’s initial haunting:

I wanted that haunting not to be really a suggestion of being bedeviled by the past, but to have it be incarnate, to have it actually happen that a person enters your world who is in fact—you believe, at any rate—the dead returned, and you get a second chance, a chance to do it right. Of course, you do it wrong again.¹²¹

The past moves and is sentient (“unstable”), at least like a ghost is sentient: it is the living, wa(l)king dead, a paradox in at least time, and so a direct (and logical) product of the untimeliness of our the Black position. In its “new skin, lineless and smooth” (61), skin that defies age and the ages or, as we might best imagine it, flesh that is timeless, are

¹²¹ Morrison, in Rothstein, 17.

the stories of “whens” that precede, and so exceed, the boundaries of the experienced present. In the “undecipherable hieroglyphics of [her] flesh” (Spillers, 69) are moments passed that are no longer located (just) in the past, but move and interrupt the present. There is something wrong, or off, or unsettling in her very emergence into the world (of the novel, of the reader’s or the writer’s imagination); Sethe, Paul D, and Denver experience this over and again throughout. The lie of her smoothness and “the newness of her shoes” (63), the strangeness of her simultaneous oldness and youth, the problem of her aliveness in relation to the shared knowledge of her deadness: she is a disturbance of the illusion of temporal cohesion in and outside House 124, and in and outside the world of the novel; they and we all *feel* it, and what it *shows*.

Beloved’s conceptualization as a ghost is violent, both in the interruptions it creates, and in its embodiment of the violent untimeliness of Sethe and Margaret Garner (specifically), and slavery (more generally). She is a force of, and a forced confrontation with, the dead. In essence, she is an opportunity to enter the tomb of the archive, to in a literal and literary way look death back in the face, to watch it watching us. More than that, she is the terrifying possibility of an engagement with the impossible, “a second chance” at something less, or at least other, than redemption or renewed “life;” so, something different than a kind of imaginative invention that would save or resuscitate Sethe, Paul D, Denver, or even Beloved, or Margaret, or her children, or us. Morrison’s desire to invent telegraphs an aspiration toward the kind of “wake work” that would not offer the lie and harm of falsely filled-in blanks, but instead the opportunity for a caring for, a tending to, a playing with, and a defense. If into the mausoleum of the archive we go to meditate and play in the space and time of death, what words and worlds might

emerge in the pungent silence? Given a second chance, if we, knowing that we might want to, do not fantasize away the darkness that occludes what happened to Venus, or what Margaret Garner lived through, but listen to, and work and play with and in the void, what might we make of it? I think this is the central question animating Morrison, *Beloved* and *Beloved*. *Beloved* works as a ghostly singularity, attenuating time and simultaneously vacuuming those with whom she interacts into the crushing gravity of traumatic pasts made present through memory and recollection.

Black memory acts as the mechanism through which she performs her (at least imaginative) spaghettification of whoever's in orbit. Hers is a violent intrusion; she is a destructive and untimely Black force encapsulated in the ghostly form of a living-dead memory. Morrison mobilizes in her what she calls, "rememory." Sethe meditates on "rememory" early on: "You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there... What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean even if I didn't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there" (43). Sethe and/or Morrison's rememory stages spatial and temporal collapses (more on the spatial in the next chapter). The time of the "pictures" of other times, summoned with or without thought, in and outside of a living or dead consciousness, persists. It both is and is not of the imagination: it is, in that it depends on the remembered pictures the imagination conjures from the past, whether or not they are actively thought by the one subject to their interruption; and it is not, or at least it is not *just* of the imagination, as it exist as places, untimely places, time-stricken places, "out there outside [her] head... not just in [her] rememory, but out there in the *world*" (43, emphasis mine). The "place" she was will always *be* "out there," undead

because “nothing ever dies” (44). Rememories live, timelessly, undead, independent of the one most likely to run and “bump” into their ghastly and ghostly presence.

Beloved moves ghastly and ghostly *as* rememory’s singularity; the text, and everyone within (the characters Morrison develops) and outside (of it). She moves independent of the consciousness with which she becomes entangled, or at least independent of its intents and will, embodying, or at least sparking the reemergence of, the undead—never dead—untimely stories of the traumatic that haunt and horrify the residents of House 124. Her force materializes in and through language; her presence speaks and she inquires and requests—or demands. Beloved asks Sethe, “Where your diamonds?” and the hardest of the hard crystals buried in her memory’s imaginative terrain, begins to crumble. Then the pressure placed on memory in the form of a request/demand: “*Tell me...Tell me your diamonds*” (69). A doubly ocular demand: to show and to bear witness. And a doubly auditory demand: to tell and to listen to what’s told. What must be told, what Sethe “and Baby Suggs had agrees without saying so...was unspeakable”—what is doubly unspeakable, the unspeakableness of what the diamonds hide is, itself, unspeakable, or at least unspoken—is an impossible story, with its “hurt that’s always there” (69), its untimely hurt. At the chance and possibility and demand for the impossible, there is resistance to the pain of telling, of, more precisely, traveling in time to revisit, converse with, and tell about the impossibly painful, and the unimaginably shameful. A seeing/showing and listening/telling demand to *feel* what breaks her and us through broken time: a story of birth (Sethe’s) and death (countless other infants, “*without names*” (74, emphasis mine) thrown overboard) forcibly reborn, and all the blood and pain to go with it.

She performs, dances, this same demand, without questions, with Denver. Again the double demand: “*Tell me... Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat*” (77). Another birthing reborn; another story of (pro)creation—(pro)creative invention—of flesh, blood, bone, with a name. In Denver’s mind: “Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was” (92). To fill in the blanks, or, rather, to uncover what has been concealed and made to look blank—“blank blackness”—becomes a generative, imaginative process; Denver, through and with Beloved, attempts to reveal what’s there in the dark. It becomes a kind of active, or better, enacted process: Denver becomes the conduit for the force Beloved embodies, and she channels this force in the performance of an *aspiration for* or an *attempt at*—“did the best they could”—creation, at telling the impossible story. Perhaps it is the effort to perform and the impossibility of performing “well” or “right”—“you do it wrong again;” perhaps there is no *do*, and only *try* when it comes to telling (and perhaps, reading, writing, thinking, feeling, and doing) the impossible, or imagining the unimaginable. Perhaps the constitutive impossibility of this work in the wake of many layers of trauma necessitates a ceaseless search, an endless attempt, an inevitably inadequate creation for the sake of the performance of rememory, and the engagement with the Black time and its archival secrets, without end, or ends.

Beyond the imagination, what Beloved “begins,” so ruptures,¹²² without end, bleeds out, “out there, in the world,” and can act upon the canvas of the flesh as it does the terrain of the mind. At the nexus of the mind and the body—rather, the imagination

¹²² See: Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 68: “The symbolic order I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an ‘American grammar,’” begins at the ‘beginning,’ which is really a rupture, and a radically different kind of cultural continuation.”

and the flesh, rememory performs. When Sethe closes her eyes and imagines her voice speaking a desire for Baby Suggs's touch, almost at command, familiar fingers lightly begin to caress her neck (112). The touch Sethe appears to summon—or creatively invent—seems to invert the relation between rememory-as-Beloved and Sethe (and Denver): Sethe requests, or creates, albeit silently, and rememory, or its ghostly embodiment, performs accordingly. She *feels* the sudden collapse of time in the familiar touch, and crosses into memories of when “124 was alive,” ventures into a dark sphere of time where she might find and look in the face of that ‘life.’ But before long, the perils of wielding, or trying to wield, rememory’s force in the name of imaginative creation or excavation, are felt: Baby Suggs begins to strangle her.¹²³ Rememory becomes unfamiliar; perhaps Sethe looked *too long* into the face of death, lingered *too long* in her memory’s archival tomb. Perhaps there are a way and duration to wield rememory in a way that avoids suffering another kind of deathly fate. Perhaps the question is, indeed, “how often does one touch a ghost?”¹²⁴, but also, “how long is too long to touch one, when one does?” How would she or we know, but by peril of trying? The kind of imaginative work through the impossibility of healing and redress, the kind of nourishing imaginative work we must do in the ‘wake,’ appears paradoxically to necessitate endangering the imagination and the flesh to do so.

The incomplete strangulation leaves bruises that tell something of these dangers, but the markings, the hieroglyphics, remain undecipherable beyond the event, or the

¹²³ Morrison, 113.

¹²⁴ Wilderson, “Grammar and Ghosts,” 86.

“resonance,”¹²⁵ that wrote them—they tell a story only of the violence and the terror that produced them, but cannot be translated or achieve legibility because, “how,” let alone “how often,” does one “speak one’s grammar” or to it? More terrifyingly, these markings—and all the others, the tattoos, the scars, the brands, the dips and folds where lost flesh could not have hoped to heal, and the bruises—helps us consider the way rememory sticks to and indelibly prints upon the flesh, perhaps to speak the impossible through it. Saidiya Hartman speaks to this, and I quote her at length:

In this case, these traces of memory function in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there. It is a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as mode of testimony and memory. The recognition of loss is a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slavery. This recognition entails a remembering of the pained body, not by way of a simulated wholeness but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness, in the insistent recognition of the violated body as human flesh, in the cognition of its needs, and in the anticipation of liberty. In other words, it is the ravished body that holds out the possibility of restitution... what is precisely at stake is the *body* of memory... Breach triggers memory, and the enormity of the breach perhaps suggests that it can be neither reconciled nor repaired.¹²⁶

The crises in time to which we gain access by way of rememory, broken memory, appears in traces on the flesh, so that Black time, rememory, broken flesh, shattered

¹²⁵ In a talk delivered at Omni Commons in June 2015, Frank Wilderson speaks, in part, on the temporality of Blackness. At one point, he makes the following clarification: “Social death elaborates a sentient being whose temporal resonances can never be transposed to temporal events—they’re resonances, but they’re not events.” This is because, as in the first chapter of this project, Wilderson also conceives that Black time is no time at all, and that the time of Blackness cannot so simply be thought of in the terms of a conventional temporality.

¹²⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, 74-6.

being, and the ceaseless undeadness of them all refigures Black flesh as a time bearer. Borne on the ruptured flesh, borne from the ruptures, are the ruptures in time that manifest as corporeal and imaginative memories through which untime appears and can be entered.¹²⁷ Performing rememory, and the violent time travel it promises, is to endanger oneself and one's community of the variously dead and dying, with the hope of caring for, defending, comforting, and tending to them, in imaginative memory, and in memory made flesh—memory *in the flesh*; broken memory in the broken flesh.

Recalling how *Beloved* triggered Sethe's "rememory" specifically—"Tell me your diamonds"—we encounter yet another peculiar, seemingly contradictory conceptualization: black memory, if it can best be thought of in terms of rememory, is constitutively and irreconcilably broken, but Morrison selects the absolute hardness and preciousness of diamonds to symbolize the first materialization of the concept. The untimely force of antiblackness, here in an encounter with the ghostly embodiment of slavery's ceaseless trauma, operates such that not even the hardest hardness¹²⁸ of diamonds cannot resist the multiple and repeated orders of breaking that come with initial and repeated encounters with that trauma. That force might best be thought of as a kind

¹²⁷ There is a doubleness to this word, "entered," that can be felt and understood by recalling, or returning to, the first chapter's analysis of Ursa Corregidora and her "black hole."

¹²⁸ Hardness can be thought of in terms of scientific measurements: scratch hardness (along the Mohs scale), indentation hardness, and rebound hardness (also known as dynamic hardness). While in recent years, diamond has been usurped in its status as "hardest known material" by a growing list of "ultra-hard" materials (e.g. Fullerite), at the time of Morrison's writing, diamond persisted in most discourse, for all intents and purposes, as the pinnacle of hardness. And, to date, the actual utility of ultra-hard materials remains difficult to measure due to manufacturing problems, specifically with the extreme pressures and temperatures required to make even small quantities of the material, though this is likely to change as scientists pursue alternative methods. At least in the realm of the symbolic, the kind of absolute hardness diamond means to telegraph remains unchanged.

of overwhelming pressure, powerful enough to sever the powerful bonds forming the complex crystal lattice, and fracture the structure of both the resonance (the traumatic memory scattered in ‘bits and pieces’) and the imaginative, physical, and metaphysical relation to it (the capacity and desire to recall/reengage the trauma). The *diamonds* that characterize the singularity of the encountered event/resonance suggest that what’s going to be told is a set of glittering fragments, refractory and precious, but broken and disorienting in the trauma(s) they crystalize. This feels Fanonian, recalling Douglass and Wilderson’s reading of my reading of the opening passages of “The Fact of Blackness,” and Morrison’s symbolism adds to the infinite horror of Fanon’s recollection-cum-breaking-over-and-over-again a terrible kind of preciousness and a strange kind of hardness in order to explore and visualize what Black trauma might look like. And it also brings to mind the work of M. NourbeSe Philip (her most profound work, *Zong!*, partly the inspiration for Sharpe’s questions about “wake work”), namely, “Fugues, Fragments, and Fissures – A Work in Progress,” which thinks, in fragments, about the unwieldy entanglement between memory and forgetting.

Philip organizes the essay into a series of journal entries, anecdotes, readings, lyrics, lists of thoughts; her words in whatever form comprise a careful and sporadic meditation on the way memory is bound to forgetting, “w/holeness” to fragments. She seeks to linger in her thinking on the paradoxical way Black “w/holeness exists in the fragments,”¹²⁹ and the way Black “memory carries within it forgetting” (5). In her thinking, “the fragment is both/and: containing the w/hole while being at the same time a part of the w/hole—it compels us to see both the w/hole and the hole; impulse to memory

¹²⁹ Philip, “Fugues, Fragments, and Fissures,” 3.

and impulse to amnesia” (6). The fragment cannot be “static,” even if its presence is constant, as it moves and moves us, and spurs imaginative movement toward the fissure where memory and forgetting/amnesia collide. It is this spurring toward the latter that is the “fugue” state of *being*, literal and figurative, characterized as a potential protection of flight from physical and/or imaginative space and time to elsewhere and elsewhere. It can feel or seem like a wandering into the depths and deaths of the fissure, the “tear in the world,” that searches the fragment for wholeness, and searches for fragments to explore.

If the “nation state can be described as a fugue state,”¹³⁰ if reality, and so time as a feature of reality, can be described as fugue states, fugal states, created by “the amnesia generated by slavery and colonialism,”¹³¹ then how to explore the fissure if we cannot remember, or if memory and forgetting are constitutive to one another? Which is to say, if memory might be tooled as a guide into the deathly dark of the archive of the Black w/whole, how might we confront the “beginnings” and legacies of enslavement, the multifaceted and catastrophic traumas that ruptured all of time, and collapsed fragments with wholeness, remembering with forgetting? How might we look into the Beloved eyes of death if we cannot, not wholly, remember? Philip suggests wandering in search of fragments: “and one of the ways to confront it is through memory—the *memory fragment*” (7, emphasis mine). This is a *performance* of broken memory, “the jazz of memory” that “riffs on absences and gaps” in order to “weave from a fragment”—or a collection of fragments—“a whole” (4); this is a broken memory that must move creatively, or move into creation (read: invention), that must “live,” or at least be envisioned as “sentient.” This is, then, not a performance *of* but a performance *with a*

¹³⁰ Philip, 6.

¹³¹ Philip, 9.

“living,” or undying, untimely and broken memory.

In a journal entry from 2004, Philip allows us to visualize this search. At length:

“Fragment

Journal—January 2004

I walk the beach almost every day—as is my custom I collect shells—if I manage not to pick up one then I can walk without picking up any—having picked up that first shell, or pebble, or piece of smoothed glass, I am then condemned to keep picking them up...I find the fragments of shell more beautiful than the whole ones and today, reading a book on shells of the Caribbean, and again on the beach, am aware of preferring the broken ones and liking the challenge of trying to figure out the identity of the shell from the fragment.”¹³²

On the one hand, this “quest” (3) is the product of a condemnation to the necessity of at least a continuous searching; once the search begins, it must continue, with or without foreseeable end. The work of the search is essential. On the other, the search can be characterized as a search for beauty—or, rather, as inherently beautiful in its hope for multiple or repeated encounters with the broken; in fact, it might be even more beautiful than the presence or promise of an encounter with some prior or forthcoming wholeness. Rememorial encounters with the shards of traumatic event/resonance(s) produce for Philip and for us a litany of questions: “*-can fragments be an organizing principle...? - how much of a shell can be lost before it is no longer a shell?- when does the fragment cease being a part of the w/whole? To become its own w/whole?*” The search for fragments might be a search for w/holes, and these w/holes might best be thought of as distinct in their own right, a departure from the privilege placed on the kind of singular, restorative wholeness (e.g. “diamond”) that Hartman challenges in her essay, and a recognition of the distinct wholeness of individual fragments in the arbitrary arrangements of multiple

¹³² Philip, 2-3.

and repeated breaking (“diamonds”).

Philip’s work recalls our engagement with Hartman’s essay on “Venus,” crystallizes some of its features, and clarifies some of its conditions of possibility. Telling impossible stories fundamentally demands a reckoning with impossibility. In terms of the archive, in terms of memory and forgetting, and in terms of imaginative creation, it demands a working with and through the absences, the silences and the fragments as they are. In the tomb of the archive, on the edge of a beach, or in the presence of ghosts, doing “wake work” in the form of imaginative invention must wholly attend to the fragments—of shells, of diamonds, of existences—as fragments. Philip extends Hartman’s claims into the questions she poses, pondering what our work might look like if reckoning with silences, absences, and fragments as they are means treating these “holes” as “wholes” in their own capacity. The fragments of the shells and the fragments of the diamond become shells and diamonds in their own right. They are at once the pieces of an irretrievable and unknowable whole, and also a set of wholes arranged by the force of untimely trauma that produced and reproduces them; what defines the set as such is the spectral force that transmuted a singular wholeness into an arrangement of dispersed wholes.

If fragments/wholes can or should be our “organizing principle,” a kind of symbolic order or grammar for how we understand our untimely relation to the trauma of being Black/Black nonbeing, I think it important to examine their mechanics to better understand how they might work and be made to work for us, and what kind of imaginative invention or work a fragment-framework might make possible. Returning to our examination of the physical and symbolic properties of Sethe’s diamonds will prove useful, here. Specifically, the interaction between Sethe’s diamonds and the force of

trauma they interact with might be illuminated by a discussion of the highly refractive quality of diamonds. Diamonds have a very high refractive index, a ratio that describes the relation between the speed of light, or any kind of radiation, as it moves in the vacuum (the space/air outside the diamond) versus the phase velocity of light in the media with which it interacts (the diamond's internal lattice). The incident light that comes into contact with the diamond's surface will refract inside and travel throughout the lattice via a series of internal reflections that will eventually direct the light back out of a different surface of the diamond. With such a high refractive index, this could result in a phenomenon known as "total internal reflection." For total internal reflection to occur, the incident light must strike the surface of the medium (diamond) at an angle that exceeds the diamond's "critical angle." If it does, the light totally (as opposed to partially) reflects internally, reflecting repeatedly throughout the medium, instead of passing through to the other side uninterrupted, or at a slight angle. This, in addition to the diamond's cut, determines the diamond's brilliance, or radiance.

If we understand Morrison to be symbolically telegraphing Sethe's past trauma through diamonds as a force, and if we understand this to position the diamonds as conduits that channel the waves or particles of this force, then our questions become ones about the optics of refraction. How, how much, and how well do the fragments of trauma—the peculiarly horrifying splashes infants make when flung into the water, the smell of blood in the freshness of open air, the fact of the namelessness of other babies, the parallel fact of Sethe's name—refract the total and absolute force of the traumatic event/resonance? This is as much a question of radiation and radiance: given the questions about how these diamonds/fragments play conduit to the force of trauma, what

is the quality and character of the energy these fragments radiate? Thinking of this as radiation allows us to question whether or not this energy behaves like particles or like waves (or, as with photons and helium particles, indeterminately like both), and so helps us also consider what's being done with that force as Sethe, Morrison, Douglass, Hartman, Sharpe, Lacy and the rest of us wield, and seek to wield, it. Reckoning with radiance hones in on the optical because it allows us to think about what these diamonds/fragments render observable to our varied optical systems—we see, by way of some mixture of choice and position, with different eyes—so that we might: a) consider what is observable in relation to what we see (e.g. Venus as a fragment of a life/time; Margaret Garner dead, underwritten and unthought) and want/hope to see (e.g. Venus and her friend dead, but together, at the bottom of the ocean;¹³³ Margaret with family members, a backstory, and second chances); and b) the ways the sensory input (e.g. seeing) and output (e.g. writing) that frame our encounters with fragments and trauma transmute into the imaginative invention we do and want to do.

Our medium is language, and our method has been a form of analytic experimentation that turns on 'plugging in' for the many variables that emerge at the intersections of the Physical and the Literary, so plugging in "language" as the variable for the kind of radiation rememory's fragments produce seems both interesting and logical. We return to Morrison, but at a different location in spacetime. In 1993, Toni Morrison tells a story as she accepts her Nobel Prize in Literature. An old, blind wise daughter of slaves lives on the outskirts of town. Despite, or because of, her blindness, she is clairvoyant—sight beyond seeing; a seeing not accountable to conventional

¹³³ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

understandings of sight. All in town know of her, which is, perhaps, why petulant young folk approach, apparently determined to disprove her ability and wisdom by playing/preying on her physical blindness. One of the group approaches her with a question: Is the bird in his/her hands dead, or alive? Morrison reads the question as one about language—is language dead or alive? If the hands were to unclasp, would they reveal language languid, wings crushed, dead? This is Morrison's Schrödinger's Cat—Morrison Blackens Schrödinger's thought experiment into a story, and so an ensemble of questions, all grounded by a fundamental, guiding inquiry: What is the relationship between Blackness, space, time, and language?

A brief detour: In 1935, building from a paper authored by Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky, and Nathan Rosen (commonly referred to as the EPR article¹³⁴), Erwin Schrödinger imagines a thought experiment involving a cat, some poison, a radioactive trigger, and a steel chamber. Essentially, the cat is sealed in the steel chamber with an extremely small amount of a radioactive substance that, once it decays—say, it takes an hour, or some measurable amount of time—will trigger a mechanism that will release the poison, killing the cat. Schrödinger suggests that if we understand and take seriously quantum mechanics' ideas about uncertainty, the outcome—whether the cat is dead or alive—is indeterminate until it is observed; the cat is simultaneously dead and alive. The cat occupies a quantum superposition, existing in all of its possible theoretical states (dead, alive, or some unimaginable state in between) at once, until measurement or observation (reality) collapses that superposition into one of those states. Schrödinger means to press the limits of quantum mechanics' explanatory power by asking *when* this

¹³⁴ Semi-detailed note about the EPR article and its central claims and implications.

collapse occurs, as the implication of the thought experiment seems to suggest that the state of the system is observation-dependent, instead of operating based on the rigidity of prefigured physical laws whether or not a measurement is taken—an implication both Einstein and Schrödinger vehemently challenged. However, emergent experiments in theoretical physics seem to seek to inhabit the indeterminacy that characterizes Schrödinger’s famous thought experiment, so inhabiting this indeterminacy may prove generative.

The “I don’t know” this old, blind, wise daughter of slaves utters marks the young folk’s question with an indeterminacy that is both an opening and a closing. The cat become bird become language occupies its own quantum superposition, the physical system concealed by clasped hands and moist palms—simply, the bird, or language, and the concealed space it occupies—renders it simultaneously alive *and* dead. This “and” presents a few possibilities: language is as it reads, *both* alive and dead, as if “and” shares the same meaning as a plus-sign; or, the bird’s status is greater than what we can grasp via addition, this alive-and-dead quantum state being more than can be accounted for by the mere sum of its parts; or, finally, the quantum state, being totally indeterminate, leaves language *neither* alive nor dead, an unnamable state of flux that can only approach the realities of either life or death, as a limit approaches infinity in calculus, but only achieve one or the other once the hands open and the superposition collapses into one reality. An opening because in any instance, the hands remain closed and these possibilities and their collective indeterminacy remain possible. A closing because in any instance, the hands remain closed and these possibilities remain possible. Both, and so maybe neither, and so maybe more—whatever the case, the shared assumption remains:

not only are the possibilities simultaneously opened and closed by their posing the question, but the cat become bird become language *must* be concealed in the young folk's hands. Hence, what she says to the young folk: "but I do know that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Facing the critical question posed by the petulant young folk, the old, wise, blind daughter of slaves and theoretical physicist imagines the aliveness or deadness of language, and the conditions of possibility and implications for reality of each. If language is dead, then language deadens. In one sense, it operates from a static, paralyzed position that "actively thwarts intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential," and wielded to "sanction ignorance and preserve privilege." It is the numbed, inflexible tongue of the subjugated, and the tool wielded by the tongues of the agents of the antiblack world's systems of domination. "Menace and subjugation" replace language's "nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties," killing the potential for intellectual and creative flight—this is the language of Mastery. Mastery as it positions Blacks as antithetical to Humanity—as anti-Humans—bearing a singularly "abject muteness"¹³⁵ in the absence of the "right to name and "name""¹³⁶ Black flesh—sentient and not: this language wields Mastery's "powers of distortion" that dismember and mutilate, and that gird not just this language's content and expression, but the very grammar (or symbolic order) that organizes it. So language operates as death—as a recognizable force with recognizable consequences for Black folk and Black creation—but in another sense, it operates as if endlessly dying, as if "'murdered' over and over again," to recall Spillers,

¹³⁵ Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, 89.

¹³⁶ Spillers, 69.

and as if subject to the gravity of “deathliness,” to recall Marriott.¹³⁷ Language, in this collapse of reality, behaves like an unstable particle, inevitably and continuously decaying into other elemental (particulate forms).¹³⁸ And the radiance of language, in this sense, marks a loss of data or information that decays or reduces toward greater and greater incompleteness and incoherence.

If language lives, language’s vitality might behave more like waves, which propagate. This is language as a kind of disturbance moving, or “[arcing] toward the place (and time) where meaning *may* lie.” Its incompleteness inheres in recognition of the ineffability of what it attempts to telegraph, encode, or explain; “its *force*, its felicity is in its reach *toward* the ineffable.” Language’s waves approach the infinite, or at least extremely immense, gravitational force marked by the event horizon, and they do so aligned with the uneven power relation between language’s explanatory power and the obliterating, untimely force of antiblackness that forms its medium. Language surges toward the unknown knowledge that “may” lie beyond the event horizon and at or within the singularity.¹³⁹ In this way, “word-work is sublime...because it is generative...(and) it makes meaning that secures...the way in which we are like no other life,” or, in our terms, like no imaginable life at all. Language propagates toward and through the deathliness that warps the time and space of our being, thinking, and inventing, and itself

¹³⁷ See: Section II, “A Matrix of Deathly Hallows,” of Chapter 1, “Black (in) Time,” 27.

¹³⁸ Particle decay is the process of one elementary particle becoming other elementary particles, specifically an elementary particle with less mass along with an intermediate particle, the latter of which decays into other elementary particles. If these particles are also unstable, then particle decay can continue. In terms of language, this might begin syntactically: the sentence particle decays into the conjunction particle and the clause particle; the clause particles break down into the punctuation particle and the word particle; the word, into the phoneme and the semantic content; etc.

¹³⁹ For the specific use of this term in terms of black holes, see: footnote 73 of Chapter 1.

bends into the shape and quality of energy we might wield to create deathly and untimely words and worlds out of nowhere.

Considering both, but professing neither, the old, blind, wise daughter of slaves and quantum theorist leaves the young Black folk (and us) in the indeterminate dark. Language's radiance and language as radiation become uniquely generative in the simultaneous both/and- and neither/nor-ness of its aliveness/waviness and deadness/'particulateness.' Language as the cumulative product of a decay toward incoherence and a propagation toward destruction and meaning; language as something unimaginable in between the poles of decay and propagation; language as some other unimaginable thing, unimaginably beyond the scope of either decay or propagation—beyond the limits of names and knowledge. In the story, the indeterminacy tears an opening, a deep silence that, without available fictions, can only be filled with unanswerable—or impossible—questions, demands and faithful assertions. Questions about what constitutes telling and showing, demands to be told and touched, and assertions about the supposedly protective qualities that “only language” possesses. Here, though, reckoning with the kind of peril elemental to encounters with untimely fragments—through rememory, through the archive—described by Hartman and experienced by Sethe suggests that, at the very least, we must qualify or curb what Morrison suggests, here, to be language as singularly, but not purely or wholly, protective. In fact, I think we will do well to reframe her reading of “protection” in the terms of the kind of nourishment that this imaginative invention, word-work, or wake work in question throughout the entirety of this chapter.

Returning to *Beloved* one last time, submitting to the burgeoning tidal forces of

more and more untimely questions, I want to think about what Morrison ultimately suggests we do, having carefully considered the framework and mechanics of our doing. The final pages of the novel dwell in the indeterminacy on which Morrison meditates at a podium six years after *Beloved*'s publication. Of all that happens—of all the plot—it is their ultimate subjection to forgetting that might best guide us to the next waypoint. *Beloved* ends with a lamentation about forgetting. Beloved exits House 124 and the lives of those whose trauma she telegraphed, and disappears to casual and deliberate forgetting. Being dis(re)membered, unclaimed, unnamed—her name is forgotten, or never known, or both—and “unaccounted for,” Beloved both falls and is willed out of consciousness and the imagination in a way that relegates her to a different kind of ghostliness; she becomes figmentary. For all they know and forget, Beloved might have been purely the product of a collection of imaginative projections; all she said, only the manifestation of “what they themselves were thinking.” Her presence fractures like the diamond of a traumatic event/resonance, and the fragments that play conduit to her force—“the rustle of a skirt...the knuckles brushing a cheek,” the shifting of a photograph looked at too long or too closely¹⁴⁰—no longer signal the fact or fiction of her existence.

This more precisely frames Morrison's repeated line for us. Tonally, the refrain becomes a kind of admonition modified by lamentation: “it was not a story to pass on” laments the Beloved story, having been deliberately dis(re)membered, not having been passed on; “this is not a story to pass on” laments the present tense factuality of this dis(re)membering. And it appears to, if at a distance, admonish this kind of deliberate

¹⁴⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.

forgetting as it eliminates even the power and utility of fragments in constructing and (re)imagining the kinds of trauma that form them and form us. The repeated admonition might also suggest that, contrary to the behavior of the characters that encountered Beloved, the language (what Beloved said) and the presence (Beloved's factual or fictional existence) telegraphed a set of meanings and images—a story—that one should not pass on—avoid, overlook, pass over, pass up. In those senses, Morrison's narration/narrator really seems to be saying that this story, especially given the dis(re)membering that threatens it with absolute erasure, *must* be passed on, over time and space, carefully shared, or offered up and forth. This, with the apparent hope that it/this was/is not a story to—that will, at some point—pass on, fade, dissipate, die or otherwise fall into disarray and disuse.

On the other side is the possibility that Morrison instead seeks to warn us *not* to pass on—share, disseminate, etc.—this text, precisely because of the perils that come with repeated encounters and engagements with the fragments and force of trauma (e.g. Beloved's words, Beloved's factual/fictional presence). The perils of participating in and spreading the encounters/engagements with the trauma(s) of Black nonbeing are, maybe, too great, and so forgetting, as the characters of *Beloved* do, might be our way to ensure the sanctity of our individual and collective consciousness—to ensure that our shadows hold hands,¹⁴¹ or that our hands transmute love and intent into touch.¹⁴² Whatever the case, the indeterminacy of the refrain opens us up into a question about what we might do with the arrangements of language and meaning—the structures, stories, that emerge when we channel the however radiant radiation of the fragments we collect, encounter,

¹⁴¹ Morrison 59.

¹⁴² Morrison, 322.

and take seriously—once we make them. What are they for? If they differently channel the force of trauma that characterizes being Black in an antiblack cosmos, what do we do with these Black worlds? Are they too dangerous to engage, or to demand that others engage, and, in that sense, should they be allowed to pass on or be forgotten? Or are they to be passed on and carefully shared as a kind of nourishment? Or, given that indeterminacy generatively founds our journey, what is the shape and scope of impossible, dying, shareable stories and storytelling?

I am less than certain that this leaves or leads us anywhere I/we hoped to go, more than it reveals the nowhere I/we have been from the outset. The nowhere we are, and the destructive void we keep reestablishing as our destination, at least appears to emphasize the spatiality of the questions at hand. Thinking about the spatial qualities of the kinds of imaginative invention that must be passed on, or that must pass on, or both—the spatial qualities of this perplexing, indeterminate, remembered and forgotten, dying and ‘living’ word-wake-work—might illuminate what has been a present absence in our discussions thus far. How to conceive of untimely movement and creation through and with *space* undergirds the work already done, and defines the questions that vex us now. Specifically, thinking about how we might navigate the space of the ergosphere (just outside or before the event horizon) to cross the spatiotemporal boundary of the event horizon, and to arrive in the unknowable nowhere of the singularity that defies our capacity for knowledge, thought, and invention becomes imperative if we are to remark more wholly and precisely on where we’re headed.

If our destination is an infinitely crushing nowhere, how to get there?
Understanding the temporal mechanics and capacities of the stories we wrote, write, and

seek to write—as well as the contradictions and questions emergent from thinking about these mechanics and capacities—how does this word-wake-work mark our present relation to the space outside, near, and inside the Black w/whole? Further, how does this word-wake-work move us through the empty nowhere we are, the fragment filled accretion disk around the Black w/whole, and then to the singularity—the nowhere that spatially telegraphs what, if we return to Sharpe and Hartman, is unimaginable and impossible about what we do when we write? We boldly go to this crushing nowhere, imaginative invention as our vehicle, hoping to cross the event horizon, which is to move wholly over the threshold beyond which there is no possibility for return.

Without looking back, and with hope, dot dot dot

CHAPTER 3

From Out Of Nowhere

“Back up!
Gimme my space!”
—Yasiin Bey, “Ghetto Rock”

“Cartography is description not journey. The door, of course, is not on the continent but in the mind; it is not a physical place—though it is—but a space in the imagination”
—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*¹⁴³

Introduction: “*We Gon’ Be Here for a While*”

We might be lost. Or, at least, at a loss—for words, directions, and even the coordinates to relatively locate ourselves in the void—so how might we continue? After interrogating, unraveling, and reimagining how we imagine the entanglement between time, Blackness, and creation, we “find” ourselves in an encounter with the peril of space. Unsurprising. The physical relation between time and space, since the advent of General Relativity—really, since far earlier¹⁴⁴—relates them inextricably. Events, or as Frank Wilderson rightly describes them in relation to Blackness, “resonances,” occur at a

¹⁴³ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 96-7.

¹⁴⁴ For example, we might turn to Incan mythology’s *pacha*, which characterized how Incan culture understood the order of the cosmos. The three levels of *pacha* mapped the three planes of being that the Incas understood to name the structure of the universe and their position in it. Each level was not only spatial, but also temporal, revealing a “premodern” understanding of the inextricability of time from space. Obviously, this suggests what should be commonly understood: these conceptualizations, though most famously formulated through the “hard” (and supposedly more legitimate) sciences and Western, imperial practices of hypothesizing, experimentation, and theorization, are not

unique moment *and* position in the larger fabric¹⁴⁵ of spacetime. Each resonance is simultaneously spatial and temporal, and each marks a coordinate in the larger coordinate system (the fabric) of spacetime. Keeping in line with the theoretical influences of relativity, *both* the time and space “warp” in their interaction with the force of gravity, which, for our purposes, has been the gravitational, deathly force of antiblackness (we will think more about “gravity” in the fourth chapter). That this force’s capacity to warp, bend, crush, and so on, defines the unethicity of our relation to time, our untimeliness, suggests a similar unethicity persists across, or bleeds into, our relation to space as well.

We are worried about the arrangements—of the terms, the bodies, the landmarks, the feelings, and the beings. Not solely do we worry about the material and abstract spatial arrangements made possible *within* the framework founded upon this unethical relationship between Blackness and space, but we also worry about the kinds of spaces—gatherings, worlds, universes—we create *from* within and *against* this framework. Differently put, while we must worry about our spatial relationship with armed officers (e.g. Darren Wilson) and deputized citizens (e.g. George Zimmerman), stampeding military boots, lobbed teargas canisters, and flying bullets, we also discover that we worry about the mass of Black folk convening in Cleveland lovingly and critically moving for Black lives, and what the space they occupy, the space they indict with their

¹⁴⁵ The use of fabric to visualize the otherwise more abstract idea of “spacetime” is both useful and pervasive. Not only does this gel well with current prevailing metaphors in the world of theoretical physics (e.g. String theory—even though this set of “strings” is based more on music, we might also think of them as threads), but it seems to have found a comfortable home in popular culture. Across science fiction, ranging from parody, to reference, to serious work, we find versions of the idea: “the fabric of spacetime;” “the fabric of space and time/time and space;” “the cosmic quilt;” and so on and so forth. Tellingly, it is almost universally mentioned if it is already imperiled, or in danger of being imperiled.

collective presence, tells us. We worry about the destruction of the spaces we occupy, the spaces of our flesh, and the spaces of our imaginations, and we also inextricably worry about the spaces we create and maintain to channel, contend, and outdo—because undoing is impossible—that destruction.

A brief story, and I tell it in the spirit of Fanon,¹⁴⁶ but arranging the fragments has proven difficult; remembering has been a breaking, and here we are holding too few pieces. At the vigil for Nephi Arreguin, we stood scattered together. Shattered together, our very beings had been shaken by his sudden removal. We gathered to locate and name our sadness before pictures and posters bearing his name, and candles lit in his memory. On 7 May 2015, a resident near Pires Ave. in Cerritos, CA, where Nephi Arreguin would be murdered, called to report a “suspicious” Black woman going from door to door asking whether or not so-and-so lived there, and gave the police the license plate of a vehicle that seemed to be accompanying her. Officers from the Cerritos Sheriff’s department respond, and find the woman standing outside of Nephi’s car, Nephi sitting in the driver’s seat. Spatial arrangements become imperative, here.

The officers claim that Nephi, refusing to step out of his vehicle when Massa ordered, attempted to, from parked curbside, accelerate in order to mow down one of the officers; this caused the officer to “fear for his life,” and he and his partner fired shots into the vehicle, striking Nephi in the heart, immediately killing him, and causing his car to collide with both a fire hydrant and a pole. No medical assistance was offered or attempted because the water spewing from the hydrant flooded the area beneath and surrounding his car, and his collision had knocked electrical wires into the water,

¹⁴⁶ From *Black Skin, White Masks*, “I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self” (Fanon, 82).

endangering anyone otherwise able to give him medical attention. Eyewitness accounts differ. In these accounts, Nephi and the Black woman were *lost*, looking for a friend who they believed lived in the area. And immediately following Nephi's refusal to step out of the vehicle because Massa told him to, the police officers fired through the driver's side window, killing him. The shock of his death to his flesh caused him to accelerate, crashing his car into the hydrant and light pole. The officers, in these accounts, stood at the driver's side window, and were in no way in danger of Nephi accelerating and running them over. While Black folk daily venture to do and think the impossible (Christina Sharpe has helped us by naming this, "wake work"), the kind of impossibility here (i.e. that he could, even if he tried, run over the officer) is more a glimpse of our unethical relation to space than of the work we do and make out of nowhere.

This impossibility, derived from the account of the spatial arrangement of Nephi's Black flesh and Black being in relation to the White/Human being and flesh of the two officers, was recounted in horror, sorrow, and disbelief by his uncle, Zachary Wade, at both the vigil and march organized to mourn and protest the untimely death of yet another of our kin. Local accounts favoring the Cerritos sheriffs described Nephi and the Black woman's presence as "not belonging" in that neighborhood, or, even better, as looking or *being* "out of place." *Being* out of place; *being* without the possibility of belonging. That his and her Blackness entered into a predominantly nonblack space in which they did not belong became the justification for the phone call that alerted the murderers to their out-of-placeness. Following what we might imagine to be Nephi's ethical refusals to exit this space, space he perhaps felt he belonged, or at least had no reason to feel as if he did not, he was forcibly, fatally removed.

Triggered, we might begin to encounter rememories of similar removals, of ourselves, of others we can name, of still more that we will never be able to imagine. More menacing and unbearable questions: What do we make of the space of Kendrick Johnson, whose body, following an “investigation” of his yet unsolved murder, was stuffed with old newspaper after his internal organs were “discarded”—what of that displacement/replacement, and the flesh encasing it? What do we make of Aiyana Stanley-Jones’s space, the small and cozy space of the living-room sofa where she slept across from a television, and its vulnerable openness to stampeding boots, flash-bang grenades, and bullets? What do we make of the space of Elisha Walker’s shallow grave, how it housed her trans flesh, or the voids between the many “wheres” in the incomplete narrative that left her there? What do we make of the many voids in the archive—all the failures to locate the lost—all those empty spaces, all those lost names and the Black folk that, should we ever rediscover them or their remains, might not ever be able to bear or claim?

Of creation, we worry about the possibilities encapsulated and afforded by the organized, moving space we created in his “wake.” In the city of Cerritos, which almost absolutely supports its Sheriff’s department, we arranged a gathering with Black Lives Matter activists from the cities of Long Beach, Los Angeles, and Pasadena. The collective arrangement of our flesh, sound, movement, and Blackness sought to Blacken, if for a moment, the physical, sonic, and political terrain of the conservative, predominantly nonblack space of the city from library and Sheriff’s station to the town center, to the 91 freeway, to the corner of Pires where his fourth or fifth memorial

endured¹⁴⁷—the first few had been destroyed, or removed, by residents and/or police. Our untimely interruption and invasion of antiblack space was the multifaceted “pure utterance”¹⁴⁸ raised against the clarity of the statement made by the city, the county, and the world: that Black folk do not matter, in life or death, beyond being black matter, the fungible material the world accumulates to make, remake, and develop itself.

Standing, singing, chanting, dancing, and crying in the middles of Pires Ave, we met the rising threat of violent removal by officers who not only increased their presence, but also symbolically escalated that presence—one cruiser and an officer, then another cruiser and two more officers who told us to “move” out of the street, and then a police truck with high beams aimed at us from down the street. Our dispersal was imminent and inevitable; we did not belong, and we’d shouted as much with our voices, and with the collective space of our shared flesh. This was our untimely mourning for him, Nephi, for his partner and yet-to-be-born son, Nephi Jr., for his mother, Carla Wade, and her brother, Zachary, for all of them—the named, the unnamed, the forgotten, the unspeakable—and, perhaps most foreboding of all, for all of us, because the very real possibility of our own removal surrounded us. In essence, we mourned the lost, “the dead, the dying, and those living lives consigned in the aftermath of legal chattel slavery, to death that is always-imminent and immanent,” those for whom loss was not only never-ending, and not only an omnipresent threat, but also the constitutive feature of both their individual and collective beings. The creation and diffusion of our moving space of mourning invaded not only the various levels (physical, imaginary, political-ontological)

¹⁴⁷ A special thank you to allies, Alex Aguayo, Joshua Kaanaana, and Tania Zogheib, for maintaining and rebuilding the space of the memorial.

¹⁴⁸ Taken from the final utterances of M. NourbeSe Philip’s brilliant and earth-shattering *Zong!*, when and where she describes Black noisemaking: “

of spaces we did not belong, but also the very foundations of the civil society (Cerritos, Los Angeles County, California, USA, the World) that gave those spaces meaning. Which is why we had to be contained, and then dispersed, always under the threat of being removed, like Nephi, like so many others.

Triggered again, we encounter more menacing and unbearable questions: What do we make of the space of the Mondawmin Mall, which was at once a space of deliberate provocation and aggression created by the Baltimore Police Department, *and* a space of active resistance and Black rage spontaneously carried out by stranded, Black school students? Of the space of the riots, created by an explosion of Black pain, rage, and love? What do we make of the space of the convening of the Movement for Black Lives in Cleveland, Ohio, which was simultaneously a space of creation and critique, and also a space for action and resistance? What do we make of the space of the MOVE compound, or of every gentrified (e.g. Compton, CA), imperiled (e.g. the BSU of UCI), or destroyed (e.g. Black Wall Street) Black community, organization and space? What do we make of what happens to the spaces we create?

Of creation and destruction, all we have asked and been asked bleeds into our particular and peculiar worries about the literary and the imaginary. What do we make of all the literary and otherwise imaginative spaces—communities, worlds, universes—we create in relation to our inescapable vulnerability to invasion, violation, removal, and other forms of violent displacement? Of what we've read, what do we make of House 124's spitefulness—the spitefulness and vengeful aliveness (which is really living deadness) of the space itself? Of what we will read, what do we make in the dispersal of mourning across national boundaries (however violent and illusory), cultural-historical

differences, and kinship ties stained by death in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*? What might we make of what all of these questions tell us about the capacity to create parallel, or intersecting, or *interjecting* Black literary universes, from words to the worlds? Of that capacity in relation to both the fact of our loss and lost-ness, and the desire and imperative to mourn, "tend to, care for, comfort and defend" those/we subject to that fact?

These are our questions, and they disorient, vex. So claiming to know 'where' to go from here is to ignore the real and powerful "vengeance of the vertigo" we experience. Lovingly, I want to make the untimely journey to where nowhere might be. This is an imaginative enterprise preceded by a necessary, if daunting, need to map the contradictory topographies of our untimely relationship to space. Being description, cartography, the creative process spanning the desire and inclination to create the map of some/nowhere, the ethical necessity of the accuracy and truthfulness of the map, and the actual creative work of drawing, scaling, detailing, and providing a key for the map, both implicitly and explicitly describes spatial relationships—between cartographer, traveler, terrain, and the physicality of the map itself. Lovingly, then, what I desire to do is map the relationship between Black theorist theorizing (myself), the terrain of the antiblack cosmos, Black folk (my mother, my auntie, and all) who might make use of this map as we travel and navigate that antiblack terrain, and the untimely, imaginative and real Black spaces we might create.

How do we locate those/we who at the level of our being are, as Dionne Brand writes, "flung out and dispersed?" Or, how do we reckon with the impossibility of locating ourselves—the flung out, dispersed, removed, displaced and *lost*—as the

defining characteristic of how we relate to space? And, if we can bear this total "loss of bearings," this vengeful vertigo, in our thinking, being, and creating, how can we orient ourselves, in the flesh and in the imagination, to the parallel universes we make out of the nowhere where we are? To ask all this without recourse to the kind of spatial and temporal affirmation of a definitive set of answers is, perhaps, dangerous.

But this is about boldly going. This is about venturing into the dark. With love, we set out, are cast out, are jettisoned into the void. Adrift, without the right (read: correct; ethical) words or phrases to catch hold on, or of, just the imaginative journey, the sense that we must move, and the propulsion of our "menacing and unbearable" questions.

"Whatever we make of this, so long as we make it out of nowhere," we might think, tumbling, tumbling, in the dark.

So there we go.

I. *Nowheresville*

"The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a *tomb*, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history"
—Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," emphasis mine

"We may have forgotten our country, but we haven't forgotten our dispossession. It's why we never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call home, a place better than here, wherever here might be. It's why one hundred square blocks of Los Angeles can be destroyed in an evening. We stay there, but we don't live there. Ghettos aren't designed for living."
---Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 87.

“Westside, nigger! What?”
---Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*¹⁵⁰

We’ve been here before—with Hartman, investigating the archive, struggling to recall because rememory is untimely, and poring over the potential perils endangering us as we traverse the tomb in search of clues, or even answers. More precisely, and likely more horrifyingly, we will do better to reckon with the fact that we have yet to leave; that we have gone nowhere else, and that it is in this labyrinthine site of the dead that our efforts not only began, but also where they will continue. Having yet discovered an escape route, or yet seriously considered that no such route exists, our gaze sharpens, and our eyes linger at previously, haphazardly passed over details. Focused in the dark, we take note of two structures: the vague outline of a door; and the labyrinthine walls that occlude the fullness of its shape. We take these into consideration, and begin our examination, which is our imaginative exploration of what we’re able to do next, which is our cartography of the possibility of return or exit.

Before us are the labyrinth and its walls. Anthony Paul Farley’s response to Maria Aristodemou’s *Law & Literature: Journeys from Her to Eternity*, “Behind the Wall of Sleep,” offers us some guidance. Rather, since Farley’s stylistic choices and argumentative claims in it seem to bewilder us as much as they propel us through the labyrinth—since Farley’s response to Aristodemou is itself labyrinthine, “guidance” might best be sandwiched between quotation marks. Farley singularly investigates Aristodemou’s opening chapter, “A Rebeginning,” because, he thinks, “the rebeginning is the most important chapter of *Law & Literature*” as it establishes the methodological and conceptual groundwork for the entirety of the text. Aristodemou’s “retelling of the story

¹⁵⁰ Beatty, Paul. *The Sellout*, 41.

of Ariadne and Theseus and Asterion,” one of the many “tales of retelling” she retells throughout her text, opens us into thinking about the complex relationship between reason, desire, repression, and law. Specifically, Farley’s winding reading parses the key symbolic and conceptual elements Aristodemou draws from the story of Ariadne as she examines this relationship—the figure of the Minotaur, the structures of the wall and the labyrinth, and the repressed performance of the dream—in order to orient us to her argument. We worry about this orientation, as it governs how meaningful the relationship between the repressive “wall of sleep”, the labyrinth of law, and the desirous, symptomatic dream, will be to our capacity to imagine an escape or an exit.

The wall is an obstacle. More precisely, it is “a *political* obstacle, an instrument of repression;” it is “the form taken by repressed desire” (Farley, 424). The wall works as the materialization of repression’s force, barring us access to the “forbidden” country of desire we imagine to be on its other side; the imaginative labor instigated by an encounter with the wall *as* an obstacle, *as* repression reveals and clarifies the nature of the desire. Perhaps it is the recognition of the wall’s repression that transforms desire from the potential for movement into propulsion, itself, driving us through the entrance, and deeper into the labyrinth. The labyrinth and its peculiar characteristics are the spatial realization and arrangement of our desire meeting structural, political repression. How it twists and turns, where it leads, and whether it has any kind of exit at all, seems to turn on our capacity to orient ourselves to the length, detail, and durability of its structure. If desire is our propulsion through the structure—our imaginative resistance to repression, mobilized into our attempt at navigating the labyrinth—and its full realization is the forbidden country that might be on the other side of the labyrinthine wall, then the power

relation between the force our desire and the force of repression materialized into the walls that impede us structurally determine how far we might travel, where we might go and how quickly, and whether we ‘make it out’ or resign ourselves to the impossibility of escape.

This is at once an imaginative and political problem, and so a problem of position, capacity and orientation; where we are in relation to the walls impeding us, and our capacity, at the level of our very being, to imaginatively and politically locate that position, worry us, here. The nature of the walls becomes more important; what they look like, or, at least, what their structural composition is might help us unravel our dilemma.

Following Farley following Aristodemou, we look:

To look at the wall is to wander into the endless complexity of the stonework. The wall, as we stare at it, becomes a labyrinth—a network of lines that enlase. Each line is a philosophy, an explanation of its own necessary connection to each of the other lines... This side and the other are both made by the wall. The wall is made of writing. And this leads to reading.¹⁵¹

Or we begin our attempt at reading. Reading becomes the groundwork of our movement through the labyrinth, as it tests our ability to discern the characteristics written, etched, painted onto the wall(s) before us. For Aristodemou, the labyrinth’s walls are inscribed with the literature and narrative of Law. Looking intently, we might find the constitutive features of what makes the wall a wall, Law, Law; reading the lines and in between them, we “enter” the labyrinth of the wall’s structure, the labyrinth within the labyrinth we already struggle to begin to navigate, getting lost, or even losing ourselves, in the complexity. Reading is both necessary and perilous, then: we must read the writing on the

¹⁵¹ Farley, “Behind the Wall of Sleep,” 425.

wall to have a chance at moving along it toward what we hope or imagine might be the exit to the land of our desire, but we risk losing ourselves in, or to, the details of the structure and what they tell us about where we are, if anything. Our reading is a mandatory test of our desire against the stricture and structure of repressive reason, and it is also an encounter with the real, and likely fatal, possibility of being lost, of losing our bearings, or realizing we'd lost them some indeterminate, immemorial time ago.

For Farley, depending on the paradigm, the name of the writing on the wall might change: "Gender is a wall...Race is a wall. Class is a wall. The nation is, of course, a wall" (426). The labyrinth, and the labyrinths composed by the lines of the stonework, appears to be a complex, intersectional structure. The writing on the wall(s) are the philosophies and explanations necessary to give the structural formations of gender, or race, or class, or sexuality, or disability, or nation, their meaning and form. Examining the structure of the wall(s), reading the writing, then, as a means of entering the labyrinthine logic that gives them their dimensions, frames this process of orientation as one of identification. We locate ourselves in relation to the structure in our careful examination of the walls and stonework that give it form by way of a measured identification with what's written there—about whatever feature of our structural position, only a few of which are listed above. We who are behind the wall of sleep, performing this identification, this orientation, this reading, articulate ourselves only in "symptoms and dreams" produced as our interpretation of the structure. If, following Farley into Du Bois, this symptomatic, dreamy language is the language of problems, problem language, then what might we be able to say about when, where, who, and what

we are in the labyrinth? How might this kind of talking help us navigate, let alone escape, the walls of sleep?

The problem of spatial orientation becomes one of reading and communicating; the process of our interpretation, and our capacity to translate that interpretation into meaningful communication, become the conditions for locating ourselves in relation to the repressive structures framing our untimely existence. Reckoning with this, we recall having conversed with the words of Hortense Spillers, who sought out a “vocabulary,” and a “method for reading” the “undecipherable hieroglyphics of” and on the brutalized flesh of Blacks.¹⁵² Farley confirms that we move in the right direction: “The wall, then, is made of skin...Whiteness is a wall of skin; gender is skin; class is also a skin... We are able to negotiate the labyrinth because we have, inside *our* skin, an orientation” (429). What is written on the skin of the wall can be “read,” or deciphered (read: interpreted), by way of the key, or as we previously described it, “cryptovisible,” coded into our flesh; the wall’s repressive literature interacts what we bear *in the flesh*, revealing our structural position, and allowing us a sense of place. Knowing this, following Farley, would be *enabling*: “all these lines, all these fates, *enable* us to orient ourselves in the *dark* of the labyrinth, and, seemingly, find our way out.”¹⁵³ Ariadne seems to leave us a way out, a thread, a “method for reading,” by revealing to us the content and nature of our very

¹⁵² For a sustained reading of the relevant passages of Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” revisit Chapter 1, namely pages 10-15. Also, recall that in the passage in which the phrase “method for reading” appears, Spillers specifies Black female flesh as the primary subject of her analysis. As we see throughout this project, her analysis is absolutely foundational to how we understand Blackness; here, how we locate Blackness in space.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

beings—the fact of the cryptovisible or key within us—in relation to the repressive structure barring us from the other side.

But we've yet to attend to something; Farley seems to miss something. The room of the labyrinthine tomb is dark. All its possible walls surrounded by darkness; what is the nature of this darkness? What does it do to our capacity to read the writing on the walls, to know where we are? Certainly, there are many kinds of walls, so many kinds of repression, and many kinds of identification produced in relation to those varied repressions the problem remains that the walls appear to be, for all the difference in their inscriptions, *equally* walls—hence the indefinite article of Farley's list. Gender is *a* wall; race is *a* wall; class is *a* wall; nation is *a* wall; sexuality is *a* wall; (dis)ability is *a* wall, and so on. The indefinite article links these together, not quite appositively, so not quite synonymously; rather, since the walls are *at least* political, the continuous indefinite article creates a political equivalence. The walls of the labyrinth are equally walls, equally political. Struggling to grasp the flattening consequences of this logic, we worry about the singular impenetrability of the darkness we'd taken for granted in Farley's retelling of Aristodemou's retelling of the myth. We are reminded of the singularity of Blackness that brought us here, and find ourselves at a loss.

This thick Blackness obscuring the glyphs on the walls, the narratives in the flesh, illuminates a question we never thought to ask. Perhaps, in Farley's response to Aristodemou, it was not only unthought, but also unthinkable: Knowing how imperative it is we locate ourselves in relation to the labyrinthine structure of repression before we can begin to imagine a way out, what happens to the writing on the walls, the structures themselves, and our capacity to orient ourselves *in the dark*—in relation to the dense,

atmospheric Blackness before us? We realize have yet to proceed. Worse, more than that there is a dark space surrounding us, that there is in fact a structure we wish to escape and the glimmer of what might be an exit, we find that we remain lost. The walls, in their obstructiveness, in the political identifications (race, gender, class, nation, sexuality) they produce, still offer us a chance, a way to find a way out; the walls, then, are flawed. But Blackened by the darkness, their texts become, as Spillers wrote, *undecipherable*. Reading between the lines of that undecipherability, we find that we cannot orient ourselves, that we do not know where we are, and that we are incapacitated: we have yet to move; we are going nowhere.

Perhaps Farley recognizes this, and encodes it into what otherwise appears to be an analysis that makes the mistake of analogizing Blackness to (any) race, to gender, to class, to sexuality, and so on. The darkness of the room is constitutive to the scene from the myth he recreates, and it is only after the introduction of darkness to the space that he writes: “the moment of capture was the one in which the watcher began to stare at the wall: the wall became labyrinth and the watcher began blindly searching its many mansions, its many law rooms. Ariadne’s thread never leads us out. Theseus never escaped.” Perhaps this is too generous, but in Farley’s retelling of Aristodemou’s retelling, he appears to place Blackness on a different plane of physical space than forms of identification that comprise the walls. Blackness frames the structure of the labyrinth *as* darkness, and being unable to do the imperative, to meet the demand of the space (to read, and so to escape) *because* of the Blackness/darkness, locating ourselves within the labyrinth, let alone navigating it, let alone escaping into the imagined space of our fulfilled forbidden desire, becomes impossible. Perhaps this is why Farley leaves us with

a final question, confirming our darkest fears: “What if we only *think* we escape the labyrinth?” What if the nature of the darkness of the labyrinth is to merely give the *impression* of possibility—of locating the method for reading the walls in is, of interpreting the writing on the walls, of *finding ourselves* in the flesh, politically, physically, and imaginatively? What if there was never a way out, never an Ariadne, and we are, as feared we were at the start, *lost*, left in the dark?

This is going nowhere, and Farley appears to anticipate the worry we experience after recognizing the fact of the Blackness/darkness encroaching us. Given where we are, Aristodemou only suggests that we “must dream harder...dream of a [new] beginning,” a new entry into a new story without the darkness, the labyrinth, or, perhaps, the need for an exit; an alternate reality altogether, without the perils of being in, surrounded by, with, or subject to the force of Blackness. This is to do the symptomatic, problematic speaking or enunciating against what the structure tells us about itself and ourselves; this is the imaginative work, performed in the flesh, of recreation. Thinking outside the dark box; outthinking the labyrinth; this seems to be the “wake work,”¹⁵⁴ Sharpe thinks about with us in the second chapter, impossibly wielded against the dominating force of the “symbolic order”¹⁵⁵ we, through and with Spillers, trace in the first chapter. This is Aristodemou, beyond the intended conceptual bounds of her work, suggesting that the only way out is to do the impossible, but this labyrinth(ine) work. To perform it is to perform under the recognition that our capacity to imagine at all is sutured to the obliterating force of the darkness that keeps us here in the first place. To attain force and

¹⁵⁴ The whole of Chapter 2, “Untimely Wor(l)ds in the Key of Love,” depends on Sharpe’s work, but a direct discussion can be found in the opening section of the chapter.

¹⁵⁵ We spend much time on Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” in chapter one, but her work is integral to the whole of this project.

meaning at all, our “wake work,” our dream work, must reckon with the fact of the labyrinth and the darkness; to dream at all we must reckon with the fact of our inability to locate ourselves, the fact that we are and were always lost.

All that there is for us to do from here, all that we might do, is speak through the dream of an exit. Farley seems to anticipate this, too, and enlists Ursula K. Le Guin to confirm what we begin to understand. “There is only ‘the Telling,’” he tells us, a “practice,” and a “form of attentiveness” that, we hope, affords us the capacity to at least *attend* to the fact of the Blackness structuring our position and the possibility of our spatial orientation. In Le Guin’s words:

It appeared that in the old Akan way of thinking any place, any act, if properly perceived, was actually mysterious and powerful, potentially sacred. And perception seemed to involve *description*—telling about the place, or the act, or the event, or the person. Talking about it, *making it into a story*. But these stories weren’t gospel. They were essays at the truth. Glances, glimpses of sacredness. One was not asked to believe, only to listen... There were no rules. *There was always an alternative.*¹⁵⁶

If cartography is not journey—our movement through and out the labyrinth—but description—the dream-wake-work of “Telling” about an alternative, a way out, another reality altogether—then what we have been tasked with, by Farley in his layered retelling of Aristodemou, Du Bois, and Le Guin, becomes clear. We are to imagine the map to the way out, to elsewhere. “There is only ‘the Telling,’” there is only the story, and so there is only the “making” of the narrative map, the “story,” to the way out. We know as much: in our rememories, we encounter our reading of *Beloved*, and thinking about what it means to “pass on” a story—is this it? A story, a map, a description of a way to the way

¹⁵⁶ Le Guin, Ursula K., *The Telling*, 96-97, cited in Farley, “Behind the Wall of Sleep,” 430-1, emphasis mine.

out, an approximation of the “truth” of the exit; a story in orbit of the dark, real (“actual,” if we remember Spillers in chapter 1), deathly Blackness surrounding our very being, gripping our every gesture—*this is it*. Our access to the exit of an “alternative” that was “always” here, always with us in the dark; this, we think, blinded by the dark, looks like our way out.

A moment of informed, but blind optimism, then, and we’re searching the backs of eyelids and the spaces of our imaginations for stories that tell toward, or about, the “truth” of the map, the way out, the elsewhere, the other side. We think hard, clamoring for stories of new beginnings and dreams, of spaces where we might ‘be.’ In want, we encounter Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, and find ourselves hoping to find ourselves in Dickens, California. Our section opens with exclamation at the intersection of imperative and declaration: “Westside, nigger!” Me, aka Bonbon, aka the titular Sellout (or at least one of them), who we only know by his last name, declares by name a black space, a black region, and commands that we recognize it as itself. High volume, this is a dense, loud sentence that forcefully asserts the legitimacy of the framework and premise of the novel: the reclamation, or “reanimation,” of Black space subject to denial and erasure. This is not to suggest that Beatty explicitly or even primarily concerns himself with establishing this as the central problem of the terrain he maps, but to reckon with the fact that for all the brilliance, scope, and incisiveness of the sometimes satirical, always if awkwardly loving, and relentlessly Black setups, scenes, jokes, characters—main and peripheral—the novel never loses hold of a fundamental concern for what constitutes Black space, being Black in space, and how Black untimeliness operates as the grammar suturing being to Blackness to in-ness to space.

But I am also, if not more, intrigued by the immediate shift to the interrogative: “What?” What is the matter, but what’s what? If “Westside, nigger!” exclaims both the affirmative declaration of a connection between Blackness, belonging, space, and representation, and the imperative to “recognize” the invocation and reality of this connection, then this “What?” can express a critical vexation with that connection. Tonally, given the absence of exclamation juxtaposed with the exclamation right next to it—Beatty seems deliberately to call attention to the distinction between the sound of both the exclamation-declaration-imperative and the interrogative—the vague emotionality of the question-mark expresses confusion, indignation, disgust, and/or explicit critique, in all a calling into question the nature of the preceding claim. To what ends? The deliberate vagueness¹⁵⁷ of the relationship between “Westside, nigger!” and “What?”, whatever the intended tones of the expressions, shares across the array of interpretations an attempt to trouble the terrain of the connections captured and invoked by the opening exclamation-declaration-imperative. A quaking of the world presumed, declared, to be underfoot of the claim, a shaking of the grammar that gives the exclamation its force and shapes or directs its meaning, what’s what is the unthought “how” whispering behind the loudness of the claim: how does this relation work, look, operate, and/or exist, given what we know about where we ‘are’ (or aren’t)? If this

¹⁵⁷ I say deliberate because Beatty has implied, across several of his interviews, that the obfuscations he typically includes in his work—the way he masks or at least coats what he’s ‘really’ doing in humor, parody, and absurdity—is always deliberate, and that he has no intention of clarifying, let alone outright stating, what he ‘means’ when he does X in this novel (or his others). There are always hints. Or, instead of providing insight himself, he allows the interviewer to lace their questions with the sets of interpretations and presumptions about the work that they have, to which he responds with a vague affirmation of the legitimacy of the ‘readings’ that whisper behind the questions, or with a deliberate move from the singularity of those ‘readings’ to an openness-to-interpretation that, rather than clarifies, obfuscates, in the best way.

“what” channels the force or our predicament in the labyrinthine tomb of this ‘nowhere’ where we work to locate ourselves into the form of a question, then what’s the matter, at least at the foundations of all that is written in the novel, is what it might mean to think, move, and create in terms of reanimating, reclaiming, or making space when we know what we know about the structure that positions us. If “lost” and “nowhere” characterize where we are/aren’t and how we are there/here, then “what?” elucidates the stakes in naming, declaring, exclaiming, recognizing, and belonging or laying claim to space, and calls into question what it is we do when we try or aspire to “make ways out of no way,” literary or otherwise.

Before we arrive in Dickens, there is a detour in the “making,” here. How might that making take place? What are the constitutive features and elements of that process transform “nowhere” into “a way out,” or “elsewhere,” or, at least, a space where we might do wake work? In October of 2015, theoretical physicist Lisa Randall’s fourth book, *Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs: The Astounding Interconnectedness of Everything* emerges to a generally positive reception. Aimed at a lay audience, her text works as a kind of thought experiment in which Randall hypothesizes about how the existence and behavior of dark matter might deepen our understanding about the nature of the extinction of the dinosaurs. She divides her text into three parts. The first, “The Development of the Universe,” explains the science of cosmology, presenting the Big Bang theory, cosmological inflation, and the general composition of the universe, and defining what dark matter is, how it was ascertained, and what its role is, or might be, in influencing the structure of the universe. The second focuses exclusively on the Solar System and the constituents that relate most closely to the thought experiment at work—

meteoroids, asteroids, and comets—and how those constituents relate to life’s formation and destruction on earth. The final section integrates the work of the first two, and works to map out and compare various models of dark matter, each of which presents what dark matter, or at least the effects attributed to its existence, might actually be, and how this dark matter’s interactions with matter and with itself continue to pose theoretical problems.

We are concerned primarily with the first and final sections of the text, specifically Randall’s explanations of dark matter, galaxy and structure formation, and her use of analogy to help explicate both—it is this last concern that will be our ultimate problem. Dark matter remains elusive, invisible. It only feebly, imperceptibly, interacts with the matter that we currently know. Detectors have yet to achieve the necessary sensitivity to directly measure its effects; much of the belief in and theorization about its existence comes somewhat inferentially. Dark matter might be best thought of as existing, as Randall puts it, in and as “a society totally separate from the matter that we know,” one of countless distinct, invisible “universes” that “passes right through our bodies,” while eluding our capacities to sense it. At the particulate level, whether it is composed of some new type of particle, if those particles have a mass comparable to known particles, or if those particles behave as expected given current understandings of dynamics, dark matter remains a problem for thought for those in search of it.

The most important evidence for what this “dark universe” and its composition might be appears to inhere in dark matter’s importance to the formation of structure like

galaxy clusters and galaxies via its gravitational influence.¹⁵⁸ Dark matter's abundance and apparent immunity to electromagnetic radiation, which in the early universe "initially prevented ordinary matter from developing structure on scales smaller than about a hundred times the size of a galaxy,"¹⁵⁹ heavily contributed to the attraction of ordinary matter into increasingly dense regions of space. These density perturbations, "regions that are slightly denser or less dense than others, which are created when" the period of cosmic inflation ended,¹⁶⁰ precipitate in the collapse of matter that seeds the creation of structures like galaxy clusters,¹⁶¹ galaxies and stars. The "diffuse spherical halo"¹⁶² of dark matter framing these regions heavily contributes to the gravitational attraction that maintains the structure of the formation, allows gaseous matter to cool, condense, and fragment into stars, and even attracts back into galaxies "some of the matter that is ejected by supernovae...[helping] to retain heavy elements that are essential to further star formation and ultimately to life itself."¹⁶³

Randall works to consolidate research from ongoing investigations into the

¹⁵⁸ Scientists have been able to study this particular interaction between dark matter, gravity, and galaxy structure by way of measuring gravitational lensing. Lisa Randall explains it thusly: "The idea behind the gravitational lensing proposal," first put forth by Swiss astronomer, Fritz Zwicky, "was that the gravitational influence of dark matter would also change the path of light emitted by a luminous object elsewhere. The gravitational influence of an intervening massive object such as a galaxy cluster bends the paths of the light rays that are emitted by the luminous object. When the cluster is sufficiently massive, the distortion in the paths is observable" (locations 582-594).

¹⁵⁹ Randall, location 1243.

¹⁶⁰ Randall, location 1219.

¹⁶¹ Of particular import is an example Randall uses in her text, a galaxy cluster known as The Bullet Cluster. Formed by the merger of two galaxy clusters, the peculiar structure of the galaxy has been difficult to explain without accepting the influence of some non-interacting matter (possibly dark matter), and is thus an important source of evidence for dark matter's existence.

¹⁶² Randall, location 1347.

¹⁶³ Randall, location 1256.

problem of dark matter into one textual space, and to render that material accessible for lay readers. This is characteristic of work written by so-called “science popularizers” who write about this complex, fascinating research in ways that offer textual points of entry into what is otherwise treated as esoteric material. Crucial to Randall’s venture into clarifying some of the research and theorization about dark matter (including her own) are analogy and metaphor. In the opening section of her text, she makes to central, framing comparisons: between the dark matter’s involvement in structure formation to the planning and layout of a city; and, between dark matter, itself, and the “rank-and-file of society.” Of the first, she writes:

“Urbanization has been vital to many of the advances in modern life. Put enough people together and ideas bloom, economies flourish, and abundant benefits emerge. Cities develop organically as they expand...but once a city becomes too dense, expensive housing, crime, or *other urban predicaments* frequently drive people out into more sparsely settled neighborhoods, or even farther away—outside the city altogether...And without stable urban centers, suburban communities won’t flourish either, in which case mall developers will be disappointed too...It turns out the same general pattern might apply to the growth of structure in the Universe...As with predictions for large-scale urban growth, predictions of large-scale structure in the Universe agree with observations extremely well.”¹⁶⁴

I quote her at length to express the full shape of what is a facile-at-best, antiblack-at-worst comparison between the nature of urban development and large-scale structure formation—of galaxies, galaxy clusters, stars, etc. Randall flattens the process of modern urbanization in a way that necessarily, if haphazardly, displaces the antiblack violence inherent in the organization and growth of cities to clarify the effects of dark matter on

¹⁶⁴ Randall, location 4819-4829.

large-scale structure formation in the universe. She presents an idyllic, simplistic framing of urbanization without addressing the violence animating the planning, arrangement, rearrangement, and maintenance of “urban” spaces: gentrification and the ensuing displacement (New Orleans, in the still-burgeoning wake of Hurricane Katrina, provides a case-study);¹⁶⁵ the creation of food deserts and the destructive responses to the ways Black communities attempt to develop self-sufficient sources of nourishment (AfrikaTown in Oakland);¹⁶⁶ forms of environmental racism (e.g. the poisoning of the

¹⁶⁵ From an article written by Ben Casselman entitled, “Katrina Washed Away New Orleans’s Black Middle Class,” published on 24 August 2015 at *Five-Thirty-Eight*: “But they also worry about rising rents, gentrification and the erosion of the culture that made New Orleans special in the first place. All of those changes are closely entwined with issues of race. *More than 175,000 black residents left New Orleans in the year after the storm; more than 75,000 never came back.* Meanwhile, the non-Hispanic white population has nearly returned to its pre-storm total... Together, the trends have pushed the African-American share of the population down to 59 percent in 2013, from 66 percent in 2005. But it isn’t just that there are fewer black New Orleanians; their place in the city’s economic fabric has fundamentally changed. African-Americans have long accounted for most of the city’s poor, but before the storm they also made up a majority of its middle class and were well represented among its doctors, lawyers and other professionals. After Katrina, the patterns changed: The poor are still overwhelmingly black, but the affluent and middle classes are increasingly white... The influx of young, educated—and *overwhelmingly white*—professionals... [has] brought with [it] a wave of gentrification.”

¹⁶⁶ The Afrikatown Community Garden’s Facebook page provides the most current updates of its ongoing battle with the owner of the once empty, dilapidated lot in which the garden thrives. The owner seeks to sell the land to luxury condominium developers, and in April 2015, the standoffs with bulldozers began. On 3 April, declared Liberation Day by protesters, organizers invited guest speakers for a day of music, food, lecture, and dance meant to prevent the destruction of the garden. In November, when Danae Martinez and Qilombo volunteers began to clean the lot—littered with discarded needles and human excrement—they sought to establish a space where the predominantly Black community members could work together toward collective physical, psychological, and spiritual nourishment. As described by Linda Grant, questioned for an article written by Luke Tsai for East Bay Express (on Liberation Day), entitled, “West Oakland Activists Vow to Defend Afrika Town Community Garden:” ““Our idea with Afrika Town was to have a place that Black people could say is ours,” said Linda Grant, a Qilombo volunteer. According to Grant, the burgeoning garden now features kale, chard, collard greens, green onions, rosemary, lavender, garlic, three kinds of fruit trees, and three different

water of at least Flint, MI); and the overpolicing of Black communities. To make this critical elision in the name of clarification to knowingly or unknowingly ground that clarification in an obfuscation of the realities of antiblack violence at the level of spatial arrangement and relation. *Clarification* for the lay audience remains imbricated in an *obfuscation* of the violence that emerges in the arrangements, infiltrations, intrusions, displacements and death that characterize the relation between Blackness and space.

This problem of obfuscation persists as she crafts the second metaphor, in which dark matter metaphorically stands-in for the “rank-and-file of society.” In an article about *Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs* that she writes for *The Boston Globe* entitled, “Seeing dark matter as the key to the universe—and human empathy,” she clarifies and focuses what she might mean by “rank-and-file.” Recounting a reading from the first chapter of her book for an audience at the artists’ colony, Yaddo, during which she ventured to help clarify the dark matter’s “unseen but important influences” on the universe, Randall recalls being asked, “I know this might sound like a crazy question, but were you really talking about race?” In her telling, Randall beams at the thought: “the real issue I was addressing was the transparency—both metaphorical and literal—of people, phenomena, particles, and forces that we don’t necessarily appreciate but that are important to our shared reality.” She revels in this connection and extends the metaphor into seminars she teaches at Harvard.

Dark matter is the dominant form of matter in the universe, but it goes unnoticed and remains undetectable to current research methods and instruments. Ordinary matter

kinds of lettuces. Volunteers harvest the produce and set up a table outside of Qilombo where anyone can come take some vegetables for free, or community members can simply go into the garden and pick what they want. “There’s no gate, no lock, no nothing,” Grant said.”

does not interact strongly with or resemble dark matter; dark matter merely passes through ordinary matter, and ordinary matter phenomenological exerts more influence on the known universe, its shape, contents, and so on. Some might consider dark matter dangerous because of its “ominous-sounding name.” Dark matter’s very existence confounds and fascinates scientific and lay intellects alike, prompting extensive research into what it is, how it behaves, and what the full extent of its influence on reality might be. In all, thinking critically about or researching dark matter demands an attempt at understanding the invisible, the underthought, the unimaginable, the terrifying, the otherworldly, the Black. For Randall, research into dark matter, and the parallels between dark matter’s function in the universe and the positions of Black folk and nonblack people in the world, prompt questions of empathy: what is it to think through and about, and to identify with, the constituents, sentient or particulate, of another world? Of another universe?

This is peculiar in its own right, particularly given the position of power Randall occupies. Occupying the political-ontological position of the Human, as a white, blonde woman of increasing acclaim in a field that continues to marginalize not only Black people (and on a different register, people of color), but Black *womyn* (cis- and transgender) in particular—providing fewer research opportunities, accepting fewer candidates to elite programs, research laboratories and projects, and offering little or no access, reinforcement, or encouragement at early ages¹⁶⁷—she presents this metaphor,

¹⁶⁷ One of the most compelling writers and thinkers on this problem as it intersects with the sorts of metaphors Randall employs is theoretical physicist Chanda Hsu Prescod-Weinstein. Her research into the viability of Axions as the strongest candidate for dark matter constituents, as well as her commitment to centering problems of inclusion and access for Black people and people of color in STEM fields is the driving force behind

like the first, in a way that works to obfuscate the antiblackness undergirding it. Worse, in the second instance in particular, she wields Blackness, via the invocation of race and the focus on the “dark” of dark matter, as a tool to make a general claim about the need for empathy (the very concept of which Saidiya Hartman tears asunder in her work)¹⁶⁸ without a substantive recognition of the singularity of Blackness. In both instances, clarification and connection turn on Randall’s blindness to the realities that characterize the Black position in the antiblack world, in the field of Physics (and in STEM fields in general) and with regard to the spatial formations created by the violent process of urbanization. In all, while dark matter can at least draw and hold the fascination, care, adoration, research, and funding of physicists, researchers, and laypersons with scientific interests, dark matter—at least in Randall’s metaphor—does not experience or capture the profound, debilitating, exclusionary, and fatal violence generally characteristic of Black life and death for Black folk around the globe.

Troubling as these elisions are, they intersect with what are useful metaphors for our consideration when thinking about the relation between Blackness and space. If for Randall Black folk and dark matter function similarly, as the structuring, transparent—rather, unseen, unthought—feared condition of possibility for the formation of structure of the universe, the very condensation of matter that eventually produces the earth, its inhabitants, and the structures those inhabitants create to house and arrange themselves or

the use and critique of Randall I’m presenting here. One conversation in particular brought this problem with Randall’s framing to the fore.

¹⁶⁸ I’m drawing attention to Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, specifically to the chapter entitled, “Innocent Amusements,” in which Hartman dismantles the concept of and capacity for empathy between white/nonblack observers of Black suffering, and the Black people who are political-ontologically, psychically, psychologically, and physically terrorized by the antiblack world.

others, then this metaphor proves useful. That Black folk qua dark matter likely facilitates the condition that make what we call “space” possible, be that space physical, political-ontological, psychic, or imaginative, clarifies the darkness before us in the labyrinthine structure of the mausoleum before us. Not only does it affirm what we understand to be the violent mechanics that edify this structure to begin with, but it also directs our questions about how we might make or inhabit a space to do the wake work of mourning and moving with the dead. The “dark universe,” this “zone of nonbeing,”¹⁶⁹ this nowhere, that gives the (non-dark) universe form, as a metaphor for the kind of spatial arrangement we occupy primes us to read what Beatty and Me are doing with and in Dickens, CA.

Differently, how Beatty and Me work with the dark matter of Blackness to shape the space of Dickens as a site of Black interaction, confrontation, and creation will help confirm and challenge both what we know about being and going nowhere, and also better frame our understanding of the possibilities afforded us by being lost.

II. *Stanky Shrines and Hollow Bastions*

“Shit, when Cuz and my brother picked me up from work and we drove back here, *soon as we crossed that white line you painted*, it was like, you know, when you enter a banging-ass house party and shit’s bumping, and you get that thump in your chest and you be like, if I were to die right now, I wouldn’t *give a fuck*. It was like that. *Crossing the threshold*.”

---Marpessa in Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

Beatty’s *The Sellout* follows Me as he tries to “reanimate the city of Dickens,”¹⁷⁰

California, an agrarian “ghetto community on the outskirts of Los Angeles.” Dickens

¹⁶⁹ This is a Fanonian concept, introduced by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He writes, “There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (Fanon, 2).

¹⁷⁰ Beatty, *The Sellout*, 93.

recently suffered a silent erasure from the map as “part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car garage communities to keep their property values up and their blood pressures down” (58). Or because of the “widespread local political corruption,”¹⁷¹ lack of open police and fire stations, poorly staffed city hall, and nonexistent school board—whatever the reason(s), and without announcement, editorial piece, brief sound-bite on the daily news, or anything resembling the promise of recognition or memorialization, Dickens was deliberately dissolved from cognitive and geographical maps into topographical nothingness. This casual, quiet and violent alchemy transmutes “somewhere” to “Nowhere,”¹⁷² a clear parallel to the singular kind of quotidian violence to which Black folk around the globe remain subject—consider as evidence the ongoing, slow poisoning and murder of the predominantly Black community of Flint, MI¹⁷³—prompts Me into action.

His plan wins him the juridical lottery, a congratulatory summons to the Supreme Court of the United States of America, stamped with the word “IMPORTANT! in large, sweepstakes-red letters” (1). The novel begins here, almost all of its plot told in a series

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² This kind of dissolution parallels the first step in the alchemical process, tellingly and usefully called “nigredo,” the “black process,” which consists of the disintegration of material to its most fundamental, essential elements, at which point it is no longer recognizable as itself, and it becomes the material, for our purposes the (dark or black) matter

¹⁷³ The city of Flint, MI is experiencing a crisis because of the lead-contaminated water it’s been pumping into its residents’ homes and throughout the water system. While this is receiving national attention only now, this problem has been protested by residents of Flint for nearly two years, and parallels several similar, deliberate poisonings in predominantly Black cities like Baltimore, MD and New Orleans, LA. This subjection to what has been called “environmental racism”—in which the access to environmental resources and the quality of those resources dramatically differs across racial positions—usefully and necessarily parallels our concern with the relationship between Blackness and space.

of layered flashbacks as Me reclines while smoking weed in the Supreme Court chambers, as an infuriated parody of Clarence Thomas is prompted by rage to speak for the first time in almost a decade.¹⁷⁴ Referred to as “the black Justice,” his fury stems from precisely how Me tries to “reanimate” Dickens, CA: by violating “the hallowed principles of the Thirteenth Amendment by owning a slave...willfully [ignoring] the Fourteenth Amendment and [arguing] that sometimes segregation brings people together” (23). Me’s project entangles notions of “life,” “(re)birth,” and “(re)creation” with the political-ontological, psychological, temporal, and spatial implications and consequences emergent from slavery and segregation, and inadvertently calls into question the relationship between Blackness, creation, erasure and space.

Beatty’s framing narrative asks: What gives a space life? What about being Black in space must we understand differently when the “life” of a space is sutured to the way it contains or houses and advances antiblack practices and policies? Differently, what is it to be Black in space when antiblackness affords space recognition *as* space in the first place? Worse, when a ‘Black space’ becomes a ‘dead space’ that must and can only be ‘reanimated’ by antiblackness? If that ‘dead space’ is a ‘nowhere,’ and an antiblack space is a ‘living space,’ and so a ‘somewhere,’ then what even *is* a Black space, given the labyrinthine enclosure, the door, and the darkness that form the architecture containing

¹⁷⁴ A New York Times article by Adam Liptak published on 1 February 2016 entitled, “It’s Been 10 Years. Would Clarence Thomas Like to Add Anything,” addresses the fact that the real-life justice has maintained a “decade-long vow of silence” during oral arguments and his reasons for doing so. Which makes this parody especially absurd and funny, given what he ultimately and ironically says of Me at the end of the Prologue (24).

our structural position? To put this as Me and Beatty do: “So what exactly is *our [Black] thing?*”¹⁷⁵ Here, nowhere, can it ever be “ours?”

Beatty situates these questions in two distinct but overlapping frames: the external, which might be best broken down into the institutional, with respect to the juridical processes that seem to end up being the way to legitimize Dickens as a space, and to the communal, with respect to the need to compel LA’s denizens to take Dickens’s territory seriously, both of which depend on recognition from without; and the internal, which Beatty captures in a recurring question first asked by Me’s father, “Who am I? And how may I become myself?” Overlaying them both, Beatty reveals the inextricable entanglement between spatial arrangements and coordinates, and the assertion and definition of Black selfhood via identification with, or an emplotment in, space. Examining the way Beatty stages and characterizes this set of internal and external spatial relations through Me, specifically the strategies Me devises to accomplish his goal, will afford us insight into the limitations of a framework that draws internal identification and external recognition as its boundaries without reaching into the realms of the political-ontological. And doing so will also throw into crisis the ways we conceptualize space itself: what we take to be the defining features of a space; what we take to be essential to locating oneself, one’s community, and one’s being *in* space.

Dickens was founded in 1868, perhaps some time between the founding of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (later, Hampton University) and the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, as an agrarian community that sought to remain free of “Chinamen, Spanish of all shades, dialects, and hats, Frenchmen,

¹⁷⁵ Beatty, 288.

redheads, and unskilled Jews.” It is the “Last Bastion of Blackness,” a hollow bastion, not just vacated of the recognition of its space, but denied the spatial relations of having so much as a sibling/sister city Me is from the Farms, a “ten-square block section of Dickens” spanning “five-hundred acres” occupied by grown men and children riding dirt bikes through crowds of wandering livestock, and various series of failed and successful crops grown by Me and others. At different intervals and depending on the season and the movement of the Santa Ana winds, it Stanks, or it reeks of cow manure, weed smoke, slices of square and pyramidal watermelon, and satsuma oranges. There is a dank sweetness and a sweet dankness to the peculiar kind of nourishment this land provides the mostly black and brown folk that find themselves in the middle of this cultivated nowhere.

The Stank arbitrarily drifts into and looms over Dickens as a cosmic effluvia comprised of chemical pollutants, blackness, death, and decay. As Me describes it, the Stank is:

“an eye-burning, colorless miasma of sulfur and shit birthed in the Wilmington oil refineries and the Long Beach sewage treatment plant. Carried inland by the prevailing winds, the Stank gathers up a steamy pungency as the fumes combine with the stench of the lounge lizards returning home from partying in Newport Beach, drenched in sweat, tequila shooter runoff, and gallons of overapplied Drakkar Noir cologne. They say the Stank drops the crime rate by 90 percent, but when the smell slaps you awake at three in the morning, the first thing you want to do is kill Guy Laroche.”¹⁷⁶

The Stank is an unnatural sensory force with political-ontological scents, and physical and psychological effects. It operates invisibly, lacing the life-giving air Dickens’s

¹⁷⁶ Beatty, 113.

constituents breathe with a mix of white power and privilege embodied by the drunken, sweaty Newport Beach “lounge lizard;”¹⁷⁷ an aroma of sulfurous, gaseous byproducts of manufacturing refined black fuel—for transport, for commerce, or whatever other nefarious process, and perhaps produced by insidious and environmentally devastating California fracking projects with effects that disproportionately affect Black folk; a stench of shit from mismanaged and massive sewage treatment plant; and an unmistakable, musty, and as-advertised performative, faux-black hypermasculinity in the name and color of the bottle of Drakkar Noir cologne. Perhaps deadlier than even the massive methane leak in Aliso Canyon, it is a curious Stank, but no less violent for its peculiarity as it, at least for Me, awakens a desire to aim and express Black rage at the cologne’s creator, Guy Laroche, as a proxy for every white or nonblack contributor to the wretched Stank the wretched must breathe as if air.

The Stank might be a fundamental feature of being Black in space, the odorous marker borne by Black folk marked by Blackness in the labyrinthine mausoleum of the variously dead, deathly, and dying. Differently put, it might be the amalgamated smell of death, and all its attendant meanings for Black being. Following a two-day symposium entitled, “Black Thought in the Age of Terror,” held at the University of California, Irvine in 2006, Frank B. Wilderson III offered the closing comments to the brilliant work shared by the scholars in attendance.¹⁷⁸ Entitled, “Do I Stank, or was it already Stanky in Here?; or, Notes from an Impossible Negro,” the anecdotal sections of his comments provide insight into how we might name and decipher Me, Dickens, and Beatty’s Stank.

¹⁷⁷ Typically pejoratively refers to a lounge musician, but can also just refer to someone who idles at lounges and clubs in a general sense.

¹⁷⁸ These included: David Marriott; Fred Moten; Lindon Barrett (rest in power); Cheryl Harris; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson; Jared Sexton; Akinyele Umoja; and Frank Wilderson.

Wilderson recounts a ride to the airport in an airport shuttle with a South Asian driver, a White woman, and a White man, soon after the “ground at Ground Zero had stopped smoldering.”¹⁷⁹ They converse about Wilderson’s position at Cal, discuss the supposedly generalized injustice of the Patriot Act, Wilderson’s responses either spoken in the parody of a minstrel’s voice, or described narratively. Never do we hear precisely what he speaks as he speaks it; rather, we read it relationally, as if his very capacity to speak on and for himself, his beliefs, and his works has been mutilated by the nature of this confined, communal space ‘in mixed company.’ As a proxy for empathy and suffering, the White passengers prompt the South Asian driver to disparage the Patriot Act’s immorality by recounting the kind of suffering he and his family endured prior to entering this country, only to suffer continuously, if differently, because of legislation like the Patriot Act. After sharing and lamenting, the South Asian driver wonders aloud to everyone and no one in particular, “I don’t know why I ever brought my family here.” Unthinkingly, half-jokingly, and sorrowfully, Wilderson responds, “me neither,” and the space of the van shifts, smells of Frank’s stank.

Too comfortably, Wilderson responds operating on what he recognizes is a misreading of the space of the shuttle and the structural relation between the passengers. For a moment, in their discussion of the Patriot Act and a shared disdain for the supposed un-American nature of it, he allows himself to believe in a “common sense,” a connective thread of shared thought between beings of otherwise different structural positions, and a “common purpose,” a shared purpose. In both, he allows himself the dream of a common people-ness, a shared humanness, a collective “we”—“we are all people”—and a

¹⁷⁹ Wilderson, Frank. “Do I Stank, or was it already Stanky in Here?; or, Notes From an Impossible Negro,” 3.

flattening “just”—“just people”—a “multicultural consensus” indicative of some form of organic “community,” an “intrepid coalition of affect.”¹⁸⁰ The intoxicating, sweet scent of the fantasy of this kind of political-ontological flatness radiates from a momentary desire for and belief in not only the possibility of assimilation, but also in the capacity of the Black (Frank) to directly *facilitate* the realization of that possibility, *in spite of* the distinctions in structural position between itself and the nonblack “people” occupying this space. This fantasy becomes an unspoken, imagined truth wafting through the air of this enclosure, the transformative, invisible force transmuting the anti-Human deathliness of Wilderson’s Black position into Human life, comparable to the differential Human status (modified by gender, race, class and citizenship) of who he believed to be his compatriots. But once it is uttered aloud—“me neither”—once the fantasy is spoken into the air *as if*, the air clears, the fantasy’s aroma dissipates, and the way for the very pungent odor of the fact of his Blackness reaches the nostrils and lungs of the passengers and driver; an untimely truth prompting a rude awakening, and introducing an “uncommon” silence.¹⁸¹

This shift embodies the paradigmatic question of the title; does Frank stank, or was it already stanky in the airport shuttle—in the world beyond it? This is, in part, a version of a Fanonian question, indicative of a temporal problem and a set of spatial relations: was I a “dirty nigger” before the boy invoked it, was I Black and stanky before I spoke, or was that fact (re)introduced into the air anew in a way that is distinct from any prior version of it? Here? Everywhere? We pursued the temporal implications of Fanon’s narrative in the first chapter while dissecting Dana’s character development in Octavia

¹⁸⁰ Wilderson, 4.

¹⁸¹ Wilderson, 6.

Butler's *Kindred*, but Wilderson adds, or excavates, a different layer to the problem of the stench. Temporally, Wilderson is always already untimely, and as such, the answer appears to be both: the stank operates as a confirmation of what is already true; it is a removal of the perfumed, fantastic mask that had been carefully crafted by both Wilderson's Sambo dialogue and the favorable responses of the White and South Asian passengers. Once he speaks, once the fact of his Blackness becomes undeniable in this space; his Blackness becomes the muting, suffocating force that sutures together the real, unmasked, coalition of silence formed by what Wilderson would call the Master/Settlers (Whites) and their junior partner (the South Asian). The antiblackness lurking behind the varied structural positions occupied by each putrefies behind the lie of the common erected in the shuttle, and its revelation manifests in the "uncommon" silence, the shared holding, or withholding, of breath by the three nonblacks.

Spatially, if Frank stank Black before he entered the space—if it is an untimely fact of his deathly existence—and this stank is only made the odorous equivalent of "legible" to everyone he encounters in the space of the shuttle, then the answer to his titular question affirms not only the fact of his stank as it pollutes the civility of the shuttle's space, but also the fact of his stank in all spaces he enters and exits before and after his ride to the airport. Yes, it was already stanky in here, but only because it, and I, and Blackness is stanky already everywhere. Blackness operates as a kind of pollutant that, perhaps in the performative self-deprecation and degradation of appeasement with aspirations for assimilation (e.g. Frank's Sambo), might be masked or rendered odorless (like methane) in the name and fantasy of civility, here captured by the sonic space of a particular kind of utterance. But should it suffer some form of Fanonian exposure,

whether on the part of the Black or from an antagonistic encounter, the way its stench had already expanded to fill the volume of the space it occupies becomes undeniable. So much so that, in the end, given the opportunity to symbolically recant, to deny the emission of the stench, Frank straightens his posture, and affirms the stankiness of his stank. This time, the stank's smells distinctly of burning, "a cornfield up in flames," a conglomeration of, perhaps, singed hair, the smoldering feces of livestock, and disintegrating possibilities for nourishment; everything—the fantasy of coalition, the desire for and belief in assimilation—ablaze; the fire, this time.¹⁸²

Me and Beatty's Dickens, CA stank, for all the specificity of the components sutured to its geographical location, is a Blackness that is always already present. It waxes and wanes in odor; it stanks differently on different days, is at one moment in the text infuriating and interruptive, then at another wholly unbearable.¹⁸³ The stank operates as an omnipresent, "omnipotent"—in a quite different sense of potency—isolating force, singular to the nonexistent city of Dickens, a site at which its amalgamated smell and all its components might conglomerate, linger, become one with and inseparable from the air Dickens's denizens must breathe. On one particular morning, the stank becomes overwhelming. At the height of his efforts to wield segregation as a tool to "reanimate" Dickens, which is to say earn its recognition as a legitimate space within the larger space of the antiblack world, specifically soon after he sets his plan to segregate Dickens's Chaff Middle School in motion, the Stank rolls in with a particularly devastating force. Children in the Farms stumble and stagger to Me's plot of land in flight from its stench,

¹⁸² This is both a thinly veiled allusion to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and to a song by The Roots featuring John Legend called, "The Fire."

¹⁸³ Jared Sexton's essay and presentation, both entitled "Unbearable Blackness," are worth investigating here for their dissection of the many meanings of "unbearable."

some retching and vomiting on the elm tree, and some devouring peanut butter to keep their mouths and minds occupied.¹⁸⁴ All try to flee the World-War-I-mustard-gas-
esque¹⁸⁵ miasma as if seeking sanctuary from the omnipresent violence, both symbolic and intestinal, of this iteration of the Stank.

I am interested in what draws them to Me's farm. Me's plot of farmland locates the nexus of nourishment and subjugation, satiated life and social death, Stank and citrus, for Dickens's constituency. In this instance, "it was the smell [of satsuma oranges] that brung 'em." The "refreshing pungency of citrus" interrupts the violence of the Stank's omnipresence in a way that entices the children of the Farms to seek refuge near Me's satsuma tree. Satsuma citrus perfume holds a set of promises: a reprieve from, or at least a masking of, the overwhelming and unbearable Stank; and several entangled forms of nourishment, physical, psychic (relational), and political-ontological. Bound up with the satsuma's "perfectly balanced bittersweet flavor" is its restorative, protective magic. They, like Me's other cultivated fruit, promise health benefits akin to shiny hair, clear skin, ultra-white eyes, and a general state of relaxation;¹⁸⁶ perhaps, more specific to satsumas, wrinkle-free skin, a stronger immune system, decreased likelihood of cardiovascular disease, and relief from hypertension. They, not tangelos, clementines, or tangerines, remedy strained and broken kinship ties, romantic and otherwise; Marpessa, a Black womyn bus-driver who enters and exits an on-and-off relationship with Me, "face...slathered with Satsuma juice" dons an "irrepressible smile," and speaks joyously

¹⁸⁴ Beatty, 185-6.

¹⁸⁵ Beatty, 186. As he writes it, "I stood in the middle of Bernard Avenue, the kids beckoning me over, waving frantically like World War I soldiers urging a wounded comrage out of the mustard gas and back in to the relative safety of the trenches."

¹⁸⁶ Beatty, 184. Specifically, Me's papayas, kiwis, apples, and blueberries seem to provide these effects.

and affirmatively on the renewed status of their romantic partnership. Their scent on a photograph prevents Marpessa's younger brother, Stevie, from pulling the trigger. Their sweet (sixteen point eight percent sucrose)¹⁸⁷ juice "[removes] the nasty taste...of cooning," which sometimes tastes like "nasty...comic-relief watermelon,"¹⁸⁸ a way of masking the wound and pain of performatively 'selling out' on television and movie screens (and, by extension, in songs, dance, in government institutions, and so on). Satsuma juice, pulp, and rinds work as an elixir for physical ailments and hunger, romantic relationships, life-and-death situations, and affirmations of one's property status; they attract children, appease ex-lovers and their antagonistic (perhaps murderous) younger siblings, and shield children and adults from the overwhelming and unpredictable Stank of Blackness. They are, in every register, "what freedom smells like."¹⁸⁹

The congregation of children that gathers on Me's farm daily continues to devour the newly ripened satsuma oranges in order to escape the warlike terrorizing violence of the Stank, masking the bitterness and stankiness of Blackness with the sweet scent, food, and juice of a fantastic kind of freedom. The farm becomes a pocket universe, housing a reality in which Black children might taste and ingest a kind of life-giving *and* life-sustaining freedom from the symbolic, sensory, psychological, physical, and political-ontological violence comprising the stank of the life-denying, poisonous air they otherwise breathe. Perhaps, satsumas smell like the pristine containment of the airport shuttle, the kind of fantastic space, the kind of sanctuary, from the omnipresence and

¹⁸⁷ Beatty, 187. Beatty takes great care to detail the characteristics, cultivation, and quality measures of satsuma oranges.

¹⁸⁸ Beatty, 173.

¹⁸⁹ Beatty, 185.

omnipotence of Black stank that seems to make real a dream of the alchemy that turns fugitivity into freedom, freedom into life-giving nourishment and satisfaction, and life into joy and pleasure.

Satsuma oranges, like the “coalition of affect” of the airport shuttle, are the fruit borne by that dream behind the wall of sleep, and they too wake to the nightmarish question Farley poses: “What if we only *think* we escape the labyrinth?” To reframe the question, what if the Stank and the sweet scent of satsumas are so inextricably entangled, the latter not only not an escape, but also not the marker of the creation of a space, an elsewhere to the nowhere we occupy, where we might *be* and, so, *be free*—what if that entanglement reveals that the sweetness of the satsumas, and all the relational, physical, psychological, and political-ontological dreams they fulfill, to be similarly violent, which is to similarly bound up with Blackness and its attendant, deathly features?

Me buries Me’s father in his backyard. A ‘liberation psychologist’ so invested in dissecting what it meant to be Black that his son became his primary and most important experiment-cum-patient, Me’s father worked, often with the police, as Dickens’ “Nigger Whisperer,” a black community crisis manager who was called “whenever some nigger who’d ‘done lost they motherfucking mind’ needed to be talked down from a tree or freeway overpass precipice.”¹⁹⁰ Not unlike many Black folks who work within antiblack institutions like the system of policing,¹⁹¹ he inevitably faced and succumbed to the

¹⁹⁰ Beatty, 36.

¹⁹¹ Both barring and including actual wrongdoing these officers have done: Christopher Dorner, for example, and the notorious “burn that motherfucker alive” uttered by police who had cornered the former officer who’d allegedly murdered two people; Christopher Owens, a Black police officer of the Providence Police Department in Rhode Island who was beaten on his day off; Cariol Horne, who, after witnessing another officer choking a suspect and intervened on his behalf, was punched in the face—she had to have her

overwhelming and gratuitous antiblack force of that same institution. Having impatiently driven around a pair of officers mindlessly blocking an intersection while talking to a homeless woman and “yelled something,” Me’s father was stopped, lectured, and about to be issued a ticket when, quoting Bill Russell, he replied, “Either give me the ticket or the lecture, but you can’t give me both.” The officers “took exception, pulled their guns, [Me’s] dad ran like any sensible person would, they fired four shots in to his back and left him for dead in the intersection.”¹⁹² I recount this at length because it resonates with accounts like Nephi Arreguin’s, which opens this chapter, and other stories about what happens to Black folk of any age, class, gender expression, sexual identification, or disability, for driving while Black or fleeing, unarmed, from the promise of dishonorable death, like Sandra Bland, Sam DuBose, or Walter Scott. This real, quotidian, spectacular antiblack violence that contextualizes and gives meaning to the moment of the murder in Beatty’s novel also gives meaning to the corpse of Me’s father left in this moment’s wake.

When Me claims and protects this corpse and all its spectrally attendant meanings by burying it in the farmland he inherits from his father, that spectral and spectacular violence, that untimely deathliness, dissolves—decomposes—into and becomes one with

bridge replaced—fired, and denied her pension; and Howard Morgan, who, while off-duty in 2005, was stopped for driving the wrong direction down a one-way street, shot 28 times—23 in the back—tried twice for the crime of attempted murder—found guilty the second time—and thrown in prison for, as his attorney puts it, “driving while Black.” Morgan was released last year and is trying to have his conviction reversed. This list is not exhaustive by any stretch of the imagination. And while I have written repeatedly on the foundational unethicality of the police as an institution, and that through that I am always of the mind that reforming it is impossible, let alone from within, this list is indicative of the way Black officers/people who work or worked with the police are imperiled by their Blackness in ways they may deny, but which remain real and unavoidable.

¹⁹² Beatty, 50.

the very earth on which Me produces his crops. Black death, even in some infinitesimal way, fertilizes the fruit and cotton Me grows. Standing in the mud atop his father's grave, Me recalls attempting to plant an apple tree—his father loved apples—how that tree died almost immediately, and how the fruit tasted fertilized by, or at least in close proximity to, Black death: “Two days later it was dead. And the apples tasted like mentholated cigarettes, liver and onions, and cheap fucking rum.”¹⁹³ From atop the grave while encountering the rememory of the stank-infused apples, he observes the farm in its entirety: “Rows of fruit trees...Lemons. Apricots. Pomegranates. Plums. Satsumas. Figs. Pineapples. Avocados. The fields, which rotate from corn to wheat, then to Japanese rice...the greenhouse sits in the middle...backed by leafy processions of cabbage, lettuce, legumes, and cucumbers...grapes...tomatoes...cotton.”¹⁹⁴ The panoramic view projects outward from a vexed position, one that is untimely for its concurrence with the foundational and fertile memories of death, violence, bitterness and decay, and deathly for its position atop a corpse produced and haunted by quotidian, but spectacular, forms of antiblack police violence. “In the mud” mixed with decomposed matter directly from his father's corpse; the mud dark and fertile, perhaps the color of the flesh of the one dead below, and the one imperiled by death above; the mud melding the untimeliness of the rememory, the Me remembering, and the corpse violently vacated of life—from here, Me spies it all. It is *only* from this position *in the mud* that melds the space of death and decay with the space of life and growth, that the whole expanse of the farm becomes visible, legible in its totality. Black death fertilizes this totality, how Beatty envisions it, and how

¹⁹³ Beatty, 213.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Me witnesses it; it is only at this nexus that the full promise and complexity of the flourishing farm becomes clear.

The satsumas, too. The fruit the children devour cannot be disentangled from the Black death feeding the tree to whatever degree at its root; that there is no way to discern how much of the refuse produced by Me's father's corpse is directly responsible for the growth and development of the oranges (or any other fruit or crop). Initially, at first whiff bite, against the waking nightmare of a Blackness that cannot and does not stop stanking, this succulent dream plays on a desire for affirmation, protection, assimilation, and inclusion that momentarily masks the stanky and untimely fact of Blackness. It is enticing, this many-tiered, sweet and juicy trap of the pocket universe. But in actuality, and perhaps more devastatingly, the "pungency" of "freedom" and all its attendant sentiment, satiation, and affirmation, however fleeting or illusory, Stank just as much as, and of, untimely, deathly Blackness; if differently, that difference is not at the level of fundament, the level of the soil and the root. The "pocket universe" carved out of this violent miasmatic Blackness looming over all of Dickens, CA, becomes nothing more than a fantastic reiteration of that miasma made more palatable, more digestible, to those forced to bear its overwhelming force. In other words, like Blackness, bad dreams, and waking nightmares, satsumas stank of death, and the space of their creation and cultivation is made both possible and fertile only by the decay of Black flesh. Flight from the suffocating violence of nowhere, in the name of ascertaining fugitive nourishment or cultivating some semblance of freedom, is a lie.

If the answer to "So what exactly is *our thing*?", which is also, "What even is a Black space?", is something like, "a nowhere produced, at least in part, by a violent and

arbitrary erasure, shrouded in variously sweet, pungent, and foul iterations of a Stanky Blackness that is inescapable, where even life, growth and nourishment are made possible, at least in part, by Black death(liness), then the question of the possibility of making a way or where out of no way or nowhere collapses. Instead, what becomes clear is that all ways, untimely as it is, always Stank—that is, that there is not only no escape from the Stanky Blackness of our position in the labyrinth, but that even the large and small spaces we make and cultivate out of nowhere cannot be disentangled from that Stank. While we understand that dark matter condenses and congregates, giving framework for and form to the masses of ordinary matter, the large and small structures that dominate our conceptualizations of the universe and what it is to *be* in it, as we understand it now, it only imperceptibly and undetectably interacts with ordinary matter. Its effective invisibility and implicit effectuality is bound up with the way ordinary matter dominates the visible, interactive plane of the universe. While under erasure, while rendered spectral, this condensation of dark matter, of Blackness, named Dickens, CA remains structurally entangled with the antiblack world that transformed it into a Stanky, ghostly space.

Further, what Beatty suggests through Me and his farm’s entanglement with the Black death that variably fertilizes it crops is that spaces *for* or *of* Blackness, spaces where Black folk might congregate, be nourished, and dream of freedom, must also be sites that stage confrontations with this Stanky death that never really leaves. Black spaces must, both because they are structurally bound to do so and because the possibility for an “authentic upheaval”¹⁹⁵ inheres in doing so, wallow in the muddy contradictions,

¹⁹⁵ This is another reference to Fanon’s “zone of nonbeing;” see footnote 169.

confronting the series of knots binding life with death, cultivation with decay, nourishment with nausea and hunger. This appears to be the logic animating Me's plan to reanimate Dickens, to get it back on the map: painting white boundaries around the territory;¹⁹⁶ creating whites-only seats on local buses;¹⁹⁷ segregating Chaff Middle School; and unofficially reinstituting chattel slavery by honoring the wishes of Hominy Jenkins. While a superficially absurdist plan, on the surface purely interested in appealing to desires for inclusion and assimilation via juridical recognition, implicitly legitimizing the same juridical process that both erased Dickens in the first place and casually snatched life from his father's flesh, these strategies appear to hyperbolize the inextricability of this Black bastion from the labyrinth. His machinations for recognition attempt to elucidate and make unavoidable a confrontation between this looming question of Black space and what it might look like, or what might be its constitutive element or problem, and the way Black spaces, like condensations of dark matter, remain structurally bound up with the antiblack world and all its attendant, violent features, its constitutive matter.

The Sellout theorizes that Black folks occupy a space, a nowhere, constituted of unresolved and unresolvable contradictions—antagonisms—in which we must wallow. That Dickens quietly returns to recognized status in a weather report on the news one day, and that Me accomplishes his self-appointed mission, does not obscure the nature of Dickens as a hollow, stanky bastion of Blackness in the antiblack world. Rather, given that Me only comes to the understanding that he will never understand himself or precisely what animated his mission, and that its accomplishment occurs so

¹⁹⁶ Beatty, 99-100.

¹⁹⁷ Beatty, 127-128.

unceremoniously, this achievement of the novel's superficial goal might only affirm the importance of the theorization that undergirds—fertilizes—it.¹⁹⁸ Beatty leaves us lost, irresolute. To enter into the novel, to travel to Dickens, is, paraphrasing Marpessa, cross the threshold into nowhere, its irresolvable contradictions, and impossible entanglements; it is to enter into a forced, forceful, stanky reckoning with the knots binding Blackness, being, space, death, and life into something at once flourishing and dying.

The Last Bastion of Blackness is inextricable from the antiblack labyrinthine mausoleum in which we are structurally positioned. It is a land of the living dead, littered with crops that thrive in toxic air and promise nourishment with the sweet poison of dreams, dreams of elsewhere and escapes that only mean to jettison us deeper into the muck and mire of a confrontation for which we must “make way” in this “no way.”

III. *Lost; Here, We Go, Again*

Here we are, ‘in Dickens, CA,’ lost, dreaming of impossible sanctuaries, doors and exits, enrapt in the miasma of the dark. We worry about the nature of this space across the threshold, this site of contradictions; our concern is for the mechanics of our passage, for the structure framing our crossing, for where we’ve ended up now that we seek a reckoning with the door and the stanky Black deathliness looming over this space beyond the threshold. In our collective rememory, Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*¹⁹⁹ comes to mind. In it, we travel with her with and toward the figure of the

¹⁹⁸ The final chapter of the novel is entitled, “Closure,” and the lack thereof appears deliberate for the sake of the need to leave unanswered this lingering question about Blackness and space.

¹⁹⁹ We spend some time with her work in Chapter 1, “Black (in) Time: Untimely Blackness”

eponymous “door of no return.” The “door,” which “is really the door of *dreams*”²⁰⁰—“dream harder”—as a figure and concept, allows us entry to the labyrinthine dream for an exit; through its conceptualization, we might find our way to imagining and telling the stories that will takes us to the nowhere we want to go. Hoping to imaginatively make a way out of no way, and knowing that, though we fear what monsters might lurk in the dark, this has been about boldly going into the black (w)hole’s abyss, we do what we set out to do from the beginning. “We leap, we fall.”²⁰¹

The door calls for as much. It is, after all, “the place of the fall”—into deathliness, into untimeliness, into nonbeing, into Blackness. We must map the door’s characteristics; what it is and what it is not will frame what we might be able to do and where we might be able to go in our imaginations. Contrary to Aristodemou in Farley’s reading, it is *not* the marker of or access to a “beginning,” new or otherwise, not precisely. In discovering our untimeliness, we reckoned with what Brand calls “a tear in the world... a rupture in the quality of being... the end of traceable beginnings” (Brand, 5). Rather, it is where the connection between Blackness and meaningful “beginnings” dissolves. In “Black (in) Time,” we thought with Brand about how Slavery inaugurates a kind of time and temporal relation, *untime*, that violently severs the connection between us and being, and between us and the possibility and sense of origins. Following Brand’s thinking, “too much has been *made* of origins” (64, emphasis mine). The door, the tear, *seems* to locate the inaugural moment at which Blackness becomes antithetical to being, at which we might emplot ourselves at the beginning of the grand, antiblack narrative of modernity—of, really, time itself. In actuality, the door only marks the site at which we lost our

²⁰⁰ Brand, 28, emphasis mine.

²⁰¹ From Chapter 1, 28.

temporal and spatial bearings; it is the place the event of a metaphysical, physical, and imaginative “dislocation,”²⁰² in which our being, our flesh, and our imagination was “flung out and dispersed”²⁰³ from any sense of time and space. The door is not neatly framed, or pristinely crafted; it is not the beauty of an old or new point of entry. It is the jagged and distorted site memorializing our dislocation from the capacity to know where we are in time and in space, an indictment against the very possibility of “beginning” for Blacks. *A beginning, new beginnings, the “rebeginning”*—these possible destinations recede into the dark; they cease to mean what they might have.

If not exactly a point of beginning, but one of a fatal and untimely injury and entry, how might we orient ourselves in our imaginations to the door? Further, if “too much has been *made* of origins,” what’s been made of their dereliction? What can we make of the door, then? As always and like us, these questions are untimely, “too early, or too late.” We need(ed) more information. Brand’s text offers numerous descriptions of the door that might guide us toward the orientation we seek. The door exists triply: physically, psychically or imaginatively, and metaphysically or political-ontologically. The door of no return “is not mere physicality...it is a spiritual location...[and] also perhaps a psychic destination” (1), which is to say that “the door is a place, real, imaginary, and imagine...which exists or existed...the door of a million exits multiplied...a door which makes the *door* impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable” (19). The door’s existence bleeds across the planes of spatiality in which we find ourselves lost, but it is not even precisely a door. It is a site, a “location” plotted on the map of the antiblack world, a mark demarcating “the place of the fall” that

²⁰² Brand, 73.

²⁰³ Brand, 26.

happened and keeps on happening; it is also a “destination,” a psychic spatial place to which we might like to return, through which we might exit, or, at least, where we might end up. It is both singular, ‘*the* door of no return,’ and potentially infinite, the chimeric structure of “a million exits multiplied.” It is a door with its very door-ness thrown into disarray; it is, perhaps, not even really best thought of as a door.

The door and its threshold appear to open us to an unfamiliar and contradictory space. On the one hand, its opening “exists as an absence...a thing in fact which we do not know about,” the dereliction of our capacities to imagine and think ourselves toward its presence both because we cannot grasp its precise location, and because it is both present and absent, and if present, both singular and infinite—or, absent in the way that it exceeds thought. It is “really *the* door of dreams,”²⁰⁴ and yet it is also “*a* ‘vastness,’ indeed ‘beyond imagination’” (61, emphasis mine), the kind of spatial excess that exceeds the bounds of the dream, and strains and stresses the dreamer. Finding our way to the door, and so also being able to orient ourselves to its place, might require nothing more than the mind; better, the door might, in fact, best be thought of “*as* [Black] consciousness” itself, and reaching it, or finding oneself in its multiplicitous space is what it is to think or imagine while Black at all; the door of Black dreams, the door *as* Black imagination. And yet, from the outset, Brand reminds us that “there is as it says no way in; no return” (1). But maybe this is less a set of contradictions than it is a reflection of our imaginative capacity. Passage to and through the door requires nothing more than the imagination, but the violence marked by the door (it is the site of the fall) creates an imaginative set of barriers and limits that both ensure that we are unable to conceive the

²⁰⁴ Brand, 28.

door's totality, and also bar our imaginations access/entry should we ever impossibly find our way to it. So imagine or "dream harder," Aristodemou might suggest.

If, in the end, for all the qualities of its imaginative and spiritual (read: metaphysical, or political-ontological) structure, and its many permutations in the material world (e.g. the Castle at Elmira Brand visits, it both sets and exceeds our capacities to imagine what and where it is, our work might only be able to aim "at the truth" of what it is, and what it does and means to us. We might do well to track its presence in what it's touched, in its resonant effects on we who 'fell' through it; perhaps we hold the clues and the keys in the flesh, in the imagination, and in our very beings. The question might be, "How did we end up here?" Which, relative to the door and our initial passage over its threshold, is to ask, "How did that passage happen? What was the nature of our crossing?", and also, "What hieroglyphics or marks do we bear because of it?" These are questions aimed at characterizing our movement through the violent space of the "tear," and also at the traces of that movement we bear in our flesh, imagination, and being.

Of movement, we worry how what we understand to be the deathly and untimely force of enslavement propelled us through the door. To know the way this force moved and moves us would be to better understand our capacity to move and orient ourselves in relation to it. From the door, we are "flung out and dispersed,"²⁰⁵ catapulted through the portal of terror and domination (of enslavement), and into the darkness devoid of being, the void or "zone of nonbeing,"²⁰⁶ the Black space of the labyrinth. Being jettisoned,

²⁰⁵ Brand, 26.

²⁰⁶ See: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2. Here, he maps the zone of nonbeing; the passage in question appears in footnote 169.

being jettisoned, we suffer a violent “dislocation” (73) from the world, from time and space, from each other, and from ourselves; the labyrinth’s walls are the structural manifestation of this dislocation. Brand’s language is the language of violent breaking; the scatter and shatter of relations, orientations, and the capacity to create or maintain either in “dispersed;” the disturbance of the connections, or joints, between us and the constitutive features and forces of the world—namely time and space—in “dislocation.” Passage through the door appears to be a quick and haphazard spaghettification: we are “atomized” in our being, being forced through the violence of the door, as are the connections that might allow us to locate ourselves in relation to the door’s threshold, to each other, and to ourselves; the broken refuse of our flesh, imagination, and being “dispersed” across the “vastness” of the void; our “dislocation” inhibits if not prohibits our ability to locate ourselves, “here,” or anywhere beyond the door’s threshold. In our memories, we encounter Dana in the moment her arm is amputated by the wall, and hear her screams; we also remember Saidiya Hartman’s analysis of the amputated flesh; we reconsider Fanon’s sense of being dismembered.²⁰⁷ We find our many fragments scattered at the labyrinth’s entrance.

This is what lost us; this is why we are lost. Our lostness is the product of our subjection to a force that flung us out, shattered us, and scattered the pieces at the “entrance” to the dark and labyrinthine structure of terror and domination. What we have named “lostness” is not merely a condition characterized by our inability to orient ourselves to the structure as well as we might like, which is a problem created, in part, by

²⁰⁷ For the corresponding readings: Chapter 1 - “Black (in) Time” 48-50 (discussion of Dana’s arm); also, Chapter 2 - “Untimely Wor(l)ds in the Key of Love,” 25 (Hartman); 9-10 (Fanon).

the darkness encroaching our bodies and the walls around us, but also a state of being-in-space characterized by being broken at the level of our flesh, our imagination, and our being, the innumerable fragments dispersed. “Lost,” unable to find our way; “lost,” unable to recollect ourselves into the wholeness of singular beings or positions; “lost,” multiplied by the countless bits dislocated from one another; “lost,” it seems, irretrievably. This is to be “captive” to being lost: bound to our lostness by both the labyrinth’s structure, and by the state of being broken. Our broken flesh is of “captive bodies,” our bodies are the “(places) of captivity.” Our being and imaginations are bound up with, and bound to the shattered space of Black flesh. This entanglement is inextricable, to be “captured in one’s own body” is to be captured “in one’s own thoughts;” to be captured in the untimely shatter of the flesh is to be possessed by, so “out of possession of one’s own mind” as well.²⁰⁸ As Brand writes, “our cognitive schema is captivity:” the framework for the production of thought, and for the stimulation of the many gestures that would and do comprise our movement within the dark of the labyrinth, is our captivity to the force and effects of the door of no return. Our capacity to think and move, to imagine and orient ourselves, in the dark is captive to being broken, captive to breaking, broken, itself; we, our means, and our way, are lost.

The horror. This is the stuff of “bad dreams,” waking nightmares, Stank, Brand tells us, to which “the dreamer is captive,” and in which we are “overwhelmed by the spectre”—the living dead, or undead, or Beloved, presence—“of captivity” (29). We face the nightmarish reality of immeasurable and “perpetual retreats and recoveries,” the maneuvers necessitated by the perils of the structure with which we hope to contend.

²⁰⁸ Brand, 29.

When we do move, when we do think, we do so like Fanon, piecing together fragments as other selves—broken selves, the spaces of which break again and again in untimely encounters with old and new trauma; we move and think in the breaking wake of enslavement, against the overwhelming force of the door. Our body/flesh, imagination, and being, being broken open to all forms of gratuitous antiblack violence, are “constructed and occupied by other embodiments; in our dispossession, we are possessed by captivity’s specter. As Frank Wilderson writes in “Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom,” “violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture,”²⁰⁹ which for our purposes is to say, that our movement and thought are at least framed, if not wholly possessed, by this specter; our capacity to move and think in space emanates from and gestures back to the door, its force, and all it signifies.

There is no way out. None we can imagine or locate, but we knew this before we arrived at this conclusion; we’ve been in Dickens, and we have yet to leave. What Brand reveals is that in addition to being unable to locate some form of escape, engage in some form of meaningfully fugitive flight from the labyrinth, or cultivate a space for life and nourishment, we also remain unable to imagine or locate even the possibility of the wholeness of our own flesh, imaginations and beings. It is stanky where we are, and at least a portion of the particulate refuse comprising that Stank’s miasma is itself comprised of the particulate dark matter into which we shattered, scattered indiscriminately throughout nowhere. Following Farley’s method, retelling—reTelling, to clarify Le Guin’s import—the broken narratives of our beings, or the narratives that

²⁰⁹ Wilderson, 119.

broke, break, and will break our beings, would not redress the wounds, not repair the breaking. Brand discovers as much while reading J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, on the verge of falling asleep, and drifting into dream. Stunned by Coetzee's reductive characterization of Blacks as "acquisitive, predatory, rapine, and brutal," specifically by his deployment of the antiblack "trope of the Black rapist," Brand worries about the creative possibilities of myth, allegory and reality in relation to Blackness. She worries that they "fail as imaginative devices," that their structures crumble when they must describe, or map, the position of Black flesh, imagination, and being. She worries, as she falls asleep, that Farley's kind of revisionary myth- or allegory-making, or dreaming (harder), or "reTelling," will not take us to where we imagine we would fundamentally like to go: elsewhere; away; out. But doing so might take us deeper, might allow us to wallow, might afford us the place where we might confront Black deathliness' stank without retreat.

Having the sense that we have yet to meaningfully move from where we began, from where we were flung—Dickens, Flint, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Irvine, whatever the name borne by our coordinates in the labyrinth—what have we made and what do and can we make out of the nowhere where we are? Better, *how* do *we* inhabit this place, and what's at stake in embracing that inhabitation—in allowing ourselves to meld with mud and Stank?

We encounter one more guide, here, in our rememory. We recall that the framework for what we understand as "work," specifically Black creative work in the shadow of the door, in the dark of the labyrinth, "in the wake" of enslavement. Sharpe reminds us that the guiding question animating our work concerns the deathly nature of

our being broken and scattered into the void, of various being stricken by the incapacitating and mutilating force of death: “How do we who are doing work in black studies *tend to, care for, comfort, and defend* the dead, the dying, and those living lives consigned, in the aftermath of legal chattel slavery, to death that is always-imminent and immanent?”²¹⁰ Thought differently, given where we (fail to) find ourselves, this is in part a question of how we create spaces of mourning for the loss that characterizes and plagues our position, and for the variously lost in the dark. We think with Brand about the simultaneously meticulous and automatic (re)cognition that allows us to think the world and its structures into “solidity:”

There are ways of constructing the world—that is, of putting it together each morning, what it should look like piece by piece—and I don’t feel that I share this with the people in my small town. Each morning I think we wake up and open our eyes and set the particles of forms together—we make solidity with our eyes and with the matter in our brains... We collect each molecule summing them up into flesh or leaf or water or air. Before that everything is liquid, ubiquitous and mute. We accumulate information over our lives which brings various things into solidity, into view.²¹¹

We accumulate information as particulate dark matter in our imaginations, that information is framed by, rearranged and stored in relation to the cognitive schema grammatically structuring our thought, and we deploy that inflected information in order to construct the world(s) around us. Inextricably bound up with the captivity and breaking that characterize at least our structural spatial relationships, the world(s) we produce out of the silent liquidity are the product of an attempt to account for death spatially—to make a space for death, the dead, and the dying.

²¹⁰ Sharpe, 59-60. For a more extensive discussion of Sharpe’s essay, “Black Studies – In the Wake,” return to Chapter 2’s introductory section.

²¹¹ Brand, 140.

The careful “summation” of all that we know means to do the work with which Sharpe tasks us. Broken and broken open, we must and do make space for the fact of our lostness in the dark terror of the world’s labyrinthine structure. Our creations are not imaginative exits, escapes, or returns, but deeper descents into the dark, into nowhere. To make space “out of nowhere” is to sculpt what indomitably stands before us into an examination of this lostness, and into a space where we might actively honor and mourn the dead. In the labyrinthine tomb of the archive, we sit, think, and imagine in the space of death, with the dead spread out like dust all around us.

Out of the particulate refuse of our flesh, imagination, and beings, out of that illegible dark matter, and out of nowhere, we only work to make the necessary arrangements.²¹²

²¹² In a talk delivered today, 19 November 2015, from a forthcoming text tentatively titled *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman talked openly, in a kind of continuation of her work in “Venus in Two Acts,” about trying to imagine “other kinds of arrangements” within, with, and against the limits of the archive. Such a timely suggestion and venture; in the talk she considers the space of and afforded by the archive, and the intimate and experimental spaces of Black sociality that flash into and out of being. This is something other than resuscitation, and something other than an account of resistance and opposition; this is something/somewhere else. “Elsewhere” in “nowhere;” “elsewhere” from “nowhere.” We visit her presentation in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Dark and Black Matter

The Gravity of Being Together

“So much ‘we’ in your work.”
---Kiese Laymon²¹³

Swayed, pulled down, called, pulled apart, we’ve taken the leap, or made the best effort to lose our feet. Lose our way. Go nowhere, together. But a question that haunts this wake work theorizing at the level of its motivation, conceptualization, mobilization, direction and continued development lurks behind the collectivity and communality of an ever-present and repeatedly invoked—summoned, conjured—“we.” Who and what is “we?” What is “we” about—what is “we” invoking, conjuring, speaking to? When “I” speak to and with “we,” what am “I” doing, and to what ends? Especially “here”—in an academic work, in the academy, on the page, in the labyrinthine mausoleum of an antiblack structure—and especially “now”—the untimeliness of the intervention I am making, the untimeliness of these persistent questions, nearly out of time?

I ask out of a genuine, critical concern and interest for the aims of this project, renewed by Kiese’s comment. Every deliberate invocation of “black folk,” of “we,” of a

²¹³ Kiese told me this in a Facebook comment on a piece I’d written, entitled “Masa, Massa, Matter,” published at *Out of Nowhere*, a blog a friend, Nicholas Brady, and I cofounded a few years ago. The comment stuck with me, and the sort of vibrating, unsettled “we” in that claim—drove me to question notions of collectivity and togetherness in my work, both in how and for what reason I write, but also in the very content. I was searching for a way to frame this fourth chapter; I was struggling to find what I needed to say to ‘finish’ this daunting project. And here we are.

kind of singular audience, or of a singular(ly Black) section of an audience—they and “we” lead us to this point and place in the unthought, “unimaginable” (pace Sharpe) terrain of this dismembering exploration.

A destruction of wild cats. A crash of rhinoceroses. A murder of crows. Like Spillers, in search of a vocabulary against the symbolic order and the dynamics of naming and valuation it violently releases into the air we breathe to speak and think, what is the name and signification of a collectivity of the dead, the dying, and “we” who remain in proximity to—rather, *entangled with* death? Differently, as our rememories force before us the interminable silence of Dionne Brand’s grandfather when asked about the matter of origins and names—if those names and our names and this name *structurally* cease to matter (though they matter to “us”)—how do we describe what it is to collectively occupy this position? How might “we” describe the consequences of reframing black temporality as untimeliness, and black space as nowhere, on the notion of our being “here,” “now,” “together?” Essentially, what is it to be Black in time—untimely—here—nowhere—together?

I understand this to be a question of and with gravity, so we might begin here. Leaping into the black hole means negotiating gravity’s tidal forces—inasmuch as a swimmer might ‘negotiate’ a cataclysmic maelstrom—as they play out—inasmuch as ‘playing out’ denotes ‘atomization’ or ‘spaghettificaton’—on our imaginations, at the level of our beings, and, irreducibly, in the flesh. The catastrophic flow and force of gravity as it reveals the dramatic warp of the spacetime beyond the event horizon of the black hole interacts with “we” as “we” spaghettify toward singularity. Worried about the arrangements of this process, “we” concern ourselves with the dark matter of what keeps

these distinct, sometimes distant, scrambled clouds of particulate black matter—the political ontological refuse produced by our endless subjection to and countless encounters with unimaginable, gratuitous, and so antiblack, violence—“we” do well to concern ourselves with the mechanics of this force that binds and breaks “we” at once. That gives “we” form, however disarticulated, and meaning, however immaterial or meaningless.

Yesterday, 11 February 2016, researchers at the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) announced the detection of gravitational waves for the first time. Gravitational waves were predicted a century ago as one of the consequences of Einstein’s theory of General Relativity. From it, his geometric theory of gravity attends to the way matter interacts with the universe: a mass—say, a planet or a star, or some configuration of matter—placed in a region of space will produce a distortion in the fabric of spacetime, which, in the presence of mass, is curved; this distortion of spacetime, generally speaking, is gravity, and what might be thought of as “intrinsic gravity,” gravity as it operates independent of phenomenological problems/constraints, is bound up with the curvature of spacetime’s geometry. Different from what might most helpfully be called “relative gravity,”²¹⁴ which characterizes most of the gravity we experience on earth, “intrinsic gravity...manifests itself in tidal forces.” This distortion in spacetime and its manifestation “makes matter move in certain ways,” and that movement shifts that matter’s configuration “as the sources of gravity change

²¹⁴ Both terms, “intrinsic gravity” and “relative gravity” are taken from an explanation of Einstein’s theory in relation to gravity on *Einstein Online* in a post by Markus Pössel entitled, “Gravity: From Weightlessness to Curvature.” This is an extremely useful, condensed explanation of what we’ll be thinking through here, and also helps to contextualize the recent, groundbreaking detection of gravitational waves by the LIGO.

their locations.” This change precipitates in (another) change in spacetime’s geometry, which causes the matter to move in a different way, and with the matter moving differently, spacetime’s geometry distorts again—“an endless dance” between matter and the universe.

Gravitational waves “are periodic distortions of space-time” that “move at the speed of light” and “can exist at any wavelength.”²¹⁵ Accelerated masses in space emit gravitational waves as they continuously distort spacetime by moving through it. The sophisticated equipment of LIGO detected gravitational waves emitted by one of the most violent processes known to the universe: the collision and merger of two massive black holes, which, in this case, were each approximately 30 times more massive than our sun. Over 1 billion light-years from earth, the collision sent ripples through the fabric of spacetime strong enough for the interferometer²¹⁶ to detect, providing passionately sought after confirmation of one of the most elusive consequences of Einstein’s groundbreaking theory. One only need read one of the countless articles written by physicists in the wake of the announcement; the kind of glowing exuberance limning the lines of each piece echoes the brief, simple, and explosive excitement in LIGO executive director Dave Reitz’s announcement of the discovery, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we have detected gravitational waves. We did it.”

²¹⁵ From BackRe(Action), a blog dedicated to research in Physics, headed by physicists Sabine Hossenfelder and Stefan Scherer. This particular post, written by Hossenfelder and entitled, “Everything you need to know about gravitational waves,” was dedicated to explaining the countless headlines and news articles covering the discovery made by LIGO. See also, footnote 72 of Chapter 1 for reference.

²¹⁶ For more information on how this equipment originated, and also how and why it works, see: “Gravitational Wave Detectors: How They Work” by Markus Pössel, which also has links to more detailed information and explanations; and, also, “Fabry-Pérot Interferometer,” which can be found at Starkeffects.com.

One piece in particular, written for the New York Times by Lawrence M. Krauss, and entitled, “Finding Beauty in the Darkness,” bore the tagline: “Einstein’s ‘ripples’ should matter to everyone—not just physicists.” Given that, in Chapter 3, we have considered how Lisa Randall wields her ‘dark matter is like Black people’ analogy in a context in which Physics seems deliberately unconcerned with the marginalization of Black people, especially Black womyn, in its own laboratories, departments and research projects, and also elsewhere in the universe with which the field remains fascinated, I worry about “everyone” and what “should matter” in Krauss’s tagline as much as I worry about “we.” He clarifies further:

Every child has wondered at some time where we came from and how we got here. That we can try and answer such questions by building devices like LIGO to peer out into the cosmos stands as a testament to the persistent curiosity and ingenuity of humankind — the qualities that we should most celebrate about being human.²¹⁷

Gravitational waves “should matter” at the level of the Human in a political-ontological way. Gravitational waves, their implications for the creation of new research opportunities in a new field of astronomy, for how “we” understand the universe, “where *we* came from and how *we* got here,” and for how “*we*” approach the fundamental, physical and philosophical questions that appear to concern ‘us,’ are a Human matter, and “*we* should celebrate” the fact that “we” are inquisitive enough to recognize this. This is a “we” of a paradigmatically different register than that which concerns “us” here, but the bifurcation is striking, if at all unsurprising. For being, for Humans, for being Human, gravitational waves *should matter*; what then, for “we” who occupy this untimely position, “we” who are nowhere—double emphasis on “are”—which is to say, for “we”

²¹⁷ Krauss, Lawrence M. “Finding Beauty in the Darkness,” *The New York Times*, SR3.

who do not *be*, who are not *Human*, and who are, in fact, positioned as the constitutive antithesis to not only the categories, but to the founding logics—the “symbolic order”—that gives them meaning, force, power?

How might “we” whose togetherness in this spacetime, in this untimely, labyrinthine, stanky mausoleum, this mass, structural grave, darkly matters—is like, or *is* dark matter—consider this Human matter, these gravitational waves? What can they tell us about what it is to be *nonbeings*, be *antihuman*, to *not be*, together? More precisely, what insight can the behavior of gravitational waves and the characteristics of the force of gravity, at least at the level of analogue and metaphor, offer this “we” into what it is to congregate as the universe’s dark matter? Better, what can they tell “us” about the nature of the grave—deathly—togetherness at the foundation of this “we” for whom I write this project?

“We” must carefully consider the constitutive features and characteristics—the “physics,” or at least the mechanics—of how “we” inhabit and move deeper into this spacetime of contradictions, of how we do the unimaginable wake work of confronting these contradictions as they are, of how this inhabitation and movement both warp the fabric of the arrangements between “us,” and of how that collective inhabitation and movement interact with the overwhelming, crushing, spaghettifying tidal forces of the gravity of our Black (w)hole. Tina Mabry’s autobiographical film, *Mississippi Damned*, and Taiye Selasi’s novel, *Ghana Must Go*, not only meditate on and theorize about what it is to make space for direct confrontations and conversations with the contradictory presences of death, the dead, and the variously dying, but also offer devastating insight into the possibilities denied and afforded by those confrontations and conversations in

this kind of space. Further, both pieces task us with seriously considering the kinds of violence that propagate intramurally through our nowhere, the iterations of destructive, warping force that play out between Black folk in ways that shatter the possibility of dealing with the structural death that shatters “us” all in both very similar, and very different ways. Both Mabry’s and Selasi’s pieces clarify the stakes, fragility, and necessity of this “we” and of performing this confrontational wake work, and both pieces, themselves, attempt to do this work—rather, both pieces work to make filmic and textual space out of the dark matter(s) of this nowhere for “us” to bear witness to what it might and might not be, to not *be*, together.

So “together,” then, wholly devoted and broken, down the Black rabbit (w)hole we go.

I. *Damned, All of “Us”*

“Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there”
---Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam”

“If “slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship,” it is in part because under slavery, system and sign, *lexico-legal acts of transubstantiation* occur in which the blood *becomes* property (with all of the rights inherent in the use and enjoyment of property) in one direction and kin in another.”
---Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*²¹⁸

“We” is fraught with violence and trauma. “We” is imperiled from within and without. From within, “we” struggles with the sometimes fatal identifications with and

²¹⁸ Sharpe, Christina. *Monstrous Intimacies*, Location 420-421. Note: this is from the Kindle edition, as will be all future citations.

performances of the violent sexist, queerphobic, transphobic, and ableist ideologies and practices of the antiblack world, which is further compounded by the disavowal of the legitimacy, the *actuality*—to draw from Spillers’s “actual violence”—of these kinds of violence, and of the trauma ceaselessly endured the victims subjected to it. From without, “we” remains in a constant state of subjection to the terrorizing, dominating forces, institutions, and agents of the antiblack world; from without, “we” is embattled, enmeshed in the ceaselessness of creative, imaginative, organized, disorderly, and always real warfare waged at every level of being and identification. “We” “all gonna get it,” sings Nina Simone: “get it,” as in, face some form of the fact of the deathliness that stalks and positions “all” of “us,” albeit in ways varied by way of gender expression and identification, sexuality, (dis)ability, and class—untimely social death captures the fundament, and the edifice molded around this framework, the way the flesh, and so what is violently inscribed into that flesh, wraps around the skeletal frame of bones and innards, influences the particular experience of dying; “get it,” as in “gettin’ it,” as in taking hold of it, the actuality of this peril of “we,” move with it, wholly, without reservation; and “get it,” as in contemplate it, to bear witness to it, to examine every facet, and to at least work and aspire to understand, or grasp it, for all that it means and does to ensure that the possibilities of “we” remain unattainable. “We” is complex, dangerous, in danger, perhaps impossible. “We” is a problem for thought. “We” must be taken seriously.

Tina Mabry’s *Mississippi Damned* takes this problem of “we” seriously, spills its mess onscreen. Making use and work of the material of her own life, she and cinematographer Bradford Young narratively and filmically rend open a space to wallow

in the disturbing contradictions of “we;” she lays these contradictions bare, and allows “us” to bear witness to what is, foundationally, a meditation on the possibilities and problems of intramural intimacy. The film orbits the narrative of Kari Peterson and her immediate and extended family, tracking their lives in two acts, both set in Mississippi, the first in 1986, and the second twelve years later in 1998. It tracks generational and personal traumas as they overlap and intersect among each of the family members whose difficult, traumatic, and loving relationships and lives become inextricable from each other because of, both, their geographic proximity to one another, and their sense of obligation to one another by way of a blood-bound, sometimes bloody, kinship. While Kari’s story weaves together the complex familial tapestry Mabry unfurls, describing the many entangled stories of her friends and family as peripheral or secondary would be inaccurate. Rather, the kinds of sexual violence, abuse, betrayal, tenderness, and sacrifice all of the films characters endure and display, as well as the kinds of trauma and care that ripple outward from them, tether each character to the next. In *Mississippi Damned*, the state of kinship, the nature of “we,” is thick, messy, complex, disturbing, imperiled, and sick, and Mabry compels us to bear witness to how it plays out.

Sexual violence and psychological and physical abuse characterize the relationships across gender and generation in the film. “We” will attempt to bear unflinching witness to each, paying particularly close attention to scenes of intramural subjection that are key not only to the advancement of the narrative and of the development of each character, but also to the way these kinship relations mutate and dissolve in untimely ways. In 1986, we are introduced to what appear to be ongoing forms of sexual violence and abuse; the way Mabry suggests, via the routine, casual,

almost expected ways these scenes play out, that these problems are “ongoing” offers us insight into how kinship, here, is inextricably bound up with the forms of violence that contradict its own existence.

“We” meet Sammy Stone, cousin to Kari and her sister, Leigh, and a talented, perhaps prodigious basketball player. Though he appears much younger and smaller than the nameless teammates Mabry surrounds him with in his practice and game-time scenes—he is a sophomore on a presumably predominately senior squad—his skill is undeniable, making him a prospect for scouts and recruiters seeking new, promising talent. As his white, male coach exclaims during practice after a poor display of his team’s defense at around thirteen minutes into the film, “He’s making you all look like shit. Like a stinking pile of shit!”—or, if rememory serves us, like less than (horse) shit. In the second chapter, “Untimely Wor(l)ds in the Key of Love,” we think through the temporal registers and theorizations of Toni Morrison as they emerge in her Nobel Prize Lecture, delivered in 1992. In the demands of the petulant youths come to prove the old, blind, wise daughter of slaves to be a fraud, they include a scene I’ve read elsewhere²¹⁹ as indicating a temporal collapse at the site of (re)memory between slave and self, past and present. They describe a set of spatial relations that arranges slaves shivering in the snow after a long trek outside a warm inn into which the slavers enter, and outside of which their horse, to which the slaves are tethered, defecates into the snow:

Tell us about ships turned away from shorelines at Easter,
placenta in a field. Tell us about a wagonload of slaves,
how they sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable

²¹⁹ When I was invited to teach a course at Hunter College, I lectured about both Toni Morrison’s novel, *Home*, which had just come out at the time, and her Nobel Prize Lecture. I delivered a lecture on what would be an early iteration of the ideas that frame and found this whole project, so the opportunity proved to be formative.

from the falling snow. How they knew from the hunch of the nearest shoulder that the next stop would be their last. How, with hands prayered in their sex, they thought of heat, then sun. Lifting their faces as though it was there for the taking. Turning as though there for the taking. They stop at an inn. The driver and his mate go in with the lamp leaving them humming in the dark. The horse's void steams into the snow beneath its hooves and its hiss and melt are the envy of the freezing slaves.²²⁰

That shit, that void, left by the horse becomes the envy of the cold slaves as it steams in the snow; not the men in the inn, not the horse itself, but the steaming void. These arrangements, I argue, position the slaves as “aspring to be *even* the shit,” and not even attempting to do the impossible, which would be to dream of being as ambivalent or satisfied as the horse, or as warm and welcome and alive as their captors. *Not even shit.*

When witnessing this small exchange between White/Coach/Master, Sammy, and his teammates—the kind of attractive chattel meant to draw, off-screen and incidental to the plot as it might be, funding and interest from other Whites/Coaches/Masters and donors, and the kind of cultural legitimacy that comes with performative success in sports—this passing commentary conjures up untimely imbrications of Slaveness with Blackness and Shitness, or, pursuing what Beatty and Me taught us, Stankyness. It’s a quick scene, perhaps incidental to the importance of this scene in establishing an important plot-point, but unlikely accidental with regard to the foundational questions and problems the film presents. The scene means to establish that Sammy, while talented, and while ‘more than shit’ than his “pile of shit,” or ‘ain’t even shit’ teammates, lacks, or at least struggles with, financial barriers to his budding basketball career. He needs fifty dollars to pay for a team trip, and appears to lack access to acquiring the funds. What

²²⁰ Morrison, “Nobel Prize Lecture,” 2.

Mabry conjures here is an untimely, temporal problem: the subtle persistence of a Master/Coach-Slave/Shit dynamic between Black athletes and White coaches (and off-screen recruiters and scouts) forms the grammar by which this problem at the level of Sammy's plot can be articulated onscreen.

The problem of Sammy's problem comes to the fore while he shoots a crucial pair of free-throws at the end of the team's next game. Between the first and the second, Pumpkin, a family friend or older, distant relative, enters the gym. Sammy spots him, and once eye contact reciprocates the focus of his gaze, Pumpkin nods solemnly, a slight smirk printed on his face. The faces of the crowd, earlier in the scene shown with the full clarity of their joy and excitement at the nearness of another victory, fade, recede; the gym and the game, but for the indiscriminateness of the noise they generate, blur in time with the gesture, while Pumpkin occupies the screen, taking up its space almost fully, front and center. When the shot returns to Sammy, he looks away, the crowd behind him still faded, partially obscured by some player's arm blocking—boxing out—the scene. Because of the arm and the blur of everything, Sammy occupies a distorted, trapezoidal left side of the screen, eyes downcast, the slightest of hesitations before he refocuses himself on the task at hand (he must make this final free-throw), just before the arm completely obscures him for a moment. In the wake of making the shot, in the midst of celebration, as Sammy's teammates and peers raise him up in a slow-motion shot superficially meant to capture the moment of happiness in victory, Sammy's eyes dart toward Pumpkin, who while lurking off-screen, remains the absent center of Sammy's celebratory moment.

When the scene shifts from the bright, yellow-tinted gym, littered with reds, blacks, golds, and blues of the jerseys, the richness of glistening Black skin, rife with movement and noise, to the flattening, stifling darkness of the car-ride home, “we” feel prepared to engage what silence haunted the gaze, the hesitation, and the glance of the game. Everything is whispers here, between Pumpkin, who is driving, and Sammy, stiff and uncomfortable—unwilling, it seems—passenger to Pumpkin’s machinations. The blackness of the frame reduces faces, shot in alternating profile, to outlines and vague expressions, magnifying the silence of Sammy’s responses to what Pumpkin suspends in the air but leaves mostly unspoken or coded: Pumpkin offers to pay for Sammy’s trip in return for fellatio. Pumpkin’s gaze becomes predatory, cast half in and half out of the dark. “We” remember the gaze, the nod, the glance, and the discomfort of the basketball game. And “we” are made to recall a moment in the opening scenes of the film, during a card game between many of the adults who will be central to the film, during which Sammy enters, hungry. Delores, Kari’s mother and his aunt, offers him money to pick up something from the store; seeing the opening, Pumpkin offers Sammy money as well, leaning over as he does here. In that instance, Sammy refuses, eyes downcast in discomfort, perhaps shame, given what “we” know now, again relegated to the left side of the screen, the right half obscured by Pumpkin’s blurred, but unavoidably interruptive form.

Here, Sammy maintains his silence, continuing to refuse Pumpkin’s gaze, defiant. It is only when Pumpkin asserts that Sammy’s absent father would not “be able to pick [him] out of a lineup,” and that he is merely trying to “help [Sammy] out,” that Sammy relents, taking the money. Pumpkin distorts what it means to “help,” or, put differently, to

“take care,” warping his own perverse desire for Sammy with specters of his father’s absence and state violence—as if to imply, by way of what “we” understand to be the profound psychological pain and strain Sammy experiences because his basketball aspirations (his “hoop dreams”) remain imperiled and his belief in, or desire for, his/a father is thrown into disarray, that without this kind of “help,” he might face the juridical, antiblack violence of the police—and with a spectral kind of interest, belief, and care. The distended mathematics of this exchange, whereby sexual trauma and financial need trades for sexual pleasure, filmically overlay violence with sex, trauma and horror with pleasure and care—however illegitimate—all of it, mixed up in the blackness of the scene. As it all pools together and putrefies as a perverted and traumatic dependence, masked by Sammy’s need for what ends up being fallacious—fellatious?—form of kinship, it reveals what is a set of what Christina Sharpe might call “monstrous intimacies,” between trust, violence, trauma, care, need, aspiration, desperation, shame, and pleasure.

In her brilliant 2010 text, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe offers profound insight into the “monstrous intimacies” that characterize post-slavery subject formation, and that hold terrible implications for both Black temporality and for the stakes and possibilities of Black kinship when the nature of our structural positions remain intimately bound up with the political-juridical and sexual violence of enslavement. “We” will jump in and out of her text. But initially of import, in laying foundations for how “we” might approach the stories of the film’s remaining characters, is the way Sharpe grabs hold of the tether between kinship and how Black

folk perform it, the unimaginable violence of slavery, and the complex, if disturbing, overlaying of horror, shame, and pleasure *as* intimacy's almost constitutive features.

“We” begin with Sharpe’s elaboration of an epigraph that introduces her first chapter, which is the epigraph for this section of the chapter. Introducing what will be her reading of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, which is the focus of the first half of this project’s first chapter, Sharpe compels us to attend to the way slavery founds the ways we might begin to even consider Black kinship, its mechanics, and its properties. As Sharpe deciphers the complex compulsions and relations transmitted and maintained between the *Corregidora* womyn across generations, she unpacks how the “instrumentalization of sexuality” itself by slave owners like Senator James Henry Hammond “in the making of the black family as property and the white family as kin.”²²¹ Black kinship, like “slave narrative,” becomes oxymoronic,²²² as the coherence of the term, kinship/kin, to “we” subject to routine antiblack (sexual) violence, “we” occupying the structural position of property, dissolves: as Spillers writes, “‘kinship’ loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations.*”²²³ What is a problem emergent in the violence of the Master/Slave dynamic, here between Hammond and the Johnsons, and between *Corregidora* and the womyn he raped and procreated, invades Slave/Black relationality, such that the many iterations of gratuitous and sexual violence “are mapped onto the bodies of the formerly enslaved and their post-slavery generations and manifest as hysterical symptoms, as ways of making the body speak.”²²⁴ Slavery and all its attendant and unimaginable terror and domination, as “the ghost in the machine of

²²¹ Sharpe, Location 516.

²²² See: Footnote 31, Chapter 1: Black (in) Time.

²²³ Spillers, quoted in Sharpe, Location 515.

²²⁴ Sharpe, Location 578.

kinship,” forms the “grammar and ghosts” of not only the ways the Corregidora womyn bear witness, through practiced memory, to slavery and its untimely trauma, but also the ways they define and practice their kinship with one another, and with the men in their lives.

The ghost of enslavement, the multifarious “afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment,” litters the arrangements of bodies, practices, and spaces in the scenes of Mabry’s film: the crushing impoverishment experienced by everyone in the film; the limited access to affordable and quality healthcare, embodied by Anna, sick with diabetes, and Delores, devastated by lung or breast cancer; the limited access to education, captured by repeated reference to Kari’s collegiate prospects; the incarceration of Charlie, Kari’s aunt and Sammy’s mother, midway through the film. In all, we glimpse the ways slavery’s enduring legacy in rural Mississippi variably and multiply manifests in and around the lives of the Black folk who dwell within and beyond the frames of the film. What Sharpe’s analysis of the possession of kinship by the ghost of slavery demands is an attention to the ways this grammatical or structural haunting “maps onto,” or, more messily, becomes entangled with, the relational possibilities and problems of Black folk in and beyond the film.

She offers us a more precise lens through which to consider what “we” witness in Sammy’s interactions with his coach and with Pumpkin. How the Stank of the imbrication of Blackness and being *less or more* than shit, *being* bound up with shit acts as the grammar to his coach’s interaction with Sammy and his teammates. How Sammy’s poverty and the absent kinship of his unseen father hang in and *as* the encroaching

blackness of the scene in the car; how they form particulate effluvia of the dense and stanky ‘dark matter’ that both demands our focused attention, but obscures our view. Pumpkin’s material sexual manipulation and coercion of Sammy, as well as Sammy’s prospects for success in an antiblack world and the desperation coded in his submission to that manipulation and coercion, are haunted by a structural violence that invades and mutates whatever relation might have otherwise connected the two; what might have been filial becomes predatory. Worse, “filial” and “predatory” overlay, such that the kind of care and attentiveness that characterize the former meld with, melt into, the violence and horror characteristic of the latter, and the two become inextricable; perhaps, interchangeable—one and the same. This is a monstrous intimacy. And as this mutagenic invasion of kinship transmits across the generations of womyn in Corregidora, this predation transfers from Pumpkin to Sammy in a way that maintains and *refines* the monstrousness of this intimacy between horror and attentiveness, violence and care; violence in place of care, *as* care; horror in place of attentiveness, *as* attentiveness.

I linger here, as Mabry does, on Sammy’s downcast eyes, trying to wade through the mess of violent misogynoir practiced by the Black men in the film, typically in relation to the Black womyn with whom they engage, romantically or otherwise. Sammy’s trauma provides us a disturbing, speculative template by which we might contextualize, without rationalization, the violence the Black men of the film subject Black womyn to. For example, at soon after 24 minutes into the film (around the 24:10 mark), we learn that Tyrone, Anna’s husband, cannot secure a job, at one point invoking the futility of trying to appeal to presumably white men doing the hiring. Seated in the dimly lit living room close to Anna, he laments an institutional iteration of the structural ghost of enslavement,

claiming, “them racist motherfuckers don’t give a shit” about his qualifications or experience, “they just don’t want no niggas up in their union—that’s what it is.” Anna reveals she’s told Junior, Kari’s father, in an attempt to secure him work; she tries to transmute hopelessness into hope, here, but the gesture maps strangely onto her movement in the frame. From seated next to him with her hand placed gently on his knee before revealing what’s she’s done, she rises and moves across the room, to the edge of the frame, stretching it, pulling it away from Tyrone. What is a gesture couched in care and tenderness manifests performatively as a creation of distance rather than a collapse of it, a moving closer. The chasm between them, the way the camera must now pan across their divide rather than capture them in the frame they shared, suggests or preempts an imminent danger. The distance had to increase; the tenderness means to close it; the dysjunction creates the sense that something has been troubled, here, some sedimentary problem unsettled by way of flesh and speech, of a body in motion, a body speaking.

Tyrone’s shame at his struggle being common knowledge, of himself being exposed as jobless, helpless against a system in which discriminatory hiring practices routinely ignore the experience and talent of Black folk, sends him into a fit of rage. It is not instant; it is a subtle, dark and smoldering transformation. The camera, focused on him and the vacated seat next to him, catches the change in his posture and expression by way of shifting shadows. The way the darkness of his side of the living room deepens the contortions of his face before it nearly swallows them whole, but for the seething fury in his eyes; he becomes all eyes, in this moment, a synecdochal reduction or condensation of his emotion in the subtle widening of his eyes made clearer, more emphatic, through the way the darkness of the room plays out in the flesh. As he rises, as he begins to close

the distance between himself and Anna, “we” know that the transmutation is complete: shame and hopelessness have turned over, inverted into rage and violence. “We” are told, then, before he reaches her what he might do, so that his hand on her neck becomes a confirmation, jarring as it might be. His face left mostly off-screen, just the corner of his jaw and a portion of his back occluding the left side of the frame, “we” can only feel her terror in this moment, the terror that laces her continued elaboration of what was meant to be a caring gesture. Each shot repositions Anna in relation to the shadows that cross Tyrone’s face; each shot maintains the shadow of his expression. The fearful smile, the unspoken “I will comply,” to which Anna’s presence has been reduced, does not ward off the despicable insult Tyrone leaves her with—“sometimes, I swear, I must have married the *stupidest* bitch in creation”—as terror and care violently collapse into one another, in the (her) flesh.

“We” cannot make assumptions about Tyrone’s past that position his narrative in direct relation the something like that of Sammy; “we” do not make the imaginative leap to question Tyrone’s relation to structural antiblack violence in order to read his transmission of whatever violent experiences into his relationship with Anna. What Sammy’s and Tyrone’s very performatively and personally distinct narratives share is how the monstrousness of the intimacy with forms of sexual and structural antiblack violence condenses in their behavior in ways that transmit or reify that violence in terrorizing ways for the Black womyn with whom they interact. With Tyrone, his psychological and later physical abuse of Anna,²²⁵ and how Sammy, as a teenage boy, rapes Kari at the end of the 1986 portion of the film, and carries on this behavior with his

²²⁵ In the 1998 portion of the film, at about the 83-minute mark, Tyrone physically assaults Anna for defending Kari from him.

child's babysitter in the 1998 portion of the film. In both instances, the Black men play conduit for the terrible and unimaginable kinds of structural violence that they experience, transmitting trauma from one body to another, and transposing rage and violence onto care and kinship such that they become inseparable. This condensation of traumatic, of dark, matter collapses, and the movement of its mass through space warps the fabric of the connections of "we," troubles it, imperils it, threatens it with rape and death, invasively unmakes it and, so, vacates it of its meaning.

For all the violence of the Black men in their interactions with Black womyn in the film, and the ways that this violence darkens the metaphorical application of gravity, here, such that gravitational waves become the intimacy between trauma and care, and that intimacy ripples through the fabric of intramurality or kinship is disturbed by the movement of the speaking and gesticulating bodies arranged with one another, Mabry offers a glimpse into what "we" might look like in resistance to these waves, and to the tidal forces of gravity that threaten to overwhelm and dismember "us." The womyn of the film—Aunt Anna, Kari, Charlie, Delores, and Alice, the family elder—collectively form an intimate space of care and sacrifice that allows us to glimpse what "we" might be, should it resist both the forms of structural antiblack violence that are at least political-ontologically analogous to that which traumatizes and shames the Black men of the film, and the violent misogynoir these same Black men subject them to.

Spatially, the womyn congregate in Anna's living room. Filmically, they do so periodically in a way that repeatedly establishes the health or status of "we," as they embody it, as the "monstrous intimacies" that characterize their relationships with each other and the men in their lives continuously alter the health of "we." As we timidly,

peering around the corner into the room, “we” spy how these bodies are arranged: reclined, relaxed, legs outstretched, clad in a multitude of colors and patterns—red-orange plaid, the pink and greens and whites of flowers, bold blues, the red of the couch they sit on; at once, the scene is vibrant, both because of the arrangements and variations of color and the falling pallor of the light cascading through the window to the right of the frame, loud, and serene. “We” hear their conversation in the middle, Anna offering Delores money for the bills that, in the previous scene, her husband Junior failed to pay because of his gambling addiction. Delores refuses, claiming she doesn’t know when she might be able to pay her back, and Anna persists, presenting the money as a gift, an offering, a sacrifice. Juxtaposed with the scene to come, with the darkness of the coerced and monetized exchange of sexual trauma and sexual pleasure between Sammy and Pumpkin, this scene alters a preemptive alternative, a less insidious, less violent, more open, more caring “we.” Together, they chuckle and lament through Charlie, “these no good men gon’ have us all in the poor house or the crazy house.” The momentary appearance of Mama (Alice), the smiles, and Kari’s piano playing appear promising for the fullness and good health of “we”—light, illuminated, vibrant, flitty. However fleeting.

“We” see this “we” and its attendant care in motion in the second of Tyrone’s onscreen attacks. After trying to return money she accepted from Sammy to help with the otherwise seemingly insurmountable financial hurdles barring her from attending her dream school and being rebuffed, in what is part of Sammy’s repetition and transmission of the “monstrous intimacy” transmitted to him by Pumpkin, Kari has a nervous breakdown, becomes hysterical, and seeks refuge with Anna in the middle of the night. Anna holds Kari close, kneels to sit her down and to sit with her as they both prepare to

sit with the rawness of Kari's trauma in the living room; they occupy the whole of the frame here. But in an inversion of the spatial arrangements of the first attack, Tyrone enters off-screen, demanding to know why Kari and her trauma are intruding in this space. When Kari offers to leave, Anna rises, positions herself between Kari and Tyrone, and between camera and Tyrone, the back of her head obscuring him in an effort to *make space* and *maintain that space* for Kari. Her denial, with her figure in the frame, become central, and as the shot reverses, we see that she holds Kari close, her touch suturing the two together and physically communicating Anna's intent: she holds space for Kari and all she's brought with her, here, and she intends to hold tightly, saying, "I don't care if it's 3 in the morning or 10 at night, Kari is always welcome in my house."

Her house, this space, their space, the space where the womyn of the film seek and make refuge from the structural violence and interpersonal misogyny they face elsewhere. When Tyrone attacks the claim of ownership, Anna defends it, "If it's your house, you gon' start paying the mortgage," as she repositions herself, again, between Tyrone and Kari. The tenderness of how the positioning of her body speaks through the frame when she moves closer to Kari, overlays and easily slips into and out of the protectiveness of the defensive posture she assumes when she places herself between Kari and Tyrone. If this is a refuge, it is one that she plans, in the flesh, to defend: "You can treat me like shit every day of my life, but you not gon' run my niece out of my house."²²⁶ When Tyrone reaches up to strangle Anna, to force her to submit, Kari shifts, becomes protective, moves to defend her. When Kari is knocked back by Tyrone, a gun fires from off-screen, and the camera pans to reveal Mama in the doorway, shotgun at the

²²⁶ All of this occurs at approximately 83 minutes into the film.

ready, prepared to defend this space that Anna has claimed, that Kari occupies, in which she herself lives. When he is forced out, when this returns to a space of refuge, after their defense has been mounted, the camera shifts back to Kari and Anna, locked and rocking in tight embrace. The womyn here shift seamlessly from tenderness and comfort in the wake and presence of trauma, to active—and violent, if necessary—defense, prepared to endanger themselves for the sake of each other’s wellbeing—Anna for Kari, Kari for Anna, Mama for them and “we” all. Armed with a shotgun and the willingness to use it, and equipped with a space that works as a refuge from the violent elsewhere and others of the film and the world, this nowhere might be where “we” might be, live, and thrive.

It is not impervious. Its defense is not perfect, lasting. Subject to the “afterlife of slavery,” addiction and death begin to whittle away at what “we” might have been. Charlie’s alcoholism, prison sentence, and eventual drug addiction slowly removes her from the space. Delores’s debilitating cancer, and the hopelessness and futility that comes with fighting it, traps her in her own home, and then her bedroom, for the remainder of the film. Mama passes away off-screen, and we only attend a moment of her funeral. And Anna’s diabetes, along with the loss of her job, erodes her physical and psychological wellbeing. But “we” is not without possibility for what it suggests about engaging, about directly confronting violence, trauma, and death, as we aspire to make refuge for the dead, the dying, the sick, the stricken, the traumatized, the variously deathly. At their intimate nexus in Anna’s living room, “we” glimpse what it is to leap to sacrifice, to risk, and to care for each other.

The culmination of the film makes this clear. Anna, knowing that Kari has yet to secure funds to leave Mississippi for her dream school, leaves Kari the twenty-five

thousand dollars remaining in her pension as another gift, offering, sacrifice, at the expense of her own life. Given the loss of her job, the debilitating nature of her sickness, and the absence of Tyrone, the remaining money would go to her own medical care—the purchase of insulin, the likely visits to the doctor or to the hospital for routine or emergency treatment, and so on. With Kari’s dream on the line, and the sense that she is wasting away, she gives up her very life so that Kari might achieve what she seeks. Kari’s life becomes sutured to Anna’s in a way that exceeds physical proximity, be it in an embrace or fighting for life and space; Kari’s life and future become possible by way of Anna’s death; Kari and Anna overlay, become inextricable.

Anna tasks Kari with the following in their final conversation, “If you really want to help, you go on and *be* what *we* couldn’t *be*...By helping *yourself*, you helping *us*.”²²⁷ Here, she performs an alchemical overlay, transmuting the singularity of “you” and “yourself”—Kari—into “us” and “we.” When Anna dies, having sacrificed her own life for Kari, Kari fully embodies, if not wholly *becomes*, “we.” That she—that “we” lives and leaves Mississippi leaves us with a glimpse into what “we” might be, and what possibilities toward which “we” might move.

In the forthcoming, what Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*, read alongside a talk delivered by Saidiya Hartman at UCLA, will offer us is an alternative understanding of how “we” manifests through confrontations with death, dying, sickness, and trauma, and how and where “we,” when those confrontations are made central, when textual and imaginative space is *made* or even *forced open* for them and the wake work these confrontations carry out, like Kari, en route, mobilized by and as “we,” might end up.

²²⁷ At around 106 minutes into the film, as Kari is leaving Anna (alive) for the last time, emphasis mine.

So there “we” go.

II. *Way-Making, Wake-Keeping*

“So you know, I would ask you: *What do you make of that?* There’s always this ethical conundrum, dilemma, there’s always a kind of risk here...just a kind of fundamental antagonism that makes this work possible.

Oh, I get to describe what I have no access to because the state has made possible someone’s capture and the production of a certain set of stories about them. *So it’s a really charged and entangled territory...* I’m just trying to be really...self-reflective about what I’m dealing with, and also to account for my own acts of violence...to know that I’m also there as another uninvited presence. But then I’m also trying to break away the walls of the bedroom, too—so there are different kinds of violence.

What does it mean to think of the bedroom that’s not that different from that of the dancehall, or maybe a party space...We want to think about these embodied practices in much more overlapping ways...that returns bodies and pleasures to the realm of the everyday.

So, it’s not the truth of who we are, but another place where we try to make things happen.”

—Saidiya Hartman, “An Intimate History of Slavery”²²⁸

Saidiya Hartman delivered a captivating reading of what she described as “a speculative history” of the “wayward life” of Mattie Nelson, a black girl attempting to carve out of the perilous space of New York City a free space, if small, if fleeting, if vulnerably open to criminalization, pathology, and violence, in which she might find, create, and become herself. As she describes it, the speculative history of Mattie Nelson aspires for more than mere biography, but does not approach the impossibility of reclaiming or rescuing her from the violence of the case file. Rather, it “is to exploit the

²²⁸ Quoted from Hartman’s “An Intimate History of Slavery” talk.

elasticity of fact, reshape the lives fashioned in the case file, write against the grain of the given, pose critical questions in the register of ‘what might be,’ and craft a story written at a lower frequency, and mindful of the secondary rhythms of Black life” in order to “describe social life in the making, to interrupt the verified history, and to *disorder* the case file.”²²⁹ This imaginative process does not forget or forego the “facts, rumors and stories” comprising the archive, framing the reality of black being in antiblack space, but instead “*rearranges* and *dissembles*” them, exploiting their “*elasticity*” into the speculative history of Mattie Nelson.²³⁰

For Hartman, this narrative reflected a layered aspiration for the creation and affirmation of bodily space, the sensuous site of intimate connections in the flesh, narrative space, the site of the story, critically “*fabulated*”²³¹ within, with, and against the limits maintained by the case file, and political ontological space, the place and position of being, that Hartman wields to make the rearrangements for her speculative history of Mattie Nelson. This is creation, but creation that strives to evade the perils and fantasies of invention, redress, or otherwise “*consolatory fictions*” that impossibly and fallaciously claim, in their structural and imaginative choices, to rescue the wayward lives from the “two zones of death—social and corporeal death.”²³² This is creation, creation as a careful disordering or scattering, rearrangement, obfuscation, contestation, and, in all,

²²⁹ Ibid, emphasis mine.

²³⁰ Ibid, emphasis mine.

²³¹ Here, I draw from Hartman’s “*Venus in Two Acts*,” where she writes of “*critical fabulation*” as a process of fictitious creation that pays attention to, but attempts to strain against, the real and perilous limits of the archive while “*playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story*” (11). I also draw it from its use in cognitive neuroscience, which describes the way the brain “*confabulates*,” or fictitiously fills in the blanks of and revises, narratives stored in memory.

²³² From “*Venus in Two Acts*,” 12.

elaboration, of the space of the case file; this is to create at the “charged and entangled territory” of the nexus between fiction and fact, intimacy and violation, body and state, writing and erasure, creation and destruction, life and death.

Perhaps this is where we arrive, end up, or find ourselves. The possibility compelled me to ask Professor Hartman if this was the case, if this, in fact, “is how we tell those impossible stories? And what are the limits of doing that?” Her response, the epigraph opening our discussion, confirmed two thoughts, twin worries that emerged in our own journeys through the labyrinth, subtended by our previous walk with “Venus in Two Acts.” First, that the perils of “critical fabulation,” are not only inevitable, but constitutive to the possibility of generating, revealing, or locating otherwise selves and spaces—bodily, social, imaginative, political-ontological—intimate and collective worlds that both intersect with and jut out from the narrative lines written in case files, court documents, medical histories, and so on. This, I believe, we knew; Hartman’s current exploration seems to dive deeper into the implications of this fact for how we practice our creative critical thought. And second, that the derangement of the facts and fictions, lines and limits, available to us in the flesh, in the archive, in *being*, the willfully anarchistic scattering of their refuse, and the rearrangement of what’s there performs a necessary, creative violence that can only reveal but not rescue, question and contend but not answer, the death and loss that mark and position us amid the darkness and the wreckage.

We are tasked with making the necessary arrangements by rearranging what’s written on the labyrinthine walls, what’s scribbled, tattooed, and scarified into the flesh, and what propels and follows us across the threshold of the door. Our way is no way out or around the structure, but an attempt to navigate and negotiate the narrative (k)not of

the nowhere where we find ourselves; it is to recognize, reckon with, and travel, the Möbius strip before us. “What do you make of that?” If the answer to her rejoinder suggests to use that our way is only made possible by the fundamental, violent antagonism—between Blackness and the antiblack world—on which the structure of the mausoleum, tomb, archive, labyrinth, and only made at all via a wielding of another “form” of violence in the form of disorder and derangement. We remember our engagement with M. NourbeSe Philip, and the need to do wake work with fragments; we remember our engagement with *Beloved* and rememory; we remember that we thought about lovingly reckoning with and writing about loss, hope, love, and disappearance in the dark and damp space at the end of *Long Division*. What we understand differently, having gone nowhere, having arrived at the knowledge of our position again, anew, with perhaps both fewer and reasons to hope, is that the best and most attentive of the imaginative, speculative spaces of mourning we have made, can make, and might make, do and must reflect a willingness to continue the breaking, the disordering, the whole creative process of derangement and disarray.²³³

If we mean to create imaginative spaces that strive to do the traumatic, untimely, and loving work of mourning (defending, caring for, and comforting) the variously dead and dying, we must not only collect and examine the fragments, their refractions, and the status of our untimely breaking, but we must also be willing to break them open, scatter them and see where they fall, and create deeper incongruences between them in order to see what different contradictions might reveal. Speculative creation becomes entangled with accounting for the orders of violence that position us *and* with inevitably performing

²³³ Taken from Chapter 2: Untimely Wor(l)ds in the Key of Love.

other orders of violence to “break away the walls,” to break open the space, the break *us* open, so that we might become available not just for the construction of a “way” out of nowhere, or for a deeper dive into and exploration the dark, but so that we might “imagine the reconstruction of everything.”²³⁴ This is both our work and the condition of possibility for even the possibility of its success; to do imagine the impossible, we must do the unthinkable.

“*What do you make of that?*” Nothing. Many things. The literary untimely worlds of mourning we carefully sculpt out of a nowhere made up of darkness, silences, muffled voices, redacted statements, missing documents, and fictitious and violent reductions, approach death and dying differently. Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* paradigmatically rethinks continuity and connection; Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* confronts a haunting—the textual, imaginative sites of mourning through which we made our way to arrive here again mourn and think about mourning differently than Taiye Selasi’s sustained, artful, and moving *Ghana Must Go*. Beautifully written, the text begins in a state of disequilibrium with the immediate disruption of a death that reverberates throughout. From a book review I wrote for MAKE Literary Magazine, Kweku’s death is death:

...as it reverberates through the many complex familial relationships that give this unflinching engagement emotional and corporeal form; death as it permeates the interlocking variations of black cultural existence in the world—here, the interwoven living, moving philosophies of black life, death, grief, and growth from Nigeria, to Ghana, to the United States; and death as it makes impossible demands on those swept in the violent current of its wake, those who must reconcile the irreconcilable, who must live with death, black.²³⁵

²³⁴ The final line of Hartman’s talk, “An Intimate History of Slavery.”

²³⁵ The review is short, but I wanted to quote this chunk to give a snapshot of the kind of permutations of death that seem to structure Selasi’s novel; I think this extended, but also

This is death that moves and moves us, in, across, through, and with the spaces of mourning we differently occupy, share, bear in the flesh, imagination, and being, and struggle to maintain. Her novel sifts through and sits with death in a layered attempt at thinking about what mourning while Black, and moving through and making space able to sustain that mourning, might look like. In their own ways, each of her characters struggles to be with loss and grief, to distance themselves from it, and ultimately to open and create spaces to confront, converse, and live with death. Through them, Selasi explores what seems to be our central question: how can we make space for death—where we can *be* with it, where we can bear that being?

A corpse-cold open: “Kweku dies.” We begin without time or space to prepare for the blow. We begin confronted with a demand to make way for the fact of death, for its presence in the present tense, and for its futurity, its inevitability, captured in Selasi’s inspection of the architecture of “how.” Her writing is filmic. She carefully moves us into and through the spatial arrangements of the many scenes of loss and love, pain and desire, into which she guides her characters. Where Kweku stands, “between doorways,” at the threshold between the life, the home of his elegant design, “arrested” there, “transfixed” by the garden, the rooms, the space of it all, and the death toward which he moves, where he falls, barefoot, into dewy grass; where he leaves us, leaves them, leaves it all. This is an untimely death, and we encounter it at its edge, its horizon.

Behind Kweku is an imaginary life made material in the wake of a series of losses. Following a failed emergency appendectomy that left Jane “Ginny” Cabot, a rich

cursory, description of how death seems to work within the space of the novel is useful for us here as a primer for the analysis to come.

white patron-patient and friend, who'd waited far too long to seek medical help, dead, a review board elects to fire Kweku. Led by Dr. Yuki, an "odd" Asian woman and an agent of shareholders, the members summon Kweku to the "Room of Judgment," the center of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center's labyrinth, to hold him "accountable" for what they call his "failure." Eleven months and tens of thousands of dollars of fighting his wrongful termination, eleven months of pretending to don his scrubs and coat, leave for work, and do his job—of performing the lie to his family—all culminate in his defeat. Dr. Yuki, the committee, the Cabots, the spectral donors and shareholders decided to feed Kweku to the crushing, devouring machine, and his resistance to the call of its maw ultimately proved futile. Stories of antiblackness like this are familiar: the hospital compels Kweku, a Black man and their best surgeon, to perform a surgery that, per his analysis, based on his brilliance and expertise, is ill-advised; the brilliant Black doctor performs masterfully, even though there was no help; someone must take the fall for white death and sentimentality; it must be the Black thing in the room; it was a failure. That Selasi makes an Asian woman the speaker and embodiment of this antiblackness subtly attends to the paradigmatic distinction between white supremacy and antiblackness, and that Selasi establishes this sequence of events and resonances as the beginning of Kweku's breaking, is important, but I am primarily interested in the Room of Judgment and the hospital-as-antiblack-machine: how they position Kweku, where they take him, where they send him.

Selasi describes the Room of Judgment as spatially oppressive. The scene opens with the invocation of unwanted detachment, "I am afraid we have to let you go," and an ensuing silence, long as the oval table around half of which the hospital trustees sat and

gazed, seated in “squat-rounded” leather armchairs on swivels, reminiscent of “the Cups ride at fairs.” They sit, in their red, brass-studded amusement and judgment, arranged like satellites revolving around the oppressive, manufactured celestial body—a veritable Death Star, and all its name and structure suggests to the imagination—or like a series of red dwarf stars, burning cool in a constellation of dim and vague antiblackness, but lit and burning all the same. Clad in the stars’ ruddy oppressive and “hopeless light,” the “feasting colors,” bloods, dark reds, wines, mustards and plums, that comprise the scene’s palate prepare us for the coming mashing, churning, and devouring of Black flesh by the hungry machine. Nonblack gazes penetrate, become bloodstained; Kweku’s presence in this space a black hole, a wound, from which the machine might siphon its life-force. On all sides, the machine surrounds him with its meaningless literature, “maximum number, countless books, dark red books no one read;” “*being* let go,” *being* made to fall to the violence at the intersection of gaze and word, individual and institutional power and fixation, and empty, un-accessed, or inaccessible literature that buttresses its force. Judgment is violent and distant; Black flesh and being in this space, in Judgment’s room, is open to that violence; the room runs bloody red, between looks and books.

And so after eleven months of fighting the machine’s maw, Kweku only seeks out a seeing and a word. With only “nowhere to go” following his apparent acceptance of at least legal defeat, Kweku finds that his body mindlessly carries him back to the hospital for a final confrontation with Dr. Yuki—to see her, to have a word. To have an audience, to pose a question meant to implicate her unethicity, the antiblackness of her actions, the likely pursuant lack of regret, the violent, bloody callousness; to indict her, with the

sight of him, with his speech. He means to be an interruption in the pallor of the hospital's space, a Black, fleshy, demanding, visual and vocal interjection of ethical, Black rage, an exclamation point scribbled into the sentence the machine and Asian emissary had written for him. An attempt at a Fanonian explosion, or one akin to the explosion imagined by Max Reddick, at once too late and too early to truly quake the foundations of the machine or its edifice, perhaps untimely enough to rattle one of its cogs. Even this, though, only serves to make plain and open the fact of Kweku's out-of-place-ness, his not-belonging-there-ness, to Ernie, the Jamaican security guard who was otherwise unaware, and to his second son, Kehinde, who witnessed the ineffectual whimper with which Kweku was ultimately removed. His words and the many forms they took—letters, petitions, appeals, statements from other colleagues—were merely eaten up.

Removed, offered up and devoured. Not just his flesh or his words, but the “whole life...[the] *whole world*” of his and his family's creation, “an existence unraveled.” The shame of losing his career, of losing the legitimacy of the eleven month long lie by way of a truth the length of an oval table, of losing *her*—Folasadé, his beloved wife, mother of his children—he loses his bearings. The dream for which he worked, for which she had sacrificed her own, of a narrative of life, love, and freely being in the at once small and large space they and their children carved out, took up, occupied, protected—the space of a home, a career, of the flesh of a child, Sadé, stolen from death's grip, of the flesh of the three children before them, of the intimacies shared in dark rooms between husband and wife—shattered, turned to dust. He flees the fact of loss, and the possibility of its irreversibility,

hoping to have found his way out...to escape...to be 'free'...to be 'human'...to have somehow unhooked his story from the larger ones, the stories of Country and of Poverty and of War that had swallowed up the stories of people around him and spat them up faceless, nameless villagers...to have fled, thus unhooked...for the vastness and smallness of life free of want...Progress. Distant shore reached.²³⁶

Back to Baltimore to an old and empty shell of a home, a vacated space no longer housing 'the dream,' a space "in ruins...*a ruin*," then back to Ghana, back to a home that is not home, he means to make create distance between himself and loss, himself and those who might wear his loss and shame on their own faces, himself and the inevitability of a confrontation with losing, its possibility, its lives.

Kweku knew loss well-enough, he might have felt. He had stayed in the room with death and his sister, Ekua, before it took her, before she left with it, before she was lost, and he was made to hold her cooling hand, the hand of loss. He did not leave the dark room, couched in the raw "heat and smell of it, the stench of new death," in the space of unresolvable regrets and vague, cloudy reflection, where his mother lay dead; he sat there, "who knows for how long," in the space of untimely passing, in the room with a loss that had been waiting for him. In other words, Kweku had been there, holed up with and held up by and holding the hand of loss. The life he and Fola, and Olu, Kehinde, Taiwo, and Sadé built was an escape, another story, an outside to those rooms, a sanctuary for the lost from loss, and losing this story, or imperiling it by forcing a confrontation with the loss of his career and the shame of the lie, would be unthinkable. So he runs from loss, believes he can stave it off, and cordon's himself off an ocean away, elsewhere, "gone."

²³⁶ Selasi, location 1317-25, (also, from the Kindle Edition of the novel).

The compact, one-story compound he builds as his fortress stands against the rooms of loss and judgment, an architectural contrapposto to the constructs from which he strove to fly. He designed his hollow bastion, seemingly emptied of loss or the demand for its reckoning, this “beautiful, functional, elegant house, which appeared to him whole...an entire logic,” with its “four quadrants: a nod to symmetry, to his training days, to graph paper, to the compass” and its “gray courtyard, a kind of rebuttal...to home...a homeland re-imagined, all the lines clean and straight”—it is, he has made, “a brilliant arrangement.” The crispness, cleanness, functionality, and elegance of his design arranged against the bloody, ruddy, rounded tyranny of the Room of Judgment and its vacant literature; its straight lines and angles slice crisp and surgical cuts that carve out an architecture of order, of *his* order, against the orderly chaos of the hospital’s hungry, all-consuming machine. The little sunroom’s surround of “floor-to-ceiling windows” channel light and warmth, promising openness to sun and heat, stands as a not-so-gentle rebuke of the cold, closed dark of the shanty where he was born and his mother died. This is Kweku’s well-lit, geometrically rigid, monolith to elegant design, order and control, all his, all from his imagination, an indictment to the chaos of shame, loss, and death. And yet, we know. Here he falls. Here he dies. This is, and might have always been, the space of death.

I wanted to retell, to rearrange, the ‘narrative’ of the life of Kweku Sai, as Hartman retold the story of Mattie Nelson, as Farley retold Ariadne’s myth. With the intent of situating him, making arrangements for him, within the limits of the framework that wonders about the many “where”s—nowhere, elsewhere, where we are, where we can’t be, where we end up, where we want to go—I moved with him as Selasi wrote him,

thinking aloud about the nature of his placement in the many scenes, rooms, and spaces she and he create. I want to linger in this moment of dying, sit in the room with impending loss, and consider how he arrived across that threshold. Specifically, his inability to confront the real possibility of loss, his fear of having to sit in the room with it once more, of having to grieve again, and his failed flight from loss, from death, from dead ends, beckon our attention. More precisely, the strategies with which he manufactured distance *between* himself and loss, made a space to *deny* its entry and so its company and so its confrontation, speak to us about the ways that distance, avoidance, and denial can create problems for the spaces we attempt to create, and can limit the possibilities for what and where we might imagine. We worry about this. We grope in the dark for more to help us confront the danges.

How Fola and her children, Olu, Kehinde, Taiwo, and Sadie confront and fail to confront what ends up being Kweku's failed flight from their lies, how they confront this loss, will help us explore the perils and problems that emerge when distance, avoidance, and denial are the blueprints for the spaces we create in relation to the fact of loss. Further, how they deal with distance, and how Kweku's death compels them to confront the many kinds of distance and space they create between themselves and the truth of shame and loss, will guide us toward a glimpse of what it is to make way, to make space, for death, the dead, dying, loss, and grief, and so also for love. Like Fola, we touch our stomachs in the quadrants of our torsos, feeling for, sensing, what they try to tell us. It is, with care, then.

Olu flees, or flies, from loss like his father, in search of order, sterility, and control. The bedroom he shares with his partner, Ling, "is white, all white, everything

white,” the Eames chair, the walls, the linens; oppressively, apathetically white, its “hard angles” the sites of collision with white sunlight, “white on white,” whiter still in the snowfall that absently flutters, lands, and falls or fades against the room’s tall windows.²³⁷ A white light box; all-white, everything.²³⁸ Like an operating room. The room’s colorless sterility reflects and frames Olu’s career choice, having switched from the chaos and unpredictability of the Emergency Room to the “procedural” nature of orthopedic surgery. The simple physicality, the precision intersecting with the procedural repetition of fracture, the rigidity of bone, parallel the white, controlled hardness of Olu’s light box. The bedroom’s hard too-whiteness, like Kweku’s sunroom, is defiance edified, a spatial “rebuttal” or refusal of the fact and possibility of loss, and so an affirmation of a desire to create, maintain, and solidify distance between being and being with loss, being lost, losses, and losing—more, and again, given that this is all untimely. It is an ivory containment wherein the intimacy and privacy he seeks with Ling might bask in white sunshine, or silver moonlight, without interruption—by color, by chaos, by death—away from the space of his broken family, and so at enough of a remove from the fact of the loss of Kweku’s presence they each telegraph, embody.

As Taiwo imagines it, Olu and Ling, or “Ling-and-Olu,” hyphenated into a single, indistinguishable construct, embody this cold, white hardness in the flesh. As she describes them, their white light box, and by extension their relationship: “with his cold

²³⁷ Selasi, location 1558.

²³⁸ The phrase reminds me of a song by Lupe Fiasco, entitled “All Black, Everything,” in which Lupe dreams/imagines an inversion of the world that embraces a totalizing Blackness by asking unanswerable questions (e.g. what if there “were no slave ships, were no misery?”) and racially switched celebrities (e.g. “that inspired five white guys called the Jacksons”). The song, in execution, is, like that album, mostly awful, but at the level of its founding motivation, dovetails with what Hartman wants to do with the archive, and what we want to think about through Selasi.

little life in cold Boston, his girlfriend, their cold-white apartment, white smiles on the walls...two robots, degree-getting, grant-winning, good-doing androids.”²³⁹ They bear Olu’s desire for and edification of distance in their collective being; they wear it; they recreate themselves at the level of the flesh (at least in Taiwo’s imagination) and at the level of being. No longer object or human, no longer warm or soft, no longer plural, Ling-and-Olu, perhaps having deeply listened to Janelle Monáe,²⁴⁰ or closely read Joy James,²⁴¹ have become transcendental, revolutionary, “individual and collective, in over and covert rebellion, alive...with the spiritual force of freedom driving it—biological, mechanical, divine;”²⁴² distance made alive, impenetrable, unimaginable, distance protected and *perfected*. This is a rebirth into a reimagining of life itself, and so the constitutive features that characterized “life” for Olu and Ling before becoming Ling-and-Olu, a rebirth into an imagined freedom from the boundaries of the Blackness, bleakness and brokenness that characterize the familial upbringing of each—Ling, whose father’s antiblackness is unapologetic and relentless; Olu, whose family cannot bear, let alone face, let alone sit and be with the departure, the loss, of Kweku, and the ensuing grief. White, contained, solid; procedural, pristine, perfect—this is the relational and

²³⁹ Selasi, location 1758.

²⁴⁰ See: Her whole corpus, from *Metropolis Suite I*, to *The Archandroid*, to *Electric Lady*. The mythos, the counter-myth, Monáe creates about a time-traveling—so, untimely—android Black woman named Cindi Mayweather destined to be the harbinger of revolution against the system of antiblackness. The brilliance of the musical choices, the smooth, clear, almost pristine metallic beauty of Monáe’s voice, the coded lyricism of the songs and their organization into act-like suites are invoked, here. I would highly suggest listening to Monáe’s music, and exploring the essays in my “Hotel Oblivion” series, which experimentally dissects her work.

²⁴¹ See: “‘Concerning Violence’: Frantz Fanon’s Rebel Intellectual in Search of a Black Cyborg.”

²⁴² James, Joy. “‘Concerning Violence’: Frantz Fanon’s Rebel Intellectual in Search of a Black Cyborg,” 61.

material freedom Kweku might have imagined of his compound; this is, it seems, the clean sterility of freely being, in flight from the fact of loss.

Too good to be true, too perfect to be real; too cold, too robotic, too far removed, too distant: it is a fantasy. Being too distant and too cold to create or maintain the requisite warmth to stoke physical, emotional, ontological intimacy. Connection and intimacy, the collapse of the distance so sought, manufactured, protected, and sanctified, drown in the drift—drifting apart, drifting away—of cold waters, beneath the hardness of ice.²⁴³ Olu maintains his distance from Ling. This appears to be a reflex response to moments in which this distance is imperiled. When finally confronted with the intrusion of loss, the knowledge of his father’s death in Ghana, Olu initially withholds the news from Ling, who is asleep as he arrives home. Seated in the white Eames chair, in the silence and cold of a box encased in silver-white, icy light, he does not wake her. When she stirs, asking if he is “coming or going” from work, he wields a lie to prevent being “caught”—reined in, captured, bound, forced to create or affirm a connection.²⁴⁴ Saying that he is “going,” he safely affirms the lie of the distance he needs to maintain to ensure that he imaginatively and emotionally avoids breaking—breaking down, into grief. Secured in the small containment of the bathroom, Olu finds himself “taut,” rigid, hard, strained from the lie that makes, needs, and protects distance. But he is “caught” again, or at least threatened with capture, caught off guard, by Ling’s offer to accompany him to Ghana for the funeral. When he refuses, “too quickly,” unthinkingly, reflexively, in

²⁴³ I pluck this imagery, specifically the ice, from a scene in the novel. Olu arrives home, enters the white light box, after learning of Kweku’s death. We discuss this a bit later, but the imagery of the scene transforms the well-white-lit bedroom into a too-cold, too-dark space into which death, grief, and loss have begun to spill.

²⁴⁴ Selasi, location 1683.

attempt to defend what he understands to be a desire and a venture to imagine and “be something better” than family, to create a space for an intimacy that is not reducible to the fixed brokenness captured in that label. This is his automatic affirmation of distance, of being distant, for the sake of imagining otherwise.

His ultimate concession to her ‘offer’ emerges out of a moment of openness created by a phone-call from his distant brother, and the scene offers a glimpse of “what might be” possible should distance give way: Olu hunched over, Ling kissing his forehead, her tears rolling down onto his face as if they were his own; Ling-and-Olu in repose. Genuine intimacy becomes imbricated, entangled, with grief; the space in which intimacy might be made makes way for grief to enter, to reveal itself, Against his affirmation, his sanctification, of distance, the real possibility afforded in this moment of grief that materializes in Ling’s loving gesture and his acceptance of it stands at odds with his belief in the fantasies of else or otherwise that inhere in distance. Robotic as he is, he does not compute this. This sequence repeats in Ghana. Trying to comfort Olu, who is distressed after recalling a traumatic encounter with his father, Ling reaches to touch him, an echo of the moment in the bathroom; Olu flinches, cries out in protest. Ling steps back, wondering aloud, angrily if helplessly, why he does that, when she touches him, why he flinches. Distance affirmed, distance secured, intimacy staved off. Recognizing this, recognizing the mistake, the distance, made, here, Olu finds clarity once more: “he sighs...he can see that he needs to say something to *fill in the distance he’s opened between them.*”²⁴⁵ Though he does not know how to hold her, to make love

²⁴⁵ Selasi, location 3501, emphasis mine.

to her, to collapse this empty space he's worked tirelessly to make and to protect, there is a glimmer here, only in the grief.

Intimacy appears quite unlike the hyphenated automaton of Ling-and-Olu's creation. It does not lose the warm for the cold, or trade the biological for the mechanical, being (or nonbeing) for the illusion of transcendence. It is, in that sense, maybe more wholly what Monáe and James envision of their androids and cyborgs, an entity in actuality collective, shared, while remaining distinct, individual, able to remain animated spiritually, emotionally, political-ontologically, and physically by the force of freedom, or the desire for it—or, better, the force of and desire for something unnamed, unimaginable, impossible in the wake. Given the scenes that guide us here, what does it mean when grief and loss might be the sites of that intimacy, or the constitutive elements of making way for it? How might we fold this logic into our understanding of how to make spaces for loss, grief, pain, shame, and death—especially death—of what's at stake, and of what's *possible*, should we open the flesh, the imagination, and the *being* to the reality of their presence? Is this kind of grieving intimacy, intimacy through and with mourning, the object of our untimely aspiration—where we want to go, what we want to make out of nowhere?

Intimacy cannot merely be exalted, however loving and genuine the grief or mourning that founds it might be. Intimacy is imperfect. As an opening in which mourning can occur, an opening made so that loss and death might enter, it can be subject to violence and violation. It is vulnerable as it is unimaginable and precious. The strange, unnerving connection Taiwo and Kehinde share as twins is couched in mysticism, the stuff of myth. They are the manifestation of the Yoruba myth of *ibeji*, otherworldly

intimacy in the flesh, mind, and being: they are “two halves of one spirit too massive to fit in one body, and liminal beings, half human, half deity, to be honored, even worshipped accordingly” (location 1220); in this myth, they are more akin to what we know of James’s cyborg (and by extension, Monáe’s android) than the cold automaton, Ling-and-Olu. Differently torn between dimensions, longing to return to the spiritual realm from which they emerge and venturing to explore the terrestrial one into which they’ve been jettisoned, they embody a kind of spatial doubleness—they embody being betwixt and between, being both (spirit and ‘human’) an neither, here and there, the antiblack world of the real, and an imaginary elsewhere.

Taiwo, short for *Taiyewo*, adapted from *to aiye wo*, “to see and taste the world,” the scout, agent of outward movement and venturing into the unknown, openness and possibility made flesh; Kehinde, adapted from *kehin de*, “to arrive next,” the inscrutable, the reluctant and withholding, the shadow, the “something else,” the otherworldly²⁴⁶—they are twin, complementary beings that collectively embody what it is to be, move within, with, or toward, imagine, and possibly create an elsewhere inextricably entangled with “here.” This is why they lean on one another, sleep in the same bed head to foot like sardines in a can,²⁴⁷ read one another’s thoughts,²⁴⁸ and know, instinctively, where the other is and what they feel; this is why he holds her that way before *it* happens. Together, they are what it might be to move, imagine, and create while, at each level of their being, in a state of being torn, being unknowable, being, as is said of Kehinde, “a veritable black hole”—and embodying its constitutive behaviors and potentialities, from destructive

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Selasi, location 3799.

²⁴⁸ Selasi, location 2670.

spaghettification, to the theorizations about other-sides, alternate realities and parallel universes.

All the myth and “magic”²⁴⁹ of this possibility might be described as “good luck and great fortune.”²⁵⁰ In these terms, their otherworldly intimacy attains material and supernatural value. As much, or more than the price of room and board, school fees and college tuition, which is why the struggling and desperate Fola considers the “small trade” at all, ultimately sending the twins, her *ibeji*, to her brother and his wife, Niké, in Nigeria. Believing that their presence in his lavish home might “cure” Niké’s barrenness, “Uncle Femi” houses the children on the second floor, in separate rooms. Used to sharing a bed, and stricken by the newfound and very real distance between themselves and home, their mother, their estranged father, and their siblings, Taiwo steals away in the middle of the night to sleep in Kehinde’s room. They likely believed the second floor’s space, rarely if ever interrupted by the presence of tyrannical and unwelcoming Niké, or aloof Uncle Femi, to be theirs, the site of their private, casual, filial, otherworldly intimacy, so how they sleep with one another—sardines, can—becomes routine, a small gesture grounded in a set of possibly naïve, and so dangerous, assumptions. Which is why, and when, *it* happens.

Niké accuses them of incest, the word itself rendered unspeakable in the text, a testament to the seriousness of the transgression within and beyond the confines of the second floor. Having discovered a spot of blood on a sheet from Kehinde’s room, as well as the clear-white residue she assumes to be semen, but which is really the product of Taiwo’s daily exploration of her own body and its sites of pleasure, she confronts the

²⁴⁹ Selasi, location 3248.

²⁵⁰ Selasi, location 2398.

twins violently. A vicious slap knocks Kehinde from his seat at the breakfast table; another strike stuns Taiwo into silent submission upstairs, after they arrive in the fourth floor, Niké seeking punishment for the twins from Femi himself. Here, they realize the extent of their “vulnerability, their defenselessness *here*. Something had broken. The casing around them,” made of the fantasy made available by the magic and otherworldliness of their connection shattered by the slap, the strike, and the suddenness of being “caught” being together, a capture made worse by the insidiousness of the lie injected Niké injected into it. A kind of unwanted and unexpected penetration of fantasy with the poison of the accusation, and it appears to demand a suitable punishment. After commanding Niké to leave the fourth floor, Femi forces Kehinde to perform the lie for his own amusement, pleasure. Kehinde’s finger, inside his sister, the lie fully penetrating the presumed purity of the lived fantasy, the black hole violated, the otherworldly intimacy transmuted into a horrifying, monstrous intimacy via a distorting and destructive alchemy.²⁵¹

The sexual violation of Taiwo and Kehinde reveals—rather, *reminds us* of the openness or vulnerability of the spaces of our intimacy to gratuitous antiblack violence, even if they might be cyborg, android, otherworldly, magical, unimaginable; they are, or end up being, defenseless. We know this, we knew this: this was the animating force behind the desperation and love of our opening questions; this was laced in our knowledge of how Blacks occupy and create spaces in or against the antiblack world. Summoning Hartman, even intimacy made in “the register of ‘what might be,’” of the kinds of possibility and connection the Taiwo and Kehinde embody as *ibeji*; even

²⁵¹ This is a very deliberate invocation of Christina Sharpe’s brilliant *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*.

intimacy made in the wake of loss and grief (for them, of and for familial presence) that is described as “otherworldly,” as *magic*, cannot *escape* the kind of violation and violence carried out by Uncle Femi. Worse, the very notion of intramurality on which the cyborg, android, *ibeji* is founded collapses and becomes the *source* of the violent denial of a space (and time) for black intimacy-in-loss or –in-grief. The mythical connection between Taiwo and Kehinde, what might have appeared to be the answer to our opening questions, to the problems embodied by Ling-and-Olu, and by Kweku, to our questions, falls away.

Distance and connection bear an unsightly resemblance to one another in the way that neither can escape old and new grief, loss, violation, and death—so we understood. We understood, perhaps in a more superficial way, that reckoning with death, making way and space for it, is what it might mean to make a space for Blackness, a Black space, out of the nowhere where we are. Selasi reveals in Kweku’s hollow bastion, the automaton relationship of Ling-and-Olu, and Taiwo and Kehinde’s violated intimacy, and also in the way Sadie empties herself—creates and fosters an emptiness in herself—via her eating disorder, as well as the way Fola flees to Ghana once she has been separated from her children following Kweku’s departure, the way distance and intimacy in the wake of grief both leave us in the presence of death, whether we choose to make way for it or not. More terribly, she reveals “what might be” when that way-making is avoided, delayed, or unrecognized as such.

But she also gives us an opportunity to imagine “what might be” should the loss and grief made real in the wake of death be accepted, embraced as unifying, as the source of spatial (and by extension) temporal possibility as opposed to its negation. Kweku’s

death becomes a force that collapses the many distances created and nurtured by his family members. Fola and Olu make arrangements for the family to travel to Ghana to mourn their loss. Here and together they invite death into their collective ritual arranged to confront the fact of Kweku's departure. Fola deciding who to put where—who will be with whom in which room, who will share beds and converse in this space of mourning, what will be said, there; and the rearrangements the children make so that they might confront the pain and grief that comes with sitting in the room with loss. They have, like the coffin maker on the beach, aspired to make “*a home...for the homeless*, a home in the space after bodies, before” and so with an through them; in and through the flesh, each of the many distances so manufactured and sanctified by Sadie, Taiwo, Kehinde, Olu, Ling, and Fola collapses as each becomes a conduit for the kind of creation and resolution that death will speak through them. The prospect of this creation-from-collapse, creation-with-death, creation-in-mourning is “absurd in one sense, wild, fantastic in another,” this and these strange spaces in peculiar shapes, carved at the nexus of intimacy and confrontation, love and shame, living and dying, in and *in* the wake.

It is only here that Olu can fully and finally melt into Ling. A body in heat heeding the repeated command, “make love;” “piercing” and “pushing,” falling “deeper, in, farther, down, down” into the warmth of the gesture that entangles body with body, flesh with flesh; a “rounded and destructible and soft” tying up, binding, and becoming, against the static, “sharp-edged” sterility, whiteness, and coldness of their white-light box back there, and “so a home.”²⁵² It is only here that the “knot” of real shame, rage, and pain between Kehinde and Taiwo unravels, making way once more for their otherworldly

²⁵² Selasi, location 4240.

intimacy; their telepathic connection returns, “her thoughts in his head,”²⁵³ his in hers, the resolution of a too-long longing for communication beyond the bounds of speech and gesture. Here, that Sadie might fill the void she’s created in her body, between herself and her mother, and between herself and her siblings, with the exuberance and fulfillment of movement that is dance. Here, that Fola can make space to finally converse with the dead.²⁵⁴

Small and large gestures of intimacy founded upon the fact of death create a space for mourning. Irreducible and imperative are the bodies in motion, bodies entwined, bodies connected by way of touch, confession, confrontation, love, shame, and pain, to the way-making and wake-keeping required to create space for the dead, the dying, and those in proximity to death through the brokenness and untimeliness of their flesh. Creation elsewhere and otherwise produced only the lonely fantasies of manufactured intimacies, distances, and isolated bastions; creation elsewhere and otherwise could not achieve or think to do the impossible with which our wake work tasks us. To keep working in the wake, to make way for death and all the resonant loss and grief that inevitably travels with it, is to attend wholly to the need for intimacies in the flesh, imagination, and being that do not (try and fail to) forego or forget the fact of death. Selasi affords us a glimmer of hope without forgetting the pessimism that laces the reality of the entanglement between Blackness and death, the inescapability of death and its force and labyrinthine structure for Blacks. If we are to foster love, connection, intimacy, family, collectivity, we must make way for death, the dead, and dying; we must invite it, a place in the imagination where death, “all of it comes and sits calmly beside” us. It is,

²⁵³ Selasi, location 4257.

²⁵⁴ Selasi, location 4353.

like the coffin salesman, like Kehinde imagining doing the same, and also like Hartman as she writes of Mattie Nelson, to carefully carve a space *out* of the space of the nowhere where we are—to use the refuse of our broken flesh, what’s written there, what’s given, to make arrangements that might house us, together, with all the death and loss we bring, in mourning, with love. Only at this knot entangling death with creation might we make way, make a way, out of no way, out of nowhere, one that is not a fantastic escape, but an inhabitation.

To do the wake work, to work in the wake, to make space, to boldly go, then, speak with, think through, imagine in the presence of, and *be* with death. Nothing less, nowhere else, with no time to spare.

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