

**BEYOND BARE LIFE: ONTO-EPISTEMIC ARCHIVES, PRECARITY, AND THE
PRAXIS OF BEING HUMAN**

by

Dominique Deirdre Johnson

Bachelor of Arts, Emory University, 2006

Master of Arts, University of Pittsburgh, 2014

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This dissertation was presented

by

Dominique Deirdre Johnson

It was defended on

August 4, 2017

and approved by

Dr. Karma R. Chávez, Associate Professor, University of Texas at Austin

Dr. Caitlin F. Bruce, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication

Dr. Paul E. Johnson, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Ronald Zboray, Professor, Department of Communication

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Dominique Deirdre Johnson, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2017

This dissertation argues that mapping undercommon appositionality—as an epistemological and ontological formation—provides a complementary corrective to identitarian “subject positions.” It does this by accounting for structural and institutional displacements that are simultaneously constitutive of and oppositional to black (queer) femme [B(Q)F] subjectivities. In this project, I study B(Q)F subjects’ everyday negotiations with structural order that present as forms of cultural expression responsive to three systemic structural patterns: antiblackness, misogyny/misogynoir, and queer antagonism. I analyze the ways that intersectional activism and scholarship inform lived experience and, in so doing, can catalyze ontological and epistemological affirmation. For black queer women and femmes, surviving the ongoing violence of dispossession requires the creation and discursive circulation of pro-black, pro-queer, *and* pro-feminine knowledges without which social death is ontologically substantiated as the dominant organizing logic reducing *social life* to *bare life*.

The dissertation’s case studies are organized into conceptual *onto-epistemic archives*: Liberation, Refusal, Exception, and Intimacy. In the first case study, I follow the work of activist-scholar Barbara Smith as it overlaps with the efforts of London’s Black Lesbian and Gay

Centre. I begin with a discussion of black LGBT activism and scholarship highlighting the contemporary beginning of an explicitly black queer femme *topos* of political action in the 1980s US and UK. The next chapter explores black queer femme advocacy by illuminating the ways that one queer dandy style movement further complicates how gender functions to delimit social relationships. The third study takes up social relationships, thinking through B(Q)F socialities by exploring the ways that legal policy, media representation, and cultural ideologies reproduce structural violence impacting the everyday lives of trans and gender non-binary persons. Finally, I turn toward the interiority of B(Q)F affective discourse to think through what dispossession entails in the realm of interpersonal, erotic intimacy as themes emerge in autoethnography, oral history, and two black women's creative works: Solange Knowles's *A Seat at the Table* and Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man*. This progression of OEAs moves from the formation of community to the autonomous recognition of subjectivity, generating a narrative of black (queer) femme sociality along the way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2.0 THEORETICAL PROLEGOMENA.....	18
2.1 AFRO-PESSIMISM AND AFROFUTURISM AS THEORETICAL PARTNERS.....	20
2.2 INTELLIGIBILITY AND RECOGNITION	29
2.3 PLACELESSNESS/PRECARITY AND UNDERCOMMON APPOSITIONALITY	37
2.4 A NOTE ON ORGANIZING ONTO-EPISTEMIC ARCHIVES.....	43
3.0 OEA: LIBERATION.....	48
3.1 “WHEN S.H.E. WOKE”	48
3.1.1 Black (Queer) Feminist Re-/production and <i>Misogynoir’s Ressentiment</i>	52
3.1.2 Black Feminism Undisciplined	54
3.1.3 But <i>where</i> is the queer?.....	64
3.2 SITES	69
3.2.1 Calling Out, Calling In—Building From, Within, and in Loving Concern for Flawed Social Advocacy	74
3.2.2 On Visibility and Recognition, and the Importance of Knowledge Production.....	85
3.2.3 Epistemic Erasure and a Black Lesbian Critical Corrective.....	95
4.0 OEA: REFUSAL.....	109
4.1 SIGHTS.....	115
4.1.1 Gendering/Ungendering the Dandy	115
4.1.2 Queer Sartorial Vernacular	130

4.1.3	Dapper Quares and Embodied Difference: Exploring Black Queer Femme Cultural Iconography	139
5.0	OEA: EXCEPTION.....	150
5.1	CITES.....	152
5.1.1	Knowing Placelessness, Locating Ourselves: On Belonging in Dispossession.....	154
5.1.2	Performative Apologia and the Production of “Rights-less” Citizenship....	164
5.1.3	Understanding Intraracial Violence in the Context of Structural Antagonisms	179
6.0	OEA: INTIMACY	197
6.1	BREAKING THE FRAME.....	197
6.1.1	Archival Record and Purpose: An Introduction to the Archive of Intimacy	204
6.1.2	Considering Asexual Social Orientations	207
6.2	SITES/SIGHTS/CITES OF INTIMACY	211
7.0	CONCLUSION	226
APPENDIX I		233
Chapter 5 Respondents: Eva’s Man and A Seat at the Table.....		236
BIBLIOGRAPHY		238

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Hey Mom, we did it <3

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation argues that mapping appositionality—as an epistemological and ontological formation—provides a complementary corrective to identitarian “subject positions.” It does this by accounting for structural and institutional displacements theorized as simultaneously constitutive of and oppositional to black (queer) femme [B(Q)F] subjectivities. In this regard, B(Q)F appositionality is not primarily conceptualized as resistance or opposition to sovereign authority, which centers a normative, representative figure of Man-as-Human. Instead, it conceptualizes B(Q)F appositionality as affirming polyvalent praxes of social life and their attending delineations of being human. This perspective affords ontological subjectivity where it is presumed absent, objectified, or otherwise subjugated. In this project, I study B(Q)F subjects’ everyday negotiations with structural order that present as forms of cultural expression. I analyze the ways that intersectional activism and scholarship inform B(Q)F lived experience and, in so doing, can catalyze ontological and epistemological affirmation. For black queer women and femmes, surviving the ongoing violence of dispossession requires the creation and discursive circulation of pro-black, pro-queer, *and* pro-feminine knowledges without which social death is ontologically substantiated as the dominant organizing logic reducing *social life* to *bare life*. It is this structural dynamic that must be addressed in identifying modes of resistance that exceed

“contestations of the law or of power structures” and why I turn to the scene of everyday experience to supplement an otherwise totalizing interpretation of Foucauldian biopolitics.¹

Attuning to state and community discourses regarding issues of relational belonging, I examine the ways in which dominant frameworks for intelligibility rely on fixed modes of recognition that center white, cisgender, masculinized and heteronormative subjectivity from which “difference” is established as definitionally derivative and oppositional. I posit that such a framework concretizes identitarian categories, reducing their complexity to a negotiation of failures to achieve—not opportunities to rethink—the ontological status of humanness. The reductionist result produces and sustains conditions for dispossession and social death. I offer that B(Q)F lived experience provides the opportunity to consider an alternative framework for intelligibility: one that conceptualizes social life through the recognition of ways that precarity²

¹ Ewa Plonowska Ziarek’s powerful critique of Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life” identifies its “central paradox,” arguing that it is “not only the erasure of political distinctions but also the negative differentiation, or privation, such erasure produces with respect to differences that used to characterize a *form of life* that was destroyed” (89-90). In this essay, race and gender are highlighted to provide a corrective to that dilemma though they are treated as politically separate in the discussion of pre-/modern forms of slavery (race) and in the British suffragette movement (gender). I similarly respond to the concept of bare life, adding a perspective that complicates the cleavage between race and gender by taking an intersectional approach to politicizing difference. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008), 89-105; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

² Precarity, as I use throughout the dissertation, refers to the politicized condition of vulnerability, or dispossession, that proceeds from hierarchies of social organization. It recognizes the pervasive impact of systematic social and economic oppression, while also denoting the arbitrary enactments of violence that characterize state and institutional power. Drawing on Judith Butler’s explication, it also encompasses “other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection” (ii). I also invest in the notion that precarity opens space for political possibility at sites of state inaction where arbitrariness reflects the limits of state power to consistently act with precision. This is especially prescient regarding matters of cultural expression and collective participation in subversive socialities. Such enactments of agency effectively utilize the absence of state or institutional oversight to forward praxes of resistance to domination and subjugation. Judith Butler, “Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics” *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*

informs the inventiveness and adaptability of everyday interactions within structural and cultural institutions.

For my case studies, I summon instances of black diasporic cultural expression and knowledge production, mostly from the US, and marginally from the UK. In one instance, I look at the ways that coalition work resulted in nationally and internationally recognized publications of black queer political thought, including BLACK/OUT magazine in the US and the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre's newsletters in the UK. In another, I examine black queer aesthetic style which draws on historicized European and US practices of dandyism. However, I also make minor detours from the US and UK in Chapter 3's reflection on transnational collaborative work of black queer activism which includes mention of Caribbean, South Asian, and African LGBT organizations and conferences. In Chapter 5, I engage a brief consideration of public address pursued in the name of national interests regarding antiblack violence in the treatment of Aboriginal Australians. Though nationally-specific cultural and political historicity informs my examination of the rhetorical context of black cultural expression and knowledge production, it does so that I may trace the consistency of patterns that emerge in the production of antiblack, misogynistic, and queerantagonistic systemic and social discourses. I am mindful, too, of the fact that systemic structural hierarchies of postcolonial domination deploy controlling mechanisms that exceed national interests. Addressing this, my analyses challenge the universalizing effects of Enlightenment-based constructions of the sovereign subject; I operate from the notion that

4, no. 3 (2009), i-xii; Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, "Precarity as Political Concept, or Fordism as Exception," *Theory, Culture and Society* 25, nos. 7-8 (2008): 51-72; Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider, "Precarity and Performance: An Introduction," *TDR/The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (2012): 5-9.

definitions of humanity are culturally and historically contingent, which speaks to the possibilities of B(Q)F ontology in the here and now, and for the future.

Many of the contemporary concerns that organize my research have engaged scholars in the field of Communication and, adjacently, Performance Studies, though they have not always been attentive to dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality simultaneously—especially regarding black queer women and femmes. This is true even considering the theoretical turn toward intersectionality that takes root in the 1990s following Kimberlé Crenshaw’s germinal essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”³ The continued marginalization of the experiences of women of color—particularly black women—is still common practice as indicated by the dismissively low number of publications centering this community in communication and media studies. The dearth of scholarship on black lesbianism, for example, effectively diminishes black queer women’s visibility as a rhetorical community that creates and utilizes alternative frames for social organization. Many of the available critical studies are limited in the sense that they address axes of oppression as singular and often without reference to significant interactional dynamics—i.e., focusing on race and gender separate from sexuality, or sexuality and race separate from gender expression and class, etc. And within this subset, most works focus on gay male masculinities, thereby obfuscating black queer femininities.⁴ Notably, contemporary scholarship such as Eric

³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (July 1991), 1241-99.

⁴ Jasmine Cobb and Robin Means Coleman, “Two Snaps and a Twist: Controlling Images of Black Male Homosexuality on Television,” *African American Research Perspectives* 13, no. 1 (2010): 82-98; Jeffrey Q. McCune, “‘Out’ in the Club: The Down Low, Hip-hop, and the Architexture of Black Masculinity,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2008): 298-314; Francesca T. Royster, “Introductory Notes: Performing Queer Lives,” *Biography* 34, no.3 (2011), v-xii; John M. Sloop, “In a Queer Time and Place and Race: Intersectionality Comes of Age,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 3 (2005): 312-26; and Julee Tate, “From Girly Men to

King Watt's "Queer Harlem: Exploring the Rhetorical Limits of a Black Gay 'Utopia'" on the emergence of black queer voice and rhetorical capacity consistently centers black gay male gender performativity as indicative of a more broadly construed black queer rhetorical practice.⁵

Black lesbianism is fruitfully taken up as a matter of intellectual and political utility in work that centers individual orators such as Audre Lorde,⁶ or that which interrogates the role of individual academics in pursuing critical intersectional scholarship⁷ and pedagogy.⁸ Others are attentive to the broader context of social movement organizational affiliation, which argues for the inclusion of—but does not specifically address—black lesbian perspectives.⁹ Further focus on black lesbian performativity emphasizes rhetorical style¹⁰; yet most treatments of black women's sexuality in Communication and Rhetoric scholarship center cisgender, heterosexual

Manly Men: The Evolving Representation of Male Homosexuality in Twenty-First Century Telenovelas," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 29 (2011): 102-14.

⁵ Eric King Watts, "Queer Harlem: Exploring the Rhetorical Limits of a Black Gay 'Utopia'" in *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, ed. Charles E. Morris (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 74-92.

⁶ Lester C. Olson, "The Personal, the Political, and Others: Audre Lorde Denouncing 'The Second Sex Conference,'" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33, no. 3 (2000): 259-85.

⁷ Shirley Anne Tate, "Playing in the Dark: Being Unafraid and Impolite," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18.1 (Feb. 2011): 94-96.

⁸ Karen Lovaas, "Speaking to Silence: Toward Queering Nonverbal Communication," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, nos. 2-4 (2003): 87-107; Gust A. Yep, "The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies: Notes on Injury, Healing, and Queer World-Making," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, nos. 2-4 (2003): 11-59.

⁹ Sherri Williams, "LGBT Stories Need Ethnic, Gender Diversity," *Quill* 101, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2013), 26-26; Mark P. Orbe, "Laying the Foundation for Co-Cultural Communication Theory: An Inductive Approach to Studying 'Non-Dominant' Communication Strategies and the Facts That Influence Them," *Communication Studies* 47, no. 3 (1996): 157-76; Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, and John P. Elia, "Introduction: Queering Communication: Starting the Conversation," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, nos. 2-4 (2003): 1-10; Gust A. Yep, "Queering/Quaring/Kauering/Crippin'/Transing 'Other Bodies' in Intercultural Communication," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 6, no. 2 (2013): 118-26.

¹⁰ Maribe Tebogo and Heather Brookes, "Male Youth Talk in the Construction of Black Lesbian Identities," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 32.2 (2014), 199-214.

narratives.¹¹ Communication scholar Sheena Howard's conceptualization of a "black queer identity matrix" remains one of the most comprehensive attempts in Communication Studies to address black lesbian identity by way of a sustained methodological intervention and critique.¹² Generally, scholarly engagements with black queerness are more broadly subsumed within studies of queer of color critique and cultural criticism of popular media and film.¹³ These studies largely deploy Black Feminist theories and methodologies in the study of black gay masculinity as representative of queerness, which further eschews black queer women and femme sexualities.

Black and Women of Color Feminisms have been addressed with far greater frequency and over a longer sustained period in the discipline.¹⁴ Olga Idriss Davis and Marsha Houston's foundational edited collection *Centering Ourselves* remains a vital resource of black feminist communication scholarship focusing on public address and rhetorical criticism. Even this volume misses the opportunity to engage race, gender, and a multiplicity of sexualities. In this edited

¹¹ Marsha Houston and Olga Idriss Davis, eds., *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002).

¹² Sheena C. Howard, *Black Queer Identity Matrix: Towards an Integrate Queer of Color Framework* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014).

¹³ Paul Andrew, "Is Queer the New Black," *Metro* 140 (2004): 146-49; Joan Faber McAlister, "Making Feminist, Queer, Latinx, and #BlackVotesMatter," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 353-56; Shinsuke Eguchi, Bernadette M. Calafell, and Nicole Files-Thompson, "Intersectionality and Quare Theory: Fantasizing African American male Same-Sex Relationships in Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 7, no. 3 (Sep 2014), 371-89; Shinsuke Eguchi and Myra N. Roberts, "Gay Rapping and Possibilities: A Quare Reading of 'Throw that Boy P***y,'" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, nos. 2-3 (April-July 2015): 142-57.

¹⁴ Katrina E. Bell, Mark P. Orbe, Darlene K. Dummond, and Sakile Kai Camara, "Accepting the Challenge of Centralizing Without Essentializing: Black Feminist Thought and African American Women's Communicative Experiences," *Women's Studies in Communication* 23, no. 1 (2000): 41-62; Marsha Houston Stanback, "What Makes Scholarship about Black Women and communication Feminist Communication Scholarship," *Women's Studies in Communication* 11, no.1 (1988), 28-31.

collection, it is worth noting that all but one of the included essays focus explicitly on cisgender, heterosexual black women's experiences and communities. Even the standout essay by Eric K. Watts, "The Female Voice in Hip-Hop: An Exploration into the Potential of Erotic Appeal," does not explicitly mention black lesbian sexuality but only alludes to it by referring to Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the erotic.¹⁵ Other essays in the collection cite and utilize queer women of color feminisms, citing scholars such as Barbara Smith and Gloria Anzaldúa, without explicitly mentioning or drawing connections between race, gender, and queer sexualities. In contemporary scholarship, recent collections such as *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies* have attempted to bridge the growing distance between woman of color theoretical interventions and communication studies, and these books feature important intersectional work.¹⁶ However, explicit study of black queer femme/feminist histories and public discourse is lacking. Other historical takes on lesbianism and queer women are most commonly studied without concerted attention to racial dynamics or explicit discussion of gender expression.¹⁷ The omission of black lesbian histories is indicative of a pervasive scholarly trend of erasure that commodifies black feminist and black queer scholarship, yet omits black queer femme subjects from sustained intellectual consideration.

My research addresses the gap in Communication Studies where blackness, queerness, and femininity converge as a generative site for scholarly inquiry. The discourses and histories I

¹⁵ In Houston and Davis, *Centering Ourselves*, 187-213.

¹⁶ Karma R. Chávez and Cindy L. Griffin, eds., *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015); Leila J. Rupp and Susan Kathleen Freeman, *Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017).

examine in respective chapter analyses focus on consistencies in B(Q)F cultural responses to forms of oppression, which are read as responsive to structural patterns of subjugation and modes of displacement. For example, I establish the fugitive possibility of B(Q)F style by recognizing the ways in which it disrupts the ongoing generation of controlling images that dominate popular representations of black women and femmes in the afterlife of slavery. In rejecting the image of a sexually deviant Jezebel¹⁸—whose historical narrative begins with the commodification and sexual abjection of black women,¹⁹ and the equally limiting notion of black feminine respectability²⁰ that was developed in the post-slavery effort to assimilate into American class mobility, I suggest that dandyism refuses that binary historical narrative. The long shadow of slavery has deeply affected the ways in which B(Q)F embodiment is now, and has since been, ontologically and epistemologically constructed. That similar patterns emerge across black diasporic conditions asserts the connectedness of both outcomes of and responses to the “afterlife” of slavery.

Conceptualizing the *onto-epistemic archive* (OEA), I draw on a complementary set of theoretical foundations that are put into conversation to better situate readings of black queer

¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Carolyn M. West, “Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training* 23, no. 3 (1995): 458-467.

¹⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17 no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

²⁰ E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Paisley Jane Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 212-220.

femme sociality without positing descriptive notions of identity. As stated earlier in the Introduction, this project is invested in interrogating historical contingency in the rendering of cultural expression. Toward this end, I engage an Afro-pessimistic²¹ conceptualization of ontology which posits that blackness, as related to structural enactments of antiblackness, is a condition that is representative of the status of non-human.²² Like Jared Sexton, I refuse the notion of black pathology here, and I operationalize this reading of blackness such that it does not recognize the nature of power as absolute, which Sexton suggests is a common misinterpretation of Foucault (also a matter of contention in Afro-Pessimism).²³ Therefore, the ontology of blackness conceptualizes “the condition of statelessness.”²⁴ This rendering of ontology posits a relation to categorical statuses of humanness, i.e., human, not-quite-human, and non-human which aligns OEAs with the dissertation’s overarching scholarly project of exploring praxes of being human. The ontological, in this formation, refers to the context within which knowledge and practices of social life emerge. Epistemology then, as I use it here, refers to ways that knowledges are produced in relation to the conditions of social death and in the production of social life. This construction is genealogically related to the Deleuzian problematizing of “the image of thought” as natural and unbiased. This conceptualization presupposes that knowledge is

²¹ For a general introductory overview to the key claims of Afro-Pessimism as well as a discussion of some of its limits: Michael A. Barlow, Jr., “Addressing Shortcomings of Afro-Pessimism,” *Inquiries: Social Science, Art, and Humanities* 8, no. 09 (2016): 1-21.

²² Frank B. Wilderson III, *White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008).

²³ Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions* 5 (2011), 1-47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37 (n. 1).

not necessarily rational or intrinsic, but it is instead a matter of considering relationality.²⁵ In the context I develop throughout the dissertation, it signifies on experiences of navigating day-to-day functions of dispossession. Finally, my expansion of the archive as a theoretical utility follows from Kate Eichorn's notion that engaging the archive is about "the tracing of accidents, disparities, conflicts, and haphazard conditions."²⁶ I use the archive metaphorically as a depository within which, as a scholar, I collect the artifacts that constitute the context wherein I map how, when, why, and where dispossession affects the production of social life for black queer women and femmes. I build on Eichorn's notion that the archive presents itself "not only as a conceptual space in which to rethink time, history, and progress against the grain of dominant ideologies but also as an apparatus through which to continue making and legitimizing forms of knowledge and cultural production that neoliberal restructuring otherwise renders untenable."²⁷ Therefore, onto-epistemic archives organize a reading of the conditions constituting a praxis of being human, with attention to the multiplicity of authorized (traditional, scholarly, institutional) and unauthorized (cultural, experiential, precarious) knowledges deployed in the production of social life.

In this dissertation, I track three structural patterns through the development of onto-epistemic archives: antiblackness, misogyny, and queer antagonism. I work through B(Q)F communicative formations in response to the racial "hierarchy of human life"²⁸ that necessitates

²⁵ For a thorough distillation of Gilles Deleuze's perspective on epistemology as developed through his philosophical practice: Carsten Strathausen, "Epistemological Reflections on Minor Points in Deleuze," *Theory & Event* 13, no.4 (2010): <http://muse.jhu.edu.pitt.idm.oclc.org/article/407139>.

²⁶ Kate Eichorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 8.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

antiblackness, or rather, the near-totalizing subjugation of black bodies as human commodities and capital. This perspective on antiblackness recognizes the ways in which the consumption of blackness has evolved from the literal buying and selling of bodies to the types of cultural consumption that continue to objectify black people in the present. Here I am thinking about the ways that black women's bodies were used to physically produce capital in the form of their children as slave laborers, where she would be forced to bear as many children as her body could conceive. Such a history that is reflected in the subsequent demonizing of black motherhood as unproductive, a narrative substantiated by initiatives such as the Moynihan report,²⁹ which were then turned into devastating legal policies. I complicate constructions of race in the consideration of gendering and ungendering in relation to racialized misogyny, which traffics in the production of controlling images. Again, I return to the ways in which gender is policed such that black femininity is denied complex representation in cultural and political formations. Beyond controlling images, I interrogate misogynist practices such as the historical erasure of black women from narratives of police violence, a problematic that increases their exposure to said violence. This is further complicated by the mishandling of issues of sexual violence, a dilemma that disproportionately affects black women and femmes who are always already constructed as lacking innocence and virtue. I build on this dynamic framework by also interrogating compulsory (hetero)sexuality for B(Q)F subjects as derivative of chattel slavery's legalized and culturally constituted praxes of sexual abjection against which queerness is operationalized. This perspective takes up queerness as it disrupts claims to black women and femme bodily autonomy, offering agency in the form of B(Q)F expressions of desire and

²⁹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965): <https://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>

intimacy or even the refusal to engage in sexual behaviors altogether. The structural patterns I follow develop into a narrative that contextualizes B(Q)F discursive traditions that I illuminate as counter-discourses in the production of social life. In four discrete though related analyses, I gesture toward the possibility of B(Q)F onto-epistemology suggesting that social life does not reach a resolute end in precarity, but is instead defined by an alternate set of conditions that mitigate the praxis of being human.

The dissertation's case studies are organized within four OEA chapters: Liberation, Refusal, Exception, and Intimacy. The progression of texts moves from the structural to the interpersonal; from the exterior considerations of black queer women and femmes in physical and intellectual community, to the interiority of B(Q)F affective life. I begin with a discussion of black LGBT activism and intellectual emergence to situate the historical moment within which black queer femininity became an epistemic site for collective action. I highlight the ways that race and gender displacements within mainstream social movements of the 1980s erased or otherwise obfuscated black women's cultural and political interests. This era marks the contemporary beginning of an explicitly black queer femme *topos* of political action. I then proceed to identify a collective within the larger tradition of black queer femme advocacy, illuminating the ways that one queer style movement builds on the displacements recognized in the first study by further complicating how gender functions to delimit social relationships. From here, I move into the third study that takes up social relationships again, but this time much closer to the individual within a larger systemic constellation. I continue to think through B(Q)F socialities by exploring the variety of ways that structural violence impacts the everyday lives of black women and femmes, here focusing primarily on trans and gender non-binary persons and the complex relationship to dispossession that exists in shared space with cisgender black

women. Finally, I turn toward the interiority of B(Q)F affective discourse to think through what dispossession entails in the realm of interpersonal, erotic intimacy. Contextualized by displacements of race, gender, and sexuality, I explore the negotiations of identity that structure B(Q)F interactions with the category of sexual orientation. This progression of OEAs moves from the formation of community to the autonomous recognition of subjectivity, generating a narrative of B(Q)F sociality along the way. The following provides more detail on each chapter's texts and aims.

Chapter 3, OEA: Liberation, takes an alternative approach to thinking through lesbian history and social movement discourse. In this first case study, I establish black queer activism and critical scholarly production as the mechanisms through which an epistemic “home-place” is constructed. I examine the history of exclusions that necessitate black queer femme collective action in the late 1980s and early 1990s, motivated by heightened activity of transnational, liberation social movements. Following the scholarly and advocacy career of Barbara Smith—a noteworthy black lesbian activist figure and thought leader—I think through her broad ranging influence in multiple organizations, collectives, working groups, and auxiliary movements. Her career shines light on the work of two organizations, the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) in the US and the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre (BLGC) in the UK, whose work was central to the launch of a network for black LGBT coalitions. In this chapter, I focus on the cultural artifacts that Smith and the two organizations develop toward creating possibilities for a fuller recognition of the ways race, gender, and sexuality are co-constitutive of social life. Like Michael Shapiro's reflection on divisions between women and men in mainstream gay rights movement politics,³⁰ I highlight additional divisions related to issues of

³⁰ Michael Shapiro, “Gays and Lesbians,” *American Speech* 65, no. 2 (1990): 191-92.

race and gender that move black lesbians and queer women to focus on intersectional as opposed to single-axis approaches to liberation work.

OEA: Refusal follows with post-liberation movement example of black queer femme cultural expression in the form of the dandy. I examine the emergence of this unique rhetorical figure of historical and political significance in relation to practices of self-authoring, self-styling and other performances of agency that challenge objectifying, reductive controlling images of black women and femmes. In this study, I look at online social networks and collaborations that forward a notion of queer activism that is embodied and performed as a matter of sartorial choice. Katherine Senders' "No Hard Feelings: Reflexive and Queer Affect in the New Media Landscape" provides a model for understanding how online queer communities form around GLBT visibility and self-representation.³¹ My engagement with this topic draws connections between the need for affirmation through consciousness-raising and visibility, but I also extend this to the creation of a discursive community that signifies on both aesthetic and non-aesthetic black popular media and artistry. I develop the concept of *queer sartorial vernacular* as it reflects the contemporary, gender non-binary black dandy femme—or dapper quare—that has gained visibility in online style forums such as DapperQ and masculine-of-center visibility projects, like Bklyn (Brooklyn) Boihood and the Brown Boi Project. These online networks function similarly to the Greg Young's conceptualization of narrowcasting,³² building on the

³¹ Katherine Sender, "No Hard Feelings: Reflexive and Queer Affect in the New Media Landscape," *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, ed. Karen Ross (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2012): 207-225.

³² Greg Young, "From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting to 'Mycasting': A Newfound Celebrity in Queer Internet Communities," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18, no.1 (2004): 43-62.

notion of personal branding toward a more politicized visibility and representation discourse that centers community networking instead of personal promotion.

In the next chapter, OEA: Exception, I turn towards autoethnography first to establish the relationality between black cisgender, trans, and non-binary women and femmes' displacements that increase vulnerability to structural and interpersonal violence. Here, I focus on the ways that systemic legal policy and practice, as well as toxic masculinity culture, sustain antiblack misogyny while also creating the conditions within which relational belonging between black women and femmes is made legible. Further, I consider two homicide cases of domestic and partner violence that result from queerantagonistic antiblack misogyny. I also evaluate news media practices of reporting or covering homicides and suicides, especially regarding practices of misgendering and doxing that inflict additional violence on victims and their communities. I interrogate the ways that media responses fail to validate trans and gender non-binary humanities even in the reporting of death. This chapter's analysis draws inspiration from Jamie C. Capuzza's "What's in a Name? Transgender Identity, Metareporting, and the Misgendering of Chelsea Manning,"³³ building on this framework to more deeply consider how antiblackness and forced gendering/ungendering engages in practices of dispossession made commonplace in the afterlife of chattel slavery.

Finally, in OEA: Intimacy, I stage an encounter between texts that suggest an ongoing interaction between black femme subjects in response to repetitive displacements from normative frameworks for race, gender, and sexuality. Here I examine theoretical engagements

³³ Jamie C. Capuzza, "What's in a Name? Transgender Identity, Metareporting, and the Misgendering of Chelsea Manning," *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, ed., Leland G. Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzza (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 93-110.

with the category of “asexuality” as a social orientation in conversation with statements made in an interview I performed with a black, queer, cisgender woman narrator. E. Patrick Johnson’s use of interviews in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*³⁴ and essay reflections on oral history (in conversation with Jason Ruiz)³⁵ guides my use and interpretation of interview materials while demonstrating the necessity of collecting black queer narratives. In an experimental format, I intervene in the production of analysis with the affective insights of Solange Knowles’ lyricism in the audio-visual album *A Seat at the Table* as well as Gayl Jones’ writing of the titular character Eva Medina from the novel *Eva’s Man*. Drawing together oral history, and creative and literary texts, I think through the concept of asexual social orientations, suggesting that “sexual orientation” as a singular identificatory category misrepresents-by-omission the ways that attraction, desire, models for kinship, and expectations or practices of intimacy always already account for a multiplicity of social displacements. More precisely, I seek to address how the category engages B(Q)F historical and contemporary dispossession as rooted in practices of sexual commodification and objectification, externally enforced gendering/ungendering, and antiblackness. This final chapter begins, but does not resolve, a criticism of social identity categories for sexuality in an effort to demonstrate the utility of working through onto-epistemic archives as a framework for sustaining cultural critique.

My dissertation aims to intervene in the production of scholarship that attempts to read marginalized space through processes that misrecognize the contextual ground for culturally responsive expression. My investment in an interdisciplinary approach and methodological

³⁴ E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

³⁵ Jason Ruiz and E. Patrick Johnson, “Pleasure and Pain in Black Queer Oral History and Performance: E. Patrick Johnson and Jason Ruiz in Conversation,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 160-80.

flexibility is suited to adaptation across humanities fields, but my contribution holds particular importance for Cultural Studies, intersectional Communication Studies, Black Studies, Queer Theory, and Sexuality and Gender Studies.

In the following chapter, I provide theoretical prolegomena for the ensuing case studies. This chapter establishes a rationale for my approach to the primary texts as well as the methodology that proceeds in the development of OEAs. From there, I construct four OEA studies that illuminate different aspects of B(Q)F social life by analyzing modes of relational belonging: from the development of community through activism and scholarship, to complex dynamics of interpersonal affective relationships between individuals. In the following chapters, I work through the ways that appositional subjectivities build from structural displacements and affirm precarity in praxes of being human—a rejection of the presumed stability of sovereign normativity.

2.0 THEORETICAL PROLEGOMENA

This chapter is divided into three sections that outline the theoretical framework of this project. In the first section, I establish the relationship between theories of Black/Afro-Pessimism and Afrofuturism, and then intelligibility and recognition, which underwrite undercommon appositionality. The second section briefly summarizes the debate regarding black intellectualism and ethical considerations in scholarly theorizing of Man/Human(ity). Here, I take seriously the conflicts of interest that often accompany theoretical work of this nature, and I attempt to situate my intellectual praxis within a tradition of black queer feminist liberatory struggle. The third section develops the operational framework, an anti-colonial epistemology of humanness, through which my project progresses. As I explain, I systematically juxtapose agonisms and antagonisms to read rhetorical scenes that draw attention to ways of knowing and being that are deeply impacted by conditions of precarity.

Whereas defining the subject differently was a prior motivation for this work, a more accurate articulation of positionality seeks to give up attempts to explicitly definitionally stabilize the subject altogether. Instead, this project explores ways of knowing that critically disrupt and refuse fixity as an organizing logic in the category of “human.” I read humanness as

a praxis of precarity,¹ anchored by discursive contingency²—a recognition of the ebbs and flows of assemblages,³ intersections, and interactions that produce what we know and what we do not know or understand; a reflection of what is articulable and what is not; an invitation to delegitimize the “margins” and “outside” as analogous to forms of life. Following philosophical traditions from Kant and Hegel through Husserl, Gadamer, and others interested in the question of human subjectivity, I intervene with the critical perspective of black (queer) femininity that opens new possibilities for human understanding and understanding humanness. This project argues for, and attempts to provide, substantial alternatives to reproducing power/domination models of the human.

¹ Franco Barchiesi has prolifically written on the topic of precarity in relationship to blackness/anti-blackness in previously unpublished contexts. Two of his working papers from conference presentations provide an overview of precariousness as a political theory: Franco Barchiesi. "Precarity as Capture: A Conceptual Reconstruction and Critique of the Worker-Slave Analogy" Revised version of Paper Presented at the International Colloquium "The Politics of Precarious Society", Johannesburg (South Africa), University of the Witwatersrand, September 5-6, 2012 (2012); idem, "On the (R)uses of "Precarity": Neoliberalism, Time, and the Fact of (Anti)Blackness," from the Symposium on "Neoliberalism: Past and Present," Rutgers University (2017).

² Shauna L. Scott, *Two Sides to Everything: The Cultural Construction of Class Consciousness in Harlan County, Kentucky*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995); Will Leggett, *Politics and Social Theory: The Inescapable Social, the Irreducibly Political* (London, UK: Palgrave, 2016); Donald Gillies, *Educational Leadership and Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Lilie Chouliaraki, "The Contingency of Universality': Some Thoughts on Discourse and Realism," *Social Semiotics* 12, no. 1 (2002): 83-114.

³ Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, (New York: Continuum, 2006).

2.1 AFRO-PESSIMISM AND AFROFUTURISM AS THEORETICAL PARTNERS

When Saidiya Hartman writes “I, too, am the afterlife of slavery,”⁴ the haunting refrain unmoors the black captive from the hold of chattel slavery and releases her into the precarity of its consequence. The pervasive effects of slavery on the political, social, and cultural development of the contemporary moment is the subject of study for Afro-pessimists seeking to understand the ways in which this history is ever-present.

Afro-pessimism (here also including what some scholars distinguish as afro-optimism⁵) refers to a genre of intellectual inquiry, or critical philosophical intervention, that is invested in articulating black ontological suffering—alternatively, though not equivocally, referred to as social death, necropolitics, and onticide⁶—as related to the afterlife of chattel slavery. Further, it theorizes black subjugation as irrevocable fungibility, which posits that blackness is commodity, and relatedly, that Black people continue to experience the effects of being denied personhood through various modes of dehumanizing practices and ideologies that sustain structural antiblackness. Though influenced (often through corrective critique) by the work of Foucault, Fanon, Agamben, Deleuze, Guattari, and other critical, postmodern, psychoanalytic and

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

⁵ The theoretical descriptor of “afro-pessimism” denotes a broad range of explicitly and implicitly defined scholarship. While this is not a traditional or established discipline, it is a category of contemporary scholarship with a significant impact on current political and intellectual debates. My project engages a variety of contexts but also leans toward afro-optimism in its focus on fugitivity and possibility. The subtle difference between afro-pessimism and afro-optimism can be reflected in its proposed “(re)solution” to the oppositional relationship between the Human and the Black, as defined by Stephen H. Marshall in “The Political Life of Fungibility,” *Theory and Event* 15, no. 3 (2012): <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/484457>.

⁶ Calvin Warren, *Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics* (Berlin: Ill Will Editions, 2014): <https://illwilleditions.noblogs.org/files/2015/09/Warren-Onticide-Afropessimism-Queer-Theory-and-Ethics-READ.pdf>

poststructural theorists, Afropessimism is a constellation of theories and methodologies that accumulate thematically around conceptualizing black suffering. This work emerges from a broad range of disciplines such as History, Film Studies, Queer Theory, Black Feminist Theory, Political Science, Art History, English Literature, Black Studies, and Philosophy to name a few. It is also explored and further developed through nonacademic social theory and critique.⁷ Importantly, much of Afro-pessimistic scholarship is made possible by the alternate onto-epistemological genealogies of humanity posited by black women's intellectual work which challenges the notion of *homo oeconomicus* as the primary metaphor for Man as human.

It is also worth noting that analyses that progress through an optics of antiblackness frequently eschew concentrations on gender and/or sexuality instead of viewing these as constitutive in ways of being or not-being, knowing or un-knowing. Sexton and Copeland suggest that “diverse practices of racialization and the shifting race rules that characterize the long career of white supremacy gather overarching consistency at the site of the black body.”⁸ Yet this argument is derived from what I think of as black feminist pessimism, or scholarship that foregrounds *black feminine subjectivities and ontologies* and *black sexualities* to further disrupt the notion of the Human in its current modern western construct. Sexton and Copeland's erasure of a key aspect of this theorization emphasizes the ways in which black femininity and queerness get subsumed under a broader racializing project. As previously mentioned, I am interested in processes of *being* human that engage living with, beyond, and in relation to the

⁷ Here I am referring to the work of independent scholars and public intellectuals, social critics, activists and others who participate in public deliberatory processes and literary productions that help to challenge and shape the scholarly (and institutionally regulated) knowledge of interest to the core questions of Afro-pessimism.

⁸ Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003), 57.

“destructive matrix”⁹ of antiblackness, queer antagonism, and misogyny. Though gender and sexuality are not explicitly named as part and parcel of theories of antiblackness which presumably center race, I assert that both are technologies of knowledge, i.e., amalgamations, that must be accounted for in their significant roles in the staging of precarity (that overarching consistency that accumulates at the site of the black body). Weheliye’s *habeas viscus* offers a complementary grammar that asserts queerness, a result of ungendering, as a corrective attuning to “im/potential libidinal currents”¹⁰ sustained through epistemologies of ignorance when he argues that the “hieroglyphics of the flesh intimately bind blackness to queering and ungendering.”¹¹ In the forthcoming chapters I emphasize that the “absence” of gender and “unspeakability” of sexuality require deeper analytical treatment, not erasure, in interrogating the logics that organize “racializing assemblages.”

Social death is deployed here as a way of denoting the condition of non-beingness, or non-ontology, associated with blackness specifically as it relates to social order, cultural dynamics, and relationships of Black people to apparatuses of state power. It refers to the cumulative effect of antiblack formations in the afterlife of slavery. My dissertation acknowledges the impact of antiblackness as materially, psychologically, and emotionally violent; however, it is also mundane in its everyday formations. Afro-pessimism argues that the modern world as we know it could not exist without the stabilizing consistency of antiblackness,

⁹ Calvin L. Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2015), 215-248, qt. on 240.

¹⁰ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 108.

¹¹ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 97. For a fuller account of this argument, see Weheliye’s explication of the “defacing assemblages of the flesh.”

yet it poses a sustained threat to sovereign power that cannot be resolved as it is the “lifeblood”¹² of modernity. As Calvin Warren argues in “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” antiblackness is “the system of thought and organization of existence that structures the relationship between object/subject, human/animal, rational/irrational, and free/enslaved — essentially the categories that constitute the field of Ontology.”¹³ While it produces conditions that deny what Samera Esmeir refers to as “juridical humanity”¹⁴—an affirmative legal recognition of one’s humanity which is then reflected in very fabric of social life—its impact is so excessive that it presents as normative, and thus, imperceptible without astute attention to its grammars.¹⁵

A grammar of suffering, explored throughout this project, structures the concept of social death as related to the approximate stability of subject positions. It codes implicit and explicit structural logics of hierarchical order that distinguish the human/non-human (or not-quite-human) in terms of black vulnerability, abjection, objectification, and dispossession. These

¹² See Sharon Patricia Holland’s explication of the “psychic life of racism” in the Introduction to her *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) in which she argues that racism, is the “lifeblood” of race and that it “dismembers the ‘real’—so robs and eviscerates it that nothing and no one can appear as ‘whole’ in its strange and brutal refraction,” (6). The structuring logic she refers to as “the everyday system of terror and pleasure” signifies on the articulations of antiblackness that I suggest are the structural logic of the system she describes.

¹³ Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 237.

¹⁴ Samera Esmeir, “On Making Dehumanization Possible,” *PMLA* 121, no.5 (2006), 1544-51.

¹⁵ “Grammars,” as I use the metaphor throughout this project, refer to the rhetorical structure of discourses and their constitutive antagonisms, agonisms, and epistemic logics. Grammars are “submerged in speech” (Frank B. Wilderson III, *White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010], 31) and reflect prediscursive affective economies, yet they can be revealed in rhetorical analysis. For example, grammars of suffering are made apparent in the analysis of what Saidiya Harman calls “scenes of subjection” (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)). As with linguistic grammar, ontological grammars are largely unspoken yet they are assumed. The “rules” of operation are most often articulated through structural critique. This project explores and conceives of epistemic archives that inform grammars of social life as distinct though related to grammars of social death.

affective, discursive formations have been theorized as “racializing assemblages” (Weheliye), “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (Spillers), “fungibility” (Hartman), and more recently “blood strangers” (Holland). Though each articulation of a grammar of suffering listed here refers to explicitly defined theoretical genealogies, they each attend to the project of belonging that simultaneously necessitates black inclusion-by-subjugation and sustains an epistemology of unknowing that relegates blackness to irreconcilable unintelligibility. Relating the concept of racializing assemblages to Spillers’ theorization of the flesh/body, Weheliye summarizes this contentious relationship, noting “In the absence of kin, family, gender, belonging, language, personhood, property, and official records, among many other factors, what remains is the flesh, the living, speaking, thinking, feeling, and imagining flesh: the ether that holds together the world of Man while at the same time forming the condition of possibility for this world’s demise.”¹⁶ Grammars of suffering provide symbolic, signifiable legibility to the experience of blackness in our current order of social life. And as Weheliye argues, it also makes possible the destruction of systems that insist on black unintelligibility to produce antagonistic renderings of the human.

Part of the dynamic that produces illegibility of blackness is conflict of temporality within which we reference it: black slavery as an institution was time-specific, but blackness as an organizing logic that descended from it loses that specificity, thereby disrupting the temporal frame. Simultaneously fixed and fugitive, it signifies on the status of the slave while also acting as anchoring referent for establishing “relative degrees of freedom.”¹⁷ In this way, blackness

¹⁶ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

¹⁷ On postemancipation racial formations of “Anglo and Latin America”: “As a result of the vectors established by this spatial and temporal mapping, political struggle is located in the relative degrees of freedom afforded or secured apropos of racial definition and identification. On this account, freedom from the one-drop rule is construed artfully (because not without

stands as a necessary component of reading race that acknowledges, however begrudgingly, that the black slave body cannot be left behind as it continuously situates racial signifiers in proximity to itself. In the afterlife of slavery, the fact of blackness as proximate to death/capture ultimately positions whiteness as proximate to life/freedom, therefore establishing not only a binary opposition, but the rhetorical boundaries of racial identification and definition. I refer to this liminality as the atemporal condition of blackness which is directly related to its subjects' precarity. While racialization is a process that is constantly shifting, and changing its rules of application, its anchoring referent of antiblackness remains consistent.

Afrofuturism, then, draws from the historical and epistemological narratives of Afro-pessimism and speculates how we might exist given alternative social, political, economic, and existential conditions. As described by Afrofuturist Ytasha Womack, it “combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.”¹⁸ While there is no explicit disciplinary canon of Afrofuturism, scholars such as Sharon P. Holland, Christina Sharpe, Sylvia Wynter, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and thought producers of the Black Quantum Futurism¹⁹ movement such as Rasheedah Phillips, Nikita Okembe-RA Imani, and Joy Kmt assert the necessity of not only

consistency) as freedom from the exigencies of being identified, or identifying oneself, with racial blackness.” Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), 6.

¹⁸ Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 9.

¹⁹ Rasheedah Phillips compiled and conceived of the volume *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice* ([Philadelphia, PA]: Afrofuturist Affair/House of Future Sciences Books, 2015) as a project of the website/collective <http://www.afrofuturistaffair.com>. This edited collection features work from educators, artists, and other self-proclaimed Afrofuturists on a variety of topics from reconceptualizing time and space, to black aesthetics, quantum technologies of being.

acknowledging the systemic social organizing logics of our past and present, but also forwarding creative, imaginative alternatives that we have not yet thought possible *because of* our focus on structural oppression's limited ontological potential. Together, these two theoretical models offer the possibility of redress that is foreclosed by Giorgio Agamben's conception of bare life.²⁰ Alexander Weheliye astutely critiques this failure as it does not consider the possibility of "a political imaginary that rests in the tradition of the oppressed":

The idea of bare life as espoused by Giorgio Agamben and his followers discursively duplicates the very violence it describes without offering any compelling theoretical or political alternatives to our current order [...] when we consult the fleshly testimonies of and about subjects that inhabit the sphere of mere life (the enslaved, political prisoners, concentration camp detainees, for instance). Still, these voices should not be construed as fountains of suffering authenticity but as instantiations of a radically different political imaginary, which refuses to only see, feel, hear, smell, and taste bare life in the subjectivity of the oppressed.²¹

While Afropessimism and its theoretical accomplices establish the conditions that produce bare life for the captive black body, Afrofuturism offers an intervention that draws from the same genealogy and presumes possibility beyond the state of exception and bare life constructed as a totalizing, exclusively legal category. I take the aspects of imagination, creativity, futurity, disruption, and technology, and the central thematic of liberation as a way of

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²¹ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 82.

weaponizing the limits of structural oppression toward its own destruction. Within this frame, I argue that fugitivity,²² more specifically Harney and Moten's notion of *fugitive study* as derived from the *undercommons*,²³ is an Afrofuturist method by which possibility is made achievable.

The undercommons²⁴ refers to a theoretical space and place that Stefano Moten and Fred Harney describes when referring to the originary subject who is always already responsive to, a product of, and a creator within the dis-order that arises from dominant institutional structures' failure to maintain sovereignty over all (human) subjects. A praxis of fugitivity, then, underscores the personal agency and irrefutable autonomy of those who mobilize the performativity of refusal as a method of navigating social life:

Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? Not simply to be among his own;

²² Fugitivity has been loosely defined between texts as a social capacity for engaging in a creative escape from abjection rooted in the historical flight of black slaves from captivity, an act that has not yet been realized but offers infinite promise as a modality for the production of social life. This definition is based on the variety of conceptualizations developed in the works of Daphne Brooks, Saidiya Hartman, Nathaniel Mackey, Frank Wilderson, and Fred Moten. For a broad introduction to this concept and related articulations of fungibility, the impasse, and antiblackness, see the special issue of *The Black Scholar*: "Special Issue: States of Black Studies," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 44, no. 2, (2014).

²³ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, NY: Autonomedia, 2013).

²⁴ For other applications of "undercommons" see: Stevphen Shukaitis, "Infrapolitics and the Nomadic Educational Machine," in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, ed., edited by Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis Fernandez, Anthony J. Nocella II, and Deric Shannon (London: Routledge, 2009), 166-174; Eric A. Stanley, "Gender Self-Determination," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (2014): 89-91; Alexis Lothian, "A Different Kind of Love: Vidding Fandom's Undercommons," *Cinema Journal* 54.3 (Spring 2015): 138-45; Tavia Nyong'o, "Situating Precarity between the Body and the Commons," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23.2 (2013): 157-61.

but to be among his own in dispossession, to be among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything.²⁵

I suggest, that blackness, femme-ness²⁶, and queerness potentially exist together in the space of the undercommons as interactional modalities of improvisational study. What is learned in the practice of fugitive study, then, can be conceptualized in discourse, developed and deployed as techniques to produce social life in the commons.

²⁵ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 96.

²⁶ Sydney Fonteyn Lewis's articulation of "Black Femme-inism"—indebted to Roderick Ferguson's queer of color critique and Barbara Smith's black feminist literary criticism—develops "Femme" as challenge to the antiblack erasure of femininity. Building on Spillers' gendering/ungendering, she argues "If black women have been ungendered, that is 'out of the traditional symbolics of female gender,' this erasure provides an unintentional space for rescripting black femininity" (105). Definitions of femme carry different colloquial resonances, but persist in emphasis on challenging the everyday expression of heteronormative gender binaries. Femme presents both danger and safety, respectability and gross impropriety, desire and rejection. For black femmes, gender is always already a question, but also an undisciplined exploration of possibility. I use this term throughout, in syntactical variations, to draw on this disruptive force and forward a conceptualization of gender that affirms the feminine and does not seek to quiet its brazen indifference to order.

Lewis distinguishes Femininity and Femme, drawing on a variety of other scholars, noting: "While femininity is 'the demand placed on female bodies,' Femme is 'the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine' (Chloë T. Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* [Vancouver, B.C.: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002], 13). However, Femme is not homogenous. Femme identity can only be defined as indefinite—a swagger of beauty, pleasure, and unruliness that struts across time and place. For Brushwood Rose and Camilleri, Femme's 'wildness is mercurial, encompassing the earthly and metaphysical' (12). It is 'inherently 'queer'—in the broadest application of the word—as bent, unfixed, unhinged, and finally unhyphenated [...] femininity gone wrong'—bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy (12-13). Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha attests that, for women of color, Femme in its 'brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious[ness] [...] goes far beyond the standards of whitemiddleclass [sic] feminine propriety' ("On Being Bisexual Femme," in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, ed. Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker [New York: Routledge, 1997], 142). In order to realize its parodic threat, Femme must be a trickster—constantly shifting, glamouring, dancing—the magician and her lovely assistant." Sydney Fonteyn Lewis, "Everything I know about being femme I learned from *Sula*," or Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism," *Trans-Scripts* 2 (2012), 104-106.

Situated in response to the rejection of identity politics, the undercommons suggests an alternative to categorical frames of recognition. Instead, we can consider an orientation toward being and knowing that eschews the comfort that stability offered by affirming that there are no guarantees, no social or cultural scripts, no definitive prescriptions for life and death (or making live and letting die, as commonly characterized within Foucauldian biopolitics). Instead, existence within and despite systemic structures of domination is always already an act of motion here defined as “undercommon appositionality.”²⁷ This presents a unique genre of active refusal that marks lives lived and lost in excess of sovereign attempts to constrain. In the forthcoming chapters, I take up Moten and Harney’s notion of undercommon appositionality as it a useful alternative to “subject position” which, for the sake of distinction, more accurately refers to intersections within matrices of oppression. As the counter to that framing, undercommon appositionality suggests a different sort of aggregation or accumulation of constitutive sources. Precarity situates the subject in the constancy of instability in such a way that that instability becomes the ontological condition of appositionality. The discomfort and dis-organization of precarity requires the development of a new set of tools and technologies for analysis.

2.2 INTELLIGIBILITY AND RECOGNITION

As developed at length by Karma Chávez in *Queer Migration Politics*, radical interactionality follows from the tradition of women of color (WOC) feminist conceptualizations of intersectionality.²⁸ In this application to an explicit deployment of rhetorical theory, it is defined

²⁷ Moten and Harney, *Undercommons*, 11.

²⁸ Karma R. Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 2013), 7.

as “a form of rhetorical confrontation that begins critique from the roots of a problem or crisis and methodically reveals how systems of power and oppression interact with one another in ways that produce subjects, institutions, and ideologies that enable and constrain political response.”²⁹ In thinking through the ways that intelligibility functions, I build from this definition of interactionality to better understand the ways that anti-colonial³⁰ subjects navigate those operations of power in building responsive social systems and cultural expressions. My work moves forward from this conceptual framework toward the conflicting site of struggle noted in current discourses regarding the non-ontology (or onticide) of black, queer, and femme appositional subjects.

My research ultimately engages notions of power as related to knowledge production and formation, authentication, and affirmation.³¹ More specifically, I am interested in how marginalized bodies navigate the everyday within systems of dominance/control while also

²⁹ Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics*, 51.

³⁰ On power/domination and systems of intelligibility referring to black, queer, and femme subjects: James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*; Charles E. Morris, *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007); Eric King Watts, “The Problem of Race in Public Address Research: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Conflicted Aesthetics of Race,” *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address*, ed. Shawn J Parry-Giles and J Michael Hogan (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2007), 373-397; Sharon P. Holland, Cathy J. Cohen, E. Patrick Johnson, and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Marsha Houston and Olga Idriss Davis, *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse* (Hampton, VA: Hampton Press, 2002); Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17 no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

³¹ See the Habermasian concept of *Geltungsanspruch*, from his theory of communication action, which develops the notion of social intelligibility of interaction with regard to how we interrogate truth claims according to the context within which a rubric of validity is authorized. This idea opens up the spectrum of possible constructions of intelligibility, jettisoning the centrality of a dominant, empirical claim to definitional authority. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. I: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984 [German, 1981, vol. 1]).

creating and sustaining non-normative practices of knowledge formation rooted in the cultivation of culture.³² Along the lines of DuBoisian double consciousness, my analytical framework recognizes the internalization of norms of dominance that must be struggled against in ways that are not as clearly defined by the oppositional binary of resistance/domination. For appositional subjects, the work of resistance must also account for practices of survival that often participate in the reproduction of oppressions. The challenge to domination is not always perfectly subversive, however the moments I interrogate heuristically point toward new directions of being even if it is the case that full actualization is out of reach. The proceeding analyses consider how theories of power and knowledge inform the mundane practices everyday living. These theories will help to distinguish that which is rhetorically significant, yet not easily mappable through social movement discourse and related philosophies regarding the construction of Man/Human.

In theorizing subjectivity, or a praxis of being human, I seek a nuanced understanding of frameworks for recognition that, perhaps, provide more possibilities than modern systems of intelligibility. As Judith Butler argues in *Frames of War* “If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense.”³³ From this point, Butler recognizes the problem of framing, and the problem of the epistemic investments that “fail to apprehend the lives of others,”³⁴ as an operation of power. However, I would also add to this the failure to comprehend lives as lived, for it is not only the recognition of loss or injury that matters here, but the full scope of recognition that would be attentive to the production of social life regarding those very

³² Raymond Allen Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Social Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

³³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (New York, NY: Verso, 2009), 1.

³⁴ Butler, *Frames*, 1.

same ontological omissions. Butler cites that it is the “normative production of ontology” that “produces the epistemological problem of apprehending life.”³⁵ Here, I am concerned with how the ontology of the subject is generated about social life in the undercommons as opposed to a framing that centers social death or, otherwise, bare life.

This project can be read as an attempt, without desire of resolution, to manage the problem of unwieldy ontologies—those of subjects produced in the failures of the normative instance.³⁶ Whereas failure to reproduce relies on an assumption of affective desire to become that which is being mimicked, or the normative ideal [read: whiteness, normative masculinity and sexuality], I want to suggest that refusal offers a different conceptual schema for understanding the stakes of this “failed” relationship between subjectivity and performativity.³⁷ In some ways, I want to sit firmly in the damning of the universalizing politics of inclusion that establish personhood as preceding recognizability. However, I cannot effectively dismiss the power of the rhetorical move to claim personhood as a right, especially in the sense of addressing specific political and social justice projects. My dissertation calls into question the viability of universalizing claims that ground subjective recognition. What alternatives exist that can do the symbolic work of organizing (in some communicable, articulatable way) the generation of ontologies of the subject? Given the conditions set forth in the passage below, the indefinite

³⁵ Butler, *Frames*, 3-5

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Butler distinguishes recognizability from recognition in the following ways: for Butler, recognizability relies on a notion of “personhood” that preemptively installs the normative ideal described as “all we need to know” to assess a subject as recognizable in the first. Recognizability precedes recognition, it makes recognition possible. The presupposition of norms already excludes by the application of existing norms. Recognition differs in that it is a reciprocal act or practice that affirms the subject as intelligible given the conditions set forth in recognizability.

condition of unanswerable debt of the slave, what options help us move away from subjectivity as requiring enclosure, naming, and articulation?

In the clear, critical light of day, illusory administrators whisper of our need for institutions, and all institutions are political, and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there's nothing wrong with us. We don't want to be correct and we won't be corrected. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good [...] We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything.³⁸

My analyses consider appositional subjects as they exist within and adjacent to systems of control/dominance. Embodied difference speaks to the inability of these specific bodies to visibly or discursively reconstruct the self as normative in societies where white male heterosexist patriarchal privilege structures social organization. I am interested in seeing how Afro-pessimism complicates notions of subjectivity and possibilities for resistance; however, Afro-optimism/-futurism may illuminate unacknowledged rhetorical forms that appositional subjects develop in imagining and constructing non-normative visions of social order.

Here, I want to consider Lauren Berlant's *impasse* and forces that disorganize the everyday as especially useful given the lingering hesitations from my reading of Butler. Berlant refers to the space of this type of "ordinary" as one "for inventing new rhythms for living, rhythms that could, at any time, congeal into norms, forms, and institutions."³⁹ Understanding

³⁸ Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, emphasis added, 20; also, see John Schilb, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences' Expectations* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007).

³⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 9.

that recognition relies in some ways on the establishment and reproducibility of norms, it follows that regardless of the disruption or repetitive nature of breakages that can be considered the marker of a given frame, the drive is almost always toward a sense of stability or sameness or some sort of tangible center around which meanings can accumulate. Whereas I initially wanted to draw attention to the danger of normativity, I must also acknowledge its *doxa*, underscoring inevitability as some sense of a normative is required for there to be a rhythm (involving repetition), or consistency, to life that allows us to make sense of our experiences. I can, perhaps, rearticulate my interest as an investment in conceptualizing systems that, maybe instead of offering an unattainable fantasy for life that necessitates certain hierarchies, instead suggest life-affirming ways of being and knowing that recognize the constancy of the impasse. In my mind, the impasse is (or can be) infinite, depending on who is defined as a part of any temporal, spatial, or otherwise rhetorically demarcated “situation.”

Further, Elizabeth Povinelli adds some emphasis to this last statement, arguing that, “The social worlds of the impractical and disagreeable remain in durative time. They persist. But they do not persist in the abstract. From the perspective of dominant worlds, the condition in which they endure has the temporal structure of limbo—an edge of life located somewhere between given and new social positions and roles, and between the conditions of the past and the promise of the future.”⁴⁰ This characterization fairly describes what we often refer to using metaphors such as “living in the margins” or the “outside,” where nondominant anti-colonial subjects inhabit non-normative spaces yet still produce social life. Povinelli invokes the metaphor of brackets to delimit a specific type of precarity that is cited as a matter of recognition in a slightly

⁴⁰ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 78.

more generous sense than what is discussed earlier in Butler. Recognition is noted here as only one of several types of apprehension that is incomplete and in some ways reductive of the complexity of what comprises life inside the brackets.⁴¹ Dissonance, indeterminacy, and undecidability appear to also be characteristics of the impasse that warrant further consideration.⁴² However, agency affords some modifications of recognition and intelligibility, such as in practices like signifying⁴³ and code-switching, which deliberately invoke a false reading of subjugation by dominant groups which preserves the integrity of locally understood identity. In other words, appositional subjects are aware of their displacements, however they maintain fugitive spaces and learn how to use them in a variety of explicit and implicit challenges to sovereign normativity and social order. To this, I must ask, how does an epistemology account for, or remain accountable to, the irreparable damage of bracketing while also affirming the potentialities made achievable through the complex workings within delimited space? The affective economy of the undercommons is (un-)structured by precarity, existing between the “given and the future,” it alludes to an atemporality that resists linear models of analytic engagement. How, then, can an effective analysis be achieved?

In some ways, this project explores what Rhetoric, and rhetorical criticism specifically, offers as a frame for understanding how performance, experience, and symbolic practices constitute the “everyday” transgressions recruited by appositional B(Q)F subjects in the production of social life. There are, however, limits to what this disciplinary method can achieve

⁴¹ Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 78.

⁴² Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 81-83.

⁴³ Shanara Reid-Brinkley, “Mammies and Matriarchs: Feminine Style and Signifyin(g) in Carol Moseley Braun’s 2003-2004 Campaign for the Presidency,” in *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies*, eds., Karma Chávez and Cindy Griffin (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012): 35-58.

without positing (and therefore reinforcing) a biocentric notion of humanness that situates blackness as spectacle; defines queerness as reactionary to normativity; and establishes femme/femininity as lack. Though I question the epistemological foundation underwriting the assumed rhetorical subject, I also recognize the difficulty of reconciling public performance with intentionally and unintentionally subversive communicative acts. How does the concept of bare life delimit what is often theorized as the abject excess of blackness and queerness? In what ways do notions of invisibility and visibility factor into the everyday interactions that shape appositional subjects' experiences? What types of cultural forms come into being and how are these forms used to cultivate collectives, communities, and political alliances? How do such collectives curate knowledge and what does this knowledge contribute to how we can better engage notions of subjectivity regarding what is unintelligible? Bearing these questions in mind, I will explore how specific "historically marginalized" groups create, manipulate, or otherwise employ subversive tactics of fugitive study to sustain affirmative ways of knowing and being that decenter structural logics of domination and oppression. While there are deliberate practices that appositional subjects undertake that actively challenge systems of domination, such as LGBT activism that I take up in the next chapter, other practices are simply lived and not articulated as intentional rhetorical moves—for what feels right or comes naturally to the scene of the undercommons is sometimes all the license necessary to invoke resistance. These considerations guide the selection of my primary sources and inform how I determine appropriate heuristic moments that provide insight into the undercommons as well as into the oppositional spaces of the commons that interact and overlap in the lives of subjects who constantly move between and within these generative sites of conflict.

2.3 PLACELESSNESS/PRECARITY AND UNDERCOMMON APPOSITIONALITY

Within black social theories, the metaphorical deployment of *placelessness* has been used to describe structural processes of domination regarding “systems that have a stake in the continued objectification of social spaces, social beings, and social systems.”⁴⁴ Within the framework I develop here, *apositionality* refers to a construction of black (queer) femme placelessness that is evidenced by the ontological and epistemological displacement of difference. Drawing on the concept of “cartographies of struggle,”⁴⁵ this project maps diasporic relations of contested space and place at a multiplicity of sites/cites/sights⁴⁶ of displacement. The anxiety of ontological placelessness produces another modality for the interpretation and knowability of space and place—or, “*where* the imperative of a perspective of struggle takes place.”⁴⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s foundation for this perspective insists that once scholarship “begins to address histories of colonialism, capitalism, race, and gender as inextricably interrelated, our very conceptual maps are redrawn and transformed”⁴⁸ and it is through this lens that I interrogate the dominant circulating discourses of social, political communities.

⁴⁴ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 6.

⁴⁵ McKittrick develops this concept in *Demonic Grounds* as a way of attending to the “where” of displacement, dispossession, dysselection, etc.

⁴⁶ Site/cite/sight refers to the interactional modes of engagement with discursive symbolic artifacts; material, epistemic, and ontological referents constitute the terrain of study from which I draw the context of the onto-epistemic archive (OEA). “Sites” approximate physical, material, and evental space and place; “cites” approximate epistemological and affective space and place; “sights” approximate visual and aesthetic space and place. McKittrick uses a similar discursive device in *Demonic Grounds*; however, I also emphasize this as a methodological tool for pursuing the analysis of texts used to produce the OEA.

⁴⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 6.

⁴⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in *Cartographies of Struggle*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3.

Reviewing Raymie McKerrow's foundational discussion of Foucault on discourse and critique, I recognize the principles of a critical rhetoric⁴⁹ that hold similar analytic goals as what I am attempting to do, especially regarding the "possibility of revolt" that an orientation to discourse offers the rhetorician.⁵⁰ While not without some theoretical differences in the construction of rhetorical perspective, I accept that McKerrow's principles act as a useful referent for developing an analytic that seeks to illuminate social relations with attention to normative power and its systems of power-domination. This project is made possible through a study of the ways in which a critical rhetoric reveals operations of power, and thus exposes the logics that underwrite the displacement of difference.⁵¹ Such structures affirm the limits of identification through repetitive acts of negation⁵² which organize present hierarchies of

⁴⁹ Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989), 98: "Discourse is the tactical dimension of the operation of power in its manifold relations at all levels of society, within and between its institutions, groups and individuals. The task of a critical rhetoric is to undermine and expose the discourse of power in order to thwart its effects in a social relation." Toward rethinking rhetoric, p. 101: "The reversal of 'public address' to 'discourse which addresses publics' places the critic in the role of 'inventor.'"

⁵⁰ McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 97: "Concomitantly, Foucault is not seeking a particular normative structure-critique is not about the business of moving us toward perfection (it is not transcendental in the Neo-Kantian, Habermasian sense), nor is it avowedly anarchistic (Fields [1988, p. 143] overstates the case). Rather, it is simply non-privileging with respect to the options its analysis raises for consideration. On demonstrating the manner in which our social relations constrain us, often in ways that are virtually invisible, which occur at such a deep and remote level in our past as to be anonymous, the possibility of revolt is opened."

⁵¹ Displacement of difference refers to the ways that processes of "othering" function with a constant, naturalizing effect that produces the normative standard. In our current modern humanism, this normative standard provides the rubric for marking/unmarking "otherness" with directed attention to race, gender, sexuality/sexual orientation, able-bodied-ness, etc.

⁵² Structured through a genealogy of works that recognize the epistemological and systemic ontological constructions of blackness as lack, there exists a centuries-long theoretical engagement with "positioning" black subjectivity which anchors the Fanonian project of sociogeny. For a brief introduction to the establishment of this theoretical premise, see: Demetrius L. Eudell, "'Come on Kid, Let's Go Get the Thing': The Sociogenic Principle and the Being of Being Black/Human," *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 21-43.

humanness. For example, the dominating narrative of normativity situates non-white/cisgender/heterosexual/able-bodied, etc., identity explicitly as displacement—i.e., symbolic and material designations as marginal, ghettoized, minoritized, the subaltern, and so on. This oppositional framing of that which falls “outside” of what Wynter refers to as the “always non-arbitrary pre-prescribed”⁵³ is necessary for the naturalization of order required to sustain the fiction of sovereignty. Refusing the terms and conditions that legitimate the commons, or “spaces and places of subjugation,”⁵⁴ this project recognizes that appositional knowledges and ways of knowing are mutual to, and not directly oppositional to, dominant forms of “understanding, politicizing, and mapping the world.”⁵⁵ It is within this dynamic of placelessness that fugitivity becomes a mode of inquiry central to understanding the construction of space and place through which appositional subjects sustain social life. What tools, then, do we possess to reorient a knowledge of being that does not adhere to hierarchies of humanness so deeply ingrained in the modern socio-politico-cultural order? How do we metaphorically and materially orient ourselves as social beings if identity can be established without reference to whiteness, masculinity, or heteronormativity? In other words, what discursive practices allow us to articulate *being human* without deploying antiblackness, queer antagonism, and misogyny as structural logics?

Though Moten and Harney state that the purpose of the undercommons is not to produce a critique of politics, it provides a generative site to restructure the terrain of the symbolic universe of social life. In this way, social life is not simply restrained by structures of domination, neither is it produced and sustained *outside of* or *marginal to* dominant regulatory

⁵³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxv.

⁵⁴ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xvii.

⁵⁵ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 10.

systems. By embracing dis-order—or the excess that exists both because of and despite structural “containment,” or precarity as an ontological condition—we can begin to imagine worldmaking as a process relational to the constant movement of placeless [read: ontologically unstable, unanchored, and/or decentralized] subjects. This process incorporates breakage and assembly as both necessary and mundane; breakage is required in order to maintain the fluidity of infinite positionalities, while assembly is required to understand and make meaning of the instance of a subject’s construction (material, temporal, spatial, political, cultural, historical dynamics all contribute to the uniqueness of a subject position and its anchoring of a moment, here recognized as the moment of symbolic meaning entering into the articulable).

Undercommon appositionality recognizes the fleetingness of the intelligible subject position as it can only ever be a referent—an idea affixed to specificity when that which it refers to has already vacated the liminal constraints of its articulation. For example, in the next chapter, I take up Barbara Smith’s conceptualization of Black Feminist Criticism which asserts that black *lesbian* perspectives uniquely engage constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in a practice of critical reading. Even in asserting lesbianism as the critical intervention, it is not the identity itself that intrinsically alters perspective; the category signifies on the community from which her theorization is derived, but the process of reading she describes offers a much broader challenge to heteronormativity. Lesbianism, then, is a referent for context but what it means and how it is operationalized, whether through identity or as an analytic, determines what the boundaries of its articulation.

The navigation of appositionality requires an affective knowledge of past, present, and future possibilities that mark undercommon appositionality as a feature of the “surround”—an “outside” to that which constrains, the antithesis to the theoretical centering of structures of

domination (i.e., whiteness, normative gender, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, misogyny, etc.). Positioning the surround as a dis-organizing logic requires a semi-permanent assemblage of mechanisms that anchor an analysis of the movement of its subjects. The structuring aspects of precarity can be temporarily illuminated through the lens of interactionality, which reveal the limits of sovereign power. As Harney and Moten suggest, the general antagonism is unrepresentable or unintelligible within a normative frame, but that does not mean it is without symbolic form or otherwise incomprehensible. As my dissertation suggests, we need a different reading practice that is developed from alternative ways of knowing and being in dis-order:

We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise [sic], every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented.⁵⁶

For Moten and Harney, the investment in the undercommons is not its utility as a space of resistance or radical repudiation of politics as such. The undercommons, in one sense, is that which always already exists in the present, past, and future as an atemporal historicity that surrounds and inhabits sovereign powers' imposition of enclosed order. It is fugitivity, or "being separate from settling. It is a being in motion," that accounts for and is accountable to what is neither claimed nor named, what is unplaced, unrepresentable, and irreconcilable within the structures that have created and continue to sustain the ongoing state of dispossession. The undercommons is not a symbolic place of lack or loss, it simply *is*. And within its being-ness

⁵⁶ Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 20.

resides the affirmation of its processes of recognition without frames. However, Moten and Harney have not attended to the rhetoricity that emerges from the undercommons, and it is likely that they would consider rhetoric as the master's tools. However, in recognizing the duplicity of negotiating space within and between the commons and undercommons, I draw from and utilize what I have access to in order to forward the analytical potential of operationalizing precarity for black queer women and femmes.

This shift in focus opens a theoretical space that reveals vulnerabilities of symbolic order established as a structure of sovereign power. My project ultimately develops a model for assembling rhetorical tools that illuminate the processes through which the social comes to be constituted as definitive of and defined by undercommon appositionality. Here, precarity is not only acknowledged, but it is recognized for its productive effects; and placelessness provides a dis-organizing logic through which we can explore alternative descriptive statements of humanness. As a response to the enunciation of non-ontology (onticide) of the black queer from within the commons, and a rhetorical gesture away from a Butlerian focus on frames of recognition, my analysis is attentive to conceptualizing lives as adaptively lived in relation to the "homelessness" of unintelligibility and non-recognition. The drive here is not to reconstitute a frame within the commons as universally or essentially livable, but to understand the conditions that produce possibilities for the subject (constituted in a state of suspension) "to be among his own in dispossession, to be among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 96.

2.4 A NOTE ON ORGANIZING ONTO-EPISTEMIC ARCHIVES

I have selected four themes to anchor each OEA: Liberation, Refusal, Exception, and Intimacy. These themes reflect the sites of aggregation that inform the symbolic, discursive, and rhetorical signifiers of space and place. In the forthcoming analyses, I focus on the counter-discourses that can be infer from the artifacts in the archive. Building on McKittrick's site/sight model of inquiry, I organize the content of each archive with respect to the relevant perspectival focus on sites, sights, and cites of knowledge production. First, I engage *sites* as both material and ideological. I explore this framing through the mapping of black queer women's political and intellectual activism. The physical space of collective organizing here is not necessarily distinguishable from the epistemic place that emerges as a result of political activity. Next, I explore *sights* as a genealogical interaction with the catalytic construction of B(Q)F's ideological legibility. These texts mark the terrain of engagement, artifacts, and visual and aesthetic indications of space and place. Sights refer to the objects used to orient bodies in ways that may or may not be intentional. These attend to the physicality of being, though may be articulated through abstractions. Here I suggest the aesthetic play of black queer women and femme dandies as a sartorial vernacular—or, the utterance of style. Finally, cites denote orders of knowledge and authenticators of truth that contextualize the terms of what we know about the content referenced within any particular symbolic universe. Cites are often affective knowledges that we use to “read” environments, situations, and bodies that draw from historical, personal, political, culturally specific contingencies. The state of exception is utilized in the third analysis to emphasize the ways that dispossession underwrites appositionality and produce a unique formation of violence, but also forces new modalities for being in the social world.

The OEA model of forms of knowledge provides a framework that proceeds as a non-linear method and theory for constructing intelligibility with attention to relevant contingent information for reading the symbolic field. Below I have identified the four aspects of an epistemology derived from OEA construction that will be revealed through critical rhetorical analysis of B(Q)F scenes of worldmaking/social life, otherwise discussed as the spaces/places ideographically and rhetorically mapped.

1. Archive (frame): collects, indexes, accumulates across space and place; provides context for legibility. Organized by historical, social, cultural and political citations, the archive generates a multifaceted narrative that draws on a broad variety of texts. Considering theoretical applications of interactionality and Deleuzian assemblage, archives document the structural logics that contribute physical and discursive ephemera for thematic contextual consideration. In this project, contextual arrangements are reflected in the themes Liberation, Refusal, Exception, and Intimacy. The archive reflects the ephemera it aggregates and relatedly, the grammars that organize each collection.
2. Grammars (structural logic): organizes discursive fields including the symbolic grounds for ascertaining the boundaries of the explicit “referent-we,” or *who* authorizes, conceives, actuates, and manages the reproduction of conditions for recognition and terms of intelligibility. Spillers recognizes the difficulty of unpacking grammars as such: “Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. [...] In order

for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness.”⁵⁸

Spillers’ conceptualization of grammars attends to structural positionality, and also the fugitivity of “inventiveness” which suggests challenging, claiming/reclaiming, subverting, and creating ways of knowing and being that respond to and also exceed that positionality. Layered through interactional processes of invention and dispossession, grammars provide the “master code” or ordering logic for articulating social life. Rhetorical analysis is one of the tools utilized here to identify and provide legibility for understanding grammars of black (queer) femme social life. In this project, the naming of each onto-epistemic archive is related to its attending grammars. The thematic contexts presented by the archive are revealed in the structural repetitions that piece together disparate archival ephemera into a broader narrative. Such narratives drive cultural capacities for meaning-making, and imagine futurity by establishing viable modes of producing frames for intelligibility that respond to fugitive movements in precarity.

3. Definitional Statement (organizes the genre/norm of being human that establishes an attending order of knowledge): contextualizes the discursive field for processes of recognition and its derivative articulations of intelligibility. It forwards the guiding logic that establishes boundaries for interpellation. In this project, the descriptive

⁵⁸ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 65.

statement is always already incomplete, partial, and non-totalizing. As an anti-colonial analytic, it recognizes its own limitations and partiality in contributing to different notions of the human, or as Wynter names it, “genres” of humanness. In this way, descriptive statements are not explicitly stated but are instead revealed in the autopoietic construction of ontological possibilities. The descriptive statement that emerges from this dissertation organizes ontological possibility around the notion of precarity, and the production of appositionality which substantiates multiple praxes of being human.

4. Praxis of being human, i.e., Social Life (objects/subjects derivative of the descriptive statement): what is actualized given the symbolic terrain made articulable through the mapping of space/place. It produces new archives through which the marking and unmarking of social topographies moves, staying attentive to conditions of precarity. As an object of study, a “praxis of being human” is not so much defined by a singular statement of how to produce social life; instead, it is the recognition of the many possibilities for social life that emerge from the various adaptations appositional subjects make in navigating dispossession. Praxes reveal historical, temporal, spatial, cultural, political, and epistemological social citations which can be read through study of contextualized symbolisms. In this project, black (queer) femme worldmaking is highlighted through various objects of study, such as black queer media and black queer femme sartorial style, as related to the displacement experienced by appositional ontologies. B(Q)F social lives proceed through praxes of worldmaking that affirm the legitimacy of appositionality while simultaneously

generating new foundations for alternative orders of knowledge and ways of being in the world. Precarity demands innovation, and appositionality substantiates ontological inventiveness.

The onto-epistemic archive, then, deploys contingency as a systematic model for contextualizing rhetorical analyses. A black (queer) femme anti-colonial episteme that indexes activism (epistemological (re)production), aesthetics (vernacular code), abjection (gender/ungendering as a state of exception), and affect (desire as informed praxis) provides a structural critique that rejects an order of knowledge assumed to adhere to a stable, fixed referent. The fixed referent in this sense is in relation to the colonial “project of belonging”⁵⁹ which requires participation in the production of hierarchical difference such that identity/identifying with others (belonging imposed by relation, community, or pseudo-autonomous choice) functions to contain or delimit boundaries and cull excess. Blackness, being both affect and way of knowing, is a consistent instability in the project of belonging that defines itself by using the black body as “quintessential sign for subjection, for a particular experience that it must inhabit and own *all by itself*.”⁶⁰ This project’s mapping of onto-epistemic archives, however, attends to the possibilities of black flesh, queered and femme, and argues a belonging that centers autonomous consent and rejects the force of sovereign imposition.

⁵⁹ Holland, *Erotic Life of Racism*, 3-4

⁶⁰ Holland, *Erotic Life of Racism*, 4 (emphasis in original).

3.0 OEA: LIBERATION

3.1 “WHEN S.H.E.¹ WOKE”

The project of liberation for African-Americans has found urgency in two passionate motivations that are twinned— (1) to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behavior that make such syntax possible; (2) to introduce a new *semantic* field/fold more appropriate to his/her own historic movement.²

Activism and scholarly production will be taken up in this chapter as relational practices that disrupt the oppressive grammars structuring ontological and epistemological dispossession. Here, I recognize the culminating effects of displacement that often construct these two areas of in(ter)vention and creativity as oppositional in a way that serves the interest of antiblack, queerantagonistic misogyny. More precisely, I analyze the ways that black (queer) femme appositionality garners a form of displacement that sustains a social hypervisibility while producing political and, relatedly, cultural, erasure. I refer to this assemblage of effects as

¹ S.H.E. is defined as “Singular. Historical. Exogenous.” in relationship to the claim that “Black, female, colored, and queer share a simultaneity that opens them to violence, reduction, and forgetting. This is a historical ordering so sedimented, to echo [Phillip Brian] Harper, that even our attempts to *forget* such a designation are often futile...Black.Colored.Female.Queer. marks an undisciplined sector of the discipline: the representations of her have shifted from the dangerous and volatile to the abject and weak; S.H.E. (Singular. Historical. Exogenous.) is both protector and protected.” Sharon P. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 65.

² Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 226. Emphasis in original.

*misogynoir's*³ *ressentiment*⁴, an accumulation of negative affects that reflect a “historical ordering so sedimented” that it overdetermines the “violence, reduction, and forgetting” through which B(Q)F life is theorized. The following discussion of this dynamic foregrounds the genealogical scene where S.H.E. (Singular. Historical. Exogenous) constructs space and place toward a sociality that centers her own process of becoming. Who can S.H.E. be if not relegated to an ontology of “resistance”? What is her place if not oppositional to a central normative figure? Can S.H.E. exist in time and space if neither acknowledges her presence? Hortense Spillers’ suggestion of twinned motivations is where we begin constructing a black (queer) femme-attentive onto-epistemic grammar of “liberation.”

This chapter then moves forward with an analysis of ephemera I use to develop OEA: Liberation, the first consideration for imagining a praxis of being human attuned to precarity.

³ Black Feminist scholar Moya Bailey first uses this neologism in an essay on her *Crunkfeminist* blog, “They aren’t talking about me...” noting that it was a term she made up “to describe the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual and popular culture.” [http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/] The term has since been expanded and developed in public intellectual discourses regarding the unique formation of anti-black misogyny experienced in other social and political contexts in addition to visual and popular media representation. For more discussion on Bailey’s development of the term, see the following: Lisa Woolfork, “Nominal Blackness,” in *Rhetorics of Names and Naming*, ed. Star Medzerian Vanguri (New York: Routledge, 2016): 49-68.

⁴ I draw on the use of Nietzsche’s *ressentiment* that deploys it as a framework for understanding racism (Remley). In this context, it refers to the condition of prolonged negative affect out of which values are constructed toward a targeted class of subjects. As an aggregation of negative emotions, it does not necessarily emerge as direct, explicit action, but it pervasively influences a broad range of behaviors, attitudes and beliefs (Rollins). Regarding race, and in my corrective also gender, it refers to the deep internalization of aggression that is driven by exacerbated feelings of helplessness in the face of oppression (Fanon). William L. Remley, “Nietzsche’s Concept of *Ressentiment* as the Psychological Structure for Sartre’s Theory of Anti-Semitism,” *Journal of European Studies* 46, no. 2 (2016): 143-59; Judith Rollins, “Invisibility, Consciousness of the Other, *Ressentiment*,” in *Situated Lives: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Louise Lamphere, Helena Ragoné, and Patricia Zavella (New York: Routledge, 1997): 255-70; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008): 46, 54, 197.

Using content drawn from 1980s “newsheets” (newsletters) of London’s Black Lesbian and Gay Centre (BLGC) read alongside an interactional genealogical approach to scholarly works and commentary of American black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith (I explore the ways that knowledge is produced about, for, and with accountability to B(Q)F ways of being and knowing. The link between the organization and the scholar-activist is not direct and it is important to note the geographical and national specificity that shapes the politics that each engages. That they were active in roughly the same time frame and with high visibility is important to emphasize because it speaks to evolving trends in the Anglo-American world regarding black LGBT communities. As I reached further into Smith’s history of social movement networks, I repeatedly found spaces of overlap that could not be ignored. Blackness, queerness, and women’s political and cultural presence threads together otherwise disparate lives and collectives, thereby establishing a space beyond linearity—an unmapped social geography where those who were seeking a place to explore relational belonging, found it. Smith is a consistent figure whose political activity and scholarly work was expansive, and thankfully, undisciplined by forced or limited organizational affiliations. As activist and composer Bernice Johnson Reagon reflects, there is something unique about sustaining a longevity and commitment to movement work that so often depletes the resolve of those who try:

Now, there were a few people who kept up with many of those issues. They are very rare. Anytime you find a person showing up at all of those struggles, and they have some sense of sanity by your definition, not theirs (cause almost everybody thinks they’re sane), one, study with them, and two, protect them. They’re gonna be in trouble shortly because they are the most visible ones. They hold the key to turning the century with our principles and ideals intact. They can teach you how to cross cultures and not kill

yourself. And you need to begin to make a checklist—it's not long, you can probably count on your two hands. When it comes to political organizing, and when it comes to your basic survival, there are a few people who took the sweep from the 60's to the 80's and they didn't miss a step. They could stand it all.⁵

Barbara Smith is one of those people whose commitments to coalitional political work crossed so many paths that it is impossible to quantify her influence. However, in an interactional genealogical approach to mapping B(Q)F onto-epistemic emergence, Smith stands out as a black queer cultural architect whose constructions illuminate the sites and scenes that were (are) foundational for knowledge production. In short, whenever I lost my way tracking black queer women's historical presence, near or far, I returned to Smith and found a path to follow. There were many routes through her history to choose from, such as following her scholarly work and publications in black feminist thought, perhaps focusing on her contributions to the Combahee River Collective or efforts building Kitchen Table Press. However, I was drawn to the connections I found between Smith's mapped network and the interrelated activities of London's BLGC. The shared struggles of black queer women across borders suggests a consistent structural logic of dispossession and displacement that I will explore in this chapter.

Utilizing the sites/sights/cites model, this chapter develops the archival **site** by establishing how an epistemological foundation is rooted in activist and intellectual work by and for black queer women and femmes. First, I will illustrate the creation of a "home-place" where I use advocacy and the imperative of political action as an optic for understanding the formation of community as well as modes of recognition and articulations of intelligibility. Next, I examine

⁵ Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table—Women of Color Press, 1983), 363-64.

how the tangible artifacts, such as the BLGC newsletters and black lesbian presses, document black queer presence, forms of knowledge, and negotiations of systemic exclusions. Finally, I argue that black queer femme citational praxis rejects the structural *forgetting* of black women and femmes; instead, it centers the polyvocal perspectives that preserve queer experience as vital to developing and forwarding a critical black feminism.

3.1.1 Black (Queer) Feminist Re-/production and *Misogynoir's Ressentiment*

In 1994, Ann duCille proclaimed that black feminism occupies a precarious status within the academy, due, in part, to its lack of a disciplinary home and the pervasive denigration of black feminist intellectual and affective labor. More than two decades later, black feminism's status is equally, if not more, precarious, particularly as it has been relegated to the bastion of identity politics, a designation every rigorous critic now regards as passé. At the same time, amidst growing concerns around the ontological status of black life, the neoliberal rollback of civil rights gains, and persistent theorizations of post-911 conditions, activists, scholars, and cultural critics alike are reaching back for and stretching out toward black feminist analytics, methods, and politics. They have lauded the import of black feminism's theorization(s) of historical and current conditions, asserting that black feminism cultivates inroads to freedom.⁶

⁶ Kathleen E. Bethel, "Black Feminist Futures: A Reading List," at *Black Perspectives*, 14 April 2017: <http://www.aaihs.org/black-feminist-futures-a-reading-list/>

Wherever black femmes tread, liberation work follows; but so does the antagonistic force of dispossession that would silence them into submission, or see them exterminated altogether. The trick, however, is that the black femme's existence (or body as mythologized from flesh) is necessary for sustaining the fiction of sovereignty and the overrepresentation of Man-as-human. In other words, the racialized hierarchy of social order can only be justified by ensuring that there is an established order for punching downward. Within an antiblack system that privileges whiteness and masculinity, among other classifications, blackness and femininity define two necessary components against which value can be ascribed.

Despite its undisciplined nature, Black Feminism has entered the public lexicon and forever changed the discursive terrain of public debate about race and gender. Long before it had a name, it existed in the unaccounted knowledges and ways of being in the world that were denied articulation. Today, we recognize it as an intellectual/scholarly as well as activist discourse: it belongs to neither epistemic space exclusively, and it disrupts from all sites of its emergence. It is not without cause that I introduce the “problem” of the black intellectual into this conversation, especially regarding the transgressions between public and private, civic and systemic institutions, as this set of conflicts troubles the debate over the authenticity and validity of knowledges deemed capable of entertaining the question of the human. Black feminist intellectual activism/advocacy incites its own peculiar *ressentiment* from which some of the most scathing critiques of black women and femmes are borne. As Holland suggests in the rendering of the “Singular. Historical. Exogenous.” (S.H.E.), the simultaneity of blackness, queerness, and femininity produces a unique appositionality with a phenomenologically significant affective, structural, and systemic materiality. Here, queerness effectively haunts the ideological terrain of “black feminism” as an unnamed agonism—which underwrites the antagonistic *ressentiment*.

However, its impact persists in disrupting the semantic field/fold to suggest an alternative order of things. In this section, I will introduce some of the ways *misogynoir's ressentiment* effectively shapes common discourses regarding black (queer) femme visibility and the assumption of gains from the broad circulation of a limited scope of Black Feminist ideologies.

3.1.2 Black Feminism Undisciplined

For decades Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Olga Idriss Davis, Barbara Ransby, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni and countless others have utilized their scholarly and public political platforms, gaining traction in the black feminist convergence from creative art to academic institutions, to lament the visceral disregard with which black women's intellectual labor has been consumed and pillaged while its producers are routinely dismissed, disregarded, shunned, and sometimes altogether cast out from the premiere spaces of intellectual elite. Which is not to say that becoming a class of elites based on white supremacist capitalist notions of value is now or has ever been their goal; I am, however, arguing that black feminist scholarship largely continues to exist in a liminal state of exception that is reflected in their increased-but-still not significantly visible presence in the academy as tenured faculty, and even fewer represented in the highest-ranking faculty or administrator positions.⁷ While a notable few black feminist creative intellectuals have had more material success than others, cultivating readership in public and academic spaces, higher visibility comes at a cost that is not necessarily a proportional relationship to success. Tenure

⁷ The Condition of Education: Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty, National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS, May 2016) https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csc.asp.

success constitutes a significant obstacle; black women account for only 6 percent of the tenured faculty at all American colleges and universities and only 4 percent of the Full Professoriate.⁸ Though you can see traces of their scholarship in nearly every humanistic field of study alongside the permeation of public and private spheres (try to get away from mentions of intersectionality if you dare), that hypervisibility of ideas and arguments—most prominently featured in forums such as academic conferences, widely publicized as social justice and feminist syllabi online,⁹ and more traditional peer-reviewed publications—obfuscates the lived experiences of black women and femme creative intellectuals. As documented by many black women scholars¹⁰ (and again, these situations are further compounded when considering the experiences of black nonbinary and trans, femme-folk), public scholarship rarely counts toward tenure, so one must essentially choose between producing for public consumption or producing knowledge for a significantly smaller specialized audience of scholars. How, then, is

⁸ Ben Myers, “Where are the Minority Faculty?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (14 May 2016); <http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/where-are-the-minority-professors>.

⁹ For example, see the following: Candice Benbow, “The Lemonade Syllabus” (2016) https://issuu.com/candicebenbow/docs/lemonade_syllabus_2016; Vilissa Thompson, “Black Disabled Woman Syllabus” (2016) <http://rampyourvoice.com/2016/05/05/black-disabled-woman-syllabus-compilation/>; Crowdsourced “Ferguson Syllabus” <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/>; and Melissa Harris-Perry’s “Black Feminism Syllabus” <http://www.ebony.com/news-views/the-black-feminism-syllabus-by-melissa-harris-perry-981#axzz4bPc2sI56>—also worth noting that for the duration of the *Melissa Harris-Perry Show*, the Political Science professor provided a short syllabus for each episode and participated in online forum discussions around the thematic topics addressed both in the show and the suggested preparatory readings. Syllabus creation and distribution has become a public political praxis of communal knowledge-sharing bridging access to traditional college courses to public sphere study and engagement.

¹⁰ Blog and book, *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure* aggregates and documents data, anecdotes, peer-reviewed essays and more exploring the variety of complex ways marginalization occurs in tenure processes. The blog and Twitter accounts for the project feature in depth discussions and contributions from faculty of color, primarily women, sharing their stories at length. Patricia A. Matthew, ed., *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

accountability to one's communities sustained? This has consequences for work, such as my own, that toes the line of ethical engagement that marks theoretical scholarship as exploitative objectification of marginalized communities or (far less frequently) as integrative, interdisciplinary study *in active, mutually beneficial relationship with* related contextually appropriate laity discourses. To put a finer point on the matter, I reject the false dichotomy between academic and nonacademic intellectual labor as inherently competing epistemological perspectives. As Barbara Smith notes, this is an "immoral and false dichotomy."¹¹ Either a person is doing anti-oppression, de-colonization work or they are not. From which site you contribute is not so much a priority to authenticate than it is a way to redeploy necessary resources. Besides, the idea of having to cleave oneself into acceptable identities (codeswitching not withstanding) in order to be found [read: made legible] and deemed valuable [read: as deemed profitable to systems of domination] is at its heart a problematic investment of white supremacist neoliberal hierarchies. This is to say, none of us leave the world behind when we walk through the doors of the academy and the institution's impressions stick to our bodies when we vacate the scene; and none of us have control over the interpellation of our bodies as estranged from our flesh.¹² At what point is S.H.E. able to claim space and place in the realm of her own onto-epistemic production?

The invocation of black femme-folks' intellectual over-presence obfuscates their positioning within various cultural institutions and inflates their perceived social capital, or culturally significant value. In Roderick Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things*, Adrian Piper's *Self-*

¹¹ Barbara Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," in *But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982): 48-51.

¹² On Spillers' distinction between body and flesh, see "Mama's Baby," 260-61.

Portrait 2000 is documented as a site upon which an archive of failures is illuminated by a black creative scholar whose personal and professional life document a “chronology” of power as related to the “institutionalization of modes of difference.”¹³ Piper’s visual and poetic artwork is used to emphasize the failed promise of multiculturalism¹⁴ and inclusion in a post-sixties U.S. This time marked an era of student movements and a new articulation of disciplines within the academy. However, the proceeding adjustments made by higher education institutions has become a similar sort of overrepresentation of “representation” as “diversity/inclusion” which perpetuates a familiar fallacy of hypervisibility. The former, representation, stands in as compensation for the failed promise of the latter, diversity/inclusion. Both signify in ways that supersede the rhetorical claims of equitable inclusion.

In the public sphere, black women and femmes amass significant social media followings by producing accessible educational content and critiques, yet they are far less likely than their less prolific cisgender male counterparts to secure paid speaking engagements, visiting lecture invitations, print and online media profiles, and other professional opportunities. In fact, they are often the recipients of intense targeted harassment, violent doxing campaigns, death and rape threats that go unchecked while they are penalized for responding “inappropriately”—which is often determined through a rubric of respectability.¹⁵ Regardless of the site of black women and

¹³ Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: On the Institutionalization of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 4-5

¹⁴ Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 31-56.

¹⁵ This dynamic is well-known and commonly discussed in online forums such as Twitter and Tumblr by a broad range of black women and femmes. This critique has been written about at length by authors who prefer that their content not be included in traditional academic publications, and I will not rehearse their arguments here without the ability to adequately cite. Additionally, this dynamic can be witnessed in the unique ways harassment and “trolling” targets this particular group. The take away I will insist upon, though, is that the best way to witness these phenomena and read the thoughtful, well-argued responses of black women and femmes

femmes' epistemic convergence, there are few rewards. The processes of valuation and authentication of black women and femme's standpoint knowledges consistently reinforce the explicit and implicit human-subhuman-nonhuman ontological hierarchies organized through antiblackness, misogyny/-oir, and queer antagonism. Even so, ontologically-informed epistemologies of displacement are sustained through negotiations with the constantly shifting goalposts of the appeal to humanness. Black women and femmes are central to the project of liberation, and there will be no liberation worth claiming without them.

Another consideration that is important for fleshing out this context is the "Black Feminism"-influenced scholarship and public discourse performed by white and white-passing scholars and critics who benefit from "borrowing" its theories and analytics while speaking over, for, around, through close personal affiliation with (i.e., partnering, marriage, other kinship, etc.), but with rare reflexive *accountability to*, black women and femmes. To be clear, this type of BF-adjacent interpretative dance functions to delegitimize the breadth and depth of black feminist praxes of critical engagement. These scholarly and political performances rest heavily on the intellectual labor of a class of people who have yet to broadly see the interpersonal and professional acceptance that the seeming overrepresentation of their work would suggest. While black femme-folk¹⁶ currently lead the production of feminist thought in negotiation with and also

online, supporting (i.e. providing payment for their teaching labor), and interacting with them in genuine ways. However, one resource to help understand the critique develops the idea of *misogynoiristic expectancy*. Riley H., *Misogynoiristic Expectancy: Social Media Popularity and the Black Femme* (Model View Culture, 2015):

<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/misogynoiristic-expectancy-social-media-popularity-and-the-black-femme>.

¹⁶ Emphasis here on black queer, trans, non-binary gender femmes for whom the label of "Black Woman" both sustains and restrains as a salient symbolic signifier, I recognize that as social and political category it is frequently deployed as an identitarian label fraught with queer antagonism and transphobia.

appositional to the academy, another relevant gap in their representation remains: black women and femmes remain among the least cited scholars and creatives in general, and least *broadly* cited, when we are not citing ourselves/one another.¹⁷ This is in part due to the aforementioned devaluation of public scholarship which is often one of the only modes of engagement available

¹⁷ There is no good recent data on how many black women are contingent faculty, and even this oversight in collecting data is telling. See <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1017-how-many-women-are-adjuncts-out-there>. Considering rates of “adjunctification” or the overwhelming majority of black women in contingent, non-tenured faculty positions; social risk and political discomfort with open (public), progressive pro-black activism and advocacy; and the systematic marginalization of black women’s scholarly interests—that black women as a demographic don’t appear in discretely in the collection of data on citation practices is telling. The environment of academia has relegated this group to the smallest percentage of tenured and tenurable scholarly professionals despite the increasing production of PhD and MA degrees. I assert the claim that black women cite ourselves most because it is true, and the pattern of recognition that I develop throughout this dissertation would not break at the site of scholarly engagement as if this established institution is uniquely unaffected by white supremacist hierarchical logics. The lack of qualitative data does not negate my own personal experience of reading through thousands of book notes and article references for more than fifteen years of my own academic career in higher education. Noticing the patterns of exclusion, insufficient data does not in any way dampen the narratives that black women have been generating for decades regarding their positionality as academics. For a thorough analysis of interlocking transgressions that impact black women academics, see Tamura Lomax’s article where she draws on material from her forthcoming monograph *Loosing the Yoke: The Black Female Body in Religion and Black Popular Culture*. This article also cites The FeministWire’s 2012 forum *Take Care: Notes on the Black (Academic) Women’s Health Forum* which features extensive experiential evidence of support from women in a broad range of (dis)affiliations with academic institutions, from graduate students to independent scholars with links to the full selection of contributors found here: <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/11/take-care-notes-on-the-black-academic-womens-health-forum/>. Further contextualization of the situation of black women at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), which are the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities in the US, can be found in Erica D. McCray’s study.

Tamura Lomax, “Black Women’s Lives Don’t Matter in Academia Either, or Why I Quit Academic Spaces that Don’t Value Black Women’s Life and Labor,” *FeministWire* (18 May 2015): <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/05/black-womens-lives-dont-matter-in-academia-either-or-why-i-quit-academic-spaces-that-dont-value-black-womens-life/>. Accessed 05 May 2017.

Erica D. McCray, “Chapter 5 Woman(ist)s’ Work: The Experiences of Black Women Scholars in Education at Predominantly White Institutions,” in Gaëtane Jean-Marie and Brenda Lloyd-Jones, ed., *Women of Color in Higher Education: Turbulent Past, Promising Future (Diversity in Higher Education, Volume 9)*, (Binley, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011): 99-125.

to those whose work may be deemed unpalatable to more traditional academic audiences. It is another, though related conversation, to discuss *which* of us and *on what terms* recognition and inclusion are conferred within disciplinary canons. The appearance of overrepresentation moves from within the walls of the academy to the public debates regarding “intersectional feminism” wherein large public movements, such as the (International) Women’s March in 2017, weaponize black feminist critiques like Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of Intersectionality, against the too vocal, too visible, too anti-establishment presence of women and femmes of color.¹⁸

Even with its dangers, the digital public sphere has been increasingly fertile for (radical, queer) black feminist thought, creativity, and dissemination: discursively significant think pieces proliferate in the highly politically-charged atmosphere marked by the dawn of a “new” turn in black liberation ethos consolidating around Black Lives Matter as an anti-antiblack, anti-queerantagonistic, anti-transphobic, pro-femme episteme. This burgeoning catalytic moment, however, faces its own internal conflict that, again, centers a misogynoirist objection to black (queer) femme epistemic production and political strategy contributions.¹⁹ There is a disconnect between the *seeming* over-assertion and invocation of Black Feminist ideologies in the public sphere, and the conflated assumption of black femme structural elitism in the academy and popular media. Presumably, the epistemic popularity of Black Feminism suggests a material, political progress in the social status of black women and femmes. This produces a Barthes-cum-

¹⁸ Farah Stockman, “Women’s March on Washington Opens Contentious Dialogues About Race,” *New York Times* (9 Jan. 2016); <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/09/us/womens-march-on-washington-opens-contentious-dialogues-about-race.html? r=0>

¹⁹ The bracketed “queer” here is important: the absented presence of the black*queer*femme produces an anxiety that I will return to shortly, but this agonism is central to the contemporary critical project of liberation that both sustains and cleaves black feminist and (black) queer theoretical interventions.

Spillers genre of myth²⁰ culminating in the form of a privileged and protected black woman, and trendy but absented queer/trans/nonbinary gender femmes, who experiences relative “safety” in society, especially in comparison to black (cisgender, heterosexual) men. This presumes that the visibility of black feminist ideological social/political economies equates to black women gaining a status of privilege within white supremacist institutions as opposed to their hypervisibility reflecting a longstanding critique. The intellectual leaps required to sustain this myth is astounding, yet here we are. It is a trick of epistemological, rhetorical illusion performed by collapsing gender and sexuality into racial oppression, that redundant erasure, which conveniently forgets the multiple displacements marking the condition of black (queer) femme appositionality. Kara Keeling suggests that this oft-repeated argument collapses “her specific ‘lived-experience’ in that of the Black (man) and naturalized a problematic existence via a mode of representation that seals the White man in his Whiteness and ‘the black man in his blackness.’”²¹ As one of the most effective tools of misogynoir’s resentment, this well-rehearsed deflection is commonly argued when pitting black (cisgender) men’s oppression against that of black women, femmes, and queer people of all genders. While it may be true that there are a few B(Q)F scholars and social critics who have reached the status of broad public recognition and gained social capital of rhetorical significance, I believe it is still safe to say that this is more of an exception than a rule. And this perceived status does not account for the lived, interpersonal encounters that shape displacement in the most mundane ways.

²⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 205; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

²¹ Kara Keeling, “‘In the Interval’: Frantz Fanon and the ‘Problems’ of Visual Representation,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003), 96. The quote at the end is from Fanon, *Black Skin*, 9.

From Fanonian black nationalism to contemporary debates dubbed “oppression olympics,”²² the issue of where S.H.E. stands as a political, creative, and intellectual figure draws the ire of her ontologically-conflicted allies and adversaries across functions of racialization, gendering, and compulsory sexualization. Kara Keelings’s reading of *Black Skin, Black Masks* names both grammar and ghost of this problematic rendering: S.H.E. is “invisible and unknowable. When she does appear, she does so as, for instance, a projection of what might be raped and assaulted in order to harm the Black man or the potential Black nation... When she does become legible, usually in the interstices of discourses that invent her to serve their interests, she appears only problematically.”²³ S.H.E. has long suffered in this dynamic of perceived overrepresentation and hypervisibility.

This chapter is attentive to the conceptual and material claims to space and place that are laid bare in these conflicts. Reflected in Smith’s critique of academia’s inability to address collective struggle is the irrefutable point to which these arguments must concede. She states, “One criterion I often rely upon for assessing the revolutionary content of ideas and actions is to ask the questions originally posed by the visionary poet and activist Sonia Sanchez, which is ‘But how do it free us?’ Sanchez is asking about collective strategies, not individualized solutions.”²⁴ The question of whether or not S.H.E. exists to preserve hegemonic order is refused in favor of interrogating the system that put her into service in such a reductive way. Further, the ambiguous rendering of black feminist placement within social movements and

²² Nira Yuval-Davis, “Dialogical Epistemology—An Intersectional Resistance to the ‘Oppression Olympics,’” *Gender and Society* 26, no. 1 (2012): 46-54.

²³ Keeling, “In the Interval,” 96.

²⁴ Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998): 172. She cites Sonia Sanchez, “Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?” in *Black Women's Blues: A Literary Anthology, 1934-1988*, ed. Rita B. Dandridge (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992).

academe, and the overdetermined presumptions of social capital/privilege/access, can produce an erasure of histories and legacies that do not reflect the “official (recognized) discourse” of black feminist intellectual and creative production. The question of *where* black (queer) femme epistemologies take root still stands as contestable and undisciplined, despite the hypervisibility that suggests it is anchored in one or another competing ontological space. Misogynoir’s resentment,²⁵ the affective disdain for black women and femme (re)production that underwrites dispossession and offers a façade of (extremely conditional) acceptance *vis-à-vis* visibility, deflects the praxis of fugitive study, and rewards the process of cleaving black women and femme agonistic polyvocality into antagonistic, performatively discrete parts. Further, it refuses to recognize and substantiate the long, established history of black queer feminist struggle. The ongoing repetition of debates that reproduce *forgetting* can be challenged by targeting its core foundation of epistemological ignorance. Therefore, a different practice of viewing B(Q)F humanity is required in order to read what can be described as an onto-epistemic literacy for

²⁵ A contemporary example of what *misogynoir’s resentment* looks like can be found in tracking the overwhelming abuses black women experience in social media. From the direct, explicit attacks faced by individuals, to the complete lack of protections granted by social media websites upon reporting (using available abuse reporting processes such as with Facebook and Twitter), black women are not only exposed to unprecedented levels of public attack online but it goes largely unchecked as abusive accounts are rarely suspended or removed. Though misogynoir drives the initial attacks, *resentment* validates their intent to harm without choosing an explicit form that that aggression should take. In this example, both the explicit attacks and the refusal on behalf of institutions to act to limit those attacks produce the same effect of exposing black women and femmes to excessive and arbitrary violence. Two cases that are representative of this can be found in these links: Regarding the general state of black women facing abuse online, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/02/misogynoir-how-social-media-abuse-exposes-longstanding-prejudices-against-black>; and an example of explicit ongoing abuses regarding actor Leslie Jones <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/19/leslie-jones-twitter-abuse-deliberate-campaign-hate>.

liberatory praxis. In other words, how might we see what S.H.E. does if we cannot see who she is? How does S.H.E. *get free*? And what forms of “getting free” are made possible in her wake?

3.1.3 But *where* is the queer?

I develop this issue of Black Feminism’s hypervisibility and the impact on black women and femme’s relationship to institutional and cultural power—in academia as well as popular culture—to highlight the accumulation of negative effects at sites of black femme (re)production. Though arguably “seen” and sometimes even celebrated or rewarded, the complex labor of (re)producing sites/cites/sights of onto-epistemic in(ter)vention is held in tension with misogynoir’s resentment, the product of which is that peculiar erasure, the *forgetting* of lives lived in excess of antiblack misogynist displacements. However, it is more important for this project to meditate on the ways these conditions fail to limit or extinguish the modes of fugitivity that insist on the *irreducibility* of black (queer) femme life. Accounting for the systemic and structural conditions of subjugation is, of course, important and necessary for understanding the context of precarity. And within this structure, the ongoing survival of black women and femmes—and their attending proliferation of knowledges and praxes of difference—is irrational, unexpected, unnecessary, and altogether inconsistent with the repeated attempts to constrain the expression of an ontological sociality.^{26,27} Their continued ontological persistence is, in fact,

²⁶ “Ontological sociality” refers to the “recognition of an ontological dimension in varieties of life and disciplines” (234) and is characterized by interpretive action. Ananta Kumar Giri, “Creative Social Research: Rethinking Theories and Methods and the Calling of an Ontological Epistemology of Participation,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 30 (2006): 227–71.

²⁷ Moten distinguishes between Sexton’s argument that “black life is lived in *social death*” (emphasis mine) and his alternative heuristic disagreement that “black life is irreducibly social—which is as surely to say *life* as black thought is to say *thought*—is irreducibly social; that,

queer in ways that exceed a discrete reference to gender and sexual expression or orientation. As Kate Eichorn suggests, queerness functions here “as a concept that is neither necessarily resistant to order nor necessarily incompatible with established institutions but rather as a concept that is simply resistant to existing order and entrenched institutional ways of operating.”²⁸

It is imperative that we move away from focusing on the *where* of black(queer)feminist struggle in terms of who has the legitimated power to claim validity or authenticity of knowledges and from which place of authority, especially because misogynoir’s resentment is consistent in its attachments. Instead, I have drawn attention to *how* mechanisms of antiblackness and misogyny, are deployed to maintain systems of dispossession. As long as sovereign order needs, or rather survives by enforcement of, oppositional displacements, then the logic of onticide will produce social death as the dominant articulation of black (queer) femme life. This shift in discussion must also be accountable to the ways that the absented presence of queerness haunts the scene of fugitive study.

The category “black woman” is fraught with tension about the matter of whose bodies and whose voices can or should be centered as *the* politicized subject. I do not intend to

moreover, black life is lived in *political* death or that it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject” (emphasis in original). Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 739. (Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011) He also suggests “exhaustion” as a related ontological state that recognizes the impact of socio-political positioning, but also what results from the consistent effort to sustain a sense of space and place, while simultaneously refusing subject-positionality as such: “Moreover, I want to consider exhaustion as a mode or form or way of life, which is to say sociality, thereby marking a relation whose implications constitute, in my view, a fundamental theoretical reason not to believe, as it were, in social death. Like Curtis Mayfield, however, I do plan to stay a believer. This is to say, again like Mayfield, that I plan to stay a black motherfucker” (Moten, “Blackness,” 738).

²⁸ Kate Eichorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 30.

diminish the urgency and necessity of the (now) traditional, canonical notion that Black Feminism's theories and critiques reflect black women's standpoint knowledges. I do, however, want to emphasize that cisgender heteronormative standpoints are often used to deflect from the power and indicting force of queer black feminist intellectual activism. I affirm and assert a polyvocal, multivalent black feminism that refuses to be reduced to any one of its more palatable (i.e., respectable) parts. As a fungible site of accumulation, "black woman" as category is a myth of interpellated *body*, as distinct from *flesh*, and this project recognizes the construction of that myth as non-ontological. This concept of differentiating body and flesh and its related gendering/ungendering in Spillers is about recognizing how a regime of antiblackness, informed by misogyny and forged through the machinations of chattel slavery, creates the body by making the flesh illegible. Alexander Weheliye describes the difference by noting the processes through which this distinction is made. Citing Spillers, he argues: "In the absence of kin, family, gender, belonging, language, personhood, property, and official records... what remains is the flesh, the living, speaking, thinking, feeling and imagining flesh: the ether that holds together the world of Man while at the same time forming the condition of possibility for this world's demise." "Man" in this schema references its overrepresentation of the human, read as white cisgender and heteronormative. In this structural ordering, the body—or what gets interpellated by our current systems of recognition—stands in for human social arrangements. In other words, we can only occupy subject-positions pre-prescribed in relation to white cisgender heteronormativity, and this is done through differentiation by subjugation and negation. Thus, S.H.E. is an echo of the failure to achieve subjectivity. Racialized and ungended-until-invented-to-serve, her formation is precarious and exists in a queered temporality that is as much antagonistic as generative in her ability to know and become. Here, queerness suggests "possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a

mode of sociality and relationality.”²⁹ Subject-position—or more accurately in its refusal of non-ontology, appositionality—can be reimagined or rendered differently through the flesh, and one way of tracing this potential of liberation is through the creation of an intentionally black *and* intentionally queer *and* intentionally femme onto-epistemic *home-place*. The flesh, then, offers an affective, discursive formation that can enact escape, or fugitivity, from this ongoing symbolic scene of capture while simultaneously creating a *knowing-space*. The field/fold situating emerging grammars of self-knowing can then be deployed in a praxis of social relationality. OEA: Liberation establishes a site for developing worldmaking grammars that “rupture violently” the logics of structural oppression that would otherwise render B(Q)F social life unintelligible.

My focus on the interactionality of antagonistic assemblages interrogates how precarity functions to consistently produce displacement through processes of negation. One such process I have outlined is that of misogynoir’s resentment, which is an example of systemic effects that structure what may be referred to as an onto-epistemic condition. As a dynamic aggregation of theoretical perspectives, it provides a critical optic through which I analyze a praxis and epistemology of liberation. This chapter will think through the ways that black (queer) femme displacements in social and intellectual movements generated ongoing material and discursive formations that underwrite current liberation epistemes. Dispossession, in this framework, does not simply produce erasure and silence—a perspective that I argue centers a dominant grand narrative validating one genre of being human (Man). Dispossession, as a feature of the ongoing precarity of appositional subjects, is redeployed as a catalyst for reimagining social life; it is the

²⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996), 6.

spark that ignites the creative interpretations of space and place that allow B(Q)F folks to imagine, locate, and actuate self and community.

The cartographic mapping of black queer femme struggle does not take a traditional historical or sociological form in this project. Queer temporality in its non-linearity, the un-geographical nature of blackness, and the ungendering of black women and femmes complicate this process. However, this project adapts fugitive study through the trajectory of the political, intellectual, and social world of black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith. What this means for methodology is the undoing of focus on Smith as singular, exemplary subject, to consider instead how she and her work threaded relations between social movements, organizations, individual people, communities, and scholarship. Mapping Smith's influence and impressions, the near unfathomable reach of her interactions within black queer feminist formations—both direct and indirect—illuminates a dense network of relationships that chart a multiplicity of authorizing legacies and literacies rendering black queer ontology intelligible (for us, by us). Bringing together the work London's Black Lesbian and Gay Centre alongside a genealogical exploration Barbara Smith's praxis of activist and scholarly engagement, the following will trace the development of an onto-epistemic archive of liberation attentive to black (queer) femme social life.

3.2 SITES

Building a Home-Place through Activism and Scholarship

site (v.) – fix or build (something) in a particular place.

Having determined a disconnect with second wave social movements concerned with race, women's rights, and lesbian and gay political interests,³⁰ black queer women scholars and activists sought one another out in an effort to establish spaces of belonging that considered a convergence of identities—but perhaps more importantly, a recognition of multiple displacements that were being treated as competing socio-political interests. Exclusion from organizing and scholarly spaces worked along the same axes of erasure that culminated in a recognizable lack of a home-place for the fugitive study of black (queer) femme ways of being and knowing. Even so, advocacy and organizing became a generative site for imagining home and community in the wake of social and political placelessness. Many black queer women activists were attuned to the weaknesses in political strategies that insisted on that common *forgetting* of their sociality, thus, returning to their critiques is a vital part of understanding the conflicts of our contemporary historical, political moment.

This chapter will focus on the contributions of Barbara Smith in relation to a variety of black queer collectives and her activist-scholar accomplices, as well as the labors of London's Black Lesbian and Gay Centre members/participants who are mostly all but named in their

³⁰ For a critique of racism in women's rights/feminist movements: Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Keynote Address: The National Women's Studies Convention (1981), *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984): 124-133; for an overview of sexism in black nationalist movements: Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no.1 (Autumn, 1988): 42-72.

newsletters. The breadth of their practices and writings set the foundation for a politics of liberation that names and claims space where it otherwise did not exist. In this section, I will explore the creation of a home-place as an onto-epistemic site of liberation. Here, home resonates as a conjuring space: an intellectual and social production invented to locate self and others, and to establish a basis for recognition not beholden to a dominant imagination limited by centering notions of sameness.

Taken separately, the displacements derived from antiblackness, queer antagonism, and misogyny are often redeployed and coded independently as “community” boundaries that flatten and universalize conditions for belonging. Regarding queer studies and its attending social collectives, Lee Edelman warns that “defining a space or a state of our own, insisting that we recognize and collectively accede to some common territorial boundaries, this is a fantasy, though enabling for some, that is profoundly dangerous in its reproduction of the exclusions—and of the motivating logic of exclusion—on which the [white supremacist]³¹ heterosexual colonization of social reality is predicated.” The notion of homogenized community is thoroughly disrupted not by jettisoning “identity politics” which articulate discrete grammars of signification and interpellation (insofar as any identification can be discerned as separate from another), but instead by acknowledging the repetitious patterns of dispossession that accumulate as Barthes-cum-Spillers myth-bearing-bodies. Mapping these accumulations as relational, and interactional, shifts power from the structuring logic of dominant hegemonic ideologies to a logic of oppositionality. It is in this transition that a home-place exists as more than a meeting ground

³¹ To which I have added “white supremacist” because queer theory cannot escape its tend toward racial erasure under the same practice that Edelman attempts to resist in the singularizing narrative of a cohesive “queer family.” Lee Edelman, “Queer Theory: Unstating Desire,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2 (1995): 343.

for “allegiance to (a) name”³² or other discursive practice of territoriality. As a site of liberatory praxis (always already an exercise of potentiality), it functions as an epistemic anchor for understanding, developing tools for negotiating, and also for theorizing how to live and be in precarity.

In the Foreword to the *Black Queer Studies* anthology, Sharon P. Holland invokes “home” as “a place of refuge and escape,” but also as a place where we seek reflections of ourselves in the process of becoming both an “I” and a “we.”³³ Engaging queerness enables forms of fugitive study enacting being together in placelessness; but it also provides the occasion for restructuring terms of inclusion/exclusion and what can be affirmed, or not defined merely by negation, through a flux of disidentifications. As Holland suggests, “the more we saw the more we understood ourselves as backbone rather than anomaly; as producing the very friction necessary for ‘culture’ to survive. And somewhere in there we learned to be quare, black, and proud.”³⁴ Citing E. Patrick Johnson’s vernacular “quare,” a praxis of refusal underwrites the project of *queering* the concepts of collective, coalition, community, etc., where queer political and intellectual motivations may be overdetermined by the desire to stabilize anti-normativity. The trend toward creating a dominant narrative, and thus securing a structured reproducibility in a unified “queer subject,” in this space, is antithetical to liberation as such a motive does not disrupt the machinations of power. Therefore, how we approach conceptualizing “belonging” must also consider its role in imagining an ontological sociality that eschews the fixity of subject-position.

³² Edelman, “Unstating Desire,” 345, see also 333-36.

³³ Sharon P. Holland, “Foreword: ‘Home’ is a Four-Letter Word,” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), xii.

³⁴ Holland, “Home,” xii.

Part of the process of mapping sites of belonging requires interrogating the “fixed” locations of subjectivity that mark certain politicized constructions of identity as assumed discrete discursive formations. These signifiers of subjective fixity are, of course, never discrete but they are an indication of one’s discursive inheritance. As M. Jacqui Alexander suggests, “We never quite know who we are, because we’re always making and re-making ourselves. We know some of the inheritances that we have...and another part of the inheritance is finding a way to meld all of those things together. Because they don’t necessarily rest easily by themselves.” Importantly, Alexander cites anti-colonial, feminist and queer movements, and women of color movements in the US as the inheritances that she draws from in this process of becoming.³⁵ Social death as an analytic maintains that sovereign order depends on the stabilizing of categories in order to secure the hierarchies organizing the systemic overrepresentation of Man as Human. Tracing relations to power within this paradigm foreclose the possibility of recognizing the movements of oppositional subjects, and this foreclosure of possibility begets non-ontology/onticide. However, an analysis of oppositionality as a viable ontological condition requires a different approach that recognizes power but also recognizes the state of constant flux, making and re-making of the self in relation to others, that constitutes social life. Aimee Carrillo Rowe suggests that “the meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection...It gestures toward deep reflection about the selves we are creating as a function of where we place our bodies, and with whom we build our affective ties.”³⁶ Rowe refers to this as a “politics of relation” which theorizes moving away from

³⁵ M. Jacqui Alexander, “Jacqui Alexander: An Inside Look,” interview by Ella Andall, on *Signified*: http://thisissignified.com/?post_type=artist_page&p=448.

³⁶ Aimee Carrillo Rowe, “Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 15-46, qt., 16.

“locating the subject to a relational notion of the subject.”³⁷ Belonging, then, can be mapped with attention to the following components: “an affective component, which is spatially situated; the conditions and effects of belonging thought through questions of power, including reimagining power; and accountability as a function of belonging.”³⁸ This framework helps to provide contextual structure for my analysis of OEA: Liberation’s as a site which builds on these attentions and expands the scope of conditions for belonging.

The National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) magazine editor, scholar, and HIV/AIDS activist Joseph Beam penned a thoughtful introductory editor’s note in the first issue of *BLACK/OUT* (1986), in which he relays a sentiment of relational belonging, thereby articulating the home-seeking and -building ethos that permeates the legacy of black queer liberation struggles. He writes, “Although birthed by Latino and Black drag queens at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, the Gay rights movement, an essentially white movement, has failed to embrace us. We, like those outrageous drag queens who started it all, are the fringe of the movement—relegated to “color” supplements, minority task forces, and workshops on racism—rather than woven into its fabric. At the same time, Black civil rights movement seems slow to add gender and sexual politics to its agenda.”³⁹ In closing, Beam writes “Welcome home.” Intended as both greeting and open-ended closure, a nod toward futurity, this phrase invites the sentiment of comfort that comes with being among friends, family, and others with whom one can be present without further explanation as to why. Home signifies the movement of coming and going, but also the quiet insistence that black queer folks invest in contributing something of themselves in the creation of this place. Beam invokes the metaphorical home as “a place for

³⁷ Rowe, “Be Longing,” *ibid.*

³⁸ Rowe, “Be Longing,” 26.

³⁹ Joseph Beam, “From the Editor,” *BLACK/OUT* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 2.

viewpoints, a place for dialogue, a place to connect, a place to be all of what we are.”⁴⁰ The process of establishing a site such as this is necessarily interactive and intentional, an indication of potential, yet it makes no claim to being stable or without conflict. For the appositional subject, the onto-epistemic home-place emerges as a site of possibility for the ongoing pursuit of black queer knowledges.

3.2.1 Calling Out, Calling In—Building From, Within, and in Loving Concern for Flawed Social Advocacy

The National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays formed, through several iterations, to address the limits of civil rights movements in the 1960s-70s: “At the time very few African Americans were affiliated with Gay political groups, and I wanted to bring together Gay, Bi, Lesbian, and Transpersons who had a strong desire to become politically involved in Gay/Lesbian civil rights movement. It was an attempt to go beyond the agenda of the Black Gay Social Clubs of the day and address the issue of homophobia in Black communities and organizations,” remarked Billy Jones, cofounder of the Baltimore Coalition of Black Gay Men and Women, a precursor to the NCBLG.⁴¹ As early as the 1970s, black queer activists were producing publications, consolidating into officially recognized groups and community organizations, and organizing conferences, workshops, learning circles, book clubs, etc. It is within these often-overlapping socio-political networks that black lesbian and gay people began to distinguish a unique political concern relevant to their needs.

⁴⁰ Beam, “From the Editor.”

⁴¹ Sidney Brinkley, “The National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays: Making History” *Blacklight*, 2015: <http://www.blacklightonline.com/ncblg1.html>.

As evidenced in the ephemera I collected from the Hall-Carpenter and Lesbian Herstory archives, the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre⁴² project established—at the very least—a networking relationship with the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) and some of its most active, known members at the height of its activity. The NCBLG’s *BLACK/OUT* magazine and other print materials regularly listed the BLGC as an affiliate organization in its catalog of black LGBT centers and advocacy organizations.⁴³ In reference to attending the International Lesbian and Gay People of Color Conference (ILGPOCC) in Los Angeles on November 21-23, 1986, the January 1987 *BLGC Newssheet* provides a short report of the conference discussions and atmosphere and refer to the upcoming full report in the “next issue of BLACKOUT”; this announcement was followed by an enthusiastic note regarding the BLGC-sponsored London tour of American poet and active NCBLG member Essex Hemphill.⁴⁴ While it is unclear the extent of internal collaboration or direct contact on coalition efforts between individual members and at which times, the magazine, newsletters, and event flyers suggest that the transnational sharing of political, creative, and intellectual resources was central to the organizations’ collective efforts to establish a home-place for black queer political and social life. The NCBLG was, at the very least, aware of the BLGC’s work in the UK as they

⁴² The Black Lesbian and Gay Centre was formally founded in 1985 when it received seed funding from the Greater London Council (GLC). It began with the merging of black lesbian and gay groups in the early 1980s and remained active into the mid-1990s, with some minor community organizing continuing into the early 2000s. The organization lost funding from the GLC in 1986 when it was abolished, so the majority of the organization’s work was funded through membership collections and donations throughout the height of its activity: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2016/10/31/theblacklesbianandgaycentre/>.

⁴³ As listed in the “Connections” resource listings of affiliated organizations section of *BLACK/OUT* magazines back pages. Specific page numbers varied per print issue.

⁴⁴ “BLGC *Newssheet* no. 8,” Black Lesbian & Gay Centre, Hall-Carpenter Archive, “ILGPOCC 86 - A Brief Report,” 1; “Essex Hemphill: Another Competent Catalyst or Breaking Moulds” Hall-Carpenter Archives, BLGC Ephemera, 1986 advertisements.

were aware of the American organization's work in the US and abroad; and their many overlapping social movement activities suggest a mutuality of shared resources. Through conference attendance, proliferation of shared print and publication resources (such as newsletters and zines), and activist, scholar, and artist speaking tours addressing racial, gender, and sexuality politics during this time—a black queer worldmaking project emerged with mutual investments in anti-oppression advocacy, art, and scholarship.

The earliest mention of direct interaction between NCBLG the BLGC comes from an anecdotal reference made in an editorial letter commemorating Joseph Beam in the “BLGC Newssheet end-Jan/Feb 1989.” Written with fondness, Dirg—a longtime member of the project and contributor to the newsletter,⁴⁵ also presumably an attendee at Beam's memorial service in Philadelphia—wrote of first coming into contact with a “vexed” Beam who voiced concerns about the BLGC's similarly named *BLACKOUT* publication, which Dirg noted had been incubating since the BLGC's early days as the Lesbian and Gay Black Group. What stands out about this interaction is Dirg's reading of the conflict. In light of being called out for perceived “stolen” ideas, he offers: “The joint founding of the name BLACKOUT at either end of the planet, to me, was further evidence of how united we are in spirit with brothers and sisters on distant shores.”⁴⁶ The conflict resolved amicably and over time, connections strengthened between the two organizations throughout the 1980s as members interacted and established a similar organizational trajectory of political involvement.

Barbara Smith served on the NCBLG Board of Directors and was a regular contributor to

⁴⁵ “Dirg” is mentioned sporadically throughout BLGC ephemera over several years as a primary contact for information and events. No further information is available about individual members from this particular collection at the Hall-Carpenter Archives. Dirg, *Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Newssheet*, end-Jan/Feb 1989, Hall Carpenter Archives, 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

BLACK/OUT news magazine. Throughout its short life, she supported Joseph Beam's editorial work while also helping to establish a strong black feminist presence in the organization as well as in its published content. *BLACK/OUT*, during this time, was one of few nationally and internationally recognizable publications that featured Black Feminist perspectives and highlighted black lesbian advocacy. In the tenth anniversary issue of *BLACK/OUT*, M. Jacqui Alexander reflected on the meeting of the Black Women's Cross Cultural Institute held at the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture stating:

The ways in which we reconcile a growing schism about whether community activists or academics represent the authentic voice of the Black community challenges us as well.... Embattled communities have been wary, and justifiably so, of an intelligentsia amongst their ranks who have sold out. We should avoid the trap, however, of latching onto a kind of antiintellectualism [sic] which is in direct opposition to our struggle as colonized peoples to secure an education. Rather, we should be constructing models of education for empowerment and always asking the question *empowerment for what*.⁴⁷

Whose struggle is defined by the dominating narratives of a social movement? Who has the authority to represent its voice? In what ways do we establish a rubric for authenticity *and* knowledge of experience? These questions motivate the critiques that Alexander and other black lesbian and queer feminists voice in their interactions with scholarly and activist communities. In this criticism, they forward the notion that anti-oppression work must remain accountable to a radical reimagining of politics, liberation, and belonging—a foundational pillar of black queer feminist epistemology. Alexander further emphasizes,

⁴⁷ Jacqui Alexander, "The Black Women's Cross Cultural Institute" *BLACK/OUT* Tenth Anniversary Edition NCBLG, 2, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 31. Lesbian Herstory Archive, New York, 2017.

As an Afro-Caribbean lesbian feminist [...] I felt a familiar and intense urgency to take apart heterosexist assumptions. The essence of our sexuality has to be a part of the new images we construct about ourselves. Given the profound differences in cross cultural visibility of lesbian and gay struggles, discovering common ground among us is imperative. We must explore ways in which sexuality and lesbian and gay struggles are closely bound to struggles for national liberation; radical transformation of society cannot be achieved if one is allowed to dominate to the exclusion of the other.⁴⁸

The common thread of queer erasure from black liberation and feminist social movements overlapped with the conflict between academia and activism as the proper expression of onto-epistemic authority. As black feminism became heavily utilized as a tool to produce more effective analyses and critique, it offered the most flexible and relevant theoretical space to explore the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. However, as repeatedly suggested by black queer women, misogynoir's resentment prevents anti-colonial movements—within academic, cultural, and social institutions—from progressing toward an understanding of liberation that does not simply redistribute power. Alexander suggests academia and activism as mutually reflexive spheres of influence, and situates their potential liberatory promise in collectively addressing the structural impacts of antiblackness, queer antagonism, and misogyny. Anti-oppression work is constructed here as always engaged in understanding and centering these techniques of power as the mechanisms against which anti-colonial work must proceed. Liberation struggles map this growing urgency through the practice of critique, and this critique is often articulated through a burgeoning black queer feminist epistemology.

Black queer activism identifies racism, sexism, and homophobia as effects of colonial

⁴⁸ Alexander, "The Black Women's Cross Cultural Institute," 31.

oppression. The structural logics that shape these modes of domination sustain a uniquely violent constellation of systems that catalyzed black queer feminism. The necessary articulation of experience at this site of accumulation is an important shift in black feminist epistemology, and it is rooted in the critiques made by both individuals and organizations where black queer women organized to resist sovereign orderliness (a reductive and dehumanizing identity politic) as the dominant epistemic frame for social and political belonging. Black queer women's work to create an epistemological "home" for themselves is evident in the repetitious claims of seeking space where little, or none at all, existed. Racial belonging, the experience of blackness in particular, imparts one site from which knowledge is gained, but politicized reductionism limits its most powerful potential.

Originally appearing in the debut issue of *BLACK/OUT*, Barbara Smith wrote about the importance of blackness to her experience of relating to other queer people: "My perceptions about race are not something I have to explain to activist Black Gay men, nor do I need to delineate the challenge of being queer in the Black community. I also don't have to explain the talk I talk, why I cannot get into white women's music, why I do not call Black persons past a certain age by their first names, or why I am so worried about our youth. It's all understood. We share language, culture, values, the African genius, family ties—in short, we share Blackness."⁴⁹ Smith notes that Black culture, Black knowledge, and Black vernacular all bear significant meaning in establishing a space/place of *being* that affords queer black folks a basis for fugitive study and articulation. She suggests that blackness does not pose a threat to intelligibility within black queer communities as it does within the nonblack activist communities that often

⁴⁹ Barbara Smith, "Working for Liberation and Having a Damn Good Time" *BLACK/OUT* 1, no 1 (Summer 1986): 13; Lesbian Herstory Archive, New York.

reproduce (and contribute to) the effects of structural antiblackness. Instead, it is the basis for a system of recognition that makes room for the exploration of queerness as constructed through the discursive tradition of black knowledge and political action.

The world of black queer activism appears as unwieldy and expansive in its broad political aims, yet intimate and inviting as social circles intertwined or overlapped through the recognition of limited resource availability. Even with financial instability and overwrought participant-labor haunting social movement activities, efforts to map black queer socio-historical/-political conjunctures led to a unique constellation of cross-cultural and transnational onto-epistemic formations. To echo Dirg, this interconnectedness demonstrates a common grammar for articulating black queer experience. For these activists, artists, and scholars the “...territories and perambulations of diaspora circuits, identifications, and desires are queer in their making and their expressions.”⁵⁰ As the archival ephemera suggests, mapping black queer struggle reveals the radically interactional⁵¹ process of creating a home-place with discursive materials acquired through the destabilization of lines of power and resistance. Queer Chican@ theorist and Communication scholar Karma Chávez argues that “interactionality holds in tension both the predictable ways oppression and power manifest in relation to and upon particular bodies while also carrying possibilities for creative and complicated responses to oppression.”⁵² Structural critique is not only intrinsic to the mobilization of black queer advocacy and scholarship, but it also shapes strategies for survival and coalition building. National borders are

⁵⁰ Rinaldo Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 97.

⁵¹ Karma Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 57-59.

⁵² Chávez, *Queer Migration*, 58-59.

rendered insufficient for preventing black diasporic queer crossings, and the difficulties of sustaining both human and capital resources could not prevent the accumulation of ontological value for the systemically and culturally displaced. In short, wherever black queers formed collectives, there was also the formation of material and discursive resources that allowed them to exist in excess of the state of dispossession. With the invention of an onto-epistemic home-place, intentionally black *and* queer *and* femme/feminist pathways to liberation could be explored—perhaps without consciously intersecting, perhaps in unknown influential orbit—thereby providing a cartography of black queer femme sociality. Through the making and remaking of sovereign bodies at the site of antagonistic exclusions, a map forged through the techniques of flesh presents the opportunity to define ontology otherwise.

Similarly inspired by the history of lesbian and gay activism led by activists of color in Stonewall, the BLGC set out to address the concerns of the multiply-marginalized groups of gay and lesbian people largely underrepresented in mainstream gay rights and women’s liberation movements. Critiques of these movements were noted in several founding documents suggesting that gay rights were not inclusive of politics of race or even gender. The risk of ostracization and hostility within black and brown communities also encouraged the organization’s founding and determined the direction of its outreach strategies. Similar to divisions in the US, black and brown communities in the UK often silenced queer advocacy and discouraged individuals from “coming out” by deploying a rhetoric of assimilation, linking homosexuality to failed attempts to appeal to “whiteness.” Unsurprisingly, misogyny and dismissal of women’s interests and contributions was thematic problem across social movements and within activist communities. Reflecting similar circumstances as witnessed in the US, activist organizing exclusively concerned with race or exclusively regarding homosexuality made possible the social and

political erasure of black gay and lesbian people in the UK.

Both the BLGC and NCBLG emphasized the need to address the sexual and gender politics of black civil rights movements, and the competing racial and gender analysis absent from the broader, mainstream Gay Rights movement in American and British civil rights surges of 1970s and 1980s activism. The BLGC and Smith reflect on the conditions of participation in a multitude of movements where these absences began to hinder political progress because they centered a single-axis approach to anti-oppression work. Reflecting on what it meant to participate in activism during that time, Smith convened a roundtable discussion in 1982 featuring black lesbian/feminist activists Tania Abdulahad, Gwendolyn Rogers, and Jameelah Waheed.⁵³ Each of the participants began their early political work in areas such as anti-racism, anti-war advocacy, Civil Rights, and women's rights. In doing consciousness-raising on the issues affecting "Third World Lesbian" women who were being deported because of their sexual orientation, Waheed explains the difficulty centering this work in activist communities stating, "The main challenge of organizing for me has been working with Third World gay male groups and Black male heterosexual community organizations to make them aware of Third World Lesbian and how their sexist attitudes perpetuate our oppression. I mean, as long as males view our liberation as the least important to their liberation, then none of us will ever be liberated."⁵⁴ Despite such difficulties, activism's dynamic of misogynoir's resentment fueled the creation of organizations like the Combahee River Collective and the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre project to develop through the growth of black lesbian feminism. This shift in focus forwarded a praxis

⁵³ Tanya Abdulahad, Gwendolyn Rogers, Barbara Smith, and Jameelah Waheed, "Black Lesbian/Feminist Organizing: A Conversation," (1983) in *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 285-311.

⁵⁴ Abdulahad et al, "A Conversation," 286.

and theoretical basis for interactional coalition building that fused the political with the social and cultural which sustained black queer sociality as a site for epistemic engagement: “Not only did Combahee do the consciousness raising and political work on a multitude of issues, we also built strong friendship networks, community, and a rich Black women’s culture where none had existed before.”⁵⁵

Responsive to the climate of activism in the UK, the BLGC project functioned as a political home for engaging the interests of London’s black lesbian feminists who sought not only an intersectional approach to social politics, but also a more holistic commitment to anti-oppression work. This included an attentiveness to class and labor issues; disability resources, employment discrimination, and accessibility measures; immigration law and policy; international human rights and anti-colonial advocacy, especially in the global south; and more generally education, cultural resource development, historical preservation, media visibility, etc. Attendance at conferences such as the National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference in Chicago and the Fifth International Lesbian and Gay People of Color Conference⁵⁶ confirmed these commitments while also demonstrating an investment in engaging coalitional politics as a praxis of black queer organizing. The latter conference, for example, listed the following voted upon measures that demonstrated a multi-thronged approach to QPOC advocacy:

- Begin each conference with a presentation on the nature of the Lesbian/Gay struggles within the country of the conference;
- Raise the concerns and support the struggles of indigenous people in whatever

⁵⁵ Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*, 173.

⁵⁶ ILGPOCC held in Toronto, Canada 28-31 July 1988; The BLGC noted sending representatives to the November 1986 ILGPOC conference in the January 1987 newsletter where they also suggested plans to attend in 1988 which was then being organized.

country the conference is held;

- Use feminist principles and analyses to conduct the conference;
- Make vocal protest in our home communities on behalf of Simon Nkoli during his trial in September by coordinating actions on the day of his trial;
- Protest to our local bookstores the lack of Black Gay & Lesbian books, specifically “In the Life” and “Home Girls”⁵⁷

Importantly, it is the intervention of black lesbian activists in particular that underwrites these initiatives and shapes the direction of multivalent advocacy. In the short documentary video clip, *Under Your Nose*,⁵⁸ a brief collection of interviews map how the BLGC came together after multiple instances of exclusion from other otherwise fitting social movement spaces. The Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD)⁵⁹ broad range of black labor and civil rights activist organizations, the London Lesbian Centre, and others, were all sites of rejection either along the basis of ethnicity and sexual orientation, race, gender or a combination that especially impacted black lesbian women (though rarely cited explicitly, trans and gender nonbinary individuals negotiated overlapping exclusions though were most openly supported by

⁵⁷ Angela Bowen, “Conference Calls,” *BLACK/OUT* Tenth Anniversary Edition NCBLG, 2, no. 1 (Fall 1988), 30; Lesbian Herstory Archive, New York, NY 2017; “Home Girls” refers to Barbara Smith’s edited collection of essays, “In the Life” refers to Beam’s collection of essays, poems.

⁵⁸ Veronica McKenzie, director *Under Your Nose*. Twice as Proud Productions (2013): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKH1-2X47SU>.

⁵⁹ From the OWAAD entry in the *Historical Dictionary of Feminism*, OWAAD was “A group founded in Great Britain in 1978 by women of color, primarily black women, to challenge white domination of the feminist movement. [...] Ethnic differences were the major factor in the demise of the OWAAD, but the gay/straight split and tensions between those interested in advancing women within Britain and those stressing global feminism played roles as well.” Janet K. Boles and Diane Long Hoeveler, eds. *Historical Dictionary of Feminism, 2nd edition*, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, No. 52 (Lanham, MD, Toronto, Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 247.

resources cultivated in black lesbian feminist spaces with similar broad ranging anti-oppression ethics and advocacy). Even so, it rested on black women and femmes within these spaces to cultivate an awareness of the particular plight of black queer women, and it is from this work that proto-queer black feminist epistemologies emerge. Smith, and many other “lesbian and Third World” women with whom she worked over decades, reiterates this sentiment affirming that “Black feminist organizing built a political environment in which one could assert the importance of [Black women’s] work and not necessarily just lose everything—one’s sanity, one’s job, one’s status, one’s credibility. We were building a real-life context in which Black women could, if not be free, at least be free to express what we needed to express.”⁶⁰

One of the outgrowths of the varied, interrelated political movements throughout the 1970s and 1980s was the proliferation of publications and zines that would document communities excluded from mainstream news and media. As indicated by the BLGC newsletters and the NCBLG’s *BLACK/OUT*, these items have become important sources for documenting black queer life and its cultural, social, and intellectual legacies. In the next section, I will explore how these tangible productions established spaces that affirmed ways of knowing and being in precarity, while challenging and expanding the notion of liberation as black queer femme social praxis.

3.2.2 On Visibility and Recognition, and the Importance of Knowledge Production

Thus far, I have established the context black (queer) femme exclusion and illustrated the ways

⁶⁰ Barbara Smith, “More Than Academic: Interview with Beverly Guy Sheftall,” in *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith*, eds. Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 111.

organizations functioned to create a “home” through activism. Shifting focus, I want to look more closely at the processes through which the BGLC and Barbara Smith develop a praxis of B(Q)F liberation. Establishing community through activism and networking was one way of creating sites of belonging, but to disrupt grammars of displacement it is also important for this project to examine the ways that a “relational notion of the subject” is made possible through knowledge production in this burgeoning home-space. Newsletters, zines, and other independent publishing opportunities were vital resources that offered intellectual and aesthetic freedom to explore what it would mean to articulate this multiply marginalized experience.⁶¹ In self-produced print, it was also possible to sustain critiques that otherwise could be deemed too radical, exclusionary, or incendiary. Black queer feminist perspectives challenged dominant, heteronormative respectability narratives and did so in ways that substantiated B(Q)F intellectual and creative life giving rise to a complex system of language and style, the structural syntax and grammar of getting free by any means.

Taking a cue from Rinaldo Walcott, to read from a queer place in the diaspora, we can follow the flow of vernacular systems of recognition and trace the many ways that information is coded, dispersed, and cultivated so as to construct a community that trafficked in ontological affirmation. Though black queer feminist political and intellectual work was catalyzed by erasures and displacements at disparately situated sites of struggle, the BLGC’s and Smith’s

⁶¹ On queer print culture: Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr, *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Kathryn T. Flannery, *Feminist Literacies, 1968-75* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005). See especially the discussion of “Archives of Feeling” in Elizabeth Groeneveld, *Making Feminist Media: Third-Wave Magazines on the Cusp of the Digital Age* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2016). On gay ephemera: David A. Reichard, “Animating Ephemera through Oral History: Interpreting Visual Traces of California Gay College Student Organizing from the 1970s,” *Oral History Review* 39 no. 1 (2012): 37-60.

published works existed within and helped structure a discourse community ultimately invested in decolonizing the onticidal interpellation of black queer women and femmes. In other words, when they could not find the wholeness of their humanity reflected in the everyday practices of being and living in the social world, they created modes of relational belonging that would. Though increasing community visibility and drawing attention to pressing political issues of the time was important for consciousness-raising efforts, the circulation of information reveals the subtle genealogical process of “defamiliariz[ing] the very assumed order of things.”⁶² In this way, these documents also archive the call-and-response of queer past, present, and future articulations of subjectivity.

Importantly, the largely independently-organized and sustained visibility of black queer press and publications catalogue the everyday challenges to dominant ideologies and forms of knowledge that authorize social death. The question of “being seen” is one that is often used to define the success of social movement campaigns addressing historical marginalized groups, except in these analyses, the arbiter of recognition is often a white heteronormative public “mainstream” or state institution. This framing is inherently limited and it assumes the object status of those seeking appropriate (and accurate) intelligible representations of themselves as valued members of a larger social project. Being seen in the public sphere or acknowledged by structural institutions, as a matter of survival, is always a complex negotiation that often creates targets out of exposed vulnerable populations—even under the guise of a seemingly broad social acceptance that is assumed because of said visibility or increase in popular representations. This is well-documented in the steady rise of hate crimes and other forms of structural violence during

⁶² Here, I draw on Kate Eichorn’s construction of Genealogy, paraphrasing Wendy Brown, which argues that it is “*not* about the quest for origins but rather about the tracing of accidents, disparities, conflicts, and haphazard conditions.” Kate Eichorn, *Archival*, 7.

times of socially progressive change, which I will describe in more detail in Chapter 5's analysis of Agamben's state of exception. It is a duality of necessity that buttresses this call-to-action: 1) visibility matters because our existence matters and needs to be accounted for by state political and cultural systems, and 2) we need to see ourselves reflected in relation to others in order to know and experience belonging. Alternatively stated, our subjectivity needs to be affirmed especially in the presence of an ongoing colonialist genocidal drive to eliminate the undisciplined, unstructured subject.

Both the BLGC and Smith argue for a different kind of visibility, one that centers relationality and challenges the notion of appealing primarily to state apparatuses as the most significant or subject status-granting authority. For the BLGC especially, community exists as site for identity construction; knowledge imagination, creation/production and circulation; place to practice ways of knowing and being that are intelligible to participants. The production of the newsletter was an integral part of this process and functioned similarly to the genre of independent zines. As archival scholar Adela C. Licona argues, "Zines materialize and reflect borderlands rhetorics through the languages of resistance, opposition, and most importantly, coalition. They generate knowledge and provide alternative sources of information. They can be theoretically sophisticated, productive, and informed while also being accessible and thereby promoting community literacies."⁶³ Below I reproduce most of a call-to-action that recognizes the impact of not only social and political visibility, but the importance of documenting black queer public presence, community action, and most of all—the proliferation of black queer life. While the BLGC newsletters became *the* place to document London's black queer happenings,

⁶³ Adela C. Licona, *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 59.

the organization also understood that it was more than lists of resources that were needed for survival:

Zinesters' resistance is routinely undertaken to reimagine and re-present new ways of relating with similarly interested people, distributing information and generating knowledge. In creating spaces within which to produce and exchange these perspectives, a community of engaged participants from differing social locations and lived experiences come together to inform one another about different ways of being in solidarity around shared values and issues that are both local and global.⁶⁴

Being seen and heard and valued enough to be documented and preserved was a meaningful, intentional praxis that first and foremost places value on intracommunity relationships.

Appearing on the front page and divided into two columns by a simple drawn map of the Pride parade route, with the date Saturday 27th June scrawled along the side of the marchers, this letter to "blacklesbians" and "blackgay men" signifies on the queer temporality of archival practice of memorializing the present as past and future possibility:

We envisage that there will be a huge contingent of Blacklesbians [sic] and Blackgay [sic] men marching together under the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre banner which will be ready at the rendezvous point in Hyde Park. Don't forget to bring your cameras with enough film to produce a movie! We would like to produce a slide show so if you are taking slides (movie?) or stills, please help us to document this event...

Who is documenting your history for posterity? BE THERE — OR YOU'LL BE A VERY BORING PERSON if you don't phone us with an excuse for us to challenge.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60.

The call-to-action opens by first establishing that no one in the BLGC community would be forced to walk in the parade alone, something that many people would avoid, especially if coming out (literally and metaphorically) for the first time in such visible circumstances. The tone of the invitation is fairly light and welcoming, using jest to emphasize that excuses would have to be substantial to be let off the hook for not showing up for one another. For the organization, its members comfort and safety were a top priority. Even so, they made it clear that visibility was important and should be worked toward by whomever was capable and willing to participate. The reason to fight for visibility was simple: to be accounted for in history, one must show up! The call then invokes an important clarion call, citing the Stonewall riots to encourage participation:

We here at the BLGC don't feel that there is anything wrong with commemorating Stonewall riots in this way. There were Blackgay [sic] men involved in the defence of that pub/bar in New York City's Greenwich Village in 1989 which was being defended with honor under police siege — threatening the very liberty of the patrons gathered there (of whom we are now very proud). It was this event that triggered uprisings in many European cities and gave visibility to an important people who were once isolated by silence in bustling communities. Never again.

The reference to Stonewall here suggests a transnational collectivity that draws black LGBT people together and establishes a basis for the growing network of organizations and their constituents. In this way, a stronger narrative of black queer resistance emerges and reflects on the similarities of struggles and the need to continue pooling resources in new and exciting ways. The call continues:

If you (in error) are choosing to avoid the Lesbian and Gay Pride March from Hyde Park

to Jubilee Garde [...] then please attempts to be at one of the points waiting to wave to us as we all walk by. [...] It is a huge event and you can always say to friends who spotted you “it wasn’t me” — especially if you are wearing dark glasses.

We each have difficulties with our own Black community at large who choose to believe that we have been brainwashed by white people ‘into this thing’.

Again, the call-to-action maintains awareness of the difficult and sometimes dangerous reality of being “out” and presenting oneself in such a public setting where photos would be taken, potentially putting them at further risk. The acknowledgement of this situation also supports the organization’s suggestion that it is perfectly fine for members to avoid the public display and to choose instead to show up in other ways, even if that meant hiding one’s identity—survival and well-being were not to be sacrificed if it could be avoided. The invitation ends with a reminder of why events like the Pride March were important for future social and political aims:

As we continue participating and becoming visible in Pride marches or campaigns [sic] and initiating our own Blacklesbian and Blackgay forms of protests [...]lists national black queer action events and media programs].... we must always bear in mind that our siblings need special attention. We live in a hostile society and every bit of visibility counts. You can help by being there on the Pride March this year!⁶⁵

Accompanying the letter is a penned image of stick figures marching under the newsletter header turned into a BLGC banner “Black Lesbian and Gay Centre 01-885 3543” featuring the date of. In this, there is one visible “protest” sign that stands above the crowd and it reads: “Hello Mum.” Visibility, in this small rendering of political action, is not entirely focused on an appeal to the

⁶⁵ *BLGC Newssheet* 11(June 1987), “BLGC Current” at Hall-Carpenter Archives, London.

state. Taken alongside the letter, the appeal is to family (biological and/or chosen) and queer community, and black notions of kinship are invoked in the recognition of personal safety, hidden transcripts, and signaling of support without drawing unnecessary violence into one's life. The organization's members knew the risk associated with visibility and emphasized the careful negotiation of public space in view of hostile others.

Showing up or being present is very clearly discussed here as a showing-up for one another; being visible for other black queers to know that there was indeed a "home" to be taken into, sheltered by, and provided for. To be seen as belonging in relation to other black queers and to the black community at-large is centered in this process of creating a black queer sodality. Reflecting Christopher Nealon's accounting of queer archival history, this moment in the BLGC archive reveals, "The two-part sense of queer sodality—fluid in the present, expectant in the past" which he refers to as "historical emotion."⁶⁶ In this example, the organization is fully aware of its attempt to enter into History, but also of the need to actively write that story in one's own words for one's own spaces. The grand narrative of queer activism would ultimately erase this small gathering of black bodies as indicated by the lack of written accounts of the organization in LGBT archives and histories. As promised, the newsletter survived and delivered on its effort to document "earlier dreams of belonging to 'History' and the feeling a latter-day queer subject might have reading the archive of those dreams."⁶⁷

The BLGC provides one exemplary model for organizational modes of "entering into History," that subtly challenge the notion of *whose* sight, *whose* standard of legitimacy, matters.

⁶⁶ Nealon's statements in Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, Nguyen Tan Hoang "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007): 179.

⁶⁷ Nealon, *ibid.*, 173.

Even within this framing, however, there was still an often-noted isolation of black lesbians who were vital to organizing and producing the content of movement publications. In multiple sources, black lesbians are credited with being both the originators of the project, and its primary organizing labor:

When I was growing up, the rare images of lesbians I came across were white. I reckoned there were other black people somewhere who felt as I did, but I did not think I knew any. I was afraid to risk losing the love of my family, and others in the black community on whom I relied to survive in this racist society, by coming out to them.... Even today, many black lesbians are deeply isolated. Much of the scene is overwhelmingly white, and there are still lesbian groups and networks which ignore such problems as discrimination by schools and employers, increasingly harsh immigration laws and racist violence which makes us even less safe than our white sisters.⁶⁸

Hensman notes that the center, was also “women-only at certain times,” which is a claim that appears consistent with the most actively referenced members and participants in interviews about the organization. While men were included in the organizational structure, programming and events, and through the listing of gender-specific resources, it is clear that black lesbians fronted the BLGC’s campaigns while also providing the bulk of intellectual and organizational labor. In what appears in some of the later materials, likely produced in the late eighties or early nineties,⁶⁹ the organization employed “four part-time workers, two women and two men” with

⁶⁸ Savi Hensman, “Spotlight: Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project,” Photocopy, hand-dated 1992, publication unknown, Lesbian Herstory Archive, “England/UK” Organization ephemera folder/file.

⁶⁹ This timing is my own estimation based on the quality and nature of the printed materials which appear to have been produced on computerized word processing as opposed to the typewritten print of earlier documents.

the disclaimer that “of course they cannot tackle all these tasks [referring to the center’s aims listed prior to this note]—volunteers play a vital part.”⁷⁰ Throughout the newsletters, however, the consistent calls for volunteers and mentions of their labor most often cite the women who formed its core membership and onsite support. How then, and when, did black queer women enter into the archives as autonomous subjects beyond service to others? Even within the black queer diaspora, the issue of antiblack misogyny was reproduced in political platforms as well as interpersonal interaction. To combat this, what methods did they deploy to generate an order of knowledge that could better sustain “a sociality of mutual recognitions”?⁷¹

While the BLGC focused on visibility in a larger community or coalitional sense, Smith often reflected on that persistent problem of the few representations of black women in queer organizing. The lack of black queer feminist figures with large public platforms obscured the presence of black lesbians in activist communities, but that did not prevent them from convening through women-dedicated spaces or alternatively, in groups and social scenes where black gay men gathered. With such seeming visibility and opportunities to center black women in social movement work, how does the same affective forgetting continue to reproduce itself? How is it that black women must continue to struggle for representation, even within the spaces that they create and sustain for the survival of precariously positioned others? As Smith noted in her essay “Doing it From Scratch” (1995), “Another roadblock for potential Black lesbian activists, which results from being closeted, is a lack of visible models of what effective Black lesbian (and gay) organizing looks like.... I wish that I could fully convey to them what it was like to do Black

⁷⁰ BLGC, “Becoming a Member of the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project,” Hall-Carpenter Archives, London.

⁷¹ Rinaldo Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 93.

feminist and lesbian organizing in the mid-1970s when we certainly had no specific role models.”⁷² The exclusion of black queer women from social movement visibility is an effect of a much longer history of omissions dictated by a tradition of respectability politics. To better understand this discursive obstacle, we must account for the historical impact of black assimilationist rhetoric. Beginning with early attempts to reject antebellum tropes of black inferiority, and demonstrating the operational reflection in a canonical instantiation of Black Feminism, I briefly demonstrate how respectability politics effectively limit the black lesbian visibility that Smith prioritizes.

3.2.3 Epistemic Erasure and a Black Lesbian Critical Corrective

In Shawn Michelle Smith’s *Photography on the Color Line*,⁷³ we get a historical and visual glimpse into the era that has had considerable residual effects so far as establishing “good” versus “bad” blackness. W.E.B. Du Bois is posited here as a key intellectual and activist figure whose early attempts to recognize black excellence are credited with beginning and propagating the standards that would later become the divisive tenets foundational to the respectability politics that remain operational today—especially regarding media representations of blackness. It was Du Bois’s fascination with the visual portrayals and focus on Black elite, black wealth, and black adherence to hegemonic societal norms of the time that became the primary mode of political and social efforts intended to push back against other harmful popular circulations of

⁷² Barbara Smith, “Doing it From Scratch,” in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 172.

⁷³ Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

black debasement and inferiority in post-slavery U.S. visual culture. The archives of his photo project are a telling signifier of the necessary yet contentious preservation of images depicting affluent historical black subjects. At the expense of representing a multitude of black experiences across class differences, Du Bois suggested that what was necessary to change the white imaginary was a near-complete negation of the undereducated, economically unstable classes of black people who would otherwise reinforce negative notions of blackness circulated by adversarial white supremacist ideologies. It is within this framework that gender roles become concretized within a strict heteronormative frame that would have lasting residual effects on black activism, advocacy, and public practices of deliberation and social participation. Irrespective of Du Bois's later changes politics, the establishment of the "Talented Tenth" narrative and the valuing of hypervisibility for an assimilated black elite would haunt black liberation efforts for over a century.

The underdocumentation and willful omission of black queer women and femmes, especially lesbian and trans women, from prominent scholarship is deeply rooted in this history of "respectability politics"⁷⁴ where women are explicitly designated key to the survival of black family, community, and morality. One thread of Black Feminism grew out of this tradition, virulently decrying the existence of "negative" images of black femininity in the form of "controlling images" or commonly deployed (and infinitely evolving) sexist tropes.⁷⁵ This thematic concern is ensconced in a type of respectability politics that aims to provide a corrective

⁷⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁷⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" in *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

representational framework for establishing the social value of black women within a system designed to denigrate black femininity at all sites of its emergence. The attempt to tame black female sexuality especially makes the liberatory project of broadening sexual orientation options, practices, and behaviors of sexual intimacy a threat to the “greater” narrative of valuable black womanhood. From Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” to the unjust rendering of black maternal figures in *The Moynihan Report* (1965),⁷⁶ black women’s social roles have been mediated through a particularly damaging set of controlling images and social, political expectations including, but not limited to, simultaneously functioning as: upstanding pillars of community, cornerstones of family organization/maintenance and proliferation, and setting standards as the moral compass for wayward black men and children, etc. This limited socialization can in part be attributed to the hypersexualization of black women/hypervisibility of black women’s bodies during and post-slavery, combined with the necessary assimilation for survival that structures black entry in popular and political social life in the United States. It is within this landscape that the radical conservatism of respectability politics takes root.

It is within this framework that black lesbian activists and scholars positioned their work. Barbara Smith, like other non-heteronormative black feminist thinkers, is routinely made subject to an institutional marginalization that posits her work as periphery to what has become canonical Black Feminist Theory/Thought. As a black lesbian activist, scholar/teacher, and writer, Smith’s contributions to the field of study are sometimes at odds with what has become the canon because of its strong critiques of homophobia within black feminism. As such, citations of Smith’s work are frequently limited to scholarly discussions on literary criticism. As

⁷⁶ United States, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: U.S. Gov. Print. Office, 1965).

a result, her writings regularly take a backseat to that of her more widely celebrated peer and comrade, Audre Lorde. Often in the shadow of the highly-revered poet, Smith's critical attention to black lesbian experience and inventiveness in forwarding a radical notion of critique has been underappreciated and underutilized within Black Feminist frameworks that have often modeled progress using a conservative rubric of respectability politics. With Audre Lorde's work taken up as the leading activist-scholarship on black lesbian feminist experience, Smith's was crowded out in part because of the resistance to competing notions of black femininity, some of which were routinely deemed undesirable for the progress of race-based social movements and were treated as such—explicitly or through other means of silencing and dismissal, of which Smith was very vocal in challenging. The resulting effect was the tokenizing of Lorde and a select few other more “palatable” black lesbian feminists of the era. None of this is to say that Audre Lorde's work is any less important in its impact or contribution to Black Feminism (positioned in the precarious overlap between Black Studies, Gender/Feminist Studies, and Queer Studies). However, the system that insists on forcing competition for a limited visibility—a system that rejects polyvocality in favor of a politics of respectable representation—is counterintuitive to a liberatory project. As Rinaldo Walcott challenges, “What if black studies [queer studies] (sic) were to refuse epistemological respectability, to refuse to constitute that wounded identity as an epistemological object such as would define, institute, and thus institutionalize a disciplinary field?”⁷⁷ Barbara Smith utilized her platform to juxtapose “feminist” movements and black liberation, noting the limits of the separate approaches. Her rhetorical style and thematic investments are explored here as necessary components of an intellectual history that preceded “queer of color critique” as a radical challenge to the conservatism that marked Black

⁷⁷ Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies,” 93.

Feminism's entry into disciplinary canon.

As a rhetorician, Smith was unapologetically Black while simultaneously critical of blackness' limitations given certain cultural logics; she was also unapologetically feminist and lesbian while simultaneously a critic of the political limits as enacted by non-POC feminists and lesbian and gay allies. Similar to Audre Lorde's approach, Smith used her platform among white feminist groups and organizations to pursue coalitional politics. In this effort, she was known to work alongside a variety of collectives as an activist as well as delegate to primarily white activist spaces where she could educate on the topic of antiracism. However, in a brief explanatory note regarding a speech to the National Women's Studies Association, Smith carefully notes that in a four-month period in 1979, twelve black women were murdered in Boston preceding a speech she was to give to the organization that June. Prior to the invitation, she had participated in providing workshops on antiracist activism for white women's organizations which had turned out to be quite difficult given her frustrations with scholarship on race and gender. However, by that time she had witnessed and endured the trauma of organizing around the murders, she was intellectually and emotionally exhausted from the efforts. The excessive violence black women face systemically, intellectually, and physically proved a constant threat to epistemic and ontological survival.

The "Racism and Women's Studies" speech stands as a "critique of academic feminists" (mostly white) who were "content to theorize and build careers" instead of organizing for social change. Notably, she urged: "For those of you who are tired of hearing about racism, imagine how much more tired we are of constantly experiencing it—second by literal second—how much more exhausted we are to see it constantly in your eyes. The degree to which it is hard or uncomfortable for you to have the issue raised is the degree to which you know that you aren't

dealing with the issue, the degree to which you are hiding from the oppression that undermines [marginalized] women's lives."⁷⁸ Smith markedly points out the hypocrisy of white feminist scholarship in the space of NWSA as she found herself volleying between socio-political spheres only to find misogyny and homophobia on the one hand within black liberation movements, and racism within white feminist advocacy.

Further, she contentiously offers that "It's not white women's fault that they have been raised, for the most part, not knowing how to talk to Black women [...] Racism and racist behavior are our white patriarchal legacy. What is your fault is making no serious effort to change old patterns of contempt—to look at how you still believe yourselves to be superior to Third World women and how you communicate these attitudes in blatant and subtle ways."⁷⁹ Similar to Lorde's approach in the 1981 NWSA keynote "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Smith attempts to demonstrate white women's complacency in racist politics through their passive participation in maintain the status quo for personal gain. At this conference, the question arises of whether or not NWSA is (or should be) an academic organization, shielded by an "objective" professionalism; or an activist one committed to the liberation of all women and marginalized subjects. Smith emphasizes that "if lifting this oppression is not a priority to you, then it's problematic whether you are a part of the actual feminist movement."⁸⁰ This moment is one of many that demonstrates the critical edge Smith forwards throughout her work, never once allowing for there to be a parsing of identities and

⁷⁸ Barbara Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies" in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 96.

⁷⁹ Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," 97.

⁸⁰ Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," 98; Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984).

oppressions for the uplifting of one movement at the expense of another. She refuses to reproduce the same, persistent omissions and erasures and instead insists on a truly *intersectional* feminism prior to the term being available through popular or academic discourse.

Another consistent challenge of Smith's black feminist contributions comes with her strong critique of homophobia within black feminist literature and activist spaces. She argues, "I even question at times designating Black women—critics and non-critics alike—as feminist who are actively homophobic in what they write, say, or do, or who are passively homophobic because they ignore lesbian existence entirely."⁸¹ She goes on to suggest that these same women are absolutely capable of analyzing other gendered and sexual political implication of the objects of their scrutiny, so for her, the erasure and omission of lesbian scholarship and literature was a particularly harmful and intentional slight. There could indeed be no liberation for some if there could be no liberation for all. Quoting herself from an earlier essay, she states emphatically that a guiding principle in her work is the following: "Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement."⁸² The potency of this statement remains a marker of the strength of objection to popular theories of black liberation and the compounding interests of respectability politics. Neither racism nor homophobia could stand in the way of a truly liberatory activism and intellectual legacy. How, when, and where black queer people are accounted for and incorporated into black liberation narratives bears significant rhetorical impact for Smith, which allows her critiques to resonate in both activist and scholarly spaces.

Returning to the ongoing effects of respectability politics, "Blacks and Gays: Healing the Great Divide" addresses the aggregate effects, and failures, of maintaining adherence to this

⁸¹ Smith, "The Truth That Never Hurts," 50.

⁸² Ibid.

colonialist logic. She recognizes the difficult and complicated history between black assimilation, religion, and sexuality and consistently fights against the limiting ideals of a politics that sacrifice some for the protection of a selected few deemed “worthy” by white heteronormative supremacist cultural logics. In this essay, she argues that “All of the aspects of who I am are crucial, indivisible, and pose no inherent conflict.”⁸³ Here she takes conservative Black churches to task, holding them accountable for the divisive politics that inherently sacrifice queer communities of color for other political tradeoffs. These same tradeoffs offer little protection from systemic structural oppression yet they offer representational benefits regarding the circulation of images of a “proper” and safe blackness mitigated by religious faith. She notes emphatically that this is exploited by right-wing politicians and used as one method of destabilizing communities and preventing modes of activism for those who otherwise would find space within other liberation movements. For Smith, this is one of the reasons why black feminist theory also needs to push against respectability politics and the mainlining of the heteronormative subject suitable for state control and nationalist agendas. Smith forwards these ideas consistently and enacts them through her analyses of history, literature, and activism that culminated in the “immediately catalytic” 1977 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”⁸⁴ and the 1985 follow up “The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s.”⁸⁵

A notable early entry into the canon of queer of color critique wherein homosexuality/queerness are not taken as radical difference/Other, but instead treated as a historical given, the latter essay theorizes: “The existence of lesbianism and male homosexuality is normal, too, traceable throughout history and across cultures. It is society’s response to the

⁸³ Smith, “Blacks and Gays: Healing the Great Divide,” 125.

⁸⁴ Ibid., “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” 4-21.

⁸⁵ Ibid., “The Truth that Never Hurts,” 43-74.

ongoing historical fact of homosexuality that determines whether it goes unremarked as nothing out of the ordinary, as it is in some cultures, or if it is greeted with violent repression, as it is in ours.”⁸⁶ Here, she posits that the existence of homosexuality far extends beyond recognizable cultural histories where violence and repression dominate. From this stance, she further suggests that black lesbian feminism is not distinct from, but a principled aspect of, black liberation social and political movements. There is a necessary coalition in the work that she proposes is necessary for a transformative politics to emerge. She argues at the time that the black lesbian feminism simply “continues that principled tradition of struggle” that we largely understand today as the work of antiracist organizing, activism, and advocacy.

Roderick Ferguson, in the essay “Something Else to Be: *Sula*, *The Moynihan Report*, and the Negations of Black Lesbian Feminism” explains the structural significance of black lesbian critique noting “black lesbian feminists gravitated toward culture as a means of formulating a political alternative to heteropatriarchal and nationalist constructions of nonheteronormative difference as deviance.”⁸⁷ *Sula* is cited here as a means to develop a politics that could critique, refuse, or otherwise push back against “gender, racial, and sexual regulations” of black nationalism movements which often intersected with state aims by demanding strict adherence to heteronormative gender and sexual institutions. However, black lesbians such as Cheryl Clarke, Pat Parker, June Jordan and other foundational black feminist thinkers “pointed out the ways in which the discourse of black matriarchy regulated a range of racialized gender and sexual formations” thereby reproducing the heterogeneous limits of models for subjectivity.⁸⁸ A

⁸⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁸⁷ Roderick Ferguson, “Something Else to Be: *Sula*, *The Moynihan Report*, and the Negations of Black Lesbian Feminism” in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 111.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 125.

necessary revision in this social practice would come not from direct political action alone, but a complete dissolution of the grammars that constituted subjugation and the suppression of gender and sexual difference. Ferguson goes on to note that in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” Smith deploys “lesbian” not in terms of identity but as a “set of critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy” which allows for Smith to identify a “set of social relations that point to the instability of heteropatriarchy and to a possible critical emergence within instability.” By pointing toward the set of relationships and the critique of heteropatriarchy, the discrete distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual are disrupted such that new avenues for understanding precarious socialities emerge.

Connecting black lesbianism to political struggle was a strategic move that allowed Smith to forward a critique of the limits of black sexual politics. She argued at the time that “heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege; maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort.”⁸⁹ The act of lesbianism, then, within Black radical social movements was deemed a type of betrayal intended to detract or deter from other intellectual and social movements fighting for black liberation. As cited in Smith’s analysis however, she wanted to create new register to understand the complexity of black women’s relationships, social negotiations with systemic oppression and, perhaps, a new foundational knowledge of the meanings applied to blackness and femininity that develop through collective refusal of white hegemony and black respectability politics at once. “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” instigated a significant shift in the direction of social and cultural criticism by creating a rhetorical lens through which queerness could be deployed as an analytical challenge to

⁸⁹ Smith, “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism,” 18.

structural normativity.

Like what Barbara Smith articulates in her theory of black feminist criticism, the BLGC performs in its consistent declaration of “blacklesbian” and “blackgay” identifications. Further, the organization’s own “Definition of Black” deploys a subtle criticism that works to complicate the interaction between race, gender, and sexual orientation:

“All lesbians and gay men descended (through one or both parents) from Africa, Asia (i.e. The Middle East to China, including Pacific nations), and Latin America, and lesbians and gay men descended from the original inhabitants of Australasia, North America, and the islands of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean.”⁹⁰

There are three things that stand out about this definition aside from its general expansiveness: 1) it does not attempt to define “Black” in strict reference to racialization (i.e., a descriptive formula for what it *is*); 2) it illuminates the operationalization of “blackness” in a present order of Western, postcolonial knowledge (i.e., establishes a basis for exploring what it *does*)⁹¹; and 3) it incorporates queerness as always already present. For the BLGC, it was necessary to establish that their primary audience and membership outreach efforts extended to the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people of the UK and abroad, mainly persons of precolonial non-European

⁹⁰ Newsletter, “Black Lesbian & Gay Centre Project Newsletter Feb/March 1992, “ [1992], File [HCA/CHE2/12/5](#), CODE PA9552, Hall-Carpenter Archives, London, UK.

⁹¹ It is also relevant to note that the history of how the racial category of “black” is deployed in a nationalistic context differs across the diaspora: in the UK, usage has a history that most often includes South Asians—especially through the activism from the 1970’s through early 1990’s. This use of the term differs from the assertions of blackness gaining prominence through the influential black nationalist movements in the U.S., however. The BLGC’s definition differs from both significations in that it also includes Pacific Islanders and Indigenous nations, east Asians, and Latin Americans. For a history of the development of “Black” as a cultural and political category in the UK, see: Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Racism and the Colour ‘Black’” in *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and the Anti-racist Struggle* (London and New York: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005), 93-111.

descent. This focus does not assume that lesbians and gay men are all non-white, nor that all non-white persons are queer. Instead, the definition offers a context for relationality that both recognizes anti-colonial positionality as well as lesbian and gay identifications, representing a simple challenge to both state and cultural structures. Importantly, this definition signals a connectedness built upon and related through historic conditions that evolved into displaced diasporas. Between and within diasporic ethnic legacies, colonialism generates recognizable patterns of displacement and adaptive/resistant cultural symbolics that exceed temporal and spatial formalities. In other words, Western colonialism has produced similarities in social and political structures that mark and name “difference” by positioning non-white “Others” in proximity to an unnamed, assumed normative, sovereign white civility. The BLGC’s rhetorical gesture of extending the definition of Black reflects on commonalities not related as much to the social construction of identity as it is borne out of anti-colonial exigence. Blackness, here rendered as an organizing logic, suggests a state of ontological and epistemological dispossession *while also* recognizing ethnic, national, and cultural diversity. The condition of *relating to* this community is contingent upon proximity to structural antiblackness, or rather, standing in opposition to the whiteness of structural normativity relative to a more localized context. Such a take on relationality lingers on the question of what it means to be “the black” of any social hierarchy maintained within a postcolonial ontological order structured through antiblackness. And within this system, queerness complicates external racial hierarchies, as well as intraracial sexuality and gender hierarchies.

To begin a definition of “Black” with “all lesbians and gay men” is a significant point of departure from pro-black empowerment ideologies of the post-Civil Rights movements in the US and related political agitations in the UK, but also a point of conflict for lesbian and gay

movements in the era within which the BLGC reached the height of its activity. For the organization, “lesbian and gay” is not an additive identification that sits alongside or intersects at a definitive point with the status of blackness. Queerness, in this framing, is inextricable from the lived experience of racialization which shapes the ways that individuals negotiate expressions of gender and sexual orientation. In the organization’s collected documents I could find no notes or meeting minutes that discussed when, why, or how their use of terms or definition of blackness came to be printed in the BLGC newsletter. However, the need to provide a definition at all appears to coincide with the organization’s investment in confronting anti-black racism in LGBT communities, and homophobia within racial minority political organizing. This reworking of queerness as nascent to blackness within an attendant knowledge system of colonialism posits that the conflict is structural, and pervasive in that it reflects political (state and institutional apparatuses) and social/cultural (community and interpersonal) investments in maintaining normative power dynamics. Constructing blackness and queerness as epistemologically and ontologically distinct identifications aids this systematic Othering and is reproduced at the level of cleaving political organizing between *primary* and *secondary* affiliations⁹²—a practice against

⁹² As reflected in many critiques of social movements and political organizing, and also further theorized in scholarship such as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of Intersectionality, I am referring to the ranking of identities that assumes gender and sexual expression involves some level of choice on behalf of the individual in service to a broader community; whereas race, in this dynamic, is always already a primary affiliation that assumes collective need without regard to other minoritized distinctions i.e. gender identity and expression, sexuality, class, etc. The problem of “choice” is reflected in pressure to prioritize single-axis social movement legal policy goals, for example “gay marriage,” as opposed to more comprehensive, and admittedly more complex, structural changes e.g. addressing interrelated anti-liberation legacies of legal institutions such as marriage, military, and incarceration. For a contemporary analysis of how this type of conflict influences advocacy initiatives, see the trilogy of critiques of LGBT advocacy published by the queer collective *Against Equality*. The series explores how such a system produces erasure and increases state violence under the guise of socio-political progressivism.

which the BLGC fought from its inception. In other words, black liberation efforts could not be conceptualized as separate from queer liberation efforts, as both would be necessary to affirm the lives of black lesbians and gay men.

Building on and simultaneously expanding the functional practice of “representation” and “visibility,” black liberation efforts were given new potential through black (queer) femme epistemological and ontological production. It is through these new tools and technologies for resistance that I approach the onto-epistemic archive of “Refusal.” Here, I use an optics of aesthetic refusal to illustrate the disruptive force of B(Q)F visibility, theorized as an alternative language of performativity, that marks the radical deployment of sartorial vernacular.

4.0 OEA: REFUSAL

I've seen masculinity deployed as revolutionary love. I've witnessed a masculinity that is vulnerable and also unafraid. I know that the masculine can be a site of resistance to the heteropatriarchal capitalist society that gave birth to it. I know because when I look to my trans* brothers, or to the butches, studs, bois and other masculine presenting folks in community, I see evidence of it. This resistance often lies in the redefining or dissolution of arbitrary binaries like 'masculine and feminine.' For example, is it considered masculine to give birth to and raise a child? In my community: yes. That in itself is resistance. It is revolutionary to see masculine-of-center folks resisting and reconstituting dominant masculine mores to treat women and feminine-of-center folks with kindness, love, openness and respect — and those are the values I see represented in my community. As a woman, I am made safe and loved by a community of masculine-of-center people, many of whom enjoy less privilege than myself. ¹

The term “masculine-of-center” originates within the black feminist cultural lexicon as one of many codes for gender-nonbinary people. Considered a practice of self-authoring, as contextualized by Mire, such naming challenges the disciplined feminist trajectory that routinely

¹ Muna Mire, “Rethinking Masculinities: A Queer Woman of Color’s Perspective,” *The Feminist Wire’s Forum on Masculinity*. The site is a collection of editorials, essays, creative works, scholarship and, criticism submitted to the web to encourage discourse: <http://www.thefeministwire.com>

ignores or obfuscates the history, experiences, and conflicts that queer black and brown bodies present in the face of unyielding theory and epistemic praxis. As Queer Studies scholar Elisa Glick emphasizes, earlier departures from queer theory critiqued its tendency to revolve around the performativity of queer identity, especially in the scholarship on racialized queer “others” (most prominently cited and thoroughly critiqued, this scholarship largely follows from Judith Butler’s work in *Gender Trouble*). Related to and arguably an extension of canonical Feminist Studies, scholarship of this type focuses on the cultural and aesthetic “to dispense with the category of experience, and to disappear the subject.”² However, Mire offers a differential reading of performative expression, one that reflects on the everydayness of resistance and the subtlety of refusing complacency as a tactic of survival. Also within this statement, is a reflection on the need to position mundane action as “resistance,” which acknowledges the misreading of black queerness as “oppositional to” when it may be better understood to signify “affirmation of.” History has a proven tendency toward adapting negatively to counter movements of blackness as an organizing logic and order of knowledge. Given the long reach of misogynoir’s resentment, it should come as no surprise that black women’s and femmes’ performance of style has routinely been the subject of social movement controversy (largely intraracial, though not exclusively so). From the queer disruption of public respectability to the ambiguous gender performance of androgyny, B(Q)F onto-epistemic praxis offers tangible sights to analyze gendering/ungendering as systemic violence, but also as reclaimable through vernacular practice.

In the previous chapter, I explained the purpose of gendering/ungendering as it relates to the process of interpellation. More broadly, it is a technique of power most often used to enforce

² Elisa Glick, “Introduction: Defining Queer Ethnicities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 123-24.

strict binaries around gender, and to regulate heterosexual practice and “acceptable” forms of desire. Within a white supremacist order of knowledge, it renders black (queer) women and femmes illegible as human subjects and therefore non-ontological. As an effect of this framework, constructing the traditional rhetorical situation relies on producing a subject, or speaker, who *cannot* appear (whole or otherwise) in the role of rhetor proper. In Communication Studies and Rhetoric, scholarship on the cultural and performative acts of speech and meaning-making have been used to determine the space and place of radical departure typically in the form of public speech acts, or further, in language itself.³ Arguably, this constant marking of departure from heteronormativity repeats and aggregates discursive negations at the site of B(Q)F reproducibility—namely epistemic and ontological, but also in terms of cultural and material design. The resulting system of recognition substitutes the performance for the subject, effectively displacing competing notions of subjectivity that fail to reflect its boundaries. Processes of marking and unmarking designate idyllic state subjects and exaggerate-by-comparison the qualities that attract “corrective” social and political measures, a violent mainstay of colonialist logics of control and order.

Black (queer) femme tropes also exist and can reproduce normative frames for regarding queerness within a similarly repressive and oppressive system of binary affiliations. Black Queer Studies theorist Cathy Cohen’s summary of challenges shaping queer political and theoretical limits emphasizes the “inability to challenge heteronormativity” due to the dominating discursive rhetoric enforcing a “simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed

³ David Henry and Richard J. Jensen, “Social Movement Criticism and the Renaissance of Public Address,” *Communication Studies* 42, no. 1 (1991): 83-93.

heterosexual.”⁴ Queer “community” is not without its own procedures for policing through exclusions and enforcing a different, albeit “critical,” normative standard. Importantly, the project of decolonization must consider not only “what” is normalized, but the processes through which that normalization occurs. Because dominant structural logics reproduce hierarchies in orders of knowledge, there is very little that functions as radical or disruptive in spaces that still rely heavily on binary frames of recognition. Inadequate as it stands, the presumably stable network of signs and signals that comprises gender and sexuality identifications for black queer femmes is always already compromised by antiblackness. Dominant orders of knowledge continue to function at the level of citing—through a catalogue of negations—proximity to a centralized, white heteronormative social subject, thereby remaining within a lockstep of epistemological reference. However, the limits of this framework are revealed at sights of unintelligibility.

How, then, do we recognize the appositional “subaltern” or “non-ontological” subject? How might these rhetors influence or even determine the ways that we read objects in their discursive proximity? What changes when they are central to the situation and not alternative or exceptional to it? What can we learn from revisiting “performativity” with the knowledge that everyday practices of fugitive movement map interactional relations across time, space, and place? In this chapter, I will explore tools that gendering/ungendering create in the wake of that attempted erasure and persistent *forgetting* that haunts black femme subjectivities. Controlling images—popular, historically sedimented tropes and their attending social displacements—impact black (queer) femme lives in the stabilizing of representative models of speaking

⁴ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

subjects. Confined by particularly harmful or violent practices of reading, any construction of rhetorical agency within this framework is incapable of disrupting its epistemological traditions. The dynamic of invisibility and hypervisibility plays out in ways that are familiar to the sites of scholarship and activism as described in OEA: Liberation, and will be expanded in the forthcoming analysis.

OEA: Refusal coalesces around the idea that refusal of dominant systems of recognition is enacted in the everyday fugitive acts made by oppositional subjects. Such a challenge to normative practices of belonging provides a *sustainable* deviation from sovereign order that cultivates a critical contempt for and active defiance of hegemonic discourse. To avoid treating black queer performativity as spectacle, I will focus on how B(Q)F material cultures develop a pragmatic application of gendering/ungendering that explores the political potential of aesthetic ambiguity. Signifying on a multifaceted legacy of antagonisms, B(Q)Fs generate a vernacular response with dialectical precision. Refusal, deployed as a practice of critique and pursued through a communicative modality, “remains an operative mode of analysis that demands, rather than forecloses, futurity.”⁵) It invites a reflection on a collective, though contextually situated, historical past while suggesting possibility for future invention and intervention. Recalling the notion of fungibility, especially regarding the consumption of black femme sexualities, I argue that the transformation in meaning and purpose of style signals a divestment from “capitalism’s increasing investment in producing and regulating desire.”⁶ Read contextually, aesthetic refusal imagines and deploys queer (dis)identifications—the embodied slights that function as an indictment of complicity; or better, a reminder of the queer disruptive capacity of gesture, a hint

⁵ Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 333.

⁶ Glick, “Introduction,” 124.

or hidden transcript that echoes the failure of violent force to eliminate difference. These disruptions transform the social geographic landmarking of space and place by demonstrating the intentional ways disidentification is made tangible. In other words, using the space of the everyday, B(Q)Fs deploy aesthetic refusal as a technique to produce the subject through onto-epistemic affirmation.

This chapter historically and canonically situates black queer gender performativity as part of a living tradition of challenges to western white feminist discourse with regard to the “epistemic status of social identities and minority experiences.”⁷ It offers a consideration of the decolonizing practices of self-styling, dandyism, and critical reflexivity currently developing within a discourse community broadly related to “Boihood”—where gender-nonbinary black queers affirm gender ambiguity and fluctuating expressions. Toward a queer of color critique, this chapter draws upon the theoretical interventions of intersectionality, queer theory, poststructural feminism, and rhetorical criticism to challenge limited notions of identity formation as related to appositional subjectivity. This chapter will first explore the history of controlling images and respectability politics that constitutes common methods of gendering/ungendering in maintaining a normative social order. Next, I develop the notion of queer sartorial vernacular in the context of black aesthetic traditions. I challenge the dichotomy of traditional forms of “butch” identities as constructed through Western white feminist discourse and I complicate these ideal types by introducing the contemporary “dapper quare” as a consciousness-raising, politicized rhetor whose style embodies rhetorical critique. Finally, I

⁷ Ernesto Javier Martínez, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 5.

discuss the potential of politicized style to disrupt normative orders of desire through affirmations of race, biography, history, and sexuality.

4.1 SIGHTS

4.1.1 Gendering/Ungendering the Dandy

Academic discourse about the performative elements of black gender expression often focuses on issues of race and gender along two primary discursive threads: 1) cisgender black masculine performances of heterosexuality and/or expressions of violence; and 2) cisgender black feminine performativity in relationship to respectability politics. Scholarship in Communication largely fails to address the compounding interests of black queer female subjectivities constructed within multiple systems of domination and control. Ronald L. Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* goes so far as to explicitly urge readers "not to miss the point, which is that both Black male and female bodies have been ontologically rearranged, displaced, and economized. It is virtually impossible to speak of male masculinities without at least insinuating femaleness and femininity."⁸ A significant factor worth noting (and appreciating) is Jackson's repeated demarcation of "*male* masculinity" (emphasis added) throughout. Other texts, however, do not distinguish "black *male* masculinity" but reinforce the exclusion of black female masculinities through the strict application of paradigms of masculinity centered on black male bodies.⁹ In a

⁸ Ronald L. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Male Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 3.

⁹ Robin Means Coleman and Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop," *Popular Communication* 5 (2007): 89-108; Jeffrey

slight shift toward a queer of color critique, Shanté P. Smalls offers a rare critical interrogation of black heterosexuality and gender performativity that actively addresses black masculinity as performed by a black woman in the tradition of disruption via non-normative rhetorical engagement.¹⁰ While Smalls' essay on hip-hop artist Jean Grae engages many of the concepts I find useful for this discussion, its main thrust is the disruption of heteronormativity grounded in an analysis that relies heavily on reiterations of gender binaries.

In Rhetorical Studies scholarship, the continued erasure of the experiences of black queer women and femmes is common practice. Such analyses proceed through a limited critical perspective addressing only part of a dynamic interactional framework—i.e., focusing on race and gender separate from sexuality, or sexuality and race separate from gender expression and class, etc.¹¹ Notably, essays such as Eric King Watt's "Queer Harlem: Exploring the Rhetorical Limits of a Black Gay 'Utopia'" on the emergence of black queer voice and rhetorical potential consistently center cisgender black gay men's performativity.¹² Alternatively, black cisgender women's expressions in public speech acts and oratory¹³ are largely historical analyses of

Q. McCune, Jr., "'Out' in the Club: The Down Low, Hip-Hop, and the Architexture of Black Masculinity," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2008): 298-313; Alford A. Young, Jr., "The Black Masculinities of Barack Obama: Some Implications for African American Men," *Daedalus* 140, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 206-14.

¹⁰ Shante P. Smalls, "'The Rain Comes Down': Jean Grae and Hip Hop Heteronormativity," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55, no. 1 (2011): 86-95.

¹¹ McCune, "'Out.'"; Francesca T. Royster, "Here's a Chance to Dance our Way Out of our Constrictions: P--Funk's Black Masculinity and the Performance of Imaginative Freedom," *Poroi* 2 (2011); John M. Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Helen Tate, "The Ideological Effects of a Failed Constitutive Rhetoric: The Co-Option of the Rhetoric of White Lesbian Feminism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 28 no. 1 (2005): 1-31.

¹² Eric King Watts, "Queer Harlem: Exploring the Rhetorical Limits of a Black Gay 'Utopia,'" in Johnson and Henderson, *Queering Public Address*, 74-92.

¹³ For example, Shanara Reid-Brinkley, "Mammies and Matriarchs: Feminine Style and Signifyin(g) in Carol Mosely Braun's 2003-2004 Campaign for the Presidency," in *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies*, ed. Karma R.

rhetorical performance. Black feminine “style,” in many ways, becomes a disembodied representation of black women that follows from the long tradition of gendering/ungendering that “disappears the subject” or requires its constant recuperation. While awareness of this issue has been the subject of critique, rhetorical studies has contributed to an interdisciplinary epistemological gap. Chávez and Griffin’s comprehensive reflection on the state of intersectional scholarship comments directly on the fundamental failure of communication scholarship to effectively address these concerns:

We have a canon, a foundation, and a long-standing tradition of communication research, but these have for too long been built around and informed by singular, monolithic, and homogenous views of identity and subjectivity. As a handful of persistent voices have continued to argue, those views are not, nor have they ever been, sustainable or even productive for communication and rhetorical scholarship.¹⁴

Feminist communication scholars cannot continue to be complicit in ignoring the nuances presented by communities that are inconsistent with the discipline’s accepted rhetorical traditions. To do so would be “to deny the complexity of our lives and the communicative exchanges we live by and in; indeed, it is to deny the intersectional and interlocking.”¹⁵ Even the use of polyvocal, multivalent Black Feminist analytics and theories cannot, without intention, produce the subject at the site/sight/cite of multiple antagonisms. Despite the growing body of scholarship exploring media representations, legal policy, social movement impact, and

Chávez and Cindy L. Griffin (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 35-58; Lester C. Olson, “Audre Lorde’s Embodied Invention,” in *The Responsibilities of Rhetoric*, ed. Michelle Smith and Barbara Warnick (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2009), 80-95; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “Style and Content in the Rhetoric of Early Afro-American Feminists,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72, no. 4 (1986): 434-45.

¹⁴ Chávez and Griffin, *Standing in the Intersection*, 2

¹⁵ Chávez and Griffin, *Standing in the Intersection*, 3.

intellectual histories of black (queer) feminist communities, there is still important work to be done in combatting this familiar erasure.

Addressing the overlapping omission of queer voices in black studies, Dwight McBride (2005) acknowledges the conflict of “collapsing differences of gender, class, and sexuality into a more homogenous, hegemonic black subjectivity.”¹⁶ Black femininity, as an object of inquiry, is often deployed as the thing against which black male masculinity can be measured, defined, or constructed; alternately, it is cast as commodity, fetishized through cultural appropriation or sexual objectification.¹⁷ The ongoing displacement of black women and femmes through these mechanisms, as previously discussed, almost always produces race as a masculine form through the subjugation of gender as a legitimate axis of oppression. McBride’s acknowledgement of this dilemma manifests as only a nod to Black Feminist critique; a statement deeply couched within an essay on James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*. Though it (rightfully) challenges black studies to recognize black queer experiences writ large, it still manages to subsume black queer femme concerns in a broadly masculinized scholarly criticism. Black masculinity, then, is largely confined to cisgender male bodies while femininity for black women and femmes must be recuperated and reclaimed, somehow made compatible with their materiality. Where, then, is there room for gender play? How might we account for a multitude of gender expressions? The pervasiveness of functionally misogynist theorizing within black queer scholarship in conjunction with anti-black methodologies and analytical inquiry within communication and rhetoric scholarship opens space for critical intervention.

¹⁶ Dwight A. McBride, “Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies, in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 68-89.

¹⁷ Sydney Fonteyn Lewis, “Everything I know about being Femme I Learned from *Sula*’ or Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism,” in *Trans-Scripts 2* (2012): 104-106.

The epistemological and ontological ways by which femininity is disavowed reveals an important consideration for the destruction of the dichotomy between the masculine and feminine as mutually exclusive objects of study. In a complex system of negations, blackness supersedes gender, gender is represented as masculine, and black femininity is surveilled and policed such that expression is muted to the point of erasure, or muted so as not to invoke hypervisibility in the form of exposed sexuality which in turn, garners multiple forms of institutional and interpersonal violence. Recalling Saidiya Hartman's scenes of subjection, Fred Moten describes the complex effect of hypervisibility as "between looking and being looked at, spectacle and spectatorship, enjoyment and being enjoyed."¹⁸ To be black and queer and intentionally femme-affirming, then, poses an epistemic problem that can be analyzed in relation to dandyism as a black queer feminist praxis.

The figure of the dandy teeters along a very fine line of critique and is not unproblematic. On the one hand, the cisgender male dandy as a historical figure disrupts racialized class ideologies first and foremost; sexuality then, is secondary to the most prominent analyses included here.¹⁹ On the other hand, falsely de-racialized queer dandyism rejects femininity as a

¹⁸ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Susan Fillin-Yeh, *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Miranda Gill, "The Myth of the Female Dandy," *French Studies* 61, no. 2 (2007): 167-81; Antonio Machuco Rosa, "From Dandyism to 'Coco' Chanel: A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Theory of Fashion," *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 3, no. 1 (Apr. 2016): 91-110.

It is very telling that only this year there was a newspaper article on black women dandies in Africa: "'I like to look smart': female dandies of DRC delight in extravagance; Kinshasa's fashionable sapeurs have been joined by growing cadre of sapeuses who dress to impress," *The Guardian* (February 8, 2017). See also Gbadamosi Nosmot, "Fighting oppression through fashion: Africa's dandies," *Philadelphia Tribune* (16 Oct 2016): 9A.

viable option to authorize power and mutes its intentional expression in favor of a masculinized “androgyny.” In this case, masculinity is forwarded as the “answer” to resisting the social and cultural subjugation of femininity (perpetually fungible, renewable and without inherent value)—a claim that I challenge because of the assumed undesirability of the latter. Black feminine performances, ways of living and being in the world, and practices of communication are integral to the project of liberation, so it should follow that there is indeed power and promise to be enacted from this subjective site. Returning to the issue of respectability politics, we can better understand the aggregate layers of displacement that have catalyzed the praxis of black femme dandyism.²⁰

When S.H.E. is invited to appear, it is often in the form of contested stereotypes and popular tropes that reproduce the myth of black feminine failure. In the foundational “Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images,” Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes how these images are consumed and interpellated by in-group members as well as by the public function differently than images that are self-styled and self-selected. Controlling images are what surface when the objectified subject does not control the gaze that witnesses and interprets them. Collins’ work calls attention to visual authorship and subjectivity in the act of self-fashioning and deliberate imaging, yet leaves behind the important distinctions of sexuality and gender expressivity in this

²⁰ There are two important and relevant threads of scholarship and thought on black dandyism, one primarily focuses on cisgender men, the other considers performativity in the context of minstrelsy. On black male dandyism see: Michael McMillan, “Saga Bwoys and Rude Bwoys: Migration, Grooming, and Dandyism,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 38-39 (November 2016): 60-69; Shantrelle P. Lewis, “Fashioning Black Masculinity: The Origins of the Dandy Lion Project,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 37 (November 2015): 54-61. On blackface minstrel dandyism: Barbara L. Webb, “The Black Dandyism of George Walker: A Case Study in Genealogical Method,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 45, no. 4 (2001) 7-24.

process. In her book on black women in the public sphere,²¹ Gwendolyn Pough²² offers the assertion that an image can only be deemed politically useful if it is still very much within the control, or authorship, of its marginalized creator. Authorship, in this sense, is the deliberate imperative of black femme dandyism as it has emerged in online digital forums and as a signature of politicized haute couture. Seeking authorship of their own identities and representations, these dandy practitioners respond to the overdetermined dominant images of black respectability through a performative self-styling that breaks tradition by refusing to designate a “proper” ideal of femininity, masculinity, class affiliation, or normative sexuality.

...But All the Dandies are Men

A scholarly history of Dandyism will reveal a focus on the European dandy,²³ and more contemporarily, the black male dandy.²⁴ However, histories such as Ellen Moers’s *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* and James Laver’s *Dandies* (1968) rarely mention or reflect on the

²¹ On historical dimensions of black women’s resistive use of fashion, see Patricia K. Hunt, “The Struggle to Achieve Individual Expression through Clothing and Adornment: African American Women under and after Slavery,” in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, ed. Patricia Morton (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 227-40; Stephanie M. H. Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861,” *Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): 533-72.

²² Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

²³ Elisa T. Glick, “The Dialectics of Dandyism,” *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001): 129-163; Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964) in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed., Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

²⁴ Glick, “The Dialectics of Dandyism”; idem, “Harlem’s Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 414-42; Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Barbara L. Webb, “Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 1 (2004): 63-82.

sartorial performances of women in the same tradition.²⁵ Mentions, if any at all, are often buried deep within texts and are typically included as a way of further situating scholarship on male dandyism. As noted by Elisa Glick, who has also produced scholarship on black dandyism, Monica Miller's text has an obvious omission: "As the reader has probably noticed by now, all of the black dandies in this book are men. One wonders why Miller does not mention or even acknowledge black female dandies, who have been cutting a dashing figure along with their male counterparts since at least the nineteenth century."²⁶ Yet, even with this criticism, Glick's own scholarship on black dandies maintains the same erasure. While Glick has produced interrogations of dandyism that at least consider queer identities and race, she did not choose to include women of color in her theorizing while *simultaneously noting* their absence in current scholarship.

Miller uses historical accounts and visual images to situate dandyism within a trajectory of public performative negotiations that black men, specifically, made (and continue to make) in efforts to define and style the self. Through this analysis, she examines "a series of transhistorical and transatlantic moments in literary and visual culture in which black male subjects can be seen understanding, manipulating, and reimagining the construction of their images through the dandy's signature method: a pointed redeployment of clothing, gesture, and wit."²⁷ Here, adornments of dress are rooted in the desire to not only maintain a sense of being in the world, but also as a way of subversively resisting societal norms in conflict with one's identity. Namely, it was an important disruption of racialized class politics and a signifier of

²⁵ Ellen Moers, *The Dandy, Brummell to Beerbohm* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); James Laver, *Dandies* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968).

²⁶ Glick, "The Dialectics of Dandyism," 438.

²⁷ Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 9.

social status. When full assimilation is neither possible nor desired, when there are few opportunities to make oneself visible as a participant in and contributor to common public, fashion is posited as a rhetorical tool that can be used to redraw social maps with relation to sites of struggle. Sartorial rhetoric, as explained by Miller, performs a critique of power, gender, and sexuality simultaneously. This critique gestures toward an understanding of performativity that considers the hidden transcripts underwriting visual aesthetics of style. Instead of reading gendered fashion within a limited set of socially recognizable scripts (as simple relations between signifying explicit gender and sexual orientation, for example), sartorial rhetoric suggests that gendering/ungendering can be recuperated for powerful play. The black dandy's style, then, develops as a sustainable practice of self-affirming resistance to everyday experiences of displacement.

Slaves to Fashion characterizes the black dandy's agency as transgressive: "As he changes clothes and strikes a pose, the black dandy performs sameness and difference, safety and danger, all the while telling a story about self and society."²⁸ The *queer* performance referred to in this assessment of the black dandy as male embodiment requires an expansion that includes the unique ways that black femmes also inhabit this transformative space, often at the same historical juncture. Speculatively, Miller's text "wonders if, in the early twenty-first century, we might be both post-dandy and post-black."²⁹ Considering the contemporary style movements of the "classic man," "Black Ivy," and re-emergence of male dandy portraiture³⁰ perhaps the figure

²⁸ Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 7.

²⁹ Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 211.

³⁰ Donya Blaze, "Style Guy'd: Jidenna Is Leading The 'Dandy' Movement in Men's Fashion," *The Urban Daily* (2015): <https://theurbandaily.cassiuslife.com/3002937/jidenna-style-fashion/>; "The Black Ivy," *StreetEtiquette*; <http://streetetiquette.com/the-black-ivy/>; Jon Caramanica, "Pushing the Boundaries of Black Style," *New York Times* (17 Aug. 2011); Shantrelle P. Lewis, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style* (New York: Aperture, 2017).

no longer functions as historically imagined, but the movement continues to thrive while codifying dandyism as black masculine performance of respectability. The less subversive, arguably more conservative, rhetoric surrounding black masculine dandyism suggests that such styling is desired for social progress. In other words, it offers a corrective to popular media stereotypes of black male violence and social deviance.³¹ The suit-clad men of modern dandy aesthetics often deploy the style to increase social capital by appealing to class distinctions as noted in the rhetorical moves to equate fashion with education status, career growth, (hetero) sexual prowess, and other capitalistic measures of success. Is the figure still subversive? Can the dandy be reclaimed as a disruptive social force? Of course, but that requires incorporating an alternative historical narrative and theoretical trajectory that recognizes the inventiveness of queer sartorial vernacular. The history of the black dandy needs to be expanded by incorporating the image of the queer femme dandy figure who has gone largely unacknowledged for her contribution to this subversive tradition of sartorial rhetorical resistance. This figure asserts masculinity and femininity simultaneously, while also de/-reconstructing the concept of black respectability through visual critique. Dandies have historically been, and will likely remain, a testament to the notion that style and ideology are intricately connected; the dapper quare, however, offers a renegotiation of the relative safe spaces afforded to the heteronormative, class-assimilated, bourgeoisie-aspiring dandy.

...And All the Butches are White

It would be difficult to understand the scene of today's queer dandyism without acknowledging

³¹ David Yi, "Black Armor," *Mashable* (2015): <http://mashable.com/2015/08/08/black-men-dressing-up-police/#q9H3fraGwGqU>.

the queer theory at the root of its politicized visage. The popularization of “female masculinity” and its related archetypes are foundational to the imagined space of belonging marked by “masculine-presenting” queer folks. While I do not intend to diminish the importance of any identification that empowers marginalized queer communities, I think it is necessary to also interrogate how and why they matter with particular attention to who is included/excluded and the techniques used to establish those discursive boundaries. Thus far, I have examined the ways that black feminism and queer studies have demonstrated epistemic and social negligence in the treatment of black queer femmes. Because queer dandyism is socially constructed across a variety of intersections, I will now address the most prominent theoretical and cultural citation that frames this contemporary movement. The concept of “female masculinity” was most notably interrogated by Jack Halberstam in the historically expansive analysis of queered masculinities as presented in the absence of cisgender men.³² In addressing masculinity as performed by women of color, narratives of the “butch” female in Western white feminist discourse fail to account for the racialization of gender and sexual expression. Yet, this foundational work analyzes some of the dominant images that underwrite the most recognizable models of queer femme gender play.

In this incredibly important and necessary exploration of “masculinity without men,” Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* defines the historical genre and interrogates archetypal models that can be categorized as such. Within the introduction, it is argued that minority masculinities and femininities “destabilize binary gender systems in many different locations.”³³ Recognizing that there is, in fact, a need for a more complex analytic to address these distinctions, Halberstam

³² Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

³³ Ibid., *Female Masculinity*, 29.

continues: “As many feminist and antiracist critics have commented, femininity and masculinity signify as normative within and through white middle-class heterosexual bodies.”³⁴ This observation resonates throughout the text as the broad constructions of butch archetypes presented forgo mention of queer women of color and the ways that their lived experiences might be interpreted differently within the present constructions of masculinity. Even though Halberstam draws on a wide range of Women of Color Feminisms to develop a somewhat inclusive paradigm of the butch female, the text never fully recovers a commitment to alternative models of masculinity that account for differential racialization of gender expression. When utilized in this way, women of color feminisms work to create more opportunities to center whiteness and explore its possibilities while simultaneously quieting dissent.

The only clear representation of a black butch female we see in the text is noted in the character of “Cleo” played by rapper/actor/singer Dana Owens, better known as Queen Latifah.³⁵ While representation alone was a significant inclusion for that era of queer theory, it is important to note the limits of merely mentioning or noting certain images without detailed critical attention. Notwithstanding the mention of drag kings of color in the final chapters, none of the forwarded explicitly addresses the intersection of race and gender performativity. The text successfully complicates gender assumptions associated with the heteronormativity reflected in the butch/femme dynamic, but the archetypal image of the butch largely avoids signification of race.³⁶

Here, I want to draw attention to the notion of the “stone butch” archetype which they

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁶ Ibid., 122.

argue “makes female masculinity possible.”³⁷ Halberstam posits that this particular image of the butch “occupied, and continues to occupy, a crucial position in lesbian culture, and despite numerous attempts by lesbian feminists and others to disavow her existence, indeed her persistence, *the stone butch remains central to any and all attempts to theorize sexual identity and its relations to gender variation.*”³⁸ I have added emphasis to the aspect of this claim that very much assumes a homogenous “lesbian culture” that simply does not exist. Many of the arguments made regarding the affective limitations of this model have also been used to dehumanize and justify harm toward women of color, especially (cisgender) black women cast as incapable of experiencing depths of pain or emotional investment. In this characterization of a female masculine type, she outlines various characteristics including the factor of “untouchability” that removes the stone butch from emotional and physical sensitivity. While this construction is useful for organizing masculine types in direct relationship to proximity to normative ideals, this essay falls into the problematic feminist tradition of *not* interrogating whiteness as phenomenologically significant. The idea that “society cannot comprehend stone butch gender or stone butch desire”³⁹ is directly related to this archetype’s intimate sexual interactions and agency-affirming establishment of boundaries, i.e., determining when and how to experience or provide pleasure. As I have discussed previously and will explain further in Chapter 6’s discussion of compulsory sexuality, notions of desire, intimacy, and control over the body are areas of immense negotiation for black women and femmes. This rendering of the “stone butch” assumes that there can be a nonperformativity of sexual identity that, within the white supremacist sovereign order of knowledge, does not exist for black women and other

³⁷ Ibid., 126.

³⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Ibid., 124.

³⁹ Ibid.

women of color.

Halberstam's concern with the affective and aesthetic practices of the stone butch do not consider the complications that racial identification would present in the very ability of masculine females of color to exist in the same manner as her white counterparts. Though she engages Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), she primarily uses the text to illuminate how the stone butch navigates gender and desire.⁴⁰ The mention of Lorde's race in relation to her experience with a white woman does little to complicate *why* or *how* racial identity distorts that desire and makes emotional disclosure impossible for the poet in this biomythology. It is this lack of detail that begs the attention of critical scholars invested in making real the possibility of transgression. In seeking to locate queer women of color within a long, ultimately unacknowledged history of gender play and performativity, this project must refuse the impulse to allow the ubiquity of whiteness to remain unchallenged, ambiguous, yet pervasively operating unnoted. The unchecked whiteness of Halberstam's claims isn't necessarily about the characterization of the archetype as it reflects the assumed range antagonisms acting upon the subject. Rhetoric scholar Shanara Reid-Brinkley identifies an ideological trend in rhetorical scholarship that sidelines considerations beyond gender in her critique of approaches to the conceptual opposite "feminine style." She argues, "Our silence with regard to race, class, and sexuality is a methodological cover story that reinforces white feminist performances as the norm and disciplines the speech of nonwhite feminists, further shrinking the rhetorical space of resistance."⁴¹ The stone butch, and other butch and androgynous models analyzed in this text, have been socialized within queer spaces to generate normative, acceptable

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132-33.

⁴¹ Reid-Brinkley, "Mammies and Matriarchs," 53.

boundaries for gender recognition. The social effect of authorizing knowledges about female masculinities within white feminist and queer scholarship that does not interrogate its whiteness is the ongoing gendering/ungendering of black women and femmes.

I am arguing here that female masculinities are not merely feminine performances of a masculinity that has already been pre-determined as hostile for women of color. The significance of noting the ways racial identification influences gender ideologies cannot be overlooked—and that includes the naming of whiteness. This type of omission shapes the ways that queer women of color negotiate gender identification and performance, the result of which is a privileging of “positive” images over more complex and realistic ones. In her essay regarding Black gay and lesbian cinema, Kara Keeling makes the argument that operating within the limits of binaries forces image negotiation that can be antithetical to Black gay and lesbian lived realities. The circulation of disruptive, non-normative images is necessary to continuously critique and question the stability of notions of blackness and queerness. She argues, black lesbian and gay cinema “puts into circulation images of black lesbian and gay existence that duel with stereotypes and untie tongues regarding the range of historical experiences to which the category of ‘black and lesbian’ lays claim, continuing to rely on a celebratory notion of visibility that is juxtaposed positively to a binary opposite (‘invisibility’) reduces the complicated critique inherent in ‘the birth of a notion’ to an ‘innocent’ insistence on ‘positive images.’”⁴² Keeling’s critique resonates strongly here because it reflects on the limits of a “politics of visibility” that would be better replaced by a “politics of criticism.”⁴³ In searching for ways to theorize queer femme gender play that actively recognize the antagonisms of race, gender, sexuality and sexual

⁴² Kara Keeling, “‘Joining the Lesbians’: Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility,” in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, 217.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 216.

orientation, we must take up Keeling's call to interrogate "that which has been hidden within or obscured by the processes of the production and consumption of those images."⁴⁴ The black femme dandy figure offers us an opportunity to revisit female masculinity with renewed energy and productive, critical inquiry.

4.1.2 Queer Sartorial Vernacular

My dissertation's investment in alternative epistemological foundations for rhetorical analysis invites a turn toward the vernacular. Gerard Hauser theorizes that vernacular expression is part of the daily practice of encountering disparate others: "Our manifold ways of conversing with one another express these elements of diversity and convergence, difference and identity. Mostly these conversations are mundane transactions of words and gestures that allow us to negotiate our way through quotidian encounters."⁴⁵ And it is within these quotidian encounters that structural oppression is normalized through repetitious acts of subjugation that may be dismissed because of the seemingly innocuous effects. Without an active scene of violence, some arbitrarily assigned irrefutable evidence of harm, these moments fail to register because they are not exceptional. Spillers' metaphorical grammars refer to this structural system that appears as inexplicit rules of engagement; it organizes social interaction and everything that proceeds from communicative action. Though there have been attempts to name this phenomenon, such as the now common use of the term "microaggression" or the naming of situation-relevant biases (i.e. hiring bias, covert racism, occupational sexism, etc.), tracking the cumulative effects of such

⁴⁴ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁵ Gerard Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 11.

encounters is nearly impossible by traditional qualitative or quantitative data collection standards. The subtle yet extraordinary variations in how everyday encounters occur generate consistent effects, and they are often reflected in the counter-measures affected groups take to negotiate that recurrence. When looking for where these reflections are most visible, it is important to examine the spoken and performative languages which function as survival techniques that simultaneously organize culture. The discursively disruptive syntax becomes, as Hauser describes, “vernacular expressions of who we are, what we need and hope for, what we are willing to accept, and our commitment to reciprocity,” and they are also the ways that we make meaning of the world beyond our discourse communities.⁴⁶

Queer sartorial vernacular draws from the long tradition of queered code-switching, otherwise theorized as utilizing hidden transcripts⁴⁷ or hiding in plain sight. As an interpretation of ideology, fashion may conceal as much as it reveals about the individual or community that authorizes it. For queer femmes, the play with respectability politics collides with the twisting of objectification-based desire. Fully suited, the queer dandy presents a version of formal, respectable cis-masculine style yet displaces masculinity; though S.H.E. may not be derided for overt sexuality in appearance, her dress allows a negotiation with gaze and desire on terms that she defines. Unstated in speech, the reorientation of play, desire, and forms of recognition alter the visual and social terrain of communicative action. Through everyday stylistic choices, queer sartorial vernacular challenges hegemony at the same semi-detectable register of the microaggression. Developed here as social and material (embodied and performative) syntax, queer sartorial vernacular refuses the overdetermination of masculinity and femininity while

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

subversively deconstructing—and arguably reconstructing—respectability. A discourse community with a politics of aesthetic embodiment is rhetorically significant, and I will demonstrate some of the ways in which attention to aesthetic vernaculars provide insight into how and within what parameters such communities function.

First, I turn to black femme aesthetics⁴⁸ that are cited in the performance of queer sartorial vernacular. Within a black femme vernacular tradition, “spectacle” has been utilized as an oppositional technique of self-affirming public performance. More specifically, I’m referring to the ways that black queer women have utilized public spectacle as a response to exclusion, domination, and power relationships within and across cultural communities. In her book, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn Pough suggests that Black female rappers advance critiques of identity formations based on “Black women’s sexuality, vindication of Black womanhood, and concern for the Black community.”⁴⁹ Here, the rhetorical strategies of sass and sarcasm laid the foundation for Black women rappers to disrupt contemporary public discourse intended to severely restrict possibilities for self-definition. She roots this discussion in a history of early models for Black women’s expressive culture as exemplified in the works of Ida B. Wells Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Harriet Jacobs, and blues artists such as Ma Rainey. Pough’s documentation of nontraditional rhetorical strategies expands the historical record that demonstrates a long history black women’s participation in public debates concerning constructions of Black female identities. For Pough, and for my argument here, there are ways that this type of spectacle becomes more than a media trick and diversion. Within this history, we can begin to recognize

⁴⁸ Mignon R. Moore, “Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities,” *Signs* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 113-39.

⁴⁹ Pough, *Check It*, 45.

how artistry and politics resonate as productive modes of resistance that thoughtfully engage the concept of spectacle.

By way of example, [Angel Haze](#),⁵⁰ a pansexual hip hop artist and emcee, draws on this rhetorical tradition. She identifies femininity as source of collective empowerment, while simultaneously invoking masculinity as equally embodied—a practice necessary for producing a rhetoric of resistance through spectacularized performance. Shugart and Waggoner’s claims⁵¹ regarding masculine aesthetic as seen in pop star Macy Gray are relevant to consider how and why black queer female performers are able to find a clear trajectory of successful critique within a cultural industry that seems averse to autonomous femme expressions of subjectivity. Interestingly, gender and sexuality are not viewed here as the primary source of empowerment or collective identity; instead, we see the expression of fluidity between binaries that largely corresponds with a notion of agency expressed in the text.⁵² The preferred dissolution of boundaries are an opportunity for black femmes to transform the language and functions of public spheres as potential sites for collective action.

Confronted with limited images of the “hoochie” girls, the divas, the ‘mistresses of the come-on’” as cited in Shugart and Waggoner,⁵³ Angel Haze offers up boihood (a masculine-of-center gender presentation with political implications) as a performative response that relies on her body being read as non-normative. Lyrically and performatively, Haze invokes outsider

⁵⁰ I have included hyperlinks in this section to provide an opportunity for the reader to engage with the visual content that reflects some of the descriptions I use in this chapter. This link is a video: Angel Haze, “Werkin Girls” (Video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szj7efHG-00>.

⁵¹ Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egeley Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics and Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 99-117.

⁵² “Gray’s performance showcases sexuality that is incongruously de-gendered in its excessive embrace of gendered tropes,” according to Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 116.

⁵³ Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 74.

status,⁵⁴ deliberate ambiguity in sexual orientation and gender presentation, and a disruptive politics of representation within her music. She explicitly addresses how queer women of color have often been ignored by, omitted from, or otherwise misrepresented through public discourse due to conflicting notions of Black female respectability situated within restrictive conceptions of motherhood, community investment and personal sacrifice, and seemingly inherent duties of moral gatekeeping. The lack of sustained community attention to these problems functions to reinforce social sanctions, disciplining queer black female bodies as deviant and unintelligible. However, queer black women in hip hop have chosen to contest this omission via public declarations and rhetorical performances which align with this concept of the spectacle as productive. Angel Haze, in a longer contextualized history of black women emcees,⁵⁵ alternatively counter the hegemonies present in hip-hop culture with juxtapositions of femininity and masculinity that are not confined within limited, dominant normative constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Continuing to look toward the “imaginative terrain of culture” for potential sites of resistance, as suggested by Roderick Ferguson, I maintain that black queer femme cultural architecture productively renders “the imagination into a social practice that utilize[s] cultural forms precisely because of the overlapping gender, sexual, class, and racial exclusions that constituted forms of nationalism.”⁵⁶ In line with Ferguson’s approach to popular texts as a site of

⁵⁴ Doris Leibetseder “Express Yourself!: Gender Euphoria and Intersections,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁵⁵ Rashad Shabazz, “Masculinity and the Mic: Confronting the Uneven Geography of Hip-hop,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 21 no., 3 (2014): 370-86; Tara Jabbaar-Gyambrah, “Gender Politics of Hip-hop and Hip-life Music in New York and Ghana,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 39, no.1 (2015): 7-31.

⁵⁶ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 118.

cultural reflection, I examine online digital content to consider the ways that gender performativity in the dandy tradition speaks to greater political and social concerns. The proliferation of media, fashion designers and boutiques, stylists, advocacy organizations and social networking sites dedicated to queer femme dandyism demonstrates a growing interest in this rhetorical form of protest and resistance. Within community, self-naming is also a valuable process that reinforces queer legacies of self-authoring. In this brief analysis, I address the contributions to discourse by one site that situates itself as an educational and visual archival resource, *dapperQ*. This site's mission states:

dapperQ is a visibility project that celebrates the inner and outer beauty of masculine-presenting lesbians, gender-nonconformists and genderqueers, and transmasculine individuals of all colors, shapes, and sizes. dapperQ does have a fashion focus. But, more importantly, it serves as a vehicle to explore fashion as a social construct, providing our readers and writers with a safe space to document and discuss how gender role expectations, particularly with respect to gender identity and expression, shape who we are as individuals and as a community.⁵⁷

In a later rebranding (c. 2016), the website thinks more broadly about its audience, and its awakened political purpose emphasizing that “dapperQ is the premier style and empowerment website for masculine presenting women, gender queers, and trans-identified individuals.

Dubbed GQ⁵⁸ for the ‘unconventionally masculine,’ dapperQ is a queer fashion revolution, one

⁵⁷ Susan Herr, “DapperQs Were Born Outside the Box,” interview 18 July 2010, *dapperQ*: <http://www.dapperq.com/2010/07/exploring-your-style/>.

⁵⁸ An image collection curated on the website: “What You Wore Last Night: DapperQ New Year’s Eve Style on Social Media” <http://www.dapperq.com/2016/01/what-you-wore-last-night-dapperq-new-years-eve-style-on-social-media/>.

of the most stylish forms of protest of our generation.”⁵⁹ As a consciousness-raising effort, the site and its audience of active contributors offer a culturally politicized framing that affirms refusal as a legitimate sartorial signature. I use this site as a starting point to develop the concept of queer sartorial vernacular which recognizes the disruption of power inherent in everyday practices of self-authorship. It is also worth noting that embedded within dapperQ’s statement of purpose is the emphasis on masculinity as the preferred descriptive referent model, though the mission reflects a broader vision of gender expression.

More importantly, this site offers a generative term and operational definition of canonically ignored femme dandies that I theoretically rework to address the specific construction of the black femme dandy figure. The dapperQ is broadly defined as “A transgressor of men’s fashion. An authentic, courageous genderbender who uses fashion as a means to expressing our ever-evolving capacity to advance change.” Additionally, the site’s founder Susan Herr adds that “For dapperQ’s, fashion is not seen as an end. [...] dapperQ is intended not only to inform but to inspire those of us simply dressing to fight the good fight each day.”⁶⁰ This approach to understanding gender performativity acknowledges a contentious history, forwards a vision for possibilities of social change, and recognizes the importance of acknowledging style as ideology.

While the term dapperQ is intended to be inclusive of all manner of “courageous genderbender[s],” I find it useful to take the term “dapperQ” one step further to recognize a black queer feminist expression of difference. The “Q” of dapperQ generally suggests “queer” as noted in the ascribed meanings generated by the community’s founders. Reflecting vernacular,

⁵⁹ DapperQ, “About” *dapperQ*: <http://www.dapperq.com/about/>.

⁶⁰ Herr, “DapperQs Were Born Outside the Box.”

however, I prefer the alternative that E. Patrick Johnson develops in his 2005 essay, “‘Quare’ Studies, Or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother.” Johnson’s quare is derived from Black Vernacular English (BVE) for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community”; one who is “committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.”; and “one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.”⁶¹ Quare adds onto-epistemic specificity, which further defines the models of refusal that aggregate at conflictual sites/sights of queer embodiment. The combination of the two terms expands the notion of queer sartorial vernacular to consider interactional contextuality. The dapper quare emerges as an always already politicized body that disrupts by virtue of its very presence in oppositional spaces. They enter into social geographic space and place through the agonistic embodiment of femme-affirming blackness and queerness.

In line with my earlier arguments regarding the ways that gendering/ungendering function to shape discursive epistemologies, the racialization of gender renders the binary distinctions between masculine and feminine incompatible with normative modes of recognition. In other words, race forces a recoding of gender specificity that does not (or possibly cannot) classify subjects whose ontological status is unstable—recall Holland’s sentiment that S.H.E. is created when she is needed to fill a purpose, but what S.H.E. is created to be is entirely dependent on the situation that needs her. The precarious matrix of gender identifications expands with blackness, especially when deployed as fugitive activity. To steal one’s own body

⁶¹ E. Patrick Johnson, (2001). “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 125.

and direct its representative purpose suggests that power is not unidirectional, always already consuming and subjugating black flesh and creating images of blackness only to feed grand narratives of white supremacy. Fugitivity is, in fact, a way of life that can be enacted in everyday social praxis.

[Dapper quares](#)⁶² make extensive use of online forums for the exchange of ideas, community-relevant information, and of course, techniques of dress. As femme dandy movements are documented at length in digital forums, the archive of masculinities and femininities expands the epistemic foundations for discursive and performative rhetorical practices. This includes a fuller recognition of queer dialects of BVE. Colloquially, there are dozens of terms that black queer femmes employ to signify gender and (a-)romantic orientation. These terms are not exhaustive of the extensive variations of identifications, and they are not inherently exceptional or radical social constructions. The culturally enforced use of masculine and feminine archetypes does not elude this community. However, there are multiple models of femme masculinities that tend to go generally unrecognized in scholarship. Studs, aggressives/AGs, bois, tomboys, soft-studs, and butches exist within black queer communities as broadly recognized masculine “types” largely undertaken by women of color and communicated through intracommunity vernacular expression. Locating this discursive community by tracing its vernacular leads me to the subjects of analysis in the next section. Recognizing the limits of identifying individuals and organizations as representative of an identification that I am assigning as a scholar, even if metaphorically, I want to emphasize that I am interested in

⁶² Image from Huffington Post short feature on a dandy-based photo project by photographer Sophia Wallace: Priscilla Frank, “Men and Women Disrupt Gender Norms in Striking Photography Series ‘Modern Dandies’” (2013) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/28/sophia-wallace_n_3790270.html.

exploring the onto-epistemic archives that structure precarity. The queer femme dandy is a figure that tracks knowledges of intelligibility through discursive traditions. To honor those traditions of imagining and materializing aesthetic refusal, I turn to a few select examples that reflect black queer femme cultural iconography.

4.1.3 Dapper Quares and Embodied Difference: Exploring Black Queer Femme Cultural Iconography

In considering the significance of the black femme dandy, I argue that masculinity need not be constructed as oppositional to femininity or reflective of proximity to whiteness. As a proto-queer theoretical intervention forwarded by Barbara Smith, black lesbian feminism sutures black, feminist, and queer analytics and provides a platform from which I pursue this reading of cultural iconography as reflected in dapper quare style. Contemporarily, the dapper quare continues this tradition while explicitly and consciously centering self-affirmation in this subversive rhetorical style. Black lesbian feminism has fostered a culture of “boihood” that challenges gendering/ungendering as a process of identity construction at the intersection of race, class, gender, and age. Boihood⁶³ can be defined as a queer movement of empowerment, education, consciousness-raising and visibility for masculine-presenting and trans people of color, here primarily considered in the context of black queer identifications. Through rhetorics of fashion and a disruption of the politics of visibility, this movement welcomes and fosters social critiques

⁶³ For a broader definition of boihood: Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 121-38. The term also comes up in Kagure Mugo and Christel Antonites, “#FillThisSpaceIfYou'reAnAfricanWoman,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 28, no. 1 (2014): 29-36.

while forwarding notions of self-definition and reflexivity alongside creative innovation. Dapper quares are one of many manifestations of boihood's ideologies. For black lesbians and queer women, in particular, this is a necessary accounting of a valuable onto-epistemic archive.

Fashion cravat (bowtie) designer⁶⁴ Kate Ross, profiled and interviewed by contributors to the dapperQ (website) community, exemplifies many of the qualities of the dapper quare. Ross has become an icon of black femme dandyism, frequently featured in popular media for her contributions to shaping contemporary dandy aesthetics. Not only is she known for her signature style, but she also acts as a black cultural architect. Ross's accessories visually recall iconic black cultural artifacts like literature and film, such as her "#HintofPurp" line based on symbolic elements from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, book (1982) and film (1985). Her juxtaposition of the highly controversial book and critically acclaimed (and also, highly criticized) film with her artistic interpretations reflect on a history of queer black women's artistic visions of resistance.

The #HintofPurp tribute is one of the most conceptual collections developed by Ross, whose designs are most widely worn and appear in image searches of queer women of color. Ross and her team of collaborators create additional narrative content that provides a context for visual and historical reference. For each new release, a story of the design inspiration becomes part of a broader lore of resilience and struggle that is developed over the course of the limited-edition campaigns. Broadly, this series speaks to a process of recognizing one's capacity for self-love in a world that attempts to instill self-hatred. *The Color Purple*, for many black lesbians and queer femmes especially, has become a foundational text that explicitly addresses black same-sex love and other intimacies between women. Alice Walker received much criticism for this

⁶⁴ *Distinguished Cravat* <http://www.distinguishedcravat.com>.

novel as it rejected a bourgeois middle class respectability politic while also forwarding depictions of black women as vulnerable, sexually complex, and remarkably capable of responding to various experiences of subjection. Since its first release in the mid-eighties, the book and later the film, and subsequent plays have been reviewed harshly by black male critics in particular. These same outspoken critics⁶³ called the texts “dangerous” for the negative representations of black masculinity, while in the same breath deriding it for its misrepresentation of “historical fact” despite its status as a fictional creative project. At a panel debate with three other male journalists and critics, Armond White, a film critic from the *New York City-Sun*, spoke in favor of the film noting:

An important issue about THE COLOR PURPLE [sic] is that it is a fiction, it’s a fable, it’s a fantasy. It’s not simply a movie of Black social history. It is particularly a history of Black women. It is more about the oppression of Black women than about Black people.⁶⁵

While many black women agreed with the negative readings of the film, more spoke in support of the film and book stating that Walker’s work was indeed representative of a social reality for many black women and girls. Their everyday experiences form an unintelligible backdrop for black bourgeois social aspirations in a society that devalues what is not white, wealthy, heterosexual and male. *The Color Purple*, in the simplest of readings, is widely recognized as the

⁶⁵ In her essay “Black Women’s Responses to *The Color Purple*,” Jacqueline Bobo cites a number of high-profile film critics, journalists, and nonprofit organization leaders who spoke out against the film in particular. This list includes activist Kwasi Geiggar, TV show host Tony Brown, *Chicago Times* reporter Vernon Jarrett, law professor Leroy Clarke, black male columnists and leaders of the NAACP were the most vocal in sharing their hostile views of the themes and representations within the work. Jacqueline Bobo, “*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2006), 237.

emergence of a black queer female voice. That black queer women and femmes have reclaimed this text as positive and self-affirming is itself an act of rebellion; in the context of identifying alternative gender formations, this act is a critical intervention that also recuperates and redeems black masculinity.

Acknowledging this contentious history, Ross situates *The Color Purple* within a tradition of resistance that relies on telling the everyday stories of queer black women who evade society's normative expectations. The tribute to this text pays homage to the symbolism and images from the book and film that resonate with notions of strength, solidarity, struggle, and deeply personal trust in the process of belonging. Each cravat in this tribute series comes with a distinct story that connects the wearer with the text and the history it recalls. In setting the scene for the first bowtie of the series, Ross quotes from an iconic moment in the film between characters Celie and Shug Avery as they discuss the color purple. Simply offering this as "something to think on" she quotes:

Shug: I think it pisses God off when you walk by the color purple in a field & don't notice it.

Celie: You saying it just wanna be loved like it say in the bible?

Shug: Yeah, Celie. Everything wanna be loved. Us sing and dance, and holla just wanting to be loved. Look at them trees. Notice how the trees do everything people do to get attention... except walk? (*The Color Purple* (film), 1985)

This quote accompanies an [image still](#) from the respective scene in the film alongside, and in conversation with, the image of the handcrafted cravat. Ross's inclination to provide context for how we read and recognize aesthetic tradition complicates what we take into consideration in the evaluation or analysis of rhetorical situations. This discursive history recalled by #HintofPurp

contests black queer femme erasure and connects the contemporary dapper quare to a long legacy of critical refusals. Together, boihood, dandyism, and black feminist ideology create an onto-epistemic space where discourse expands and makes room for embodied experience. The process by which bodies are authorized to represent blackness and reflect queerness becomes the subject of implicit critique as literary and visual worlds collide at the sight of B(Q)F aesthetic expression.

As for Ross's [dandy style](#)⁶⁶ that, too, embodies a story with which to connect everyday resistance and sartorial vernacular. In the blog editorial "Style Icon: Dress Like Kate Ross," a catalog of images of her signature style are accompanied by a brief description of Ross's aesthetic, noting "Kate describes herself as a 'Southern Belle,' and although that description may conjure up stereotypical images in our heads about what a 'Southern Belle' looks like, she has created her own [Southern style](#) that redefines what it means, challenges norms, and embodies a world of possibilities."⁶⁷ A combination of masculine style and feminine appeal conflate to establish an aesthetic that fits very strategically into the definitions of disruption established in defining the dapper quare. This description and the accompanying photos suggest a more complicated reading of pre-existing scripts of black femininity and black masculinity simultaneously. In this case, we see resistance as the culmination of ideology as sartorial style.

The dapperQ community boasts many styles and types of members from the androgynous to the butch to the femme-bois that vary in degrees of masculine gender expression. This diverse

⁶⁶ Images are from "Style Icon: Dress Like Kate Ross" <http://www.dapperq.com/2012/10/style-icon-dress-like-kate-ross/>.

⁶⁷ Anita Dolce Vita, "Style Icon: Dress Like Kate Ross," October 15, 2012: <http://www.dapperq.com/2012/10/style-icon-dress-like-kate-ross/>. To watch and listen to Kate Ross describe her sense of style, also see her interview with StyleLikeU: <https://vimeo.com/12501115>.

community reflects one distinctive aesthetic, but there are others more directly addressing black and brown queer women, femmes, and trans men. The Bklyn Boihood collective, for example, addresses the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as relevant to queer of color discourse. In its vision statement, the project "...builds bridges of self-love, community awareness and personal enhancement from their basement in Bed Stuy across the world. Crossing the barriers of gender.race.class.age.sexual [sic] preference, our goal is to contribute to the creation of a healthy, safe, fun and engaging community for m.o.cs [sic] of color. Using art, performance, networking and capacity-building we are committed to shining light into the incredible lives of AGs/studs/bois/doms/butches and our allies."⁶⁸ Such digital spaces not only provide opportunities to engage in queer of color discourse, but they also allow for the formation of communities that are invested in creating coalitions for political change using nontraditional methods of engagement.

While these sites may appear to center visual aesthetics, it is clear through the various mission statements and ideological visions that style signifies far more than economic and class status. Beyond their missions, these community resources provide additional avenues of engagement. Members of Bklyn Boihood, for example, are all part of a collective that tours the country giving lectures and workshops on topics such as racism and homoantagonism, trans* awareness, and youth activism. Additionally, the group hosts one of the most well-known of a growing number of sites dedicated to providing exposure to vetted community resources through social networking. These connections yield tangible, material resources that continuously expand discourse on queer masculinities and femininities as related to black and brown bodies.

Featuring members of the BKLYN Boihood collective, The Brown Boi Project published

⁶⁸ BKLYN Boihood <http://bklynboihood.com>.

a groundbreaking text entitled *Freeing Ourselves: A Guide to Health and Self Love for Brown Bois* (2011). Encompassing more than feel good stories about coming out and “dressing the part,” this guide tackles issues such as mental health and psychological, emotional wellness; body image; exercise and nutrition for health; building and sustaining intimate relationships; and importantly, how to develop safer and pleasurable sex practices. This inclusive guide functions as a visibility project while also providing invaluable information that has been cultivated within a community that recognizes the vastly different experiences of queer bois at multiple marginalized intersections. The images used in the book are those of the Bklyn Boihood’s founders, the Brown Bois Project participants and leaders, community volunteers, advocates, and friends: there are no stock photos of traditional model types, and there is no adherence to a standard of acceptable beauty that one could identify as thematic given the variety of bodies pictured throughout. Images show gender disruption in all manner of everyday activities—from engaging in sexual intimacy to injecting testosterone and enduring pregnancy. The seemingly mundane everyday experiences become extraordinary moments to reclaim a self that otherwise seems at odds with the world that we typically encounter in popular media, or even in queer-inclusive representations.

Reflecting on boihood, bois, and the importance of the work of Bklyn Boihood as an organization, members of the community regularly provide statements and images that circulate online to further discourse regarding what boihood signifies and its importance to individuals and the survivability of community. Coupled with the stylistic images of a variety of representations of black and brown masculine-of-center bodies, the statements become a powerful mode of knowledge production as well as model for self-authorship:

“I’m a healer, a performer, and I try my best to support the visibility of queer people of

color as much as possible. Plus I love to be in front of the camera.” —*Regina*

“The beliefs of bklyn boihood match perfectly with my own—not to mention how I love being both in front and behind the lens. It only seems like the natural and right thing to do in order to share my piece/peace.” —*Xavier*

For Regina and Xavier, the boihood movement provides an opportunity to be a part of a visibility⁶⁹ effort with deep and lasting impacts. Not only do they both appreciate being able to form community with other masculine-of-center black and brown queer people, but they get to create artistic content that reflects their experiences.

“bklyn boihood has consistently been a source of freedom for me. Through visual representation I’ve been able to break through my limitations and gain infinite truths not only about my gender but the world as a whole.”—*Sebastian*

Sebastian’s statements draw attention to the need to think about visibility as a liberation effort as well as a consciousness-raising one. The existence of Bklyn Boihood makes it possible members of the community to connect, but also to explore what it means to explore gender and creative expression through performative participation in visual culture.

“I want to show that different is okay. Bklyn boihood shows that standing out against what the world says isn’t wrong. I just want to be a face of inspiration for people who are going through a hard time. I want to let those like me know it’s okay and that you’re not alone.”—*Shameer*

⁶⁹ Minh-Ha T. Pham, “‘I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See’: On #FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 19, no. 2 (April 2015): 221-41.

“The bois remind us that it’s okay to be different. The bois remind us that it’s okay to be ourselves. And they remind us that we need to push the envelope.” –*Alijah*

“bklyn boihood provides a spectrum of authenticity, liberation, resources & kinship in my life. Through affirmation I was able to bring my true self into fruition.”—*Sebastian*⁷⁰

Shameer, Alijah, and Sebastian go on to emphasize the freedom that they experience in recognizing themselves as “different” while also seeing that construction of difference reflected in a community that they could belong to in kinship with others. This is incredibly important work that goes back to Chapter 3’s conversation regarding finding queer home. As a public visibility effort, this particular campaign invites reflection on what it means to create a visual community online centered around this performance of gender-disrupting style. The underlying message from these statements suggests that black queer sartorial style is as much about community and knowledge sharing as it is about aesthetics. Further, these statements provide a useful mechanism for threading together discourses defining a politics of difference that decentralizes static identity affiliations. While community members refer to themselves using identifiable social categories socially and politically normalized regarding race, gender, sexuality, and so forth, it becomes clear that these labels and identifiers serve more to mark orientations for the purposes of intelligibility within the community, and less so to substantiate bodies as subjects. Reflecting on everything from body image to representation, parenting and family (chosen and/or biological), to sex and sexuality, these statements reveal that boihood incorporates difference and fluidity as its core *ethos*. This ethos allows for a common dedication to valuing personhoods that acknowledges racial identification, gender expression and

⁷⁰ BKLYN Boihood Tumblr: <http://bklynboihood.tumblr.com>.

performance, and class as ways of being whose social understandings are not stable though they are always already a reflection of relations to power.

Boihood, as I am attempting to describe here, resonates as a process of world-making that involves the development of practices of decolonization beyond visibility and politically charged social movements. Central to the community ethos is a focus on fluidity and possibility closely tied to black feminist politics and queer of color critique. While many may call this “resistance” to oppression, I instead argue that boihood presents a pro-black, pro-feminine *and* pro-masculine ideology that decenters whiteness, maleness, and perhaps most importantly, the certainty of identity. Due to the fact that many black and brown MoC queer women confront identity through a range of practices in everyday experiences, fluidity emerges as a central tenet to affirmative practices that are understood as indicative of QOC experiences. The push against identitarian politics suggests a different strategy of social organization that is more reflective of relations of power.

However, even while community activities become a part of the sustained engagement of masculine-of-center queer women and femmes, the power of performative style maintains the connection between disparate parts. Style is a function of ideology and can thus speak loudly, and clearly when other forms of communication are not enough. The visual offers an entry into much deeper reflections and concerns of an increasingly complex community of black women and femmes who identify as masculine-of-center. Kate Ross’s popularity and repeated exposure through photo projects, and Bklyn Boihood’s consistent cultivation and online documenting of images of queer trans and gender non-conforming women and femmes, centers a modern dandyism that answers to itself. It is self-reflexive, critical, highly skeptical of history and structural formations, and it dares to be fully present in a temporal and spatial moment of

becoming.

This short analysis only scratches the surface of uncovering the radical potential dandyism as it has come into being for queer women of color. Though this chapter has taken the historical figure of the dandy and explored the rhetorical significance of dapper quare, the notion of queer sartorial vernaculars can be further developed with contextual specificity. Dapper quares are not the only stylized rhetors within black queer cultural networks, but this example affords one way of using the onto-epistemic archive to conceptualize contingent symbolic legacies and discursive references.

5.0 OEA: EXCEPTION

Intraracial Violence, Social Death, and Rightless Citizenship

What does it mean to act politically?¹

To speak of black social life is to speak of this radical capacity to live—to live deeply righteous lives even in the midst of all that brings death close or, as Lucille Clifton puts it, to celebrate “everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed.” It is to affirm the “tragicomic confrontation with life” that characterizes so much of black humanity and to assert “those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous conditions of servitude.” Black social life is, fundamentally, the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence but is the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms, traditions, and ways of being.²

The problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

² Terrion L. Williamson, *Scandalize My Name* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 9.

with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment.³

I begin this chapter wondering in earnest what it means to “act politically,” especially when one’s very existence is often discussed in terms of resistance, and by extension active threat, to authority. Agamben’s query alludes to a broader context, but my perspective on this question brings it into the realm of the mundanities of B(Q)F social life wherein expressions of “resistance” are externally coded as such, but are often effects of everyday activities that would not be deemed exceptional in any other context. This coding is what Terrion Williamson refers to when speaking of black social life as “this radical capacity to live—to live deeply righteous lives in the midst of all that brings death close.” In this space where living is so often equated to death, in part because it can legitimately instigate excessive and arbitrary violence, claiming and affirming black queer femininity increases the odds of a short life; however radical or righteous, it still invokes unmitigated dangers. Spiller’s notes this urgency and makes the case that such claiming *is* political, and not only radical but *insurgent*: rebellious, revolutionary, insurrectionary. In this chapter, I explore the state of exception as it organizes B(Q)F everyday activities and interactions in communicative relationships. First, I begin with a story from my own life returning to the opening query with an intervening corrective: what does it mean to act politically when being black and queer and femme is treated as reason enough to warrant your death?

³ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 228-229.

5.1 CITES

Washington, DC—where I was born and raised—has always been a place of immensely bittersweet connections and disconnections for me. At the time of my writing this, it is still the only place I’ve ever called home, and meant it. As a native of the fondly monikered “Chocolate City,” a place that somehow survived the Reagan years and was still predominantly black for nearly two decades afterwards, I am always surprised by the questions people ask me about my time there. Well, maybe not surprised so much as confused. You see, the nation’s capital houses so much of the political landscape of the US that it can be difficult for people to understand, in a material and tangible sense, that the city is full of black folks and legacies that are obscured by the dominating presence of Capitol Hill and its related connotations and pervasive parts throughout. But the black people who have lived in the shadows of the city for generations—a vibrant and culturally complex network of kinships, coalitions, and communities—have almost always been flattened into an historical afterthought in the rendering of the capitol city. This place of forgotten and unforeseen social life has deeply influenced the direction of my dissertation and, of course, has equipped me with the perspectives that reveal to me models of survival that I may not have known or understood otherwise. Because of this long history of erasure, it is difficult for me to put into words the scene of the city that affectively guides and contextualizes my approach to this chapter.

Epistemological citationality is important to the project of illuminating B(Q)F praxes of social life. Who writes us into histories and documents the mundane about our lives, and what will they write? What aspects of our lives are deemed worthy of remembering and passing on to younger generations? Who memorializes? Who remembers? When I think of the ways that black

women and femmes have deployed oral traditions toward advocacy, and have utilized every possible medium to affirm the right to claim a history, a knowledge, or a practice of social life, I must also acknowledge the experiential authority coded in the unwritten utterances that have made such claims possible. In the archive, ephemera are as varied as the lives reflected in their documentation. I expand on my theorization and model of the onto-epistemic archive in this chapter by deploying experiential knowledge as a significant consideration of perspective: my personal history is cited in my rendering of the antagonisms that draw together cisgender, trans and gender dynamic/non-conforming (GDNC) queer black people. I utilize autoethnography⁴ here to think in terms I know about everyday negotiations with systems of oppression that reflect the subjects of this chapter. Lead by a hunch, and affective resonance from my past enters into the archive as a contextualizing anchor.

Moving between the public and private, this chapter opens with an anecdotal reference that situates the relationship between forms of kinship and methods of survival for black queer women and femmes in the context of state and interpersonal violence. This movement is then brought into the space of the legal and political as I interrogate nationalistic rhetoric regarding the culpability of state actors in the proliferation of human rights crimes and violations. In this way, the extrajudicial operations of socializing citizenship are illuminated. Finally, I return to the notion of antagonisms that mark black (queer) femininity and draw out the practices of erasure

⁴ Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014); Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014); Stacy Linn Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013); Stacy Linn Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, "Autoethnography is a Queer Method," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, eds. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010); Cynthia Cole Robinson, and Pauline Clardy, eds., *Tedious Journeys: Autoethnography by Women of Color in Academe* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

that produce epidemic violence against trans and GDNC black bodies. Throughout this engagement, I develop a sense of the interactional discourses that circulate, reproduce, organize, and also offer moments of reclamation and recuperation within an active, though mundane, state of exception. In short, I demonstrate how the ephemera of the OEA: Exception illuminate the competing discourses that underwrite functional practices of “citizenship” and contextualize a reading against the structuring logics of sovereign order that substantiate the state of exception.

5.1.1 Knowing Placelessness, Locating Ourselves: On Belonging in Dispossession

As a child, I was always curious about the lives my parents lived before I was born. There were not many opportunities to ask the questions that flitted through my mind over time, and my mother was especially quiet on these matters—at least in comparison to my father whose stories never seemed to end. So the few moments I could get her talking, she had my full attention and I took in as much as I could. I was maybe twelve or thirteen years old when she first told me about her early years raising my eldest sister. I remember that it was an awful, humid summer day in DC and she was blow-drying my hair. We were having one of those days where the ability to manage my kinks and coils was largely impeded by the heavy moisture in the air. Suffice it to say, the process was a long and boring one. Mostly, Mom talked to keep me distracted from the hours of detangling and styling that we had left. This day, something about the struggle of handling my hair brought back a memory of the woman who helped her get her bearings in what seemed like different life.

Around 1969, when my mother was just beginning her life as a first-time mom, she found herself living alone with few resources. She had managed to escape an abusive marriage, but at

the risk of only taking with her what she could carry along with the baby. There was a boarding house with mostly women and elders where she stayed while she tried to get on her feet. She was overwhelmed, but it wasn't long before someone reached out to help her.

Toni, my mother's neighbor at the time, lovingly chastised her one day, in the ways that knowing elders do, to pay more attention to the way she dressed her infant—importantly, never to forget to cover the baby's head before leaving the house lest she risk catching a cold! Knowing that my mother did not at the time have access to many childcare resources, Toni offered her access to boxes of baby clothes that had been saved from when her own children were small. My mom was relieved, and scared. Generosity from others has not been a strong narrative in her life, so even talking about this moment, I could hear it in the way her voice cracked ever so slightly—this was one of *those* rare stories. One that she kept close to her, and rarely discussed. Toni didn't share a lot of details from her former life, except that she, too, had been married and all she had from that time were a few boxes of baby clothes that she kept mostly for emergencies like my mother's. Being at the boarding house as long as she was, she became known as a local resource for young moms. She was an excellent caregiver and would teach the basics of childcare from her own experiences that she shared with honesty regarding the difficult, awkward, untimely, and unexpected realities of parenting. She helped young black girls prepare for job interviews, often loaning clothes or accessories from her personal collection. Toni was a lifeline for many women, and she saved my mother and elder sister's lives. I do not know how many people she helped in all her years there or elsewhere, but she was wise, caring, and well-versed in the traumas DC held for black residents East of the[Potomac]River. From what I know, she was an unassuming figure who offered what she could to help steer other women away from the harsh realities she had known; and, in her late forties/early fifties when

my mother knew her, she seemed to have lived through the worst effects of the city's most turbulent political and cultural times.

I have listened to this story many times over the years, and every time, I would learn just a fraction more about the black women and femmes who shaped my life before I could recognize their influence. Within these narratives, was Toni's. You see, when she left home to go to work in one of the federal government agencies downtown, she was referred to as Mr. and Sir. On the rare occasion of a visit from one of her adult children, they called her Dad. But at the house, at home, she was Toni and could often be seen cackling from her porch with the neighborhood's most well-known drag queens and crossdressers. She had a fly and flashy wardrobe, and an enviable collection of custom self-made wigs. Everyone in the area knew her, and recognized her formally,⁵ yet they also understood the ways she negotiated the public and private social relationships that were all but articulated as rules of engagement. Her commitment to the neighborhood's survival and intricate role in supporting individual residents superseded adverse recognition of her gender and sexuality. It was a delicate open secret, but one that understood the fragility of what it meant to provide safe passage between worlds as she traveled beyond the closed networks of the neighborhood and into the city every day. And it was a unique formulation of relationality between black women and femmes that organized around protecting the everyday transversals between public and private, protecting fugitive movements between "home" and elsewhere.

I would come to know many women like Toní growing up, all of them black queer femmes whose lives were so intimately connected by social and economic displacements. They were the

⁵ When outside of the neighborhood, she presented as her assigned at birth gender, but informally/casually was referred to/spoken of and treated as a neighborhood "auntie" which is a Black vernacular kinship status

women who exhausted the moral compass of performative respectability and exceeded the processes of gendering that would make the legible to worlds beyond our hyperlocal communities. They were transwomen, like Toní, and the stud aunties and AG tomboy cousins⁶ (who often acted as an intermediary defense against aggressive cisgender men), who ensured that B(Q)F networks were a substantial resource for enacting everyday practices of survival. Every neighborhood I knew and traversed had a unique set of unspoken rules that covertly acknowledged (or alternately, afforded privacy to) and protected trans and gender dynamic/nonconforming (GDNC) women, but also allowed them to thrive as autonomous community members woven into the fabric of hyperlocal kinship networks. In this dynamic that was so routine for me, black women—cisgender, GDNC, and trans—had always worked in tandem to create spaces for their mutual survival. In the spirit of honest reflection, I cannot uncritically glorify this relationship as if cisgender black women, and the men in their lives, have not contributed to the violence and death that further stigmatizes trans and queer communities. The sociality described here, however, depicts an interrelated yet messy assemblage of structural and interpersonal dynamics. Navigating silence and visibility simultaneously, for example, was a dangerous process for which there were no written rules of governance or practice. As a result, there were many issues in how this worked and did not work without mutual risks to black women, queer, and trans folks who participated in these protective networks; but it would be a gross historical and political misrepresentation to suggest that these connections are ahistorical or nonexistent, then or now.

⁶ “Stud aunties and AG tomboy cousins” are terms of kinship and recognition in black vernacular (BVE). Both refer to masculine-of-center queer types or styles with “auntie” signifying elder (formal) status and “cousins” signifying peer (informal) kinships. These terms are often used in the context of discussion between in-community familiars, but could be received as offensive if applied to individuals by unfamiliar others.

The knowledge my mother passed down to me in the kitchen was so much more than a glimpse into her life and struggles. Coded into her remembrance of Toni was a guide. I learned to read the formality of social interactions that organized life in my 'hood and streets of a city that had taken so many lives. I learned the nuances of intracommunity violences toward women and femmes, and especially the dangers that lurked for black queers in the city. I learned that my survival was dependent on my ability to navigate territories of disempowerment that lay traps in every corner of the spaces I moved through in public as well as in private. Importantly, she allowed me to bear witness to life's struggles so that I would understand the pervasiveness of terror that existed much closer to home. This part of the narrative was not something that shielded me from, but was discussed with the same matter-of-factness as a casual chat about the weather or local news. It was simply the way things were, and still are.

That soft introduction to the traumas experienced by my mother and other women in my family and community became my first knowledge of interpersonal violence at the hands of black men; but it was also a commentary on the long reach of structural oppression, especially in the implications of where and how to locate alternative sources for help or assistance. The latter was necessary for establishing the limits of interacting with state institutions such as social services and police. Relatedly, while black women with children were urged to report domestic abuse to the police and seek a restraining order, it was common for Child Protective Services to intervene and separate the mother from her children often indefinitely "for their own safety." Reporting abuse would open black mothers up to investigation, in part to "prove" the claim of violence, but also to determine her own culpability in creating the environment where abuse is likely. By seeking help through a system that would render them incapable of securing protections for their children, black women had few options to combat domestic and

interpersonal partner violence. Younger women and girls from low socio-economic environments were not only likely to be criminalized in the process of reporting abuse, but they would also risk losing access to their children who may also be subject to abuse in foster care or juvenile assistance programs. The routinized exploitation of vulnerability was common knowledge in the epistemologies of black ‘hood women at the mercy of localized state and federal operations. This was the system within which my mother was born and raised, and it informed how she transferred knowledge of life’s trials to me as I had not yet come to personally know the ubiquity of violences that would haunt my future in a continuing legacy of abjection. Her teaching style was coded through the oral histories she shared with me while engaging in routine activities, such as the scene above. Though I cannot put into words the many lessons that derived from our weekend haircare rituals, I do want to emphasize the quotidian nature of this exchange and what it has imparted to me as knowledge about black (queer) femme survival and social life.

I begin the chapter with this anecdote to draw attention to a perspective of relationality that presupposes black women and femme sodality; but I also submit this memory into the archive as an indication of ways the experience of extraordinary violences is communicated through that sodality. Further, I ask, what does it mean to consider the field of legibility that deploys a set of force relations toward a “conception of humanity [that] has no choice but to cast those different enough from the definition of humanity in the arena of the pre, proto-, or non-human,” thereby positioning the state of precarity as “at best, a secondary modification of this basic human nature, a minor detail, but not a fundamental dimension or defining characteristic which alters all the

other general capacities attributed to ‘human’ experience.”⁷ That is to say, how does a normative conceptualization of humanity impact the functional application of citizenship? What are the effects of such stratification that yields certain bodies as unrepresentable yet necessary for sustaining systematic subordination through the strategic production of differentiated social subjectivities?

The relationship of mutual concern between black women and femmes, the underwriting of generations of epistemological sharing and teaching, belongs to queer histories and exceeds the capacity of the traditional archive. With this affective, lived experience catalogued as memory, I have often wondered about how these traditions of care and reciprocity may be woven into the patterns and placements that situate black femininity in relation to and beyond scenes of subjection. What, or perhaps more aptly where, is the onto-epistemic point of overlap that draws together black queer feminist praxes of being and knowing? In *OEA: Liberation*, I discussed social movement activism and advocacy in terms of liberation struggle as the site of emergence for black (queer) femme knowledges. In *OEA: Refusal*, I analyzed queer sartorial vernacular as an aesthetic praxis of black (queer) femme ways of being in precarity and communicating (dis)identification. I approached the sight (literal and figurative) of black queer femme resistance as a challenge to normative ideologies that sustain the disciplining power of respectability. *OEA: Exception*, then, builds on this foundation to dig further into the structural erasure that inextricably binds blackness, queerness, and femininity to the status of non-ontological, and therefore unrepresentable as protected/protectable citizens.

Liberation work and discursive refusal provide avenues for expanding the descriptive

⁷ Elizabeth A. Grosz, “Experimental Desire: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity,” in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 211.

statement of being and knowing the condition of human experience, or rather, that which organizes intelligibility. However, the excessiveness of violence at these sites/sights necessitates an exploration of the ways in which interpersonal spaces and interactions systematically contribute to the broader structural project of producing erasure. As Juana María Rodríguez emphasizes,

Women and people of color have been hailed by these discourses of liberation through sexual sacrifice, disciplined through public shame and censure, and the disciplinary power of pathology and criminalization, even as we have symbolically occupied the image of national heroines or beneficiaries of these same repressive tactics. One a more intimate level, racially gendered feminine subjects also know about the forces of sexual discipline that surround us through our participation in the social spaces of family and community. In a myriad of ways, we have been instructed that to enter the fold of collectivity, be it familial or revolutionary, we must first be liberated of our sexual deviance, our politically incorrect desires.⁸

Family, community, and collectivity do not automatically generate safety, even in the establishment of epistemological home-spaces; thus, the question of how systems of domination infiltrate all aspects of sociality is renewed.

In my life, black femme personhood, reflecting a unique constellation of antagonisms, has always been a space shared by (queer)⁹ women and femmes whose social status was largely mediated by hegemonic structural positionality and not reductive, discrete identifications. Black

⁸ Juana María Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, nos. 2-3 (2011), 336.

⁹ I want to acknowledge the tension of here in framing queerness as the delicate open secret otherwise discussed throughout the dissertation as an absented presence.

femininity, the stage set for ongoing intergenerational scenes of subjection, does not escape the promise of eradication in the shelter of home-spaces or through praxes of refusal. Misogynoir's resentment persists as a haunting presence that lingers and follows into the close quarters of the most interpersonal interactions and even familial or kinship ties. "Home" is disrupted here and constitutes a potential site of violence. It reflects the clashing of ideological displacements that justify the active, material violence of forgetting. We have engaged other forms of forgetting that result in the absented presence of black queer women and femmes in ontological sociality. The overarching conflicts drawn out in this project regarding the convergence of antiblackness, queer antagonism, and misogyny invoke the term state of exception as it "implies a position taken on both the nature of the phenomenon that we seek to investigate and the logic most suitable for understanding it."¹⁰ Precarious subjectivities are refused sovereign citizenship, and in response, refuse the terms of capture that define it while finding ways to subvert the systematic elimination of non-classifiable citizen-subjects from social life.

Thus, I enter into this chapter drawing on a knowledge that is deeply personal, but also reflects the quotidian nature of "radical" reorientations of structural dispossession. The notion of the "state of exception" is developed here through the conceptual parameters of everydayness. Agamben argues that the erasure of "any legal status of the individual, thus producing legally unnamable and unclassifiable human being" being made the "object of de facto rule" characterize the "biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by its own suspension."¹¹ Without a catalytic event, how do we chart excessive violence that accumulates over time, in the spaces marked as "home" and

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

¹¹ Ibid., *State of Exception*, 3.

“community”? In what ways does the de facto suspension of law and legality affect the interior lives of unnamable and unclassifiable subjects? The data exists, but is incomplete as these histories go largely underacknowledged and undocumented. What we do have are narratives, critical media, and news reports that document the overwhelming epidemics of domestic and interpersonal violence resulting in the deaths of black women and femmes.¹² These items, approached as archival ephemera, provide context for the juxtaposition of social death and citizenship performed in the forthcoming sections.

I situate this chapter within the exploration of everyday sites/sights/cites of black queer femme struggle by focusing on the ways that context accounts for structural, historical, ontological and epistemological citationality. When addressing the scene of the rhetorical situation and the many symbolisms that affect one’s reading, recognizing normalized modes of dispossession is a challenge. It becomes easier to isolate instances of violence, for example, when they seem to occur without immediate provocation. Expanding the temporal and epistemological frame, however, can illuminate trends and patterns in the operations of power that produce the onticidal subject, the product of social death. The state of exception, explored here as an everyday structural process, suspends juridical law and its attending protections afforded to citizens through the intentional misrecognition of B(Q)F humanity. I propose that the failure to produce the normative human subject results in the failure to produce the citizen. First, I explore social death as it constitutes a “rightless” citizenship based on culturally reflective

¹² Robert L. Hampton, Thomas P. Gullotta, and Jessica M. Ramos, eds., *Interpersonal Violence in the African American Community: Evidence-Based Prevention and Treatment Practices* (New York: Springer, 2006); Evelyn C. White, “Love Don’t Always Make It Right: Black Women and Domestic Violence,” in *The Black Women’s Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves*, ed. Evelyn C. White (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1990); Natalie J. Sokoloff, and Christina Pratt, ed., *Domestic Violence at the Margins: Readings on Race, Class, Gender, and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

legalized erasure. Next, I relate the occurrence of homicides involving queer lesbian and GDNC black femmes to the recurrence of homicides involving black women in partnerships with cisgender black men. I argue that this type of intraracial violence is made possible through the absence of juridical recognition which effectively isolates black women and femmes, and further substantiates the social and political regime of non-ontology. Finally, I think through the ways that martyrdom works to recuperate, post-mortem, white trans and GDNC bodies into paradigms of citizenship as their lives become meaningful enough to demand changes in law and legal practices of protection while the deaths of black transwomen are given far less media attention despite the higher risk and rates of homicides.

5.1.2 Performative Apologia and the Production of “Rights-less” Citizenship

To understand the scene that opens this chapter, we must understand the conditions that draw black women and femmes into such close affective and discursive networks. It is worth noting that the *Injustice at Every Turn* special report on Black respondents states: “Black transgender people who were out to their families found acceptance at a higher rate than the overall sample of transgender respondents. Those respondents who were accepted by their families were much less likely to face discrimination. Over half (55%) of Black respondents said their family was as strong today as before they came out. This level of family acceptance was higher than for any other racial group in the study. Family acceptance correlated with lower rates of negative outcomes such as suicide, homelessness, and becoming HIV positive.”¹³ Given the arguably

¹³ Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, et al., *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011); idem., “Injustice at Every Turn: A Look at Black Respondents in the National

masculinized dominant rhetoric circulating the notion that Black communities are *disproportionately* hostile to queer and transgender people, this data suggests that a more complicated, and perhaps more precise and generous reading of this relationship is warranted. I would be curious to see *who* constituted “family” for the respondents, and if the majority of those considered in that category were other women and femmes. Given my experience as shared above, this nod of supporting data suggests that the majority of experiences of discrimination against black transgender and gender non-conforming people can be mitigated by the presence of family and kinship networks. And if “family acceptance” is anything like the B(Q)F networks I described, then my notion that it contributed to mutual survivability bears out. Black women and femme sodality is imperative to black trans and GDNC survival. The neighborhood may have been a space of resistance and defiance, but it also was the living and breathing microcosmic actualization of a polyvalent displacement.¹⁴ And it is the terms of this displacement that I carve out in this section through an analysis of texts that evidences the production of “rights-less” citizenship.

Social death, the effect of ongoing structural dispossession, challenges what it means to be “human” as a politically salient category. This presents as a conceptual conflict at the very core of the question of rights, legal protections and privileges, and political subjectivity. As Lisa

Transgender Discrimination Survey”:

http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/ntds_black_respondents_2.pdf.

¹⁴ This construction of neighborhood affinity and queer community is not unique to DC and has been discussed regarding other cities, such as in Pittsburgh, PA: Kathryn Beaty, “‘Then and Now’ Shows Pittsburgh’s Queer History,” *The Pitt News* (November 9, 20018)

<http://pittnews.com/article/22824/archives/then-and-now-shows-pittsburghs-queer-history/>; Harrison Apple, “The \$10,000 Woman: Trans Artifacts in the Pittsburgh Queer History Project Archive,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 553-564; Laura Grantmyre, “They lived their life and they didn’t bother anybody”: African American Female Impersonators and Pittsburgh’s Hill District, 1920-1960,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2011), 983-1011.

Marie Cacho suggests, marginalized groups have been “differentially included” in United States legal and political systems. Further, she argues: “As targets of regulation and containment, they are deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but not worthy of protection. They are not merely excluded from legal protection but criminalized as always already the object and target of law, never its authors or addressees.”¹⁵ Cacho’s description of social death extends to, and is complicate by, the precarious positionality of trans and GDNC black women and femmes.

An interactional approach to racialized gender and sexuality complicates the project of humanizing marked Others within the grand narrative of citizenship. In its simplest form, citizenship is the promise of “rights” legally supported in the operations of sovereign governance. Here, sites of intensification along axes of oppression become the symbolic repetition of negations against which a humanizing rubric is constructed. As Sylvia Wynter insists, the praxis of being human has routinely been denied to those whose lives cannot be articulated in the conceptualization of Man-as-human in Western modernity.¹⁶ Leading from this premise, the concept of citizenship functions as the juridical actualization of “the norm according to which the subject is produced who then becomes the presumptive ‘ground’ of normative debate.”¹⁷ Regarding the black femme—queer, trans and GDNC in particular—S.H.E. is what Man is not, therefore, there is no recourse or appeal made available in the formal application or in excess-by-suspension of the law. The state of exception structures the terrain of her body politic in absence of there being a legally substantiated descriptive statement to control, track, or

¹⁵ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003), 257-337.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2010), 138.

adequately surveil her fugitive movements. Though S.H.E. cannot be captured as sovereign subject, her personhood is sustained at great risk to her ability to survive.

The dominating ideal of Man as political subject is central to recognition of bodies as protected and protectable by juridical process. That social and cultural difference from the ideal must be explicitly named in the law in order to justify the equitable application of its protections is always already an admittance that citizenship belongs unquestionably to the idyllic form. Proceeding from this order of knowledge, bodies are interpellated within complementary systems of both abstract and material meaning-making that reinforce the stabilized sovereign political subject constructed in the language of law. These techniques of power rely on hierarchical distinctions and inchoate knowledges derived from the willful (intentional and obfuscating) misreading of embodied difference. Drawing from Tiziana Terranova, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest that governance forgoes an interest in a biopolitical collectivity based on nation, constitution, and language; instead it seeks “soft control, the cultivation of politics below the political.”¹⁸ I read Moten and Harney as directing “below the political” toward the liminal space where bodies are constructed through “political unconsciousness,”¹⁹ a process that controls, allows or denies, and increases or decreases access to ontological intelligibility. “Soft control,” perhaps what functions in the suspension of law, would be the operations of sovereignty that exceed the state, or rather, the panoptic disciplining logics and grammars that order political subjectivity. This process produces the citizen as governable, and criminalizes the ungovernable. Social death, in this framework, is the effective application of the terms and conditions of such

¹⁸ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Blackness and Governance” in *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 358.

¹⁹ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

distinctions; it is the by-product of sovereignty that “render(s) unanswerable the question of how to govern the thing that loses and finds itself to be what it is not.”²⁰

The type of governance that operates in this fashion can be examined in the formal responses issued by national leadership, representing their respective national interests, in the wake of anti-black “crimes against humanity.” Citizenship, and the descriptive statement of humanity that is invoked in this context, inflects a human rights framework that is mediated by historical state action. One of the methods of state response that I examine here, apologia, is used by national governance to redress legacies indicted as states of exception. Such reincorporative attempts to “forgive and forget” do not and cannot work, certainly not for current generations descending from affected oppressed populations. Highlighting the rhetoric used in speeches by George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Kevin Rudd, we will briefly examine performative apologetic gestures for crimes committed against black people in the US and Indigenous black peoples of Australia. There are three rhetorical tactics used to produce the political apology that will be explored in this section: the discrete partitioning of history; the production of a “respectable” victim-subject worthy of receiving the grand gesture; and the flattening of crimes committed to the gentler, less precise historical narratives of resulting civil conflicts. Apologetic practices employing these techniques deflect attention from the ideological mechanisms that sustain social, political, cultural abjection of minoritized populations while asserting the closure of the eventual moment of dispossession.

Thinking through these speeches as narratively marking the historical end of transgressions against those who would otherwise be deemed “citizens” of the nation-state, I will engage in an ongoing critique of this inconsistently protected status. Because it operates in

²⁰ Moten and Harney, “Blackness and Governance,” 353.

excess of strictly legal practice, it is often denied to those subjects who fail to meet the requirements of respectability forwarded within these speeches' descriptive frameworks. I will first engage the three rhetorical tactics of the political apology as they function to erase politically unwieldy conflicts. Following this brief overview and analysis, I suggest that what remains are the antagonisms that resist apologies as such. These antagonisms become indicative of a systemic erasure that refuses the protections of citizenship for those who violate expectations of assimilation into hegemonic normativity. Drawing on the concept of historiography, I critically consider the sources of the speech, the purposes for their delivery (stated and implicit), the sustained tensions between the recipient communities and national interests, as well as the grammars used to structure the apologies given knowledge of the specific histories being cited in each instance. Between the three speeches, the thematic marking-off of historical boundaries frames the context that prompts the apologetic response. I am most concerned here with the ways in which political structures in power position themselves in relationship to negative historical moments that darken and disrupt the retrospective national narratives of civil liberties.

George W. Bush's speech at Goree Island, a former slave trading post, rests solidly on ambiguously defining the temporal effects of slavery over time.²¹ Early in the speech he refers to "Years of unpunished brutality and bullying and rape" that is only linked to the system of slavery and certainly not its effects post-liberation (as official legal policy).²² While this statement

²¹ Martin J. Medhurst, "George W. Bush at Goree Island: American Slavery and the Rhetoric of Redemption," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96, no. 3 (2010): 257-77; Bradford Vivian, "The Paradox of Regret: Remembering and Forgetting the History of Slavery in George W. Bush's Gorée Island Address," *History and Memory* 24, no. 1, (Spring/Summer 2012): 5-38.

²² George W. Bush, "President Bush Speaks at Goree Island in Senegal: Remarks by the President on Goree Island," Goree Island, Senegal, July 8, 2003: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/07/20030708-1.html>.

clearly acknowledges some easily recognizable violences, it also suggests a bounded time when its occurrence appeared as a matter of public concern. As history would demonstrate, brutality against black people in the US is an ongoing affair with no historical breakages indicating a legitimate end. Such neat historical marking of legally sanctioned aggressions is a discursive performance that feeds the grand narrative of citizenship in the staging of a reflexive looking back and shallow acknowledgement of harms done. The gesture toward a better and more equitable present casts doubt on the quotidian nature of contemporary violences, accentuating brutality as a relic of times past. Later, he suggests that “many of the issues that still trouble America have roots in the bitter experience of other times,” signifying yet another marking of time that isolates the event as the site of trauma. Creating the illusion of a particularly violent “era” suggests that the intensity of violences has decreased over time, resulting in a much more manageable “trouble.” These misleading temporal distinctions do not consider the compounding, related effects of institutional and structural racialized abjection. Instead, the gesture reduces the impact of long-standing practices of subjugation that emerged in this early history which shaped and continues to shape American social, cultural, and political life.

In his Presidential Apology for the USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee,²³ Clinton similarly postures, offering that the Tuskegee experiments mark a time “not so very long ago that many Americans would prefer not to remember,” a “shameful past” that resonates in the

For an online video of the speech, see <http://www.c-span.org/video/?177330-1/ussenegal-relations>.

²³ Lynn M. Harter, Ronald J. Stephens, Phyllis M. Japp, “President Clinton's Apology for the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment: A Narrative of Remembrance, Redefinition, and Reconciliation,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 11, no. 1 (2000): 19-34; Joy Koesten and Robert C. Rowland, “The Rhetoric of Atonement,” *Communication Studies* 55, no.1 (2004): 68-87; Autumn R. Boyer, “Lifting 'The Long Shadow': Kategoria and Apologia in the Legacy of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2010).

memories of a largely ignored but small community of affected people.²⁴ He repeatedly employs a rhetoric of memory and remembering to firmly situate the event in a temporal past and constrain its effects to the bodies of the eight surviving Black men who were present for the speech's delivery. In this speech, Clinton emphasizes the necessary remembering of the "hundreds of men used in research without their knowledge and consent" and their families. With this move, the scope of effects is limited to those men and their families, without reference to the greater collective problem of institutionalized racial prejudice. Even further, it avoids signification of the legacies of violence against black men who harbor a justified distrust of state institutions and apparatuses that committed these atrocities across hyper-marginalized communities and through several generations. The apologies presented here are clearly establishing "bad times" without fully acknowledging the compounding effects of repetitious subjugation, abjection, and failed ontological recognition of certain bodies. The revisionist act of retroactively assigning the status of citizenship effectively diminishes state culpability in contemporary aggressions of the same magnitude. Time, then, transforms "mistakes" on behalf of national interests to lessons learned toward progress in matters of human rights.

Both Clinton and Bush deploy a hermeneutic of respectability in framing the "right" kind of African American subject. Here described using terms related explicitly to moral values and non-combative/-aggressive action, African Americans are praised for demonstrating qualities such as restraint, forgiveness, and resilience which are coded as respectable, positive individual and collective responses to systematic acts of oppression. Clinton emphasizes uncritical

²⁴ Bill Clinton, "Presidential Apology - USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee," East Room, White House, Washington DC, May 16, 1997: <http://clinton4.nara.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html>. For excerpts in an online video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6LY3zNQyFE>.

forgiveness when he states, “only you have the power to forgive. Your presence here shows us that you have chosen a better path than your government did so long ago. You have not withheld the power to forgive. I hope today and tomorrow every American will remember your lesson and live by it.” In this moment, I suggest that Clinton over-values forgiveness as a moral stance that absolves white guilt. This gesture necessarily negates alternative responses that are not receptive to erasing the affective history of collective trauma in order to ease the guilt of a nation. Bush similarly praises the dignity and consistent struggle of a few well-known, and often-cited “safe” representative advocates for the end of slavery and racial segregation who chose non-violence, education, and religious doctrine as primary modes of political engagement. This valorizing of certain types of political action over others very clearly distinguishes what can be deemed proper and useful civil acts, and who are promised acknowledgment as appropriate political subjects. This rhetoric works to sustain a division between good and bad blackness, a lasting effect of respectability politics.

Australia’s former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd,²⁵ utilizes many of the same rhetorical moves noted in the Clinton’s and Bush’s apologies in his speech “Apology for the Treatment of the Aborigines and the Stolen Generations of Australia.”²⁶ In it, he insists on the forgiveness of Indigenous Aboriginal communities for “this blemished chapter” of Australia’s history referred to as the Stolen Generation. Borrowing a similar rhetoric used to introduce the Clinton speech, the colonial power invokes collective trauma in the pronouncement of “one of the darkest chapters” of the nation’s history. Rudd then similarly reduces the historicity of the Stolen

²⁵ Tony Barta, “Sorry, and not Sorry, in Australia: How the Apology to the Stolen Generations Buried a History of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 10, no. 2 (June 2008): 201-214.

²⁶ Kevin Rudd, “Apology for the Treatment of the Aborigines and the Stolen Generations of Australia,” February 13, 2008: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/full-transcript-of-pms-speech/story-e6frg6nf1111115543192?nk=3715e84df84f8fc0132a261f6265b692>.

Generation's impact to a "blemished chapter" in Australia's history, a fading indication of an old wound that refuses to go away. He employs a grammar of tragic "past" and promising "future" to structure the evental moment. In doing so, he draws distinctions between the parliamentary structures of the past and the new, improved, and decidedly more humane structure of the present which functionally deters structural critique. He states, "There comes a time in the history of nations when their people must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future...to *deal with this unfinished business* of the nation, to *remove a great stain from the nation's soul*" (emphasis added). The juxtaposition of the longstanding, intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generation to a "great stain" in a nation's history suggests not only an end to the trauma, but it also implies that the reason for the necessary response is somehow more about creating a "cleaner," sanitized narrative history than resolving to afford Australia's Indigenous people ontological recognition, political agency, resources, and the rights and privileges of a protected class of humanity.

Though Rudd acknowledges that the historical aim of former government's policies was to eliminate the "problem" of miscegenation through the "complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white," he decenters black Indigenous suffering and ongoing displacement by centering the desire to cleanse the national narrative. He goes on to remark on the discomfort of bringing this past into current knowledge. The extreme nature of political policies intended to erase entire populations through the strategic exercise of violence—a similar modality of state action also present in historical memory of the first two speeches—is here reduced to a moment of collective national discomfort with a pathologized behavior. This dis-ease is indicative of sovereignty's failure to provide political status to the black Indigenous people, a diasporic problem that refuses resolution. Though the apology

constructs discomfort as an affective empathy, I argue that it produces affective distance for those in positions of privilege and power. Such distance allows for the temporal disconnect sustaining the pretense of a different time, a different reality, or a different ideological standpoint with no bearing on contemporary or future state action.

Rudd also stresses forgiveness, especially in the anecdote about Nanna Fejo who took one of Rudd's staff aside to suggest that he "was not too hard on the Aboriginal stockman who had hunted those kids down all those years ago." This story is used to insist upon the overdetermined goodness of the oppressed population; by making them saint-like martyrs, they can be recognized as worthy of the national apology, while this imagining secures a myth of uncontested acceptance of the political apology. In this regard, the true nature of the apology can be swathed in righteous dignity though it become clear that there is another component that suggests that this move toward apology is based on the success/failure of policy programs and not a pure recognition of the humanity of the Indigenous: "a business as usual approach towards Indigenous Australians is not working. Most old approaches are not working. We need a new beginning—a new beginning which contains real measures of policy success or policy failure; ...instead allowing flexible, tailored, local approaches to achieve commonly-agreed national objectives that lie at the core of our proposed new partnership..." The pursuit of policy initiatives is at the core of this turn toward recognition that brings some questions to the fore.

Throughout each of these speeches, it is made clear that the apologizing apparatus (state institution) is not explicitly drawing on the knowledge, needs, or collective negotiation with affected populations in the development of policy responses toward reparative measures. While apologies appear politically useful, they often do not serve the actual interests of the affected parties. They are rhetorical tools deployed to repair reputations and political careers, not

necessarily to repair social, juridical relationships or the long-term effects of oppressive policies. Additionally, these symbolic speech acts committed in the name of national “reparations” obscure the perpetuation of contemporary state violences against those same populations. This rendering of human rights as requisite norms of citizenship stages the sovereign state as equitable in its practices, especially having made peace with former, temporally restrained, antiblackness. The other effect of this rhetorical style, employed by each of the speakers cited here, is that it reduces white supremacist institutional and juridical violences to a few simplified and easily recognizable actions or social behaviors as if the conflicts of rights could be taken as singular ruptures in morality where bad decisions were acted upon in poor taste. The focus on conflicts and their martyrs fails to indict institutional valuing of whiteness that underwrites these apologetic campaigns. Further, it normalizes the conditions of historical erasure that sustain and define the state of exception.

The construction of citizenship that underwrites the present apologia attempt to misrecognize black and black Indigenous lived experience in the throes of state-sanctioned genocidal activity. Though it is not described as such, because admitting the historical effects would be far more damning than apologizing for bad policy, the rhetoric of sovereignty historicizes excessive violence through the willful forgetting of its subjects. In the refusal to provide a corrective that articulates the ways in which citizenship had been used to force compliance of extremely vulnerable populations, state actors committed to sustaining the fiction of human rights as inherent in the legal status. M. Jacqui Alexander’s interrogation of “citizenship” indicts the legal, social, and cultural status as a technique of power wielded by the state. She posits that a hierarchical social order is maintained through exclusionary practices of surveillance, documentation, and the naturalization of heterosexuality through juridical

apparatuses. Such measures *define* and *confine* the legitimacy of subjects made recognizable within a limited paradigmatic frame that requires assimilation and submission in return for the various protections and privileges mediated by the state. Alexander draws attention to the theoretical conflicts that emerge within feminist and oppositional movements that effectively reproduce the mechanisms of state control that further entrench normalizing identifications within an ultimately detrimental nationalistic hegemonic regime. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and national identification merge at a site of political struggle that seeks to recognize the ways that “the effects of political economic international processes provoke a legitimization crisis for the state which moves to restore its legitimacy by recouping heterosexuality through legislation.”²⁷ The systemic effect of state power produces the context within which we come to acknowledge and authorize sexual deviance as disruptive of a nationalistic, capitalist state agenda (here “sexual deviance” is understood as non-procreative sexuality and sexual practices deemed illicit and/or illegal within social and legal contexts).

It is the rejection of the compulsory reproduction of fungible bodies that situates black queer women and femmes squarely within processes of decolonizing the grand narrative of citizenship. Refusal to perform this function becomes the basis upon which citizenship can be denied, revoked, altered, or otherwise negated. The constellation of impossibilities that reinscribe white normativity as a tenet of citizenship structurally prohibit trans and GDNC black women and femmes access such that they cannot be addressed through inclusionary logics that appeal to state apparatuses. This creates a unique vulnerability as institutional oversight, or more pointedly, the conditions of ongoing genocidal force that acts in the absence of intentional and

²⁷ M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas,” *Feminist Review* 48, no. 1 (1994): 7.

direct discipline.

According to the data collected by the collaboration between the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, black transgender and GDNC individuals experience the most “bias and persistent, structural racism” noted in metrics of harassment and discrimination in education, housing, employment/economic security, public accommodations, and interaction with federal agencies regarding requisite legal documentation.²⁸ Relatedly, though treated as distinct and separate operations, black women and girls experience brutal state violence on par with that of black men and boys, of which the latter has received the most prolific media and political attention. Kimberle Crenshaw’s 2015 report *Say Her Name* argues, “The failure to highlight and demand accountability for the countless Black women killed by police over the past two decades [...] leaves Black women unnamed and thus underprotected in the face of their continued vulnerability to racialized police violence.”²⁹ The lack of public and police records to account for these mutually related practices of state violence proves the effectiveness of systematic erasure. The state, then, cannot be held accountable for an epidemic that cannot be qualitatively considered; the lived experiences of black women and femmes catalogued in narrative memorials, social movement projects, policy reports and news media are made to serve as records of isolated incidents. As Butler argues, “The state draws upon non-statist operations of power that work primarily through establishing a set of ‘ontological givens.’ Among those givens are precisely notions of subject, culture, identity, and religion whose versions remain uncontested and incontestable within particular normative

²⁸ Grant, et al., *Injustice at Every Turn*.

²⁹ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie, with Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* (New York: African American Policy Forum, 2015), 1.

frameworks.”³⁰ In this way, the parameters of political subjectivity are limited without explicit mention of exclusions that circulate as social and cultural marking/unmarking. Citizenship, as the guise under which this technique of power manifests, is the quintessential example of operative state power that serves not to transform oppressive structures, but to enhance their efficiency.

For those who always already “fail” to reproduce normative ways of being and knowing, there must necessarily be a difference in who can be counted as human for the process of humanizing to not only occur, but to be effective. Black women and femmes, as developed throughout this dissertation, can neither perform femininity within the confines of female gender normativity, nor is whiteness (as a humanizing characteristic) attainable as a matter of performative assimilation or other modes of social caste proximity. Within the contemporary context of antiblack misogynistic and queerantagonistic power regimes, queer black women and femmes always already exist as ontologically incompatible with a white supremacist framework for intelligibility. Therefore, their humanity is not recuperated in the functional operations of citizenship, and relatedly, legal status as citizen does not equate to personhood.

The conflictual arrangement of criteria for inclusion inherently complicates the question of citizenship as a universalizing grand narrative. That which is deemed intelligible primarily responds to an agenda that often, and intentionally, presents an undesirable option for black queer women and femmes. What then is “humanizing” in the performance of gender? What constitutes rights and privileges when there *is no effective rewarding of ontological status*? When the conferral of rights relies on the good will or good intentions of state apparatuses always already oppositional to marginalized subjects, is the most we can hope for a litany of apologia? For black (queer) women and femmes, this performance of recognition is always too

³⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 149.

little, too late.

5.1.3 Understanding Intraracial Violence in the Context of Structural Antagonisms

Focusing on the structural problematic of citizenship's exclusions can give the illusion of a flattened, oppressed collective's opposition to an overwhelming and powerful state force. However, most of us move through our everyday activities without direct interaction or discrete conflicts with state institutions or their representatives. So how does the issue of "rights-less citizenship" enter into the mundane considerations of B(Q)F experience? My introductory anecdote signifies on the everydayness of fugitive movements made to escape extremely pervasive institutional and structural abjection. Relationality and belonging, in this scene, is fraught with necessity: black women and femmes' senses of belonging to one another in queered spatial and temporal configurations necessarily critiques and subverts the systemic attempts of erasure that follow them in every social and geographic space. Returning to queer possibilities of "home," I must complicate the utopian optimism inherent in rendering it as a space/place of safety and protection as it, too, can be reproductive of the state of exception.

When I first began working on this project, I was confronted with the realization that the deaths of black queer women and femmes—trans and GDNC especially—were not a matter of broad public concern. It was barely a matter of interest for black liberation movements, even as the labor of sustaining them depends on their continued contributions. This was something that I knew, and felt, but I had not yet read through dozens of perfunctory news reports on domestic and intimate partner violence. I had not yet watched videos of grieving black women and queer folks memorializing their kin. I had not yet connected this contemporary epidemic to the past I

knew so well. The quotidian experience of mutual protection and reciprocity I knew in my personal life delayed the inevitable moment that I would have to face an immense failure of queer and black community that could not be forgiven. This isn't a productive or generative failure; it is public, private, and institutional—and it is also a failure that scholarship has consistently avoided through the various cleavages in disciplinarity that I have laid out in previous chapters. Feminism versus Black Studies versus Black Feminism versus Queer Theory and so on into perpetuity, will not resurrect the dead black women and femmes whose commonality of struggle produced the conditions for their demise.³¹ The inability to recognize the interaction of antagonisms that act against B(Q)F epistemological and ontological claims to life—social, bare, political, and otherwise—mutes and thereby diminishes the capacity for collective action. Given the affective prevalence of misogynoir's resentment, I submit that its danger and force cannot be exaggerated. If anything, it is normalized to the point of banality and such indifference is the most dangerous genocidal tool that the state of exception has invented.

I. Demarkis Stansberry, a black trans man, was fatally shot by his alleged friend, Nicholas Matthews in Baton Rouge, LA on February 27, 2016. In the initial reporting of his death and in the official Sheriff's Office report, he was misgendered and doxed by the

³¹ In an article by *Ebony Magazine's* Culture/Entertainment Director, Britni Danielle, the issue of murder-suicides involving black women killed by black men is discussed referencing the types of discourses that circulate *after* an attempt to highlight cases as a matter of public concern. The author, a cisgender black woman, situates the fact of the murders in a broader conversation about the types of backlash and aggression that she received for highlighting these cases. Such responses, I argue, are symptomatic of *misogynoir's resentment* and reveal the pervasiveness of material and discursive violence against black femininity when it is centered (either as subject or authorizing voice). It is worth noting that the author is treated as an aggressor by social media respondents, and charged with instigating conflict between black women and men. More on this example can be found online. Britni Danielle, "Here's What Happened When I Tried to Highlight Murdered Black Women," in *Ebony Magazine* April 11, 2017): <http://www.ebony.com/news-views/black-women-murdered#axzz4lc03JM8o>. Accessed 11 April 2017.

repeated use of the name given and gender assigned at birth. Though he was shot at point blank range, his murder was reported as an accident.³²

II. Mercedes Successful, was a 32-year-old black trans woman, and the twelfth investigated and reported trans person killed in 2016 in the US. An active LGBT performer and socialite, she was well known for her appearances in drag and pageant communities of Haines City, FL. In the official local news and officer reporting of her death, she was misgendered and identified by the name assigned at birth. Further, it was noted that she was “not dressed like a woman when found,” which subsequently impacted the investigation of her murder, failing to treat it as a hate crime.³³

2016 was a landmark year for increased visibility around the deaths of trans and gender-nonconforming black people. A revitalized advocacy and activism emerged from the catalytic national (and now international) movement against police violence as intersectional, and deeply invested in the overlapping political aims of Black Feminism, Queer Theory and Transgender

³² Cleis Abeni, “Black Trans Man Demarkis Stansberry Killed in Louisiana,” *Advocate* (February 29, 2016); <https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/2/29/black-trans-man-demarkis-stansberry-killed-louisiana>.

Doxing Report: Bryn Stole, “Sheriff’s Office: Baton Rouge man accidentally shoots, kills friend; thought magazine empty after firing gun New Year’s Eve,” *The Advocate: Baton Rouge* (February 29, 2017): http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/crime_police/article_2c0b8965-b301-511f-aa4d-cf67dee862d0.html.

³³ Sunnive Brydum, “Mercedes Successful Becomes 12th Trans Person Killed in 2016,” *Advocate* (May 19, 2016): <https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/5/19/mercedes-successful-becomes-11th-transgender-person-killed-2016>. Accessed 19 May 2016.

Doxing Reports: “Man’s body found in Haines City parking lot,” *Bay News 9* (May 16, 2016): http://www.baynews9.com/content/news/baynews9/news/article.html/content/news/articles/bn9/2016/5/16/man_s_body_found_in_.html?cid=rss. Accessed 19 May 2016; “Haines City Police Department releases new details about homicide,” *The Ledger* (May 17, 2016) and (updated May 18, 2016): <http://www.theledger.com/news/20160517/haines-city-police-department-releases-new-details-about-homicide>. Accessed 19 May 2016.

Studies, and theories of decolonization. However, much of the effort to bring attention to these cases is spent in the process of locating them and clarifying or improving the historical record of their deaths. While visibility has increased, so has the number of *known* cases of homicides and suicides. Without reproducing excessive details of their deaths, I introduce the situation of media's treatment of trans man, Demarkis Stansberry and trans woman Mercedes Successful. A unique constellation of displacements in the news coverage of their deaths reveals respective processes of forcibly un-gendering and gendering black femininity: Mercedes's displacement is due to the misreading of her gender as a failure to perform femininity, the practice of un-gendering initiated in the official handling of her case as a state concern, then, marked her as masculine; Demarkis's displacement as a trans man is due to the willful misreading and refusal of his gender, the action taken against him being to forcibly gender him as feminine in death. Both practices control the determination of black femininity by force, and deny black subjectivity regardless. In this framework, no choice made by the individual would be granted as an allowable choice.³⁴

The persistence of extrajudicial violence, compounded by the social, cultural, and political techniques of power that produce these visible ruptures in pretense of sovereign order suggest an underlying antagonism that deserves our sustained, critical attention. Here, I am interested in interrogating the continuous processes of marking and unmarking that attempt to

³⁴ For another example of media's treatment of trans women, this study from Portugal establishes a much broader pattern of misrepresentation: Maria Manuel Rocha Baptista and Rita Ilse Pinto de Loureiro Himmel, "'For Fun': (De) Humanizing Gisberta—The Violence of Binary Gender Social Representation," *Sexuality and Culture* 20, no. 3 (September 2016): 639–56.

For another perspective: Anastasia Walker, "Empathy and Spectacle in the Transgender Killing Fields: On Media Coverage of Anti-Trans Violence," *Huffington Post* (15 April 2017); Rebecca L. Stotze, "Violence Against Transgender People: A Review of United States Data," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 3 (May–June 2009): 170–79.

construct black trans and GDNC bodies within a binary rubric of identifying mechanisms. In this section, I suggest that these structural practices render difference as dangerous and socially malignant; a designation that ultimately fails to produce viable citizens that can be protected—or even recognized—within the ethical, moral, or legal reaches of civil law. It is also important to note that the choice to autonomously affirm difference is met with epistemological discipline (the enforcement of binary gender affiliations) and is punishable by death (treated as unremarkable; ontologically unworthy of recognition).

Even a cursory search of recent news regarding what is more often subsumed under “antigay violence” reveals a complex narrative of hostilities toward black trans and GDNC individuals where victims’ gender, gender presentation, sexual orientation, and race have a unique bearing on the problem I am attempting to construct here. As recorded in the “Hearing Before the Committee on Criminal Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives...on Anti-gay Violence” (1986), Kevin Berrill of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force states:

The nightmare for antigay violence victims does not end when their assailants have finished with them. Those few who are brave enough to step forward are often revictimized by the very agencies responsible for protecting and helping them. All too often, the police and criminal justice system blame gay victims, and fail to vigorously investigate, prosecute and punish antigay crimes. A few law enforcement agencies represented here today have taken positive steps to remedy this situation, but they are the exception rather than the norm.³⁵

³⁵ Kevin Berrill, “Testimony on “Anti-gay Violence” before the “Subcommittee on Criminal Justice,” October 6, 1986, 3. *Anti-Gay Violence: Hearing on Anti-Gay Violence before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice of the Committee in the Judiciary, House of Representatives*,

As it was argued in 1986 regarding antigay harassment, criminal justice institutions have largely failed to account for distinctive violences against non-heteronormative people. Even further obscured are the ways that gender expression, race, and class further complicate this dynamic so as to produce the consistent erasure of queer, trans and GDNC persons from the few protections that have been created in response to hate crime legislation. To add an additional layer of complication, how does one account for the contemporary moment of police distrust? What do we make of the consistent reports of law enforcement's complicity in matters of racialized and gendered antagonisms that conflate to produce targeted extrajudicial violence against black queer, trans and GDNC women and femmes? Central to my argument here, then, is the underlying impetus that real lives hang in the balance of systemic and interpersonal violence.

In the article "Living on Borrowed Time: 6 Trans Women of Color Have Been Killed in America This Year," some shocking statistics are revealed including the dire report that trans women are six times more likely to experience violence from police compared to other assault survivors. As such, not only are they less likely to seek help from law enforcement, but they are also made more vulnerable to systemic neglect due to the compounded problematic of reporting. In 1986, the situation was very much the same:

Without civil rights, victims of antigay violence cannot report attacks against them without risking their jobs, homes, even their lives. By permitting discrimination, the Federal Government actually facilitates violence against gay people by inhibiting them from reporting to the police and seeking legal redress.³⁶

When we consider the current political environment of increasingly aggressive police and

Ninety-Ninth Congress, Second Session. Congress of the U.S., Washington, D.C. House Committee on the Judiciary (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987).

³⁶ Berrill, Testimony, 5.

vigilante law enforcement—paired with the reality that hate crimes against queer people and especially transgender and GDNC persons are largely unreported—the illusion of rights granted, protected, and mediated through the legal system can hardly sustain itself. What, exactly, has changed in the federal government’s response in the nearly thirty years since the testimony on antigay violence was recorded? Where is the progress we are supposed to have faith in, to believe in, and to set our hopes upon? In one statement, the Hon. Barney Frank suggests that “the role of the Government ought to be to protect minorities who are made vulnerable because of prejudice, whatever the source. That is a role the Federal Government has had to play in the past, based on race, religion, and it is our job to look and see whether that is again appropriate, because there may well be a failure of officials to perform their responsibilities.”³⁷ The slight, almost imperceptible hesitance to claim full accountability for the complicity of a systemic failure to protect and serve a particular class of citizens is indicative of a legal system whose primary directive is to maintain its own power to regulate bodies, to control life and death. The affinity to biopower, and not liberation, bears out as a key feature of American legal and judicial praxis which I argue has a vested interest in eliminating the disruptive threat posed by black trans and GDNC individuals.

To view the occurrence of these and similar deaths of black queer women and femmes as isolated events, or the tragic encounter with an independent actor, would not only be an injustice to them, but it would also suggest that there is no pattern to connect them, and therefore no reason systematically address the ongoing violences against black women and femmes as a uniquely targeted demographic. As I discussed in the previous chapter, respectability politics are a major factor in disciplining gender and sexuality as a matter of appealing to state institutions in

³⁷ Berrill, Testimony, 8. Emphasis added.

the performance of an acceptable, or at least palatable and unimposing, blackness. In this process, heteronormativity is the ideal and femininity acts as the moral guide and gatekeeper of its practices. Juana María Rodríguez, following from Ann Pellegrini's discussion of public sexuality and the commodification sexual subjects, argues that "bodies marked as deviant that have been affected more forcefully by pernicious ideologies of 'perversion, victimization and protection' and punished most viciously for seeking out the pleasures of perverse sexual license."³⁸

When mainstream LGBTQ movements and related legal policies focus primarily on issues that only a privileged few can enjoy, they simultaneously neglect the compounding interests of historically marginalized populations within these communities. That trans and GDNC black women and femmes are rarely considered core subjects and are instead treated as expendable auxiliaries to social causes, deeply reflects mainstream LGBTQ movements' investment in maintaining hegemonic power structures. A type of respectability politics comes to dominate the public sphere interactions with popular civil society and those that do not comply fade into an invisible zone of indifference. As emphasized by Gregory M. Herek, then Psychology professor at CUNY:

The hostility, fear, and ignorance of most Americans reflect our society's institutional homophobia—the antigay ideologies prevalent in our Government, our schools, our churches, and our mass media. These societal institutions effectively create a cultural climate in which individual expressions of homophobia, including violence, are tolerated or even encouraged.³⁹

³⁸ Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality," 358.

³⁹ Herek, "Testimony," in *Anti-Gay Violence*, 13.

While I can appreciate Herek's salient point regarding the pervasiveness of queerantagonistic ideologies, his solution falls short of enacting substantial change. He suggests, "In order to reduce the violence, we must attack the homophobia that underlies it. Thus, any intervention strategies must include public education concerning gay men and lesbians. Given the frequency of homophobic violence among adolescents, such education is particularly important in middle and secondary schools."⁴⁰ Increasing funding for outreach and education programs, for example, is honorable, well-intentioned, and meaningful in terms of increasing the capacity for tolerance. However, tolerance alone does not extend to ideological change so far as to prevent the executions of trans and GDNC black women and femmes or to correct the subsequent disavowal of lives that is no endemic to news media coverage. Though I can accept that the teaching of tolerance as a response to difference has its social and cultural value, my concern is that other, more insidious ideological and politicized issues get displaced in these conversations—and this displacement leaves black queer femmes increasingly vulnerable to state-sanctioned, systemic, and interpersonal violence.

It is within this marginal invisibility I locate the stories of Britney and Crystal, Shani and Ray-Ray. While Leelah Alcorn, Brandon Tina, and other white queer trans and GDNC persons have become martyred saints of an LGBT cultural crisis, it does not go unnoticed that black women and femmes remain sidelined and their interlocking narratives of oppression fade into obscurity.

- I. On March 7, 2014, the bodies of Britney Cosby and her partner Crystal Jackson were discovered near a dumpster in Galveston, TX. The women had been brutally murdered,

⁴⁰ Herek, "Testimony," 14.

and then unceremoniously discarded. The prime suspect of this homicide was Larry Cosby, Britney's father.⁴¹

- II. In August 2003, Shani Baraka, daughter of poet and radical activist Amiri Baraka, was brutally murdered alongside her partner Rayshon Holmes. The convicted suspect of this homicide was James Coleman, the estranged husband of Baraka's daughter Wanda.⁴²

The ways that media report the deaths of black queer, trans, and GDNC persons makes it difficult to track patterns of violence even when we have extensive anecdotal and experiential evidence to support claims of excessive violence. In the above two cases, media reports were ambiguous about the relationships between women, often focusing on the relationships between two of the affected women and their fathers who were implicated in their stories (for Cosby, her father was a suspect in the murder; for Baraka, his status as poet and activist contributed to media elevating his importance in the conflict). This treatment further displaces the women who were harmed, but it also illustrates some of the reasons why it has been so difficult to obtain data about the types of violence black queer, trans, and GDNC people experience. To unpack this further, I turn to the ways gender, race, and sexual orientation compound to produce an opening for the sustained proliferation of domestic and intimate partner violence. In an important essay "When Black Lesbians Are Killed by Black Men" written for *Out* online magazine, Darnell Moore seeks to connect the two above stories through a history of neglect and devaluation of

⁴¹ Sasha Goldstein, "Texas Dad Killed Daughter, her Lesbian Lover because he Disliked that She was Gay: Mom," *New York Daily News*, March 14, 2014: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/dad-killed-daughter-lesbian-lover-gay-mom-article-1.1722103>.

⁴² Robert Hanley, "Daughter of Controversial Poet is Killed at Her Sister's Home," *The New York Times* (14 Aug. 2003): <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/14/nyregion/daughter-of-controversial-poet-is-killed-at-her-sister-s-home.html>.

black women, and more pointedly, black queer women's identities. He writes:

Thus, like Shani and Ray-Ray, like Shani's older lesbian aunt (and Amiri's sister) Kimako before her, like 15-year-old lesbian Sakia Gunn who like Shani called Newark home, black lesbians Britney Cosby and Crystal Jackson from Houston, Texas, were killed by Black men—some of whom were family members. And whether the force that propelled the use of gun, or hand, or knife in the cases referenced above was sexism, misogyny, disdain of homosexuals, or all of the above, the killing of black women, black women loving women, by black men is a clarion reminder that the want for power and the afforded privileges offered to straight/queer/trans men folk—black, brown, and white—has dangerous and violent consequences. Murder is but one.⁴³

Within this treatment of the cases, Moore reflects on the everydayness of these types of experiences for queer black women. Reports of physical and psychological violence are recognized as tragic, but they are not uncommon—and death is not always the most prevalent signifier, which makes the experience of gendered, sexualized violence unexceptional. The truth of the matter is that these and similar stories of excessive abuses of black women and femmes are frequently buried in the deep recesses of local newspapers, barely making headlines because these lives do not matter within systems built on their erasure, obfuscation, and ultimately, their destruction. And in many instances, especially those involving black lesbians and queer women (trans, GNC, and cisgender alike), the aspects of sexuality and gender expression often get coded in other ways within these stories such that those aspects of their identities do not factor into popular understandings of their lives and deaths. These omissions, the neglect and absences

⁴³ Darnell Moore, "When Black Lesbians Are Killed by Black Men," *Out*, March 20, 2014: <http://www.out.com/news-opinion/2014/03/20/when-black-lesbians-are-killed-black-men>.

noted here, reflect a larger problem of misogynoir and queer antagonism that challenge cisgender male masculinities. However, black queer women and femmes have been responsive to these paradigms of invisibility and the antagonisms that shape their everyday lives. Moore further reflects:

But the murder of Shani and Ray-Ray illuminated a particular type of everyday violence that is both racialized and gendered, a type of violence that evidences the consequences of sexism and homo-antagonism precisely aimed at black women (who love other women). Shani and Rayshon's case centered much-needed attention on the violence inflicted upon black women, especially lesbians, by presumably straight black men. We black queer men are prone to committing similar violences, just as well. But what does justice look like for black lesbian sisters, who daily fight through racism and much else while seeking to protect themselves from the violences that are inflicted upon them by their black brothers, lovers, fathers, friends, and others?⁴⁴

Moore's project highlights violence as committed by black men, but it also asks us to think about the ways that black men are perceived as violent, the risks associated with naming and interrogating that description, and the intraracial dissonance that prevents and simultaneously exposes internalized displacements. How do we arrive at this place of intraracial violence? In what ways does the history and discursive traditions of black liberation contribute to this dynamic? Briefly, we must think through the ways that black men are objectified and internalize that positionality, and the legacies of subjugation that have coalesced in the reproduction of violences against black femininity viewed as oppositional to and part of the destructive force set against black masculinity.

⁴⁴ Moore, "When Black Lesbians are Killed by Black Men."

Maurice O. Wallace's exploration of the "problem" of visibility in interpreting the black male body regards the role and rhetoric of "visibility" as a paradigm of social interaction. He states, "what racialists see gazing at the black male body, is a 'virtual image,' at once seen and unseen, spectacular and spectral, to their socially conditioned eyes."⁴⁵ Inscription through misrepresentation projected onto the black male body as object reflects processes of "perceiving and knowing" that manifest in the social interpretation of a visually significant black masculine presence. Noting the body as a sight/site of constant contestation, we are asked to consider more critically what happens in the moment that the black man is *seen*? How is the project of political "visibility" complicated by the symbolic violence that occurs through misreading? While it is clear that Wallace identifies the "gaze" here as structured through whiteness and particular class dynamics, I also encourage a reflection that considers modes of black masculinity as productive of a deeply problematic inscription of racialized gender-based violence that is similarly pervasive and often destructive.

Putting this in conversation with a reading of black masculinity as it emerges in post-Black Power social movements, these inscriptions are complicated by in-community discourses. *Soul on Ice* is the controversial memoir and exemplary rhetorical object written by former prisoner-turned-revolutionary Eldridge Cleaver. It posits a vision of black masculinity that is essentially a praxis of *misogynoir*. In this collection of essays, he reveals his process of growth and seeming redemption, while relaying the difficulty of sustaining moral virtue while facing the specific trials of being a visibly black man in his historical, political temporal frame. His revelations are sometimes brutal, to be sure; uncomfortable to read and difficult to rationalize. In

⁴⁵ Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

this often-praised collection, he suggests that black masculinity can be redeemed through the humiliation, degradation, and dismissal of black women. This process involves utilizing black women to “practice” techniques of rape and sexual abuse to be used on the preferred valuable target, white women, whose subjugation is treated as a prize to be collected. Of the many, many problematic aspects of this approach to black male redemption, two things emerge in the treatment of black women (who make up part of the community for which black liberation is supposed to protect and elevate): 1) black femininity is only useful in the service of black masculine subjective formation, and 2) black femininity cannot be redeemed from ontological dispossession as it must be sacrificed to service. Though rape is one of the most inflammatory suggestions of the text, the characterizations of black femininity in service to black masculinity inherently code her labor as subject to the whims of black masculinity’s pursuit of power. These notions of subservience persist, even without reference to Cleaver.

I bring up this text to exemplify how many black male critics, activists, and intellectuals praised this book, for generations, as groundbreaking and a necessary read. For many, it served as a guide for approaching black masculinity with an eye toward rehabilitating the image sacrificed to emasculation and colonization experienced as a product of anti-black structural hegemonies. However, much like when social structures are reproduced through the fetishist gaze, another strain of structural ideologies get reproduced through mutual recognition between black males which attempts to respond to white hegemonic dominance while also eschewing the femininity as central to an ontology of blackness. Though my project cannot pursue a fuller historical treatment of these logics, I note that the instigation of violences against black women by black men has a much longer legacy that negotiates similar structural displacements.

Considering misogynoir and queer antagonism in concert, normative frames of

recognition forcibly construct black (queer) femme subjectivities through surveillance, arbitrary punishment, and social sanctions that sustain structural oppressions. It is because of this failed system of redress that we must look beyond social justice projects that only aim for political, juridical inclusion and protections. These crimes provide an opportunity to analyze the effects of systemic erasure that lead to the consistent denial of access to modes of citizenship. Citizenship is utilized in this context as a social and politically legitimizing process; it would render these identities stable, intelligible, and ultimately, imbued with value.

In the wake of the suicide of a young, white trans woman Leelah Alcorn, the question of community responsibility emerged as did notions of what an efficient and proper representative of trans and GDNC politicization is expected to look like. While my argument here does not specifically address the circumstances of Alcorn's death, I want to interrogate the discourses that surfaced in response to her use of social media to produce a "call to action" that gained a great deal of positive media attention. I juxtapose this treatment of Alcorn's image in the press to try to make sense of the way that one debate regarding the value of trans lives has produced a simultaneous erasure of black trans people from public visibility. Alcorn's online statement (originally posted on Tumblr after her death, but was deleted soon after by her parents in 2014) has brought all manner of public intellectuals, grassroots activists, scholars, supporters and detractors into a very public debate regarding state-sanctioned violence, intrusive social surveillance, and even judicial control over spaces and bodies. Beyond the initial hashtag conversation #RealLiveTransAdults, which was used by trans-identified adults to forward messages of hope and longevity for trans youth, there was also an outpouring of news coverage situating Leelah as a particularly accessible figure capable of instigating political change. In an ABC News report, Leelah's suicide is noted as being "heartbreaking" and the effects of her last

message “inspiring.”⁴⁶ Alcorn’s alleged suicide note includes this statement: “My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number and say ‘that’s fucked up’ and fix it. Fix society. Please.” This excerpt from her final public message is found on the page of a Change.org petition⁴⁷ intended to introduce legislation under the Obama administration. Providing further justification, this petition “call(s) upon the President of the United States - Barack Obama, and the Leadership of the House and Senate to immediately seek a pathway for banning the practice known as ‘transgender conversion therapy.’ We ask that you name the bill in memory of Leelah as the Leelah’s Alcorn Law and protect the lives of transgender youth.”

Within this conversation, black trans and GDNC people have been active public voices within a growing movement to recognize, protect, and acknowledge the autonomy and subjectivity of trans individuals. From circulating think pieces on the plight of queer and trans persons in the US to encouraging honest and open dialogue on the state of LGBT movement’s capacity for sustaining livelihoods, contemporary critiques of power have grounded this current movement. However, when issues of race and intersectionality are interjected into this discussion, it has often resulted in a vitriolic rhetoric of hatred toward queer people of color that resists every effort at transformation in the public sphere. In this debate, affluent and popular white cisgender women and feminist advocates in online media spaces⁴⁸ have been the critiqued

⁴⁶ Gillian Mohny, “Leelah Alcorn: Transgender Teen’s Death Inspires #RealLiveTransAdult Hashtag,” *ABCnews* (31 Dec. 2014): <http://abcnews.go.com/US/transgender-teen-leelah-alcorns-death-inspires-reallivetransadult-hashtag/story?id=27927271>.

⁴⁷ Transgender Human Rights Institute, “Enact Leelah’s Law to Ban Transgender Conversion Therapy,” *Change.org*; <https://www.change.org/p/president-of-the-united-states-enact-leelah-s-law-to-ban-transgender-conversion-therapy>.

⁴⁸ Some white feminists who operate from a single-axis politic (gender exclusively, and cisgender female more directly), have been antagonistically branded or “called out” as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs), though application of this label has been a matter of

for using abusive discursive tactics to target a select group of highly visible black trans advocates. Competing for audience and often supported by large, well-funded platforms, they hold power to shift the conversation yet online disputes often result in fixed, unyielding stances and lost coalitional efforts. This begs an in-depth sustained inquiry into the logics that organize such conflicts internal to social justice movements.⁴⁹

What I am attempting to reach here is an understanding of how an ideology of antiblackness and queer onticide circulates and sustains itself. Here, it is useful to think in terms of discipline via the panopticon and of power as a set of techniques that maintain this structure. It would seem self-defeating at the outset for intra-racial, gender-based attacks to persist given the current call for community and coalition building; however, it also makes perfect sense that *now* is the time that one can clearly see how various punishments are meted out in order to maintain the hierarchies that structure our access to social knowledge and individual intelligibility. In this way, the proliferation and circulation of digital media online in an age where cultural capital can be cultivated via a potentially infinite audience, the question of discipline and surveillance becomes especially salient. There are, indeed, structures of online interactions and participation in public discourse that exacerbate the continued erasure and exclusion of non-white, non-heteronormative narratives from the public sphere.⁵⁰ The increasingly public backlash for

heated and ongoing dispute. The assumption that underwrites this perspective also centers whiteness as normative, thereby absenting race as an appropriately reflexive critical category.

⁴⁹ Kelsie Brynn Jones, "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism: What Exactly Is It, And Why Does It Hurt?," *HuffPost: The Blog* (2 Feb. 2016): http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kelsie-brynn-jones/transexclusionary-radical-terf_b_5632332.html.

⁵⁰ Mikki Kendall gave a talk at NerdCon 2016 that uses sarcasm as a rhetorical tool to challenge the ways that black women (and femmes) are written about by non-black people. In this playful and indicting piece, she reminds non-black authors of the limits of their "objectivity" and the value of allowing black women to speak to their own experience, which can be done by centering their perspectives and intellectual labors instead of that of the non-black author. Given the vast and quick-moving circulation of online content, we must be attentive to the types of

centering certain minoritized subjects inevitably shapes what information gets shared about whom, and to what political ends it serves.

articles and editorial content being produced that reinforces objectification and subjugation of black women and femmes through the practices of journalistic writing. The transcript is available on her blog. Mikki Kendall, "How to Write About Black Women," *Mikki Kendall: Proud Descendant of Hex Throwing Goons* (October 17, 2016) <https://mikkikendall.com/2016/10/17/how-to-write-about-black-women/>.

6.0 OEA: INTIMACY

the fire frees us
the fast-ass women the fall-in-love women the freaks
the fire is full of the all-out women
the walk-out women the sweet
the fire is finding the love-lost women
the worth-it women the ones
fire is blazing the brash blues women
the black-eyed women
the wiry women with guns

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill*¹

He kept thinking I was that kind of a woman. Always. They would, wouldn't they. Always. No matter what I. Just because the places I went, the way I talked or how I wore my hair. Any woman's talk. You know. So he came and sat down. I wasn't going to nobody else. But he thought I would.

-Eva, *Eva's Man* ²

6.1 BREAKING THE FRAME

In the context of a B(Q)F onto-epistemic frame, I propose a renegotiation of the possibilities for relationality, desire, attraction, and interpersonal engagement. In this chapter, I think about intimacies as those formations of closeness that draw our bodies/flesh into the orbit of affect: the closeness with which we come to enter into discourse with both familiar and unfamiliar partners; the closeness within which direct and indirect, immediate and lingering encounters transpire that

¹ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

² Gayl Jones, *Eva's Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 171.

shape the interactions from which we determine the spaces and places of ontological possibility. I have spent most of this project thus far addressing the structural and systemic institutional antagonisms that produce social death and mitigate expressions of social life; however, the experience of everydayness is an incredibly personal one. Each of us navigates relationships from the immediacy of our bodies in close contact with the subjects and objects of the worlds we inhabit. This simultaneously personal private and performative public dynamic is the scene that I draw our attention to in this chapter.

The onto-epistemic archive Intimacy stages an encounter between the sites, sights, and cites of black (queer) femme social life in the presence of the most direct and interpersonal forms of communication. This discussion shifts perspective into the interiority of lives lived in precarity. Thus far, I have situated my analyses at the interactional flux of the three primary antagonistic forces I've expanded throughout the dissertation: antiblackness, misogyny/-noir, and queer antagonism. Now, I transition from the metacritique of structural logics to a critique of the affective and interpersonal manifestations of those logics. Put simply, I am interested in thinking through how such conflicts inform personal and interpersonal affective experience, and the relationships that follow from interior negotiations with structural phenomena.

The criticism that I develop here follows a nontraditional format. This experimental analytic structure speaks across literary, scholarly, and experiential evidences set in the fugitive motion of ongoing conversation between black (queer) women and femmes (BQWF). I draw heavily on the theoretical vision of *ordinary affects* that scholar Kathleen Stewart engages in the movement between the circulation of public feelings and rhetorical deployment of personal narrative. She posits, "Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give

circuits and flows the forms of life."³ A nod to Lauren Berlant's rich description of the complex modes of desire that aggregate feeling and meaning in relation to everyday negations of social life,⁴ Stewart provides a notion of affective circulation that I find useful for organizing the forthcoming analysis. The ordinary, here, is constructed as the "shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life."⁵ Exploring affect as produced in precarity, my analysis triangulates antagonisms and regards the agonistic approach to affect as a reflection of the "practices and practical knowledges" that black (queer) women and femmes deploy in the praxis of worldmaking that sustains social life.

Taking misogynoir's resentment into consideration, the scene of black (queer) femme bodily reception is transformed by the gaze through which their lives are greedily consumed and simultaneously despised. The processes that reinforce fungibility also enforce tropes that situate black women and femmes as sexual objects, thereby defining and limiting the depth and forms intimacies presumably allowed or explored. The sexual politics of exception further engage the pervasive denial of humanity that has underwritten displacement and dispossession. And it is the excessiveness of violence in the closest interpersonal spaces that often determines how, when, where S.H.E. moves.

How might a different praxis of worldmaking offer an alternative, then, to the question of sexual orientation? What is attraction when mediated by such broad antiblack misogyny, reduction of self to body (ignoring the intervention/imaginings of flesh)? How might extrajudicial violence inform practices of partnership and kinship? Regarding sexuality and

³ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁵ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1.

forms of intimacy, how might the category of “sexual orientation” be complicated by an interrogation of the discursive antagonisms within which such labels circulate? Orientation can refer to security. Orientation can signify an availability. It can also reflect a need for reflection of self in others. This chapter thinks through an attraction that unmoors gender and desire for sex from the equation of relationality and perhaps suggests sexual acts as a decentralized, one of many, acceptable forms of intimacy. What if we normalize nonsexual intimacies too? Black queer women and femmes have fought for so much and deserve space to visualize modes of relational belonging that recognize their ontological presence. Our current modes of identity formation and the relationships enacted through them so often leave BQWF vulnerable and open to even more violence and exclusion, and it is imperative that we begin to think more broadly about the normalized practices of intimacy that make this so.

In the forthcoming analysis, my approach to rhetorical criticism contributes to and makes use of the B(Q)F onto-epistemic archive. Drawing on the contexts developed in the preceding archives, I approach this chapter as an extension of the thematic narrative of black (queer) femme social life, but also as a potential approach to rhetorical criticism. I mark this approach as “potential” and “experimental” because it does not follow from a standard vision of rhetorical analysis or criticism. What I attempt in this chapter relies only in part on my scholarly contribution where I decode patterns I have drawn from the previous archives, and complicate the growing B(Q)F narrative by introducing other voices into the conversation: voices of black femmes who may or may not recognize the thick and layered genealogy to which their artistry and creativity contribute. I explain the selection of texts for the archives in more detail later. The experimental format of the analysis models an archive in that it documents and indexes contextual artifacts necessary to make analytic claims regarding a central inquiry. Here, the

target for critique is the construction of sexual orientation and expression as single-axis identity formations. The critique that emerges in this process can be read as a reflection of the sites, sights, and cites mapping symbolic genealogies and fields of meaning.⁶

Constructing onto-epistemic archives as rhetorical technique works similarly to the “experiment” Kathleen Stewart performs in *Ordinary Affects*’ critical narrative model of analysis and critique. Such a model invests in ‘speculation, curiosity, and the concrete, it tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact. *Something* throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable.”⁷ The archive is my attempt to structure a frame for that *something* that has emerged as the evental moment as well as its attending affects, ideologies, and organizing logics—that sense of what is felt and experienced as both challenge to and reflection of the quotidian. Stewarts’ process imparts two metaphorical optics that help make sense of what is revealed in the wake of the rhetorical situation and its subject(s): 1) something animated and 2) something inhabitable. When I talk about worldmaking and world-building, and the epistemologies that inform a discursive field, I am similarly referring to a praxis of being human. The epistemological, in this project, is what animates: to make move; to shift, change, alter, create, imagine, invent. It speaks through the symbolic and material minutiae that come together at the evental moment, otherwise referred to as the rhetorical situation conceived as exigence. It informs praxis. The ontological, however, is authorized and affirmed through epistemic possibilities that make the social and discursive world inhabitable. To make it inhabitable, then,

⁶ Stewart refers to fields of meaning alternately, suggesting “Ordinary affects, then, are an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures,” *Ordinary Affects*, 3.

⁷ Ibid., *Ordinary Affects*, 1.

is to produce social life and the terms of its intelligibility; to make livable, and allow to live; support life; to map the spaces and places where life is sustainable.

The analysis and format I develop here helps reveal the “circuits and flows” of interaction, giving form to the movements and relationships between artifacts of discourse. It is the analysis of the symbolic artifacts of discourse which stabilize the referential frame for analyzing communicative acts. It also takes the scene of the everyday, and transforms it into “a scene of immanent force,” therefore animating what has been normalized as “dead effects imposed on an innocent world.”⁸ Reading the symbolic requires a proficiency in forms of recognition and articulations of intelligibility that mobilize the discursive field of encounter. The process I develop here provides texture and form to those *some things* that circulate in everyday communicative acts. Though I have approached archives differently in early chapters, following singular narratives, this chapter relies on the knowledge of those chapters *as well as* the experiential knowledges of black women and femmes that appear as narrative texts and affective impressions. The form these knowledges takes in the archive also mimic the ways epistemologies capture the slight, consciously and unconsciously known, information and artifacts that justify and authenticate a reading of the symbolic.

Because of the nontraditional stylings of black women and femme experiential reflections and forms of knowledge, I adapt a modified approach to addressing the interaction between those contributions and the production of scholarly insight. I look to three alternatively modeled argument structures I use in the archive-generated rhetorical criticism. As already introduced, Kathleen Stewart’s engagement with narrative inspires my use of oral history, storytelling, and literature in the staging of the encounters between black femmes in an Appendix to this chapter. I

⁸ Ibid., 1.

juxtapose those narrative moments with scholarly reflection deploying a non-linear structure that captures the ambiguity of archival entries as well as the affective call-and-response that signifies on black femme oral traditions. The “archival entry” model is informed by Sabine Broeck's contribution to a forum on black women's writing, “Enslavements as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Through Black Feminist Critique,”⁹ which uses an episodic style to establish warrants and claims in precise, semi-discrete entries that build on a meta-critique while attending to the particular. In staging the archive as an intimate encounter between texts, I explore the queered temporality of B(Q)F struggle and fugitivity as it resonates in disparate through intricately connected forms: an oral history interview (within the formal analysis), and Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* and Solange Knowles *A Seat at the Table* (in the Appendix). In collusion with and inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs model of poetic criticism, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, I put these texts into an experimental dis-order that simultaneously contextualizes and disrupts traditional practices of reading. *Spill's* practice of footnoting passages that inspired the narration of scenes is a methodological shift away from academic citationality toward an inventive, intentional practice of reading. The referenced notes require the reader to seek out additional texts: to read what is noted in direct relationship to the author's response, but also to dig deeper and search wider for meaning in the passages from the source material or primary reference. It invokes black vernacular and feminist oral tradition in the staging of a dialogic interaction that demonstrates the relationality between rhetorical actors, present and present-otherwise.

This retooling of rhetorical criticism considers this particular performance of critique as a

⁹ Sabine Broeck, “Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique,” *Gender Forum* 22 (2008): 3-18: http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/0822_BlackWomensWritingRevisited.pdf.

“temporary space, which we must leave, for the sake of future travelers and out own necks [...] Libation for the named and nameless.”¹⁰ It attempts to answer the questions that haunt any explication of the symbolic: How do you know what you know in your rendering of a rhetorical scene? Who authorizes that reading and from what epistemological tradition(s)? As a practice of fugitive study, this chapter is written with and for black queer femme purpose, and it is a small contribution to a conversation we (black women and femmes) have been having for centuries.

Before examining the archive’s model of critique, which works in tandem with the overarching archival frame, I offer a prologue that situates entries within the parameters of my central inquiry—How does the category of “sexual orientation” respond to B(Q)F ways of knowing and being? Alternatively, in what ways do B(Q)F ways of knowing and being disrupt the normative utilization of “sexual orientation” as an identity category?

6.1.1 Archival Record and Purpose: An Introduction to the Archive of Intimacy

Black (queer) femme sexualities circulate in feminist and queer discourses with a symbolic currency that always already assumes an external focus of sexual desire and pervasive corporeal availability. S.H.E. is obsessively rendered through the consumption of her image as hypersexualized Sapphire, or alternately desexualized as ungended object for productive labor.¹¹ Neither recognizes her sexual autonomy. And few so much as assume that she might

¹⁰ Gumbs, *Spill*, xii.

¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002); idem, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds., Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 432-444; Sonja M. Brown Givens and Jennifer L. Monahan, “Priming Mammies, Jezebels, and

refuse some, parts, or all aspects of sexualized consumptions of her body; or that alternately, she may demand that an entirely different set of conditions apply regarding the proximity with which you are allowed to impact her interior life and emotional investments. Black women are often denied the possibility of a subjectivity that does not center sexual intimacy and availability as a primary communicative modality.

Popular theories of sexual orientation in Western modernity presume that 1) sexual attraction and desire is compulsory and 2) attraction, desire, and physical intimacy are experienced along the same affective currencies across time, space, (intelligible) subjectivities. Even with the multitude of accessible identity categories and labels, the practice of naming sexualities and orientations operates on these two assumptions with the difference being the object toward which an orientation moves. I am less interested in the categories themselves in this analysis. My intention here is to challenge the centrality of the notion that sexual attraction is the primary motivating force that determines and shapes the compulsion toward intimacy. I am also interested in discovering what conditions transform the requisite communicative acts that get articulated under a rubric of desire. In this way, orientation is recognized as a contingent process.

From this framework, I argue that compulsory intimacy is not necessarily the same as sexual attraction or sexuality though they do interact. Also, I argue that desire is not immune to the influence of antagonisms—how we navigate desire, what structures authorize our conception, who are the appropriate objects, and what determines proximity of closeness we pursue in communicative action are all responsive to the conditions within which we establish subjectivity.

Other Controlling Images: An Examination of the Influence of Mediated Stereotypes on Perceptions of an African American Woman,” *Media Psychology* 7, no. 1 (February 2005): 87-106.

The challenge I propose offers a generative site to consider the ways in which sexual orientation functions as a complex communicative style that emerges from identity yet is only ever approaching resolution. Within this framework, it becomes less a categorical identity, and more of a rhetorical tool for communicating a relational praxis.

Given the context within which black femininity is constructed as excess, the result of which is sexuality endemic to abjection, the idea of an explicitly *sexual* orientation is troubling. The pervasive violences that shape B(Q)F experiences of sexuality in this frame are muted and approached as concerns of an unrelated social register. For black women in modernity, sexual practice and performance have played out in repetitious, persistent scenes of subjection. Envisioning a different epistemic order, I suggest “social orientation”¹² as the framework for thinking through the complexity of imagining, pursuing, enacting, and practicing intimacies. I

¹² Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s important work on homosociality among women is an important part of the genealogy of social orientation that I invoke here. The term homosocial in Smith-Rosenberg’s essay refers to social relationships primarily between women, and examines the non-sexual ways that women form bonds of intimacy. I resist directly deploying this term here because I am thinking through asexual social orientations that challenge the centrality of gender and sexual identifications, while simultaneously recognizing that gender affinity is a significant factor in determining how intimate relationships and kinships are formed. In one way, my construction of the conversation across time, space, and medium in the forthcoming section reflects a homosocial relationship between interlocutors; but how each interlocutor relates to others in her social world is also of importance because intimacy is not bound by the homosocial (though, one could argue that the safety and trust built in homosociality affords individuals an affective space to return to when other relationships falter or fail). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn, 1975): 1-29.

Smith-Rosenberg’s foundational work was picked up in Carol Lasser, “‘Let Us Be Sisters Forever’: The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (Autumn, 1988): 158-81. It was later re-assessed in Molly McGarry, Kanchana Natarajan, Dása Franciková, Tania Navarro Swain, and Karin Lützen, “Women’s History in the New Millennium: Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s ‘The Female World of Love and Ritual’ After Twenty-Five Years,” *Journal of Women’s History* 12 (Autumn 2000): 8-38. Several works applied the concept of homosociality to African American women, notably including Erica R. Armstrong, “A Mental and Moral Feast: Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia,” *Journal of Women’s History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 78-102, 190.

also want to consider what asexuality offers as a social orientation, instead of its classification as sexual orientation. Categorized as such, it is undertheorized and certainly not broadly recognizable as a substantive characteristic of subject formation. This allows room for the proliferation of social and political communicative modalities.

6.1.2 Considering Asexual Social Orientations

Asexuality is largely understudied as indicated by the relatively small number of scholarly studies, most of which are from areas of social science and public health or medical psychology. It is only in recent years, i.e., within the last decade, that the category has come up as a significant matter for humanities disciplines. In the introduction to the 2014 volume *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, Milks and Cerankowski begin the difficult task of reconciling the study of asexuality as an identity with contemporary humanities scholarship: “Although feminist and queer scholars have more recently entered the dialogue on asexuality, the gaps in scholarly literature produced on the subject remain palpable.”¹³ It is often viewed as an amorphous, illusive, somewhat mythical identification that shifts meanings based on the context of whoever employs it. It is, however, consistently framed by what it *is not* and *does not do*. Within behavioral sciences, for example, asexuality is defined as an identity and/or sexual orientation characterized by a significantly low desire for sex with a partner, lower-than-typical sexual excitement, and little to no sexual arousability. Notably, these characterizations are often discussed as “deficiencies” or “anomalies” as they deviate from what is considered “normal” and

¹³ Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, eds., *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

“healthy” sexual human behavioral inclinations.¹⁴ The humanistic study of asexuality has been an attempt to reject the pathologizing notion in the characterization as “hypoactive sexual desire disorder.”¹⁵ The general lack of consensus on the subject breeds a great deal of misinformation and inaccurately, inadequately documented research. However, Milks and Cerankowski identify a pivotal social shift that brings asexuality into the lexicon of critical identity scholarship noting, “What is relatively ‘new’ is the formation of communities around the common language of asexuality as it is understood today—communities in which new categories exist around the concept of asexuality or ‘being ace,’ where people can discuss romantic or aromantic orientations in relation to or apart from sexual desires or non-desires.”¹⁶ These new articulations demonstrate the emergence of asexual consciousness, which I will argue, must be conceptualized with regard to specific relations of power.

In the Prause and Graham study, personal distress largely reflects a preoccupation (expectation or worry) with what is perceived as abnormal behavior, which refers to a lack of desire or action on desire based on sexual attraction. Though the intended meaning of personal distress articulated in this study refers to a pathological response, I would like to suggest that there is a tenuous reflection here in the leveraging of cultural hegemonic normalcy over that which is deemed deviant. How are feelings of desire measured and what determines the level at which sexual attraction, or its absence, is considered abnormal? I suggest that distress can be read as a response to oppressive dominance, which—as I’ve argued throughout the dissertation

¹⁴ Prause and Graham offer a detailed account a variety of studies ranging from the early 1980s up to the 2007 publication of the article which sheds light on the many ways asexuality has been constructed as an object of social science inquiry. Nicole Prause and Cynthia A. Graham, “Asexuality: Classification and Characterization,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36, no. 3 (2007): 341-56.

¹⁵ Ibid., “Asexuality,” 341.

¹⁶ Milks and Cerankowski, *Asexualities*, 2.

as refusal—produces a multitude of afflicting social formations. Asexuality, then, provides a context to consider the emergence of asexual social orientations as articulable social modalities of interaction. This distinction wonders about the forcefulness of situating sexual encounters, affective and material, as a defining characteristic of normativity. However, to further nuance this articulation, I attempt to specifically address the ways that race and gender are constituted such that “personal distress” can be rearticulated to reflect ontologically significant identifications. While I reject the practice of thinking of social orientations as pathology, I do find it useful to think about what it means to experience sexual desire or non-desire through *distress lived socially*, i.e., social death, and to consider alternative intimacies that develop in differential socialities.

This archive explores asexuality as a social orientation, and the conditions of its emergence, with dedicated attention to black (queer) femininity. I bring asexuality into B(Q)F discourse because of the citational resonance with the rhetorical turn away from resistance and respectability as frames for coding the sexual politics of autonomy black women. It poses a conceptual challenge to queer notions of sex *as* resistance while also disrupting the imposition of respectability politics which deploys shame as a tactic to discipline sexual expression. Both formations arise out of contingent historical contexts where their rhetorical impact was radical in the pursuit of liberatory politics; however, they have also been co-opted as operations of normative power and dominance as methods of resistance as often adapted.

To explore the context through which asexual social orientations operate, as alternative or potentially complementary to sexual orientations, I draw on interpersonal relationality¹⁷ as well as the meta-knowledges of black femme affect that brought me to this observation. Though this

¹⁷ Joshua Soffer, “Embodied Perception,” *Theory and Psychology* 11, no. 5 (2001): 655-70.

chapter proceeds as scholarly interrogation, it is also inherently personal. My relationship with the narrator, Olivia, is also one of history, memory, and kinship, which opened up space for our mutual reflections throughout the course of the interview. I performed this interview over video conference call in 2015 as part of a separate project for a seminar, but I found our discussion to warrant further attention. It resonated with me and it is something that I return to periodically to consider the ways that we both have changed, how much our senses of identity have changed, since that initial conversation. Olivia and I discussed the parameters of the conversation in advance, but much of it was largely guided by the narrator's responses to a few predetermined prompts. Though I initially prepared a set of questions in advance, the course of the interview was shaped by a back-and-forth dynamic that is very much indicative of our long-term affiliation which served the purpose of reconfirming the trust and integrity of our friendship. I was able to elicit very candid revelations and vivid memories as a result of the ease of conversation. Much of our dialogue was punctuated by laughter: congenial, raucous, and often nervous. Notes of relief, sadness, shared loss and fear tempered these moments and produced one of the most candid discussions I have engaged an interlocutor around issues of race, gender, and sexuality in the presence of a (then, future) public. Though I contextualize Olivia's statements in a more expansive discussion about B(Q)F social life, I emphasize our encounter and her individual narrative because of its important reflection of the mundanity with which she has considered the identifications and relationships that structure how she moves through the world. There is no grand moment of revelation to explore or even a singular incident, or even a collection of related experiences, that crystalizes some profound conceptualization of her identity. Instead, the most important revelation is that social life is a process and not an achievement or something that can

be actualized and sustained as such; it is always becoming, and that is the space that I explore in this chapter.

Using aspects of this interview, I attempt to draw connections between the experiences of Olivia and other black femme narrators who speak through and about precarious intimacies. These oral history moments and my reflections on that experience are put into conversation with the consciousness of Gayl Jones's Eva and the B(Q)F *topos* of Solange Knowles artistry, drawing attention to the various themes that emerge as more than the experience of trauma at the interactional site of sexuality. Against normative argument styles, I do not interrogate each aspect of these entries as discrete parts; instead, I use the space of the archive to acknowledge the flow of experiences along familiar "circuits and networks" known to these contributors. These entrants into the archive fill the gaps and secure the seams between the analytical perspective and the intimacy of bearing witness to a public-private discourse between rhetorical interlocutors.

6.2 SITES/SIGHTS/CITES OF INTIMACY

[1]¹⁸ **Black body/black flesh:** The historical context that discursively creates (and destroys) black bodies as objects denies the formation of gendered selves that can be read as intelligible within this limited framework. Hortense J. Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" offers an historical corrective that illustrates the ways subjects

¹⁸ Numbered entries respond to notes found in the Appendix. Read together, these notes provide the texture and experiential evidences that bear out the scholarly argument. Notes, however, are not only supplemental. They also direct our attention to the ways black women and femmes interpret and respond to the claims of scholarship. Theory and praxis meet at these sites of convergence and offer a fuller reflection on the inquiries posed by the archive.

accumulate meanings which circulate in discourse so as to substantiate ongoing dispossession. In this way, Spillers maintains that the discursive construction of black “bodies” allows for an erasure of social conceptualizations of explicit gender formations (since those bodies are always already rendered captive objects unable to reproduce normative gender performances). The distinction Spillers makes between “body” and “flesh” helps underscore the materiality of black bodies such that identifications of blackness cannot escape the visual, physical markers of difference that may appear more fluid for other minoritized post-colonial subjects:

But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.¹⁹

When Olivia is asked about her experience of naming and claiming identity markers, she points to the fact that for her, what she chooses to identify as is almost always is treated as secondary to the ways in which others interact with and regard her. She says, “All I know is that I’m a black woman and I wake up every day and try to survive.” Her race, gender, and bodily significations of femininity (that she describes as “all of this T and A [tits and ass]”) are the aspects of herself

¹⁹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

that she notes as most likely to determine her treatment as she moves through everyday activities: “When you get to the point where you’re starting to fill out your clothes and your walking down the street and grown men are hollering out of cars, tryna holla...it’s scary.”

In one anecdote, she describes an encounter where she distinctly remembered feeling “cast out” of her body as an observer due to the trauma being violently reduced to a sexual object. This was a moment she identifies as first gaining knowledge that she was being considered as a sexual object, something that she had not understood at the time but she realized it later in the ways her parents changed their demands on her after the encounter. She remembers,

I remember growing up there was this old guy who used to always hang around the neighborhood. You know, a bunch of old apartment buildings, security ain’t too tight or whatever. I can’t remember if he lived there or if he was just there all the time. And there was this one time we were outside, probably in the summer, it was a warm night—all about sitting out on the steps and everything—my sister was out there with her friends and her boyfriend (he was cool, I liked him) and there was the one old gentleman he at some point was navigating in and out of the crowd. I was probably in fifth grade at the time, and I remember him inappropriately brushing up against me. My sister’s boyfriend came over and jacked him up and was getting ready to beat the shit out of him...so we had to tell my parents about that. And at the time I knew it, but I didn’t speak on it...And it happened at least another one or two times [redacted]. It was creepy and it didn’t make me feel good.

Olivia notes that these are events that she often thinks about, especially in terms of her own limited responses at the time. Her decisions to quietly endure the violations of her space and bodily autonomy seemed much less like choice then, and presented more so as confusion, or her

inability to process what was happening to her and why the sudden shift in ways men responded to her presence. This moment is further contextualized by her reflection on the ways that her parents began to respond to her changing body as well, noting that her newly visibly figure made them uneasy. They sought to both protect her and allow her freedom to grow up, but in order to do that, they often asked her to reduce how visible her body was in public—whether by choice of dress, or by rarely appearing in public (away from home) alone.

[2] **Mother/Mothering:** The first site of B(Q)F sexual formation, motherhood and mothering, morph from the long reach of subjection under a regime of chattel slavery and disrupts normative functions of gender, especially regarding the formation of family. Spillers’ evaluation of the terms “mother” and “mothering” posits the insidious nature of structural antiblack misogyny that relies on the proliferation of signifying terms that regard black femininity as excess. “My country needs me and if I were not there, I would have to be invented.”²⁰ To forward her argument, Spillers uses the Moynihan report to point out the rhetoric of blame that emerges in the narrative that situates black families as matriarchal shells invoking “fatherlessness” and the destruction of the normative family. This failure to reproduce a standard, white heteronormative familial unit becomes representative of black motherhood, which is in turn deemed responsible for this failure:

The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene—the opening lines of this essay provide examples—demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative. Moynihan’s “Negro Family,” then, borrows its narrative energies from the

²⁰ Ibid., 65.

grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person.²¹

Construed as a constellation of inadequately performed identities, the grammar of “failed reproduction” comes to dominate conceptions of gendered blackness. In order to effectively understand what is meant in the terms we use to address or signify on black femininity, we must dutifully interrogate the etymologies that have constructed black femininity as public object, from slavery to the present post-colonial moment.

[3] **Black femininity, yesterday and today—Controlling Images:** Black femme subjectivities are routinely bound by the compulsory categorization of bodies, perspectives, social types and relative norms that sustain a commitment to misogynoir that reproduce exclusionary principles of affiliation. As a result, processes of marginalization effectively eliminate options for affirmation within hegemonic social interactions while simultaneously allowing for the development of alternative techniques for negotiating between, within, and without these retraining dynamics. This process of categorization, however, is historically situated in processes of objectification that have never ceased to operate as constitutive of black femme non-ontology:

This profitable “atomizing” of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the

²¹ Ibid., 69.

procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.²²

From Sapphire to “side chick,” Jezebel to “t.h.o.t,”²³ Welfare Queen to “ratchet/basic,” black femme personhood is always already reduced to the labor S.H.E. performs as sexual or de-/sexualized object. The oppositional formations of “social just warrior” and “Black Feminists™” (derogatory²⁴)—primarily the label deployed as reactionary aggression to gaslight black women and femmes on social media—assert that any effort or advocacy to attain sexual autonomy is a direct affront to a) black mothering and placement as matriarch in the home, or b) black male sexual, familial, and economic dominance at the sites of home and community. Regardless of whether she adheres to these descriptors, the drive to reduce her to total objectification remains. These histories and etymologies of rhetorical abjection, the study of controlling images and the histories that brought them into being, reveal relations of power and efforts to control black femininity in excess—the excess being her determination to refuse objectification and insist on fully-fleshed ontology.

[4] **“Touching, not mastering”²⁵:** Laura U. Marks thinks through Deleuze and Guattari’s “smooth space” constructing it as “a space that must be moved through by constant reference to the immediate environment [...] Close-range spaces are navigated not through reference to the

²² Ibid., 68.

²³ Black vernacular English, BVE shorthand for “that ho’ over there” as a signifier of sexual promiscuity.

²⁴ Christopher Carbone, “What I Learned from Tweeting with a Black Woman’s Avatar for #RaceSwapExp,” Thought Catalog (April 14, 2014): <http://thoughtcatalog.com/christopher-carbone/2014/04/what-i-learned-from-tweeting-with-a-black-womans-avatar-for-raceswapexp/>.

²⁵ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xii.

abstractions of maps or compasses, but by haptic perception, which attends to their particularity.”²⁶ Here “touch” may refer to the closeness of subjects and objects to the immaterial, symbolic, and affective spaces they inhabit. Moving through such spaces reflects on the rhetorical necessity to situate actors with attention to particularized contextual reference. The frames within which symbolisms are generated are both responsive to and reflective of the subjects and objects with which they interact. Therefore, the relationship is reciprocal and mutually productive. Considering the “immediate environment” of structural displacement and dispossession, what is constructed as fluid potentiality for the normative subject, functions as exclusionary and definitive for marginalized others. A haptic reading of black femme sexual formations, then, attends to the state of exception that recognizes alterity.²⁷ I also challenge the notion that haptic perception does not benefit from the “abstractions of maps or compasses” comprising social geographies. Constructions of space and place that produce the normative subject are always already hostile grounds to B(Q)F ontologies. As such, the immediate environment exists on dual planes which mark multiple socialities within which the commons and undercommons co-exist, overlap, and interact. In this intervention, immediacy is jettisoned in favor of a reflexive temporal frame that recognizes ongoing, sustained and historically situated structural formation through which subaltern bodies move.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Marks’s perspective on alterity maintains an optimism that is displaced within the paradigm of structural oppression I am responding to here. She states, “I don’t believe in the alterity or ultimate unknowability of other things, people, and times. We all live on the same surface, the same skin. If others are unfathomable, it is because it takes an infinite number of folds to really reach them” (*Touch*, xii). This perspective is a privileged one. Having lived experience on the other end of infinite folds between normative human subjectivity and non-human object, responding from the perspective of the latter, I must challenge the underwritten assumption that we all equitably contribute to the production of those distancing mechanisms that construct difference as unknowable.

[5] **Eroticism as (non-fugitive; captured) Movement:** “The ability to oscillate between near and far is erotic. In sex, what is erotic is the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver. It’s the ability to have your sense of self, your self-control, taken away and restored—and to do the same for another person.”²⁸ (xvi) In the context of black femme dispossession, only part of this process is considered normative, and thus haptic eroticism is denied or delayed indefinitely. In the former, black femininity is constructed as laborer, servicer, and/or subjugated contributor, i.e., “ungendered until invented to serve.”²⁹ The interpellation of her body is dependent on a set of systems that create and dispose of her image, and relatedly her corporeality, as it suits the necessary structural objectives required to justify ongoing abjection. In the latter, *control* is foreclosed as something that could possibly belong to a black femme “self” that has not yet been invented. In a white supremacist regime that honors and reproduces logics embedded in chattel slavery’s systematic rejection of black feminine autonomy, there is no model for “self” that S.H.E. can access in an erotic configuration as such. Reflecting on a process that requires duality and equitable options to flow between and with, e.g., being giver *and* receiver, Marks’s suggestion of erotic capacities illuminates the limits not of *eroticism* but of the structural logics that bind and mark black femininity as abject.

[6] **Terms of consent:** Haptic, “as much visual or auditory, as tactile.”³⁰ does help to explain the pervasiveness of limited visual scripts afforded to black women and femmes in the public sphere, especially the continued production of black femininity *as excess*. The discursive

²⁸ Marks, *Touch*, xvii.

²⁹ See Chapter 3 on the interpellation of black women’s body/flesh.

³⁰ Marks, *Touch*, xii.

construction of her sexual objectification always already incorporates the invitation to touch and consume. My contention here, is that the mediated discursive symbolisms that mark and unmark black femme sexual formations is always already regarded with a presumed closeness where viewers assume an unwarranted familiarity (sexual or otherwise) as well as extradiscursive knowledge of their bodies, lives, and personhood.

Illuminating this conflict requires an interrogation of ideas about consent, especially regarding what it is that is assumed to be consented to. In thinking about young black women and femmes, the lines are so often blurred in this discussion and disproportionately contributes to their vulnerability. Olivia relayed a brief story of interacting with an older (then) teenage boy when she was somewhere in the age range between Middle School moving on to High School. In this interaction, the boy convinced her to experiment with phone sex. He was someone she knew from school, a popular guy whose attentions were highly sought after among the teenage girl contingent of her classes. In private, she said, he was verbally abusive “he was one of those boys that was like, ‘I like you and I’m going to talk to you all types of nasty on the phone and when I see you I’m going to physically hit you.’ Because that’s what, I don’t, what boys did? Or just him? I didn’t know. He was just one of those guys that assumed ‘oh you like me? So I’m get to do these things to you and say these things to you, and you’re going to like it. And you’re going to engage in that’.”

What is desired or expected on behalf of black women and femmes, and what is granted by the persons with which this interaction occurs, is written into social interaction in ways that privilege the latter so much so that it becomes an erasure of possibilities for *consensual* intimacy. Marks states, “Life is served in the ability to come close, pull away, come close again. What is erotic is being able to become an object with and for the world, and to return to being abject in

the world; to be able to trust someone or something to take you through this process; and to be trusted to do the same for others.”³¹. For whom is the ability to come and go, to trust and be trusted, reserved? This framing suggests something more fluid in our understanding of human capacities for social engagement than what is available in common practice.

[7] **Who Benefits from “sexual attraction” and which subjects does it privilege—the**

Seeing or Seen: Attending directly to black femme experience, the oral history interview with narrator Olivia provides further consideration of the terms and conditions that allow black women and femmes to process what is offered through normative models of “sexuality” and “sexual orientation,” and to determine whether those offerings are sufficient or even accurate in their promised fluidity. “I can’t really think of sexual attraction anymore,” she stated.

Highlighting her perspective as a black woman in the US, the consistent focus on her body made her less inclined to want to be seen as a sexual object. At one point in the interview, she repeats, “Just don’t look at me. Stop looking at me. Just talk to me.” Noting her response to mundane interactions with individuals she encounters in her everyday movements. Similar statements emerge throughout this interview and add depth to my understanding of what she means when she makes the distinction that for her, intimate connections are “about attraction...not about sexual attraction.” I invite her to explain what she means, and with some hesitation she suggests that attraction follows from affects that may or may not be grounded in what is commonly understood as compulsory sexuality: “Butterflies. Chemistry. You know, putting myself out there, there have been moments where I’ve been—and I don’t even like to say sexually attracted.

³¹ Marks, *Touch*, xvi.

I like to say attracted to a person. I'd remove the 'sexually,' that 'sex' part." The emphatic disavowal of sexuality as the basis for attraction is notable.

As it became a thematic resonance that we returned to on multiple occasions, the conflicting desire for invisibility and simultaneous visibility on one's own terms marked a significant point of dissonance. Olivia states again at a much later point, "I can't really think of sexual attraction anymore. When I'm walking through a space [...] I'm so much more than this, I'm so much more than my shell. For me, I want you to fall in love with my writing [her preferred form of aesthetic expression], just don't look at me." Later, she compared this experience to my prompt regarding what it means to be engaged with as a collection of parts, a metaphorical body without organs: what of the mind or consciousness (brain)? Desires, feelings, and emotion (the heart)? The reduction of attraction to sexual objectification and availability signaled to her that she could not be considered a fully fleshed, autonomous human subject. The important aspect I want to highlight here is that these practices of sexual desire limited her opportunities to engage in intimacy *on her own terms*. She would be willing to forfeit both seeing and being seen within this regime if it meant that possibilities for intimacy would expand beyond the sexual act, attraction, or orientation.

[8] **Racialized entitlement to black women's bodies:** How did these moments of conflict direct, redirect, and shape, how Olivia thought of sexual orientation? As a cisgender, queer black woman married to a cisgender black man, what did it mean for her to be pressured into identifying as heterosexual even when she found that she vehemently rejected the overwhelming attentions of other men? In one exchange, not at all intended to be a totalizing indictment of black men writ large she characterizes the type of entitlement she perceived to be a product of

the cultural environment, socialization, and power dynamics between black men and women. Speaking of the assumptions black men would approach her with regarding potential intimacies, she summarizes:

“I see you, you are a black woman, you hook up with a black man—like me.” It made me not want to deal with black men. In my experience, all black men had that same mentality. Groupthink. “I expect you to be with someone like me. Serve me.” [...] The more that unwanted attention came my way; I didn’t want to deal with it anymore. You get to a saturation point.... I was so happy when I left [redacted] and could get out of that. [...] I could get on a bus without worrying about getting snatched out of my fucking seat, excuse my language.

The entitlement of which she speaks holds potential threats—emotional, psychological, and physical. The pervasive effect of this constant negotiation was to distance her from a desire toward black men, though it was not a totalizing claim against them necessarily; or rather, it could be characterized as a conflicting tension between an affinity for racial community but a simultaneous distance from affective engagement with desire and intimacy.

[9] **Direction of desire, and what is desirable:** What is evidenced in the refusal to honor racialized entitlement is that the *object of desire* is control over one’s own body and the spaces it traverses. The mutual recognition of the right to choose one’s movements is constructed as central to a praxis of attraction. In this way, Olivia, for example, found herself attracted to people who did not assume her sexual availability and who also honored her request to consider her wholeness by respectfully engaging her boundaries in terms of types of desired attention,

affection, physical interaction. This includes co-constitutively creating and practicing other forms of intimacy that were not rooted in physicality.

[10] **Overdetermination of intelligible identifications, or the limits of identity categories:**

When asked to expand on her consistent resistance to using particular labels for categorical identification, Olivia argues:

I just don't like them. I don't like being in any categories.... Like being in *Dirty Dancing*, 'No one puts baby in a corner!' Don't put me in a corner. Don't put me in a box. [...]
There are restrictions to identifying with particular categories. I just, I don't know...I don't feel comfortable doing that. I just really don't. I feel like it's such a prerequisite in order to get noticed, in order to be understood. "You *have to tell me*. You have to check a box." What if I don't? What if I just want to be a cool-ass person that you talk to and, like, we have this dialogue. Like, why can't we just have this dialogue without me presenting my label first? Do I have to wear a nametag that lists "these are my preferences"?

Ultimately, a key point of contention for Olivia is that of compulsory identitarian labels. For her, the constant application of labels reduces her own story, her own possibilities for not only self-definition, but for understanding who she is, how she moves through the world, who she is able to communicate with effectively, and importantly—how she is able to navigate or negotiate her status within her social world.

[11] **Ace³² orientation and B(Q)F fugitivity:** Black femme subjectivities are routinely bound by schemas of intelligibility that, I argue, are rooted in insufficiently developed identitarian politics. Such a focus on the compulsory categorization of bodies, perspectives, social types, and relative norms sustains a commitment to misogynoir that reproduces exclusionary principles of affective possibility. As a result, processes of marginalization effectively eliminate options for intimacy that do not sustain hegemonic social hierarchies. However, thinking through B(Q)F epistemological fugitivity, ace orientations explore options for the developing alternative techniques to negotiate conditions and praxes of intimacy and desire between, within, and without these retraining dynamics. Disidentification with the presupposition of black femme sexual availability provides a generative framework for theorizing subjectivity and the capacity for communicative action at the site/sight/cite of B(Q)F ontological formations. It is within this liminal space of negotiation that I argue for the possibility of ace social orientations as black queer fugitivity.

Here, a B(Q)F epistemology provides warrants for a critique of the category of sexuality as a discrete identity. It affords us a necessary revision to account for the impact of interactional antagonisms without depoliticizing the category or allowing it to be essentialized. Instead, it recognizes how a combination of factors comes together in the ways we think through and think about intimacy as a genre of affective communication. Decentering sex and sexuality in this way, does not remove it from the realm of practice or behavior, but it does recognize the disproportionate effects of subjugation that black women and femmes experience through sexual

³² “Ace” refers to the social orientation of asexuality deployed as social practice. Asexual, in this construction, establishes a distance from sex or sexuality as a core aspect of social identification.

objectification.³³ And affective knowledge considers multiple forms and modalities of knowing and being to produces something complex, radiant, and guiding—something that motivates and responds while also helping to shape all other knowledges simultaneously. Affect and sexuality are invested in communicative capacity of the interpersonal and personal. This is the space where intimacy resides so it must be taken up as a matter that does not center behavior but instead acknowledges the function of those behaviors in a much more complex and involved process of identification.

³³ Mark Carrigan, Kristina Gupta, and Todd G. Morrison, eds., *Asexuality and Sexual Normativity: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 2014); Ela Przybylo, “Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 444 -61.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Nathaniel Mackey's short explanation of black centrifugal writing seems especially suited to rethinking subjectivity in the absence of ideals. He suggests that it forces the interrogation of "fictions" we assume to be truths. It seems, to me, that Mackey was calling for a revision of the study of blackness (as a categorical identity?) such that identity is not only ever definable against a rubric of white normativity. Instead, resistance and black innovative capacity necessarily take root in the absence of ideals because such ideals always already emerge from antiblack structural formations. This requires a somewhat radical critical orientation toward recognizing black subjectivity without employing a framework of what it is not. It recognizes the ontologically significant context of multiple marginalization while also affording black imaginative capacity the possibility of creative world-making. He states, "Black art, like any other, is innovative, demanding and/or outside to the extent that it addresses the wings and resistances indigenous to its medium qua medium, address ranging from amorous touch to agonistic embrace, angelic rub. To don such wings and engage such resistances as though they were the stuff of identity and community is to have taken a step toward making them so."¹ There is no clean, pure, or even attainable ideal for black subjects. Instead, there is always, and perhaps only, possibility—a constant negotiation between the self and world as only active agents can produce (which, I think, is a notion that explicitly denies the claim that black subjectivity does not exist; the

¹ Nathaniel Mackey, "Destination Out," *Callaloo* 23, no. 2 (2000): 814.

problem is our inability to see beyond the limited systemic structures that depend on black erasure and obscurity). My dissertation builds on this notion of ontological possibility.

Through four analytical chapters, my project theorizes and models sites, sights, and cites as organizing principles. Each provides an optic for directing the way that ephemera are read and interpreted within the onto-epistemic archive. In Chapter 2: Liberation, I developed the epistemological site of black queer sociality as it emerged in the activist and advocacy work of Barbara Smith and London's Black Lesbian and Gay Centre. Tracing Barbara Smith's genealogy of black lesbian advocacy and scholarship led me to more cartographic sites/sights/cites of black queer femme struggle than I would have ever thought to seek. Beginning with a small black queer organization in London whose work flowed back into Smith's terrain, I have had one of the most important, most exciting intellectual journeys of my scholarly life. I centered the emergence of black queer feminism in response to the political and social conditions that culminated in the driving force behind a social movement and academic turn. Here, I conceptualize sites to represent both the creation of physical or material spaces for collective action, and the development of an epistemological order (logic, structure, foundation). Finally, sites help to establish a boundary, or frame for recognition, that determines the scope of subjects included in an epistemologies' referent-we.

Sights, in Chapter 3: Refusal, refer to the signs and significations that allow us to better understand the terms of recognition within a generous contextualized reading. The turn toward aesthetic as an optic provided me an opportunity to emphasize the production of culturally relevant discourse that circulates and shapes B(Q)F social life. I developed the concept of *queer sartorial vernacular* with attention to the cultural, aesthetic, and performative praxes of gendering/ungendering deployed by black queer femmes in the tradition of dandyism. Black

women's rhetorical traditions reimagined the historicized black male dandy toward a non-binary, queer practice of gender expression that draws on B(Q)F frames of recognition and intelligibility. Refusal is posited here in terms of how and where coded signs and significations reflect the intentionality of affirming blackness, queerness, and femininity as a cultural practice.

In Chapter 4: Exception, *cites* refers to the intangible present knowledges that are invoked in the presence of contingency. In other words, it represents the ways of being and knowing that inform the rhetorical situation and limits the possibilities for its enactment. What factors contribute to the information that stands out and is recognizable to us in the analysis of a scene? What things go unacknowledged, and why does it matter that we *intentionally* limit the scope of our interpretation to the attendant knowledges that are cited by the situation? For B(Q)F subjects the state of exception is always already relevant, but needs to be redrawn as an analytical framework to recognize the ongoing, long-term, multigenerational effects resulting from no release from this ontological state. I argue that this shapes knowledges and possibilities for social life, but it does not determine ontological subjectivity.² In this chapter I think through the

² For future considerations, I want to more deeply explore the concept of “grand marronage” which was developed to explain black and native maroon societies in the early modern Americas (sometimes mixed ethnicities in the same communities): Terry Weik, “The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas: Resistance, Cultural Continuity, and Transformation in the African Diaspora,” *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1997): 81-92; Weik’s work is later updated in Daniel O. Sayers, “Marronage Perspective for Historical Archaeology in the United States,” *Historical Archaeology* 46, no. 4 (2012): 135-61.

Taking this turn, I can think through the ways that marronage serves as a model, based on historical precedent, for examining subject-based creative invention beyond the state of exception. As I intend to expand treated texts to include more diasporic examples, it is a natural direction to investigate, especially since Gayl Jones in her *Corregidora* has already made the connection of black women’s sexuality and the “quilombos” (maroon societies). Christopher Shinn, “Hemispheric Postcolonialism: Black Female Sexuality and Slavery in the Americas,” *Literature Compass* 13, no. 9 (September 2016): 538–47.

In addition to Jones, Beatriz Nascimento’s embrace of the idea of maroon societies opens possibilities for black identity formation which is covered in Christen Anne Smith, “Towards a

histories and legacies of abjection that are cited in the occurrence of intraracial, sexualized, and gendered violence.

In Chapter 5: Intimacy brings together sites/sights/cites to demonstrate how an OEA can be both archive and analytical tool in the process of rhetorical criticism. The chapter thinks through the question of intimacy given the epistemological trajectory contextualized by the aforementioned sites/sights/cites. What new questions emerge at the scene of intimacy when the subject is situated within a narrative from this rendering of the archive? How might this change if some aspect of the model were amended? This chapter uses an experimental structure to consider the topic of sexual orientation. Black women and femmes' experiences of objectification are centered in an approach to asexuality that proposes it as a social orientation that decenters sexuality as an indication of identity as opposed to practice of communication.

In thinking through the purchase of a black queer epistemology, it is the central thrust of my dissertation to recognize that specialized knowledge is written into each unique constellation of duplicitous identities, histories, temporalities and spatial locations. The connections between onto-epistemic sites produce new ways of being that cannot be understood through a singular lens of culture, public sphere, or identity politics in disciplinary isolation. Here, disidentification offers a generative site from which to interrogate the very boundaries of what structures "social life" within dimensions of power. In this project, I have explored the usefulness of the concept of disidentification as refusal, as it further nuances understandings of identity that seek to move beyond a focus on the parts of socialization that are most politically relevant, i.e. taking up the contemporary social movement cause *du jour*. My theorization of a black queer epistemology

Black Feminist Model of Black Atlantic Liberation: Remembering Beatriz Nascimento," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 14, no. 2 (2016): 71-87.

focuses on the importance of productive knowledge processes, creative activity, and the inventiveness required to negotiate dispossession and displacement. Importantly, the intervention of refusal allows us to recognize the epistemic contributions of situated, oppositional knowledges as “oppositional struggles have the possibility for contributing to objective knowledge given their ability to ‘reference’ key aspects of the social world that would otherwise remain invisible.”³

Building on Roderick Ferguson’s “queer of color critique,” Martinez confronts “some of the most taken-for-granted approaches in feminist and queer theory today” charging that they “converge with racist logics” even in the attempts to provide antiracist analytical frameworks. One major problem is the uncritical adoption of theories, language, styles of inquiry and disciplinary assumptions that direct all knowledge toward specific goals. However, disidentification as a practice of critique operates with a sharp attention to these details: “Deploying queer of color critique in this manner suggests a recalibration of our most basic presuppositions regarding identity and language, not the least because we can now point to several ways in which antirealists distort, in the most predictable manner, some of our writer’s most important and nuanced decolonial contributions.”⁴ In recognizing the role of resistance in practices of decolonization, contemporary scholarship must attend to these critiques that challenge existing canonical texts, reading practices, and philosophies of social life. Instead, we must actively engage new realities and social processes that form with respect to our contemporary social and political context (as articulated within a language of settler colonialism) which I argue deserves scholarly analysis aside from the precarious positioning of black

³ Ernesto Javier Martínez, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

subjectivity as “opposite of.”

Following from this tradition of critique, my dissertation does not proceed with identity-based intersectional analysis that presumes “specific kinds of subjects that may or may not correspond to the modes of life in play within the present time.”⁵ Instead, my project situates subjectivity itself within the interactional systems that place and displace subjects according to attendant structural institutions. Appositionality, rendered legible within a contextualized discursive field, is posited as an alternative to constructing subjectivity as conceptualized by positionality, made legible by the recognition of discrete identificatory categories. Within this discussion, it is especially necessary to highlight the concept of subjectivity that relies on classifications of difference as a “failure to reproduce” white heteronormativity. The heavy reliance on this definition of difference within identitarian politics denies the possibility of blackness, queerness, and femininity to produce ways of knowing and being that differ from hegemonic norms.

I offer that rhetorical criticism is not simply a practice of reading when it draws from appositional epistemes. Instead, it is also a praxis that produces possibility: reconfigurations that displace the assumption of Human as category of Western modernity that depends on the binary dynamic of sovereign/subaltern Other for its construction. This formulation of critique drawn from appositional epistemological archives is reparative in that it destroys, not through negation but through a process that delegitimizes the centrality of binary opposition as a definitive “descriptive grammar” of appositional subjectivities. Knowledge—and in particular, *embodied knowledge*—is a resource that cannot be pillaged, destroyed, consumed to depletion, or otherwise eliminated from the everyday movements that sustain social life. It cannot be

⁵ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 137.

contained or restricted. It cannot be controlled by the attempts of sovereign order to produce a limited set of actions. As such, critique in this way, can be a form of reparation taken not by force, but by invention of a method of recovery—a repositioning of ways of knowing that centers the subject's interactional knowledges, and not its relationship to a hierarchy of power. Black queer femme imaginings produce a new order of man; this intellectual and creative work *is* the foundation of future possibility. It is the necessary retribution of being robbed of history: it is the claiming, naming, and construction of futurity that cannot be pushed to a limit as there is none.

My dissertation has presented a call for invention and recognition of lived experiences beyond the state of exception, and this call-to-question is fertile for researchers to engage on the ground cases. Though I work through a series of cases to underscore this possibility, I mostly focus on setting the theoretical groundwork for a more fully expanded case investigation of onto-epistemic change. In the future, I intend to build primarily from the final case study on Intimacy, exploring a more expansive set of texts to further flesh out the ongoing discourse that black (queer) women and femmes engage on the topics of desire and the erotic, intimacy in kinships, and importantly, perspectives on B(Q)F homosociality. I intend to generate an archive of oral histories and written narratives, solicited from my professional and personal networks of black women and femmes who are interested in sharing their perspectives in similar discussions as the oral history I use in that chapter. Drawing inspiration from Kathleen Stewart's curating of exemplary stories, I will also engage literary works such as Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. Finally, I will expand the archive of interlocutors to include additional audiovisual media, drawing inspiration from black queer femme entertainment artists who have addressed many of the issues I discuss in the dissertation in nontraditional formats for public discussion.

APPENDIX I

“What S.H.E. Said, Sang, and Wrote”

[Social epistemic rhetoric] views knowledge as produced through the relationship among writers, communities, and contexts. Thus there can be no Truth but only the kinds of contingent truths rhetors struggle to create.⁶

The notes here reflect the histories, legacies, and routes of escape-marking pathways forged through black queer femme struggle. The narratives that are suggested in these texts draw on knowledges that black women and femmes share, consciously and unconsciously, as a result of a contingently situated appositional subjectivity. I have drawn inspiration for my scholarly arguments from the circulation of black femme discourses that, honestly, cannot be captured by academic forms of criticism and explication. Instead of attempting to unpack what cannot be rewritten by any other means, I offer these entries to the archive to be considered alongside my own contributions to this discourse. Black (queer) femme artistry, here in the form of music and literature, stands in equitable epistemic force with scholarship, and this is my attempt to illustrate a thematic inquiry through juxtaposition of disparate texts. To read against normative modes of interpretation, this process asks that you participate in a practice of fugitive study and engage the texts as separate but constitutive of a broader conversation between and about black femmes that exceeds parameters of time, space, and locale. In this gesture, I go against scholarly practice and admit: my project is incomplete with the presence of other black queer femme voices, and I

⁶ Andrea A. Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, and Rosa A. Eberly, “Introduction,” in *Sage Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), xxi.

contribute much of my work to their genius. In the words of Solange, “Some shit is a must. Some shit is for us.”⁷

Notes on Referenced Texts

I. Gayl Jones’s *Eva Medina* contributes her voice through the literary rendering of black women’s trauma. *Eva’s Man*⁸ follows the interiority of a black woman who has committed a crime of passion. After spending time in a semi-voluntary captivity of an intimate partner, she poisons and castrates him, and he is fatally injured. The story takes place in the space of her conscious reflections on a girlhood marred by sexual abuses and violence and the present interactions she engages in when in prison; and in the subconscious memories that surface through her retelling of the experience with the man she castrated. Eva’s orientation to the social world can be described as resonating along the register of “liberation” or acts that would be constitutive of what “getting free” in the only ways allowed in a sociality of perpetual dispossession and displacement. The constant motion of the text, her historical moving between spaces encompassing travel between the city and rural life, and the sporadic shifts between moments in time that are indicated in the nonlinear narrative of the text suggest an anxious resistance to capture. Difficult to describe, Jones’s novel manages to resist framing, to elude the structure of typical critique in its very construction as a reflexive disruption. Eva’s queerness, then, lies in its disruption of normativity as a universalizing construct: sexual liberation for her cannot be realized through a paradigm of sex-positive agency, which assumes that sex acts

⁷ Solange Knowles, “F.U.B.U. ft/The Dream and BJ the Chicago Kid,” *A Seat at the Table Digital Book*, 46-49.

⁸ Gayl Jones, *Eva’s Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

constitute liberation or sexual freedom. In many ways, Eva charts her own course, or so it seems, yet there exists a haunting antagonism that suggests that choice is never really about choosing; consent hardly ends at saying yes or the acquiescence to intercourse. Eva's version of liberation is not graspable apart from systems of social value that buttress white supremacy. Page numbers for references are included in parentheses.

II. Solange Knowles's musical album and digital book *A Seat at the Table*⁹ explores black femme affect through music and visual art. She captures both the political and the personal, exploring black culture from the perspective of black women's experiential knowledge. In a 2016 interview with National Public Radio (NPR), she states that she wanted to reclaim both her familial and personal history, but also reflect on the national history of black people in the US.¹⁰ The album's content consists of more than her music; in it, she conducts interviews with her parents that also reflect the album's themes and discussions about what it means to live in a constant state of persecution as black subjects. Interestingly, and related to my own performative scholarship in the dissertation, she reflects on the modes of storytelling that she uses in the album noting repetition and patterns of black oral traditions: "But there's something about the way that Southern men and women and aunties and uncles take their time with telling stories. And I think sometimes it becomes a matter of not caring how long it takes or how much you reiterate the message. I got concerned a lot of times that some of my lyrics and themes felt a little repetitious. But I think that that's something I grew up hearing so much from all of my family—the same story told in a thousand different ways." It is this energy and intentionality of praxis that I engage

⁹ Solange Knowles, *A Seat at the Table*, <http://www.solangemusic.com/digitalbook/>.

¹⁰ All Things Considered, Interview, "'We've Always Had a Seat at the Table': Solange on Conversations that Heal," *NPR Music*: <http://www.npr.org/2016/11/11/501165834/weve-always-had-a-seat-at-the-table-solange-on-conversations-that-heal>.

her artistry in the encounter I stage as fugitive study. Song titles are included next to quoted lyrics, and page numbers are included to reference the digital book. For the full experience, I suggest both listening and viewing.

Chapter 5 Respondents: Eva's Man and A Seat at the Table¹¹

[1] a. **I kept feel that after he tore all her clothes off, and there wasn't any more to tear, he'd start tearing her flesh.** (*Eva's Man*, 37)

b. **I'm going to look for my body yeah.
I'll be back real soon** ("Weary," 6-13)

[2] a. **(Auditory only. "Interlude: Tina Taught Me")¹²**

b. **My mother said his mother wasn't no good. The men she had coming in there.**
(*Eva's Man*, 15)

[3] **I tried to drink it away
I tried to put one in the air
I tried to dance it away
I tried to change my hair
...
Thought a new dress would make it better
I tried to work it away
But that just made me even sadder** ("Cranes in the Sky," 14-19)

[4] a. **Don't touch my hair
When it's the feeling I wear
Don't touch my soul
When there's a rhythm I know
Don't touch my crown
They say the vision I've found
Don't touch what's there
When it's the feeling I wear** ("Don't Touch My Hair," 34-39)

b. **"Shit, you the coldest-ass bitch I ever seen in my life."** (*Eva's Man*, 10)

¹¹ Bracketed numbers are directly linked to the corresponding numbered items in Chapter 6.

¹² Tina Knowles, Solange's mother, imparting wisdom on the beauty of blackness—an act of mothering unique to black experience; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sE1Uu_bUO9A

- [5] a. **“Say something, Eva.”**
“There’s nothing.” (Eva’s Man, 121)
- b. **Why you always talking shit, always be complaining? Why you always gotta be, why you always gotta be so mad? (I got a lot to be mad about)** (“Mad ft. Lil Wayne,” 20-25)
- [6] a. **“I knew a man once.”** Elvira said. **“He drove every woman he had crazy. I don’t mean easy crazy, I mean hard crazy. Had some of em committing suicide and stuff, and even when these women knew how he’d done all these other women, they still wanted him. I guess they figured he wouldn’t get them, figured they was different or something [...] He messed up every woman with. That’s the way I think of that nigger you had. That’s why you killed him cause...”** (Eva’s Man, 17)
- b. **you know a king is only a man with flesh and bones... He bleeds just like you do. He said, “where does that leave you” and do you belong? I do... I do.** (“Weary,” 6-13)
- [7] a. **“You’re like a lost woman,”** he said. **“Who were you lost from?”**
I didn’t tell him.
- b. **I’m going to look for my body yeah. I’ll be back real soon** (“Weary,” 6-13)
- [8] **“You let me do it once.”**
“I ain’t gon let you do it no more.”
“When you gon let me fuck you again, Eva?”
“You didn’t fuck me before.” (Eva’s Man, 15)
- [9] a. **A naked hanging light, a bed, a table, a yellow shade torn on the side. He made patterns with his fingers on my belly.** (Eva’s Man, 38)
- b. **I’m Medusa, I was thinking. Men look at me and get hard-ons. I turn their dicks to stone, I laughed. I’m a lion.** (Eva’s Man, 130)
- c. **Protect your neck or give invitations?** (“Junie,” 4-55)
- [10] **Don’t let, don’t let, don’t let anybody steal your magic**
Yeah
But I got so much y’all, you can have it
Yeah (“Interlude: I Got So Much Magic, You Can Have It ft. Kelly Rowland and Nia Andrews,” 52-53)
- [11] **walk in your ways so you won’t crumble**
walk in your ways so you can sleep at night
walk in your ways so you will wake up and rise (“Rise,” 1-5)

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