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Resisting Spatial Dispossession: Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions in California and Louisiana



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# Resisting Spatial Dispossession:
# Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions
# in California and Louisiana

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Kimberly Chantal Welch

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Resisting Spatial Dispossession:

Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions

in California and Louisiana

by

Kimberly Chantal Welch

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

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Professor Sean Aaron Metzger, Chair

This dissertation, "Resisting Spatial Dispossession: Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions in California and Louisiana," focuses on the symbolic and material spatial dispossession of primarily black Americans in California and Louisiana. Using the migratory patterns of the Great Migration as a framework to explore the relationship between historic and contemporary dissident spatial practices in the carceral state, my project seeks to illuminate complex performances of race, gender, and sexuality that often fall out of or never make it into the archive.

Anchored in black feminist thought and spanning four distinct mediums (theater, film, photography, and music), "Resisting Spatial Dispossession" explores the role media plays in spatial dispossession narratives, particularly ones around and about black female subjects.

Chapter one links the Los Angeles Poverty Department's (LAPD) theatrical representation of prison spaces with gendered experiences in Skid Row to illustrate the ways in which gender conditions spatial practice. Chapter two interrogates how the gendered specter helps us rethink the relationship between visibility, gender, and violence in sites of spatial dispossession as well as actor/spectator dynamics. through an exploration of *We Just Telling Stories*, a documentary on Rhodessa Jones' "Medea Project: Theater for Incarceration." Chapter three uses *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin, 2012) and *People*'s photograph-heavy "Katrina Girl" series to examine narratives that call upon black girls to produce an imagined future grounded in the reproduction of a structure hostile to black life. Chapter four focuses on Amy LaCour's transformation of poetry written by African American women during the Great Migration into music and the ways in which LaCour addresses complicated notions of black female sexuality and transhistoric, multiplanar gendered violence. "Resisting Spatial Dispossession" reveals the productiveness of utilizing black feminist epistemologies to chart performance as a cartographic tool in the mapping of spatial dispossession and the accompanying dissident responses.

The dissertation of Kimberly Chantal Welch is approved.

Sue-Ellen Case

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DEDICATION PAGE

*To my mother, Karen Taylor, and grandmother, Syntyche Mitchell, whose support of my education from the very beginning and resilience through trying times laid the foundations for the completion of this project.*

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## Introduction

> There's always gonna be pockets of poverty, poor. And the word "homeless" to me means "not having a lease or a key." I don't particularly care for the word. Actually, I try to use "poverty" because poverty sorta encircles all of it. You know, the word homeless, (changes voice) "Oh you're homeless," it's such a downer. You don't want people to feel down even when you're asking for help.
>
> —Cheryl K. Barnes, N Street Village resident and *How I Got Over* participant

In the summer of 2014, *How I Got Over*, a documentary that follows the creation and performance of an original play about the experiences of women currently residing at N Street Village, was released. N Street Village is a recovery community that provides housing and services, including healthcare and employment, to homeless and low-income women in Washington, D.C. The project emerged as part of Theatre Lab's Life Stories Program. Theatre Lab has partnered with N Street Village since 2007, however, it wasn't until 2012 that the company brought the work produced by N Street Village residents to the stage. That year Theatre Lab collaborated with playwright Jennifer Nelson to write a play, "My Soul Look Back in Wonder: Life Stories from Women in Recovery," based on the stories of the women residing at the recovery center. The creation of this play as well as the resulting performance are the focus of the documentary. As articulated on the official website for the film,

> HOW I GOT OVER follows 15 formerly homeless and/or incarcerated women as they craft an original play, based on their harrowing true-life stories, to be performed one-night-only at The Kennedy Center. As observers of their creative process, we bear

witness to their transformations from victim to artist, and to the performing arts' capacity to heal trauma, create connection, and start a conversation.[1]

True to the official narrative of the film, the structure of the documentary paints a story of healing and recovery as the audience learns the women's back stories, witnesses community affirmations throughout the film and emotional family reunions post-production, and learns what the women have been up to since the Kennedy Center performance. *How I Got Over* ends with a follow up with the women participants one year after the production. Throughout the coverage, one of the participants is markedly absent—Cheryl K. Barnes.[2] What happened to her? I open my dissertation with this inquiry because the documentary's erasure/occlusion of Barnes, and the women participants at N Street Village more broadly, in the film highlights some of the key questions driving my project: How do the politics of representation function in relationship to sites of spatial dispossession like homelessness or incarceration? How does (material, representational, and affective) violence manifest differently for raced, gendered, and classed bodies in sites of dispossession? How do people use their bodies interrupt/take up space? More specifically, what practices do they cite, what archives do they draw on and/or create in their polyvalent practices of space?

My term "spatial dispossession" pulls heavily from Performance Studies scholarship, particularly the work of Judith Butler. I draw my understanding of the term largely from Butler's

[1] "Synopsis," *How I Got Over*, http://www.higodoc.com/synopsis, accessed 1 June 2018.

[2] Although the film also leaves out narratives of the lives of Caroline Dorsey, Jewel McNeill, Lurinda T. Lawson, Denise Seymore, Rose Shaw (although pictured during graduation scene), Tacarra Wilkins, Tonya Stokes, Peggy Thomas, Petrina Thomas, and Linda Ann Wicker, Barnes is markedly absence because throughout the film, she is the only participant framed as an unruly body.

ruminations on the subject in *Precarious Life* and her co-authored text (with Athena Athanasiou) *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. In *Dispossession*, Butler and Athanasiou define the title term in two distinct gerund forms: being dispossessed and becoming dispossessed. Being dispossessed "refers to processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability."[3] The processes and ideologies of which Butler and Athanasiou speak, including poverty and neoliberal governmentality,[4] are part and parcel of the assemblages creating and maintaining black precarity. Although the scholars' theorization of being dispossessed resonates with my project, black feminist inquiry into structures supporting material, representation, and affective violence against black women proves more useful than Butler and Athanasiou's articulation. Consequently, I will move on to the portion of Butler and Athanasiou's argument that I find most useful for my project: becoming dispossessed. Becoming dispossessed is an occasion of disposition—"one is moved to the other and by the other – exposed to and affected by the other's vulnerability."[5] In other words, one exists in relation to another social being. Existence, agency, and intelligibility are all tied up with relationships to the other.[6] As posited by Athanasiou and Butler, dispossession allows one to have an affective

[3] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 2.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 1.

[6] The term "other" here refers to another social being. This is not to be confused with the term "Other" which is often employed in colonial and postcolonial discourse to denote strong (frequently stereotypical, ethnic) difference. The difference between the two terms in this text is demarcated by capitalization.

response to injuries suffered by groups to which the individual is not a member. Affect allows one to enter subjugated spaces because the relationality of dispossession propels one to engage in the material and ideological world of the other. For Butler, this relationality is political. In an earlier piece, Butler considers the relationality and interdependence of bodies as key to the constitution of a political subject. She argues that acknowledgement of social vulnerability compels one to re-think violence. She advocates that it is "incumbent on us to consider the place of violence in any such relation, for violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another."[7] Despite the emphasis on vulnerability, here, Butler is not articulating "victim" or "trauma" politics as understood in their negativist manifestations. Instead, Butler posits an affective *spatial* politics created by affectively traversing into emotional spaces occupied by others. Spatial dispossession, then, connotes not only the representational and material abjection of homeless and incarcerated bodies, but also (in the context of becoming dispossessed) elucidates dispossession as an avenue into the political. For Butler, affective dispossession reminds us of "our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another"[8] and thus moves us "to act" or enter the realm of the political. Butler's notion of affect as spatial enables me to include affective space as a site of redress. What kind of politics can come from affectively relating to a Skid Row activist? What might it mean for one to inhabit the affective space of the N Street Village participants? While some scholars warn us of the dangers of (white) empathy,[9] my project examines how the

[7] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 27.

[8] Ibid., 30.

[9] In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman writes, "…we need to consider whether the identification forged at the site of suffering confirms black humanity at the peril of reinforcing racist assumptions of limited sentience, in that the

positioning of other subaltern bodies in subjugated spaces might create a collectivity or vehicle for unraveling the racializing assemblages[10] affecting multiple subaltern or spatially dispossessed bodies as well as how the politics of representation play out in sites of spatial dispossession. In her first conflict with the production team, Barnes marks the difficulty of representing dispossession.

Through her critique, Barnes claims experience as a powerful/credible source of knowledge. While the rehearsal process is not the first time the audience encounters Barnes, it is during the initial read through of the script that Barnes first critiques Theatre Lab's interpretation of the N Street Village residents' experiences.[11] When the participants read through the script,

humanity of the enslaved and the violence of the institution [slavery] can only be brought into view by extreme examples of incineration and dismemberment or by placing white bodies at risk" (20-21).

[10] I draw this term from Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[11] The audience is first introduced to Barnes about seven-and-a-half minutes into the film during the first story-sharing workshop with Theatre Lab's Life Stories Instructor, Thomas Workman, and the theatre company's co-founder and co-director, Deb Gottesman. In this first introduction, Barnes informs the group that she has tried to take her life four times and that repeatedly sharing her story has positive effects on her well-being. The next time the film focuses on Barnes, the audience encounters Barnes in her favorite spot, a bench that overlooks the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial. During the feature, Barnes enlightens the audience of her views on the term homeless. She states, "There's always gonna be pockets of poverty, poor. And the word 'homeless' to me means 'not having a lease or a key.' I don't particularly care for the word. Actually, I try to use the 'poverty' because poverty sorta encircles all of it. You know, the word homeless, (changes voice) 'Oh you're homeless', it's such a downer. You don't want people to feel down even when you're asking for help."

Barnes calls for edits. As the film cuts between shots of Barnes and Gottesman, the following dialogue takes place.

> Barnes: There's something I'd like to change. (reads script) "I went to my mother's funeral high." You could probably say "I was so high that I couldn't shed a tear as I looked at her in the ground."
>
> Gottesman: I'm writing it down.
>
> Barnes: Yea, some of this needs to be changed.
>
> Gottesman: Because?
>
> Barnes: Because it doesn't fit with the story.
>
> Gottesman: It doesn't fit the story. Okay, normally an actor gets no say. And you know, if you say, "No, you know, I would never say that" it's like "Oh well, say it." You know, "find a reason," but this is really different because you created this piece so great, I got it, thanks.

Although the women at N-Street Village did participate in the creation of the play by sharing their stories, they did not actually create the piece since Nelson wrote the script based on her interpretation of the women's stories—an interpretation that Barnes (and perhaps others as well) found lacking. In a corrective measure, Barnes rewrites the quote and alludes to more edits to come. While one could argue that Barnes' call for change is specific to how Barnes herself might respond in said situation (a position that Gottesman appears to take up in her analysis of the situation—"if you say, 'No, you know, I would never say that'…"), Barnes claims that the line doesn't fit the story—one of many stories of a black women's dispossession and the aftermath. Barnes argues that the words written for the scene do not map onto the world of the play, which is arguably supposed to resemble the spaces/places inhabited by the participants. More simply

put, there is a disconnect between Barnes' and Nelson's understanding of specific black geography: gendered and classed homelessness (and self-medicated responses to said dispossession) in Washington, D.C. For Barnes, first-hand experience in this geography has generated an archive from which she can draw in her performance of the scripted scene.

Barnes' assertion of her experience into the scene written by Nelson creates space for the unveiling of knowledges present in what scholar Katherine McKittrick terms "black geographies." In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick refers to geography as "space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations"[12] and from there argues that black geographies are "subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle."[13] Drawing on the work of black feminist scholars Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter (among others), McKittrick theorizes black geographies through the cartographies of enslaved black women in North America. For McKittrick, black women encompass both the absent presence (Wynter) as well the liminal (Spillers). In other words, as a paradox of non-being, the black woman has been rendered ungeographic—outside of the symbolic order, while simultaneously remaining at the "heart of it,"[14] by demarcating the limits of femininity, symbolically representing what (white) femininity is not. Consequently, while the black female body has been rendered ungeographic, it remains geographically central to the articulation of

[12] Katharine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.

[13] Ibid., 4.

[14] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Film and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 174.

prevailing racialized and gendered symbolic orders. Black geographies, then, cite sites of contestation and disruption that occur in both the psychological and physical world, highlighting often untold stories of how black bodies have and continue to create, maneuver around, and take up space. While McKittrick's work emphasizes historic geographies of enslaved black women in the United States and Canada, my project investigates what it might mean to utilize black geographies as a primary analytic in the exploration of performance practices of the spatially dispossessed (materially and figuratively) in our contemporary moment. While McKittrick focuses on events involving enslaved black women, her broader definition of black geographies as "subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle"[15] opens up the space for me to investigate black geographies created by bodies that do not necessarily read as female and/or black.

McKittrick's term connotes both spatial and temporal relationality. As such, black geographies highlight a rich history of unconventional performance practices by the spatially dispossessed. My project puts McKittrick's work in conversation with performance in order to emphasis how bodies navigate black geographies—how one walks, talks, carries oneself, displays oneself, hides oneself, etc. in attempts to navigate precarious space. Precarious space includes material, affective, and psychological landscapes in which bodies lie outside of or on the borders of frameworks of intelligibility. Quite often said bodies face significant challenges in their quest to articulate their geographic presence and/or subjectivity. With that in mind, what if instead of reading Barnes' response as simply an actress questioning her character's response to the mise en scène, we think of it as marking/mapping a black geography, a repertoire of black experience, not illustrated in the initial draft of the script?

[15] McKittrick, 4.

In her rewriting of the script, Barnes disrupts the actor/director relationship Gottesman delineates during the read-through of "My Soul Look Back in Wonder: Life Stories from Women in Recovery." Although Gottesman concedes that since Barnes helped create the story by providing her story, Barnes is entitled to make script edits, Gottesman does so only after stating that "normally an actor gets no say." With that statement, Gottesman references a long history of conventional Western theatre in which the director makes most of the decisions for a production. By inserting her voice into the mix, Barnes' disrupts the power dynamics of this type of performance structure and in doing so, performs what I term a "performative spatial irruption"—an action that interrogates hegemonic structures and makes space for the visibility of black geographies. It is this contestation of space and relations of power (both on and off stage) that delineates my area of focus, spatial dispossession. In the humanities as well as the "hard sciences," space has largely been interpreted in one of two ways: as static and the negative opposite of time or as mobile and abstract in contradistinction to place (as static and local).[16] In "Part III: Spatial Practices", of his canonical text, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau articulates space as the latter. Drawing heavily on analogies between space and speech acts, and space and writing, de Certeau argues for the dynamism of space. He posits that space is the realm of interconnected mobile elements. He writes:

> A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect

[16] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

> produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.[17]

In this excerpt, de Certeau notes that space and time are interconnected and that space is practice—it is movement. Furthermore, he argues that space comes into being through institutional attempts to manage space. My dissertation project explores attempts to manage dynamic space in order to tease out the complex ways performance and performativity play out in sites of homelessness and incarceration. Where de Certeau proves less useful to my argument is his investment in dichotomizing space and place. As highlighted by Doreen Massey in her work *For Space*, naming place as static and local renders it apolitical; movement/change cannot take place in immobile space (what de Certeau terms "place"). Outside of politics, situating place as static also contributes to the erasure of subaltern histories. Subaltern histories are nonlinear, multiscalar, and enmeshed in material realities. In the realms of homelessness and incarceration (and arguably other sites as well), subaltern renderings narrate not only subjects', deemed non-human or not-quite-human, complicated relationships with the state in its multiscalar manifestations, but also act like compasses, helping one navigate precarious, ungeographic space.

In her work, Dominique Moran's demographic field of inquiry is shaped by a broad understanding of carceral spaces rather than limited definitions. Quoting Smith, Moran argues that carceral spaces exist outside of prisons. She writes, "the 'penal state is operative in sites where we might not be accustomed to look for it: not only within the prison interior…but also, peculiarly, in cities that have been emptied of their 'troublesome poverty' and transformed into

[17] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

smooth clean zones for the enjoyment of 'consumers of urban space.'"[18] Here Moran (via Smith) points to the carceral spaces of (attempted) gentrification such as Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. This opening up of demographics based on presence in carceral space instead of involvement with formal economies highlights part of the crux of my argument, one cannot engage with issues of incarceration without simultaneously engaging with the subject of homelessness and vice-versa. Both prisons and sites of homelessness are carceral spaces in the sense that they are racialized and gendered sites of spatial dispossession in which institutions seek to control the movement and ideological apparatuses of the bodies in these spaces. Black geographies proliferate in carceral spaces in response to disciplinary apparatuses. As Moran indicates through an extensive literature review tracking the influences of Foucault and Agamben on carceral geography, the recent turn in the discipline focuses on questions of agency and acts of resistance in carceral spaces. She writes:

> In a carceral context in which spaces of imprisonment might commonly be assumed, in the lexicon of Foucault and Agamben, to deliver 'docile' bodies and 'bare life', geographers engage with the notion of agency within carceral space, identifying ways in which those confined within these spaces may resist regimes of incarceration and deploy spatial strategies to access and express agency.[19]

While my project also explores agency and resistance, my project differs from trends in carceral geography because of its emphasis on historicity and citation as well as race and gender. Utilizing performance as a primary analytic, my project nuances expressions of resistance and

[18] Dominique Moran, *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 11.

[19] Ibid., 17.

seeks to expose expressions of noncompliance or agency that are often hard to discern in sites of spatial dispossession. My project explores both citational and original performance practices in black geographies of the spatially dispossessed to mark the myriad of ways individuals and communities navigate profoundly geographic assemblages.

**Dissertation Chapters**

The four core chapters of my dissertation project, "Resisting Spatial Dispossession: Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions in California and Louisiana," focus on spatial dispossession in two locales: Louisiana and California. During the Great Migration in the early 20th century, mass quantities of Louisiana residents migrated to the Los Angeles area in search of job opportunities as well as freedom from Jim Crow. Tracking the relationship between the two cities allows one to parse out migratory black geographies and citational performances practiced in these spaces. I turn to Louisiana and California not only because of their historical migratory relationship, but also because the high visibility of representations of the spatially dispossessed (homeless and incarcerated) in these sites offer more opportunities to discern black geographies than other localities. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, criticism of state response dominated local, national, and international media coverage as well as academic scholarship. Extensive media coverage of the rapid mass displacement of primarily black and poor bodies during and in the immediate aftermath of the storm indexed the collusion of racializing assemblages implicated by the disparate effects of the storm. Ten years later, academic scholarship and more publicly accessible material continue to discuss the natural disaster and its aftermath. As a site of mediatized spatial dispossession, New Orleans offers a unique opportunity to explore profoundly geographical racializing assemblages. Los Angeles

County and the San Francisco Bay Area, on the other hand, provide opportunities for the exposure of black geographies through the mundane in the contemporary moment. Mediatized criticism of state and local government agencies interactions with the spatially dispossessed in California is not a new phenomenon. Historically, California has and continues to have some of the highest incarceration rates and harshest crime policies in the United States.[20] Skid Row, located in downtown Los Angeles, hosts the largest concentration of homeless individuals in the U.S. My project turns to the spectacle and the everyday of California and Louisiana in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of black geographies and racializing assemblages in sites of spatial dispossession.

Chapter 1, "Documenting Spatial Practice: Black Geographies & the LA Poverty Department," explores an iteration of Skid Row activists' use of histories of representation and their re-making of these images to contest (to varying degrees) narratives about the perceived precarity of their bodies. The project begins here because Skid Row activist's portrayal of imprisonment illustrates the interconnectedness of homeless and incarceration. Situating their local performance in dialogue with national incarceration trends, especially the increased "punitiveness"[21] of sites of spatial dispossession, the Skid Row artists' performance mark hegemonic structures creating and supporting the spatial dispossession of poor and subaltern bodies in the United States and how these assemblages tie the spatially dispossessed to the carceral state. Here I investigate Skid Row artists' "counterinvest[ment] in the body as a site of

[20] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

[21] Moran, 2.

possibility"[22] as articulated in their productions "State of Incarceration" and "Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed." Chapter 2, "Ghostly Looks: Visibility and Common Sense in the Medea Project," further delves into issues around women's imprisonment in California through an exploration of *We Just Telling Stories* (Andrews, 2000), a documentary on Rhodessa Jones' "Medea Project: Theater for Incarceration" and the filmed version of the Medea Project's *My Life in the Concrete Jungle.* This chapter uses the figure of the ghostess to interrogate how the gendered specter helps us rethink the relationship between visibility, gender, and violence in sites of spatial dispossession as well as actor/spectator dynamics.

Chapter 3, "Picturing Katrina: Queer Children and Black Death-Birthing Narratives," moves us from California to Louisiana with its address of Hurricane Katrina. In this chapter, I explore the usage of black girls' bodies and affect in film and news stories to create what I'm terming "black death-birthing narratives." Black death-birthing narratives celebrate the creation of new life that is predicated on black death. Chapter 3 uses *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin, 2012) and *People*'s photograph-heavy "Katrina Girl" series to examine narratives that call upon black girls to produce an imagined future grounded in the reproduction of a structure hostile to black life. Chapter 4, "Amie Cota and Queer(ing) Migrations" focuses on Amie Cota's transformation of poetry written by African American women during the Great Migration into music and the ways in which Cota addresses complicated notions of black female sexuality and transhistoric, multiplanar gendered violence. As a whole, "*Resisting Spatial Dispossession: Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions in California and Louisiana"* reveals the

[22] Hartman, 51.

productiveness of utilizing black feminist epistemologies to chart performance as a cartographic tool in the mapping of spatial dispossession and the accompanying dissident responses.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I'd like to briefly return to the question that opened the chapter: What happened to Barnes? What if, much in the same way that Barnes' saw a disconnect between Nelson's depiction of her character and real-life experiences, Barnes is not featured in the conclusion of the film because her "one year later" did not fit in the film's narrative of transformation and progress? If this supposition proves true, then rather than bearing witness "to the performing arts' capacity to heal trauma, create connection, and start a conversation," we witness the arts' ability to occlude, erase, and leave out the stories of black women and their experience. It is these occlusions and the resistance to erasure in sites of spatial dispossession that I turn to in my dissertation.

**Chapter 1** *Documenting Spatial Practice: Black Geographies & the LA Poverty Department*

> I was so unimpressed with the city council…They had a line of homeless people who were allowed to vote because Kevin[Michael Key] was running for councilman and everything. So, they wanted ids…[The person tabling] asked me, 'Well I need some id. Do you have any id?' And the way he said it, he knew I wouldn't have any id. It was like I wasn't even there. I was invisible. He was just going through the motions of making the sound. But he didn't know he was dealing with *R-C-B.* So when I dropped my passport, and I do mean *dropped* my passport on the table, *that's* when I got respect. (emphasis in original)
>
> --RCB, Los Angeles Poverty Department Member

What does it mean to perform presence/selfhood? What conditions necessitate these kinds of performances? In the opening excerpt, RCB articulates an instance when transparency was mapped onto his body. During the election cycles of 2010, 2012, and 2014, KevinMichael Key, a prominent, formerly homeless Skid Row activist, community organizer, and member of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), ran for a position on the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC). As part of his campaigns, Key sought opportunities to help homeless residents of Skid Row exercise their right to vote in the upcoming elections. One instantiation of this objective involved tabling in the neighborhood. In a show of support, RCB lined up to vote and subsequently encountered the tabler. *And the way he said it, he knew I wouldn't have any id. It was like I wasn't even there. I was invisible*. As understood by RCB, the tabler did not expect homeless individuals to possess government issued identification. Instead of

acknowledging RCB's individuality/subjectivity, the tabler assumed that RCB's status as homeless meant not having id. In this interaction, RCB's political subjectivity was under erasure, invisible. For RCB, in this confrontation, homelessness marked him as a knowable (non)subject—a generic homeless man.

I open with this excerpt from an interview with RCB because it highlights what I term "performative spatial irruptions"—one of the many ways in which people in precarious sites contest the homogenization (and/or erasure) of their subjectivities through everyday, spatial practice. My elaboration of the term performative spatial irruption draws on Judith Butler's extension of J. L. Austin's concept of performatives as "speech acts," or words that "do something." In the first chapter of *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative,* Butler engages two forms of performatives: perlocutionary, words that do not commit actions themselves but are instrumental; and illocutionary, words that act. Here performative indicates both perlocutionary and illocutionary speech acts as well as actions that "do more." When RCB drops his passport, in addition to literally releasing an object from his hold, he actualizes the action's performative potential, rejecting the assumed transparency of his personhood. In doing so, RCB performs a performative spatial irruption that aggressively opens up space for the "subtle" violences often present in ostensibly mundane acts, like voting, that occur in and tangential to sites of spatial dispossession to come to the fore. Unlike the term erupt, which connotes a breaking out from within a given (read dominant) structure, performative spatial irruptions are invasive. As indexed in RCB's opening act, irruptions attack head on, interrogating hegemonic structures and making space for the visibility of what Katherine McKittrick might

term "black geographies"[23] (e.g. black man world-traveler who is also homeless) as well as space for the creation of new ways of inhabiting the world.

RCB's, a LAPD actor's, usage of performative gesture in his everyday life mirrors the types of performative citations conducted by the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) that are the subject of this chapter. Chapter 1 explores *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed*, the two LAPD plays that speak most directly to performative spatial practices in the carceral state,[24] alongside personal interviews. RCB's interview is part of a set of personal interviews and notes from observational fieldwork I conducted from October 2014 through April 2016 with homeless, formerly homeless, and formerly incarcerated individuals living in Los Angeles; most, but not all, of the people interviewed are current or former members of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a theater company composed of primarily homeless and formerly homeless residents of downtown Los Angeles' Skid Row. All of the LAPD members interviewed for this project performed in at least one production of *State of Incarceration* or *Chasing Monsters*—the productions of interest for this chapter; several cast

[23] In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick refers to geography as "space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations"[23] and from there argues that black geographies are "subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle."[23] For McKittrick, an excavation of black geographies illuminates cartographies of struggle.

[24] I draw the term "carceral state" from Dominique Moran's *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration*. In her work, Moran posits that carceral spaces exist outside of prisons. For Moran, carceral spaces include a variety of sites of spatial dispossession. In my work, the carceral state indexes the overarching US hegemonic system of racializing assemblages that endeavor to lock up and lock out black, brown, and poor bodies physically/materially, psychologically, and affectively from desirable space.

members have performed in both projects. The information gathered through my ethnographic research informs my reading of the performances. When engaging with sites of spatial dispossession, one often encounters a plethora of stereotyped images and simplistic narratives that fail to account for the complexity of the lives of people occupying these sites. Furthermore, these narratives also fail to articulate the structures feeding (and keeping) black, brown, and poor bodies into spaces of dispossession. Ethnography provides a way to interrogate the relationship between theory and materiality by seriously engaging with the voices and experiences of (formerly) homeless and incarcerated people in scholarship around spatial dispossession. In addition, situating personal narratives alongside state and media narratives allows me to emphasize the tensions present among these archives.

While both plays continue to exist as live performances, the excerpts explored in this chapter are also archived online.[25] The digital archives allow me to re-view the performances and, to a limited degree, control my engagement with the texts through pauses, replays, forwarding, and rewinding. However, my control is conditioned by the directorial choices, including perspective, that produced the material present in the archives. Edited by cast member and LAPD employee Austin Hines, excerpts of *Chasing Monsters* are available for viewing on the company's Vimeo page. The *State of Incarceration* YouTube video, on the other hand, was filmed and edited by the Queens Museum in New York. Although it is outside the scope of this project to explore in depth the politics of filmic technologies, I do attempt to contend with questions of what it might mean to read these live performances through the mediated lens of the

[25] Unless otherwise indicated, my readings of both plays come from the videos archiving the productions online, rather than directly from viewing the live performances themselves.

camera and the subsequent aesthetic choices (such as close-ups, cuts, etcetera). How are stories within the production(s) framed? Which stories receive emphasis and which ones are under erasure? How do representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class manifest in each production? While I only explore excerpts from each text, these questions remain integral to my readings and inform my analysis.

Like RCB's performative gesture, scenes throughout the LAPD's *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* make the racializing assemblages propagating and sustaining the spatial dispossession of some bodies and not others visible/legible. Alexander G. Weheliye draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to elaborate the term "racializing assemblage." While he pulls the latter half of the term from the duo, Weheliye problematizes Deleuze and Guattari's work on articulation and assemblage, pushing on their assumptions about race. For Weheliye, racialization is an articulated assemblage that deterritorializes some and territorializes others. Expanding upon the scholarship of black feminists Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, Weheliye investigates alterity to the present conflation of "Man", as white, heterosexual, property-owning subject, with "human" by pointing to the relationality of assemblages and the need to understand race as a sociopolitical entity that is made to appear natural versus race as biological or ideological. In doing so, Weheliye situates his work in Black Studies, emphasizing a genealogy of the discipline and its creation of pathways outside of the Man equals human structure.

Weheliye posits that racializing assemblages "materialize as sets of complex relations of articulations…structured in political, economic, social, racial, and heteropatriarchal

dominance."[26] Racializing assemblages help create and maintain stereotyped images and related affective responses through continuous (re)citation on multiple platforms (e.g. the media, institutionalized narratives of conquest, etcetera) as well as through the creation of institutions and laws positing "the Other" as less than human or abject. Building on Weheliye's work, I argue that the collusion of racializing assemblages supports capitalist logics, creating transparent space,[27] which in turn hides the racializing assemblages propagating spatial dispossession. Performative spatial irruptions confront transparent space in its polyvalent iterations and unburdens the individual as sole factor in said dispossession. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, here, dispossession "refers to processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability."[28] Dispossession names the polyvalent ways non-normative bodies, subjectivities, and forms of community are rendered

[26] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 49.

[27] In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick argues that transparent space "assumes that geography—specifically, physical and material geographies—is readily knowable, bound up with ideologies and activities that work to maintain a safe socioeconomic clarity" and that "[t]his transparency 'goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places'" (5-6). The logic of transparent space permeates state-sanctioned and media depictions of homelessness and incarceration. By failing to discuss or nuance the capitalistic logics propagating the overrepresentation of some bodies and not others in sites of spatial dispossession, these narratives map dispossession onto certain bodies as if homelessness and incarceration are the natural geographies of black, brown, and poor people rather than a result of systematic disenfranchisement.

[28] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 2.

unintelligible and the avenues by which their histories are erased from, fall out of, or never make it into, the archive. Spatial dispossession then engages with the ways in which multifaceted notions of space mediate and inform instances of dispossession.

**The LAPD and Spatial Irruptions**

The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) was founded by John Malpede in 1985. Primarily composed of residents of Skid Row, the LAPD repertoire includes devised work based on members' experiences, verbatim scripts from court cases, and performance parades, just to name a few examples of the LAPD's diverse body of work. Situated in Skid Row, an area of downtown Los Angeles that arguably hosts the largest concentration of homeless individuals in the United States, the LAPD's overtly political work addresses issues pertinent to its immediate community such as gentrification, policing, and mental illness. Drawing on a variety of performance methodologies including Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, founding artistic director John Malpede and associate director/producer Henrïette Brouwers utilize their training as performance artists to co-create productions with their ever-changing cast. For the LAPD, movement is an important aspect in the construction of a piece. When creating and rehearsing a new play, the cast do so on their feet. Since all the theatre's work is related to everyday concerns of people living in sites of spatial dispossession like Skid Row, the LAPD relies on members' own spatial practices—the cast draw on members' experiences to block the production, especially when the play makes use of personal narratives. LAPD members come with a variety of performance experience, some having never acted in a stage production prior to their involvement with the company. In fact, the only requirement to be involved with the LAPD

is presence—you "just"[29] need to show up. LAPD's approach to membership in combination with its repertoire distinguishes it from other grassroots theaters working with spatially dispossessed populations in the United States.

As a community-specific theater company, the LAPD differentiates itself from similar grassroots theaters through its exclusive focus on socio-political issues explicitly relevant to sites of spatial dispossession. For example, Cornerstone Theater, a company also based in Los Angeles that works with disenfranchised communities to create plays, has been around almost as long as the LAPD. However, Cornerstone often produces reconstructions of canonical plays or plays composed by a single playwright that take the concerns of the current community of interest into account rather than creates new, dialogical pieces intricately shaped by members' experiences.[30] While there are other grassroots theaters that function similar to the LAPD, to my knowledge, there are no other theaters in the United States that have specifically focused on issues related to homelessness for a comparable period of time.

The Los Angeles Poverty Department is well known in the realm of grassroots theater and academia related to that field, but the body of scholarship around the LAPD tends to focus on the structure of the organization and/or a specific production that exemplifies LAPD's success as a community-based theater. Published in 2015, James McEnteer's book on the company, *Acting Out: John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department*, is just one example of the

[29] I place the term "just" in quotations in order to acknowledge the variety of factors that can hinder attendance to rehearsal, thinking specifically about transportation and time obstacles often present in sites of spatial dispossession.

[30] Robert H. Leonard, *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight U.S. Communities* (Oakland: New Village Press, 2006). For more information on Cornerstone, see Sonja Kuftinec's *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater*.

scholarship happening around LAPD's work. *Acting Out* chronicles the origin and development of the LAPD, providing an in depth look at the events that led to Malpede's founding of the organization as well as a close reading of their internationally traveling piece, *Agents and Assets*. *Agents and Assets* is also the title and subject of the LAPD's own published book. As a printed text, *Agents and Assets* situates the play text (composed mostly verbatim from a court hearing about CIA involvement with drug trafficking in Los Angeles) next to interviews and transcriptions of the productions' talkback sessions. Other scholarship about the company include Jan Cohen-Cruz's *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (2005), Robert H. Leonard's *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight U.S. Communities* (2006), performance reviews, and several journal articles. My work attempts to build on this scholarship by shifting the focus from the qualifications or exemplifications of the LAPD as community theater, and instead explores specific instances in which the LAPD's work foregrounds spatial practice. If prior work on the LAPD emphasizes successful performances of theatrical aptitude and audiences' affective responses, my work, in contrast, attempts to flesh out the relationship between the spatial practices represented on stage and historical and contemporary quotidian practices. Rather than focus on the spectacular as the point of analysis, I use LAPD's theatrical representations as an avenue by which to investigate everyday practices people in sites of spatial dispossession utilize in their navigation of precarious space.[31] Through an analysis of LAPD's work, I show how dissident spatial practices in sites of dispossession map a transnational and transhistorical cartography of struggle.

[31] In my project, I understand precarious bodies as ones that lie outside of or on the borders of frameworks of intelligibility in dominant material, affective, and/or psychological landscapes. Precarious space then is the site(s) in

In addition to scholarship on the LAPD, Chapter 1 is indebted to the work of scholars like Forrest Stuart who attempt to wrestle with the complexities of homelessness, particularly as it manifests in downtown Los Angeles' Skid Row. In *Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row*, Stuart interrogates the overpolicing and increasing criminalization of Skid Row residents. An ethnographic work, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest* weaves together personal interviews with Skid Row residents and police officers with field notes and historical research to elaborate the effects of policing on the community. Stuart argues that "policing has become intimately woven into the social fabric of everyday life, restricting how those relegated to the bottom of the social order come to understand their peers, their communities, and themselves."[32] While Stuart's sociological study strongly contributes to the growing scholarship on homelessness through its emphasis on ethnography and constructions of space as well attention to power structures, Stuart's work heavily focuses on space and spatial practices related to the police and does not attend to gender. My project seeks to supplement this scholarship by highlighting the gendered performative spatial practices of Skid Row residents, and in doing so, foregrounds citational practices and creative dissent responses that engender survival.

In this chapter, I turn to *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* for three key reasons: 1) the plays represent iterations of everyday performative spatial irruptions performed by individuals and collectives, 2) they were written collaboratively between Malpede and LAPD artists and are based on members' experiences in sites of spatial dispossession, and 3) they

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which the subjectivities of the spatially dispossessed are disavowed or under erasure, including the American ruling episteme (see Spillers) and dominant media narratives around homelessness and incarceration.

[32] Forrest Stuart, *Down, Out and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7

interrogate psychological effects related to spatial dispossession and their multifaceted physical manifestations. Navigating moments in which the LAPD cites performative spatial irruptions as well as times that they enact their own irruptions through performance, this chapter uses *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* to highlight the complex relationship between two seemingly disparate sites of spatial dispossession—homelessness and incarceration.

Through their work, the LAPD documents and creates spatial irruptions. In sites of spatial dispossession, such as solitary confinement or homelessness, individuals undergo absentification—they are rendered flesh. In her influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers argues that through violence, the female body is rendered flesh. For Spillers, the body is what holds subjectification and when one is absented from a subject position, the body becomes flesh. Indexed earlier in RCB's claim that he was "invisible," this process produces "hieroglyphics of the flesh" that document racial-sexual domination.[33] Throughout Chapter 1, I expand upon Spillers' theorization in order to explore the implications of reading differently gendered bodies as made flesh and putting gendered symbolic and material violences in conversation with one another. While Spillers and Weheliye specifically focus on blackness in their texts, I find their theorizations useful in my interrogation of homelessness and incarceration because not only are blacks grossly overrepresented in sites of spatial dispossession, but also blackness is not only about phenotype—it is a subject positioning. I turn to performance, specifically work by the LAPD and its racially diverse cast, because it is a space in which this subject positioning, as well as the racializing assemblages propagating said hierarchy, becomes

[33] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Film and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 207.

visible through citation. An examination of the spatial irruptions cited and produced in *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed* and *State of Incarceration* show that incarceration and homelessness are part and parcel of the same racializing assemblages, and consequently so intertwined that one cannot thoroughly engage with one without addressing the other.

### *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed*

*Chasing Monsters* draws from the experiences of LAPD members and chronicles the stories and experiences of people living with mental illness in Skid Row. Serving as a spatial irruption, the piece showcases black life and black death as meeting points of commonsensical narratives,[34] state-sanctioned violence, historic and present-day hegemonic structures, and spatial dispossession. Throughout the piece, the LAPD divulges members' personal encounters with gendered spaces of precarity and black geographies, including homeless shelters, nontraditional community formations, and hallucinations due/attributed to mental illness, to explore the

[34] In *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, Kara Keeling argues that people share a set of collective memory-images that are called forth when one is presented with an image. The memory-images are often found in the form of clichés or stereotypes. So in the canonical psychoanalytic example from *Black Skin, White Masks*, where a white French girl says to her mother, "Maman, look, a Negro; I'm scared!", ostensibly the girl is scared because when she sees Fanon, the memory-images associated with a black, male body called forth by Fanon's image are images connected to the affective response "scared". One could posit that the images called forth to the young child's mind were related to criminality and violence. It was not Fanon himself that provoked the affective response, it was his *image* that called forth clichéd images of violent black men in the mind of the beholder; Fanon was beheld as a stereotype. This process of present images calling forth a shared collective of normative commonsensical images is not solely relegated to race, sexual, or gender markers; it is also related to perceptions of class (which itself is also deeply tied to race in the United States).

meeting and collapse of psychological, affective, and physical space in sites of spatial dispossession. By placing the murder of a Cameroonian immigrant (who had a history of mental illness and was homeless at the time of his death) by the Los Angeles Police Department in conversation with experiences of women (largely of color) living with mental illness in Skid Row, the LAPD forefronts some of the ways in which gender conditions spatial practice in sites of dispossession. The interweaving of lived experience with psychological imaginings (e.g. hallucinations, subjective dreamscapes, etcetera) marks not only the fluidity of seemingly discrete spaces, but also forefronts how, through spatial practice, both individual members and smaller collectivities, or "undercommons," within Skid Row posit their subjectivity and agency in sites that refuse to acknowledge their presence as individual, human subjects. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Harney and Moten explore the "undercommons," fugitive communities that function through a system of indebtedness. They argue that unlike the violence of privatization enacted through the marriage of debt and credit, "debt" or indebtness is a proactive force embedded in fugitive places, marking the undercommons as a site of socialization and collectivity. In *Chasing Monsters,* the LAPD draws on members' experiences as homeless residents of Skid Row, as well as their experiences dealing with mental illness in a society that provides limited access to mental health resources for low-income communities, creating a performance piece that not only interrogates racialized and gendered spatial dispossession, but also forefronts collective dissident response.

The opening scene of *Chasing Monsters* portrays the shooting of Africa, a homeless, middle-aged black man, and the subsequent crime scene. Walter Fears, playing Africa, gets up from his seat in the audience and walks toward the center of the stage. As Africa begins to reach the center, he abruptly grabs first his right arm, then his stomach, then his chest signaling to the audience he has been shot. He collapses. Two actors drape caution tape about the scene, further framing the stage. The narration begins. Wearing graphic t-shirts proclaiming, "#CAN'T KILL AFRICA", Suzette Shaw (a black woman) and Henrïette Brouwers (a white, immigrant woman) stand in front of the crime scene and narrate the story of a Cameroonian man's engagement with Skid Row. Two other black actresses outline Africa's murdered body with tape as the dialogue ensues. The outline refuses the erasure of not only Africa, but also histories of state-sanctioned, racialized violence; it catalogs the process of symbolic and physical dispossession.

Walter Fears (Africa Keunang) in *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed*. Photo: Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

**Suzette:** Here I am, back in Africa with my family.

**Henrïette:** On my own I was never able to raise enough money for the journey back, but the people of Skid Row did—they (pause) brought me home.

**Suzette:** And my family, they grieved. They don't understand who to believe—

**Henrïette:** The police say that I'm a thief. That they shot me because I grabbed their gun. (cut to side angle)

**Henrïette:** They tell me to stay calm— (yelling and pointing) "Calm down sir!"

**Suzette:** They don't sound so calm themselves. (places body in recognizable "Hands up, don't shoot" gesture) "Come out and put your hands in the air sir."

**Henrïette:** (pointing) "We'll have to come in if you don't come out sir."

**Suzette:** I know they have guns.

**Henrïette:** Man I freak out. I freeze, I hide, I curl up like a spider, make myself invisible.

**Suzette:** No way am I coming out of my tent. No way.

**Henrïette:** They tell me to break down my tent. They tell me that it's illegal to have a tent up on the sidewalk before 9 pm. 4, 5 cops jump on me, they kick me in my face, in my gut, they throw me on the sidewalk.

**Suzette** (vehemently)**:** I fight for my life. I see the fear in the eyes of the rabbit.

**Henrïette** (softly and fearfully)**:** They are going to kill me.

**Suzette and Henrïette** (shouting)**:** They do.

This condensed excerpt[35] dramatizes the killing of Charly Leundeu Keunang, also known as "Africa" in Skid Row, by the Los Angeles Police Department on March 1, 2015. According to the *Los Angeles Times,* Africa was shot six times.[36] On March 7th, hundreds of protestors marched from the Los Angeles Police Department's downtown headquarters to Skid Row in protest of the fatal shooting of Africa, who was homeless, unarmed, and had a history of mental illness. While it is unclear from the documentation exactly when Africa immigrated to the United

[35] In the online video, only an edited version of the scene is available. Rather than analyzing the full opening scene, my analysis focuses on the condensed version of the scene archived online.

[36] Kate Mather, "Skid row shooting: Autopsy shows man shot six times, had meth in system," *Los Angeles Times,* July 29, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-skid-row-shooting-autopsy-20150729-story.html, accessed April 29, 2016.

States under a stolen French identity, it was over fifteen years ago.[37] In 2013, Africa was granted parole for a 15-year sentence for bank robbery. During his incarceration, Africa was committed to the prison's mental hospital.[38] Following his release, Africa settled in downtown Los Angeles' Skid Row. Almost a year after his death, the LAPD continues to engage with this controversial incident in *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed*, performatively narrating the attempted dispossession of Africa's subjectivity through the systematic rendering of his body as flesh.

In their affirmation of subjectivity, the actresses map Africa's experience in a cartography of struggle. Made flesh through both the literal dispossession of life, as well as the symbolic through abjection from a subject position in official police narratives,[39] Africa's body serves as a site in which historic and present day forms of spatial dispossession collide. Lying prostrate in the center of the crime scene, Africa's body reminds the audience of contemporary state-sanctioned violences against black peoples—the killing of Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Janisha Fonville, Natasha McKenna, and Trayvon Martin. However, Suzette and Henrïette's narration also simultaneously reminds the audience that Africa is in fact from Africa. Calling forth images of recent African American black death, centuries of black death associated with transatlantic slavery, as well as current dismal economic conditions

[37] Kelly Goff, "Homeless Man Killed by LAPD Officers ID'd," March 5, 2015, http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Homeless-Man-Killed-by-LAPD-Officers-on-Skid-Row-IDd-295254401.html, accessed May 4, 2016.

[38] Gale Holland and Richard Winton, "LAPD body camera video of Skid Row shooting raises questions on tactics and training," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-body-cam-keunang-20150925-story.html, accessed May 4, 2016.

in African countries related to histories of colonialization and theft that prompted Africa's immigration, the combination of Africa's still body and the actresses' narration, situates Keunang's death as related to histories of the violent devaluation of black life pre- and post-emancipation across the Atlantic. Although the legislation and discourse around black bodies and black life have evolved throughout the history of the postbellum United States, traces of the racist logics that undergirded the beginnings of capitalism remain integral to the present day functioning of this system. As articulated by Spillers:

> Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated," and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise.[40] (emphasis in original)

For Spillers, a change in rhetoric simply disguises the continued symbolic violence enacted upon black subjects; the emancipation of slaves did not alter the ruling episteme that classified blacks as less than human. Located in a structure that also devalues black life, Africa symbolically and physically undergoes absentification—he is made flesh. The racializing assemblages that proffered blacks as property—as flesh—are tied to the contemporary capitalist system in which Africa lived.

[40] Spillers, 208.

As a performative spatial irruption, *Chasing Monsters'* opening scene begins to decode the hieroglyphics imprinted in Africa's flesh (including the carceral state's infliction of physical and psychological violence) by questioning the ways in which the pervasive racializing assemblages supporting capitalism mediated Africa's movements.[41] What capitalist logics necessitated Africa's emigration from Cameroon to the United States? What economic circumstances, upon his arrival to the U.S., compelled him to rob a bank? What conditions led to Africa's movement to Skid Row and his subsequent death? Arguably, Africa emigrated from Cameroon because despite the country's growing economy, the per capita income has relatively remained unchanged for the past few decades[42] due to socioeconomic conditions produced, in part, by histories of European colonization of Africa; Keunang came in search of economic opportunity. While it is unclear if Africa developed his mental illness prior to arriving to the United States and/or prior to his incarceration, the LAPD's placement of Africa's story in conversation with the overrepresentation of blacks and people suffering from mental illness in Skid Row (and, I argue, in sites of spatial dispossession more generally), makes it clear that the limited access to resources to deal with trauma, produced by living blackness in a racist, classist,

[41] For McKittrick, an excavation of black geographies illuminates cartographies of struggle — spatial struggles that, in de Certeau's rendering, have been forgotten through the mapping of stillness. By illuminating "hidden spaces that are antagonistic to transparent space" through a mapping of movement, black geographies illustrate the role of movement in constituting space as well as the polyvalent ways notions of race, gender, and sexuality condition spatial practice, which includes the creation and transformation of space through community-building as well as the physical act of moving ones' body from place to place (43).

[42] "The World Factbook: Cameroon," *Central Intelligence Agency*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html accessed September 1, 2017.

hegemonic state, engenders involvement in coping mechanisms and survival economies, creating a cyclical structure that keeps black people in sites of spatial dispossession. What I'm trying to suggest is that the difficulty of surviving the everyday in a system that does not value black life, in addition to the myriad of obstacles to lawful economic advancement for black people, creates psychological trauma. I argue that through their attention to the processes by which the contemporary racist, classist episteme renders Africa's body flesh, the LAPD documents Africa's experience as predicated on the intertwining of transhistorical and transnational processes, and, in doing so, locates "the politics of daily life [at least within the context of homelessness and, arguably, other sites of dispossession as well] as inherently spatial," i.e. tied to pervasive symbolic and physical geographic structures.

Through its exploration of Africa's symbolic, material, and affective presence, *Chasing Monsters* marks sites of spatial dispossession as battlegrounds of flesh and subjectification. In their narration of Africa's story, Suzette and Henrïette articulate the presence of multiple narratives around Africa's murder. *And my family, they grieved. They don't understand who to believe*. The official police narrative is that Africa attempted to gain control of a police officer's firearm and was consequently shot. However, an analysis of the video points to the narrative articulated in the LAPD's performance—that the police used unnecessary force and killed Africa without provocation. In sites of spatial dispossession, there is often a disconnect between official, state disseminated narratives and the quotidian experiences of people living in those sites. In the opening scene of *Chasing Monsters*, Suzette and Henrïette foreground a narrative that contests the official one. If, as Spillers posits, the body is the vessel that holds subjectification, then in their oratory postulation of Africa's subjectivity, the two women embody the subject of their narration and in doing so, locate the articulation of presence—the charting of a black geography

or positing of subjectivity—as a practice of contestation. I argue that by affirming Africa's subjectivity within a ruling episteme that only recognizes Africa as flesh, Suzette and Henrïette perform a spatial irruption that challenges the racializing assemblages upholding the hegemonic structures of a capitalistic society that deems Africa as less than human.

Invoking a larger narrative about spatial practices in Skid Row, the chalking of Africa postmortem in the first scene and the subsequent removal of his body questions the extent to which the traces left by individuals (' bodies) document presence. The outline refuses the erasure of not only Africa, but also histories of state-sanctioned, racialized violence. Although Walter (playing Africa) removes his body from the playing space following the opening scene, the white tape outlining his body remains for the duration of the play—his presence ghosts the remainder of the production. Without the presence of a body within the "chalked" space, the outline becomes a place that can be filled by differently gendered bodies. Ungendered and unraced, the outline notes the potential of any dispossessed body to occupy that space. With the removal of Africa's body and the continued narration by bodies indexing difference (Suzette through gender and nationality, and Henrïette through gender, race, and nationality—illustrated through accent), the outline opens up the space for transnational bodies, mapping the global effects of a capitalist system. Simultaneous with its gesture to a larger scale, as past presence, the outline reminds its audience that Africa was there—a black body inhabited that space. As a material manifestation of flesh, the outline catalogs the process of absentification. Throughout the rest of the production, the ambiguity of the outline allows the LAPD to engage with gendered narratives that depart from conditions specific to Africa's spatial dispossession.

In scenes focusing on the gendered experiences of dispossession, Africa's outline suggests the specific precarity of female bodies in Skid Row. Throughout the play, the LAPD

articulates some of the experiences of women dealing with mental illness in the area. The longest scene focusing on women managing mental illness occurs about midway through the production. In this scene, Silvia portrays a woman dealing with mental illness that manifests as aggression expressed through heightened emotions, profanity, and body language. During her scene, Silvia cusses out both her date and the concession stand vendor at the movie theater once she is informed that there are not any more pretzels for purchase. In this depiction of mental illness, Silvia appears to embody stereotypes associated with the wayward Latina or the emasculating black woman. Juxtaposing the aggression of Silvia with the passivity of Africa not only documents the different forms mental illness can take, but also suggests that the categorization of different forms of mental illness are tied to gender difference. While neither Silvia nor any of the other women in the production physically die, the constant presence of the outline during their disparate scenes implicitly speaks to the precarity of these gendered bodies. Consequently, placing *Chasing Monsters* in conversation with gendered experiences in Skid Row that are not accounted for in the production opens up space for an exploration of gendered geography.

Putting gendered spatial practice in dialogue with Suzette and Henrïette's imagining highlights some of the ways gender plays out in sites of spatial dispossession. During our interview, Silvia, a formerly homeless Latina in her early 40s, explained a hyper-awareness of her femaleness during her time living on the streets in Skid Row:

> I met a friend—a woman. She was a girl with some diagnosis, some mental diagnosis, and she helped me. At that point I was in a walker and I was taking a lot medicine, my back in a condition. So she was helping me to go places and (pause) protecting me when I was sleeping with her on the street. I was right there on Broadway. We were there for about like a month or so…You know, when you're on the street, you don't know what

> can happen. What I learned, there's people, they are just looking for an opportunity to rob you if you have some valuable. Or there's people who have been molested, sexually molested. In my case, thank god, you know, I was never in that case. But because her experience, and she's been homeless for so long, she knew.

For Silvia, her friend's extended time in Skid Row gave her specialized knowledge that conditioned both of their spatial practices; Silvia's friend's experience taught her that sites of spatial dispossession are gendered spaces. Attempting to decrease the vulnerability of their bodies, Silvia and her friend took turns sleeping and protecting one another; they created what Moten and Harney might term a community of "indebtedness." Cognizant of the fact that Skid Row is a gendered space that marks them as potential objects of (sexual) desire rather than subjects with agency over their bodies and sexual practices, Silvia and her friend created a two-person undercommons to combat the further precaritization of their bodies. Although Silvia and her friend formed a noninstitutional entity in response to specific forms of racial-sexual domination present in sites of spatial dispossession, other women I interviewed turned to women-only shelters in search of a similar type of protection.

As an explicitly gendered space, women-only shelters in Skid Row actively attempt to contend with gendered violences related to spatial dispossession and consequently, elaborate women's shelters as key points of intervention in racial-sexual domination. In our interview, Stephanie, a formerly homeless, African American woman in her early 50s, articulated her experience of gendered violence and its influence on her movement to a shelter in Skid Row:

> I never lived downtown on Skid Row, but I have lived on Skid Row in the streets—period. It started when I was about, let's see, how old was I, twenty—put it like this, I spent 16 years in the streets and pregnant with my third child. I stayed at a place that was

> for battered and shelter women because at that time my ex had hit me with a metal pipe, so it had messed me up. It didn't break no teeth, but my whole face was twisted like I had a stroke. For months and months I just had to suck out of a straw—horrible...the devil been trying to get me for a long time but he ain't got nothing on me, can't win.

As a survivor of domestic violence, Stephanie found shelter in a gendered space in Skid Row. Specifically designed to help women who are seeking safety from abusive relationships, the shelter Stephanie stayed in serves as gendered black geography within a larger site of spatial dispossession. As a site of recovery, the shelter pushes against the precaritization of women (mainly) from low-income urban communities in which domestic violence is not a rare occurrence. Understanding the demographics of low income communities, their limited access to resources, and the ways in which the collusion of racializing assemblages creates and sustains the precarity of black lives in these communities by providing obstacles to economic movement, the shelter serves as a black geography that attempts to counter some of the gendered effects of those assemblages, including access to physical safety. Stephanie's seeking for safety in a shelter for battered women resonates with Silvia and her friend's attempt to create a safe place for themselves in the streets. In their navigation of Skid Row, these three women strategized their movements. Situated in a terrain where their gender marks them for specific violences, Stephanie, Silvia, and Silvia's friend adapted their spatial practices to protect themselves from sexual and other violence. Taking into account the women's elaboration of Skid Row as a gendered space posits another reading of Suzette and Henrïette's embodiment of Africa.

Putting Silvia and Stephanie's gendered experiences in conversation with *Chasing Monsters*, suggests a re-reading of the Africa scene for backgrounded narratives. In their interviews, Silvia and Stephanie map a cartography of struggle by exposing of some of the ways


Suzette Shaw and Henriette Brouwers in *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed*. Photo: Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

racial-sexual domination affects geography and spatial practice. Viewing the opening scene with an awareness of gendered experiences in sites of spatial dispossession alters the reading of Suzette and Henrïette's relationship to Africa. Standing outside of the crime scene, the women not only usher forth Africa's subjectivity, but they also forefront that gender mediates their movements in ways that do not necessarily resonate with Africa's story. While embodying Africa, the women gesture to commonalities between Africa's experience of spatial dispossession and their own. However, separated by caution tape, the women also mark their difference. In this scene then, the caution tape performs in at least two distinct ways: 1) as a border between the official police narrative that renders Africa flesh and the LAPD's assertion of Africa's subjectivity and 2) as a border acknowledging the mediating role gender plays in sites of spatial dispossession. McKittrick argues that "[b]y defining and constructing the world they inhabit, black subjects challenge how we know and understand geography; by seriously addressing space and place in the everyday, through the site of memory and in theory and text, they also confront sociospatial objectification by offering a different sense of how geography is and might be lived."[43] By holding multiple subjectivities—their own in addition to Africa's,

[43] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 92.

Suzette and Henrïette carve out a geography that provides space for the illumination of subjectivities *and* accounts for gendered experience in sites of spatial dispossession. It is in this space that Silvia and Stephanie's narratives encounter Africa's. It is through this encounter that Africa's chalked outline comes to suggest not only the potential of differently gendered bodies to inhabit that space cataloging death, but also that the multiple ways one is rendered flesh is contingent upon constructions of gender.

Through narration and costume, in the Africa scene the LAPD rewrites women into discourse surrounding homeless and other sites of spatial dispossession that frequently do not attend to gendered experiences, and in doing so, creates a performative spatial irruption. *"Come out and put your hands in the air sir."* When Suzette places her body in the recognizable "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" gesture while delivering her line, she cites not only the prevalence of police brutality against people of color, but also the foregrounding of women of color in the Black Lives Matter Movement in contradistinction to other historical black liberation struggles. The Black Lives Matter Movement began in 2012 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the police officer who shot and killed seventeen-year old Trayvon Martin. Since the murder of Trayvon Martin, images of #BlackLivesMatter continue to circulate as grassroots organizations and individuals protest the devaluation of black life. As articulated on the website:

> Rooted in the experiences of Black people in this country who actively resist our de-humanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society. Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis

> Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.[44]

As a movement, Black Lives Matter (BLM) represents grassroots efforts to challenge the de-humanization of black life. Its emphasis on voices that have been historically marginalized in black liberation struggles suggests an attempt to excavate black geographies that are often under erasure in dominant discourse. As indexed in the BLM mission as well as in a survey of scholarship around homelessness and incarceration, the gender specific experiences of women in these sites have historically (and continue to be) rendered as a backdrop. By locating Africa in the BLM, the LAPD opens up space for a critique of a monocular view of homelessness as a male-specific space.

The Africa scene brings to the fore histories of racialized violence as well as addresses the myriad ways gender matters in Skid Row. The LAPD's assertion of Africa's subjectivity can be viewed as a response to the attempted rendition of Africa as flesh in the carceral state. In *Chasing Monsters*, it is primarily black women that articulate Africa's subjectivity. Black actresses outline his body with tape and Suzette co-embodies Africa's subjectivity. In "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words", Spillers argues in the symbolic order, black American

[44] "About the Black Lives Matter Network", *Black Lives Matter*, http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/ accessed April 23, 2016.

men and women paradoxically exist as nonbeings—their subjectivities are not acknowledged, yet the empowered only recognizes its beingness by defining itself against black Americans. Spillers writes,

> The structure of the unreality that the black woman must confront originates in the historical moment when language ceases to speak, the historical moment at which hierarchies of power (even the ones to which *some* women belong) simply run out of terms because the empowered meets in the black female the veritable nemesis of degree and difference. Having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as an inferior social subject, but, rather, the paradox of non-being. Under the sign of this particular historical order, black female and black male are absolutely equal.[45]

Although in hegemonic systems both black men and women have been regulated to the status of nonhuman, in sites of spatial dispossession the avenues by which they are regulated to that shared space differ. Through Suzette and Henrïette's shared embodiment of Africa, the LAPD catalogs these differences.

It is only through collectivity, through their co-embodiment that Henrïette and Suzette can affirm Africa's subjectivity. If, as Spillers posits, white femininity is defined by everything that the black woman is not, then it is Africa's maleness that allows Henrïette to serve as a conduit for the illumination of Africa's subjectivity. However, the postulation of black

[45] Spillers, "Interstices," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Film and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 156.

subjectivity through a white (female) body can always only be partial. Since in the dominant symbolic order whiteness equals human (although within the hierarchy, levels are mitigated by gender and class), on her own Henrïette could never embody Africa, who has been constructed as a nonbeing. In other words, as a subject recognized as such in the ruling episteme, Henrïette cannot serve as a pathway for Africa's subjectification without substituting his body for her own, and in doing so, repeat the process of absentification.[46] Suzette, however, who shares the symbolic space with Africa, allows for the illumination of race-specific violences without the eradication of Africa's presence. Instead, by serving as a vessel for her own subjectivity in addition to part of Africa's, Suzette marks racialized gender violence. The embodiment of Africa by each woman showcases the specific ways that as a black male, Africa becomes spatially dispossessed both figuratively and materially. Furthermore, the utilization of multiple voices to verbalize Africa's story utters forth the collectivity often present in sites of spatial dispossession. Serving as a black geography, *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed* catalogs black performative spatial practices and highlights individual and communal acts of dissent.

### *State of Incarceration*

*State of Incarceration* is a play created by the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) that charts disparate communities in a shared cartography of struggle through its exploration of the multifaceted aspects of a site of spatial dispossession: the (male) prison. The project began in 2010, and in 2014, the play toured to the Queens Museum in New York. The project lives on

[46] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20-21.

both through YouTube as well as intermittent museum installations, of which the most recent manifestation (at the time of this writing) was in April 2016 at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, California. At the Armory, the installation included a projection of the filmed Queens Museum production of the play. Viewers could watch the production while seated on bunk beds in a small room that attempted to recreate the intimate set, a prison. All of the actors in the piece perform male roles, consequently emphasizing the overrepresentation of black males in the U.S. prison system. While this demographic focus potentially occludes the growing presence of women of color and other bodies in carceral spaces, a close reading of the performance suggests otherwise. In the scenes in which women appear in dialogue with one another, the women perform hyper-masculinity such as grabbing their crotch and using profane and erotic language. This and the fact that everyone in the play appears to perform "male blackness" highlights what is not present. In other words, the excessive re-iteration of black masculinity through diction, vernacular, and gesture pushes one to question what bodies are not represented.

In one of the most intimate scenes in the play, Anthony, a phenotypically Asian, nonblack male, performs an internal dialogue about solitary confinement, aptly titled "In the Hole," that foregrounds spatial practice as a key tactic of resistance in sites of spatial dispossession. Anthony's monologue illustrates the paradoxical relationship between stillness and movement in sites of spatial dispossession. The majority of the scene switches between medium and long shots through which the video watching audience can see the majority of Anthony's body as well as the audience members sitting in the bunk beds to the lateral sides of Anthony. Behind Anthony is a blank, gray, wall. He wears a white t-shirt, dark blue jeans, white socks, and a white beanie.

> Thirty days in the hole, oh my god. What am I gon' do? What would I do? (pause) Four walls, one toilet, zero everything else. No TV, no books, no one to talk to, no nothin'. Just me. Four walls, toilet, thirty days in the hole. (pause) I walk. I sit. I look. I thank[47]. I walk. I sit. I look. I thank. (stops walking and crouches down) Can't nobody see me. (stands up, hands over face) Why me? (pause) (begins walking) I walk. I sit. I look. I thank. I count the holes in the wall. I count the rips in the mattress. I count the spots on the makeshift mirror. I count. I count. I count and I count. (looks up and out to the distance, pointing) Hi mama. I'm doin' alright pop. I'm doin' good mama. I walk. I sit. I look. I thank. I thank. I thank. I thank. I thank. I can walk through the wall I thank. I thank I can walk through the wall, I can. I can. I can. I can. I can walk through the wall. It's so nice to walk through the wall. (claps hands and starts singing and dancing) Yea, a party of the other side of the wall. Whoop. Whoop, whoop. (back to mellow) I like the other side of the wall. It's so happy on the other side of the wall. I walk. I sit. I look. I thank. I walk. I sit. I look. I thank. I walk. I sit. I look. I thank.
>
> *Fade to black.*

As a site of stillness, solitary confinement cells often do not have windows and frequently, prisoners do not have access to items, such as books, to help pass the time. Consequently, time, in essence, stands still. To counteract this enforced stillness, Anthony moves both physically and psychologically. *I walk. I sit. I look. I thank.* With each movement, Anthony moves time forward. Interspersed with moments of counting, his daily cyclical movements denote the imperative to move in order to keep the envelopment of state-sanctioned precarity (produced in

[47] A Southern (USA) dialectic pronunciation of "think."

part through mental trauma) at bay. *I walk. I sit. I look. I thank.* When Anthony completes the cycle, he starts again. The repetition of Anthony's movements in itself articulates a type of stillness—a circular motion that ends where it begins and vice-versa. That is, until the cycle breaks. *Hi mama. I'm doing alright pop. I'm doing good mama.* In this sequence, Anthony imagines his parents in the space (or at least within listening distance). In this move to fantasy, Anthony navigates the enforced absence of everything but self in solitary confinement to both invite people into the space as well as to break free from the space. *I like walking through the wall. It's so nice on the other side of the wall*. Like Suzette and Henrïette's imagined crossing of boundaries to protest state-sanctioned precaritization, Anthony permeates his mandated enclosure. In both *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters* freedom is imagined as accessible through movement.

Anthony Taylor in *State of Incarceration.* Photo: Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty

Anthony's psychological spatial move challenges a state-sanctioned attempt to further precaritize his (black) life. In this chapter (and the broader dissertation as well) the term "black" (and subsequent additive nouns, e.g. "black life"), unless otherwise indicated, is used broadly to refer to people's lives, which have been historically and systematically devalued in the United States. Here then, black refers to a set of experiences in racist, classist, heteronormative, patriarchal America that often, but not always, corresponds with phenotype. This formulation of black(ness) aligns with Spillers' and McKittrick's theorizations, which mark race as produced

rather than a preexisting ontological category. However, by utilizing an example that is not contingent on a discernable black (female) body, my analysis of Anthony's performance complicates the scholars' arguments by foregrounding the role class plays in constructions of race. If we understand black geographies as sites that make sense of/illuminate hieroglyphics of the flesh, then how might the rendering of Anthony and his body as flesh, as nonbeing, complicate our understanding of not only the broader ruling episteme, but also everyday spatial practice? Derived from Anthony's personal prolonged engagement with the carceral state as a Filipino male, "In the Hole" indexes a black performative spatial practice aimed at survival that is not predicated on a visually discernible black body.

Through his performance of exercise while delivering his monologue, Anthony illustrates one of the ways in which the physicality of his body catalogs histories of spatial dispossession as directly linked to socioeconomic status. Earlier in the play, Anthony articulates physical movement as a way to deal with incarceration. In this scene, Anthony monologues about freedom while performing jumping jacks in solitary confinement. During our interview, Anthony describes the scene this way:

> My next piece, I don't even think there's a name for it, but it's pretty dramatic because I do jumping jacks while I'm saying my monologue and that comes from being in the hole. When there's nothing else to do, you exercise and I made a monologue up and they [LAPD members] knew I could do a lot of jumping jacks. Matter of fact, I want to go for the world record. I think I can do it. Anyway, I don't know where that come from. If you see it, you ever see it, they got film on it, so I do jumping jacks continuously as I do the monologue and it's not really that easy. You know, for me it was at the time because I could just do thousands and thousands and thousands of jumping jacks. I learned how to

> do that being in the hole. But actually, let me say this part, because initially it was so painful to be in the hole with nothing to do on my mental psyche that I thought that if I do enough jumping jacks, maybe my heart would burst and they would take me to the hospital. That's how my thinking got to be. I never took any medicine. I'm not on any now. I never been diagnosed with any mental illness, but it was that bad. It had got to the point to where it was so lonely and so hopeless that at least I did, I can keep it on me, I thought of doing enough jumping jacks where I would actually maybe even die. That's how bad it got.

In this excerpt, Anthony exposes the disciplinary effects of solitary confinement. The space of solitary confinement conditions Anthony's body into a healthy, physical entity able to perform aerobic exercise, while the confinement also simultaneously injures his mental faculties. Through exercise, the carceral state molds Anthony's body, marking his flesh as a site of suffering. In her text, Spillers argues that the distinction between body and flesh is as central as between the captive and liberated subject-position.[48] She writes, "These undecipherable markings [from violence inflicted upon the body] on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color."[49] While here Spillers specifically refers to the production of race in reference to the African diaspora, her claims about hieroglyphics of the flesh are relevant to Anthony's experience. Although Anthony's conditioned body does not, at surface level, denote the violences enacted on his body, the LAPD member's performance, as well as his personal

[48] Spillers, 206.

[49] Ibid., 207.

experience, index the fact that spatial dispossession is not only mitigated by race and gender; it is also about class.

Through his semi-autobiographical monologues, Anthony performs a spatial irruption that highlights the role class plays in the creation and maintenance of precarity. Adopted as an infant, Anthony Taylor was raised by a Japanese mother and an African American father in a predominantly low-income, black neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia. Anthony was twelve the first time he was arrested. At age fifteen, he was locked up in a youth detention center. At the detention center, Anthony was held in solitary confinement, an 8 x 10 cell. Throughout his adult life, Anthony was in and out of spaces of incarceration until he became sober in the 2000s. Anthony drew inspiration from his experience "in the hole" to compose the monologue cited above. As articulated by Anthony, "I wrote that monologue and that's the way I felt then [when I was fifteen] in solitary confinement…it was over a period of time but yes a lot of it came from then because it was devastating at first, more devastating because I wasn't use to it. Eventually I got used to it." Anthony was in and out of sites of incarceration mainly because his engagement with survival economies and self-medication, which are commonplace practices in low-income urban communities. Putting Anthony's personal history in conversation with the performance forefronts the ties between socioeconomic status and the process of absentification in the carceral state. While the markings that illustrate Anthony as a captive body, including mental trauma, are related to Africa's hieroglyphics, they differ in that some of Anthony's undecipherable markings are physically cataloged through his body.[50] Without context, Anthony's toned body does not

[50] Although the hieroglyphics of Africa's flesh may have been cataloged in Africa's physical body as well, it is outside the scope of this paper to make that argument as the only engagement I have with Africa is through the *Chasing the Monsters* production and media clips and news stories about Africa's untimely death.

suggest a history of violence inflicted by the carceral state. However, the stark juxtaposition of Anthony's conditioned body with his injured psyche in the monologues indexes the ways in which the racializing assemblages supporting prison systems disciplined Anthony's body into flesh. In his illustration of the process, Anthony points to a larger scale oppressive regime that focuses on the policing of all bodies categorized as less than human. Anthony's self-composed monologue articulates the precarity of marginalized bodies in general, not just phenotypically black ones. By vocalizing his trauma in a way that resonates with his subjective experience in a hierarchal structure that posits his being as less than human, Anthony articulates himself as part of broader collectivity that utilizes spatial practice to break out of the spaces in which the dominant symbolic order has enclosed them.

As indexed in *State of Incarceration*, as well as *Chasing Monsters* and the LAPD's pedagogical practices, collectivities found in sites of spatial dispossession have the potential to become undercommons—spaces of dissident practice and community indebtedness. In his monologue, Anthony's recognition of freedom is dependent upon the presence of multiple bodies on the other side of the wall—a party. Anthony's envisioning of other bodies, a collectivity, cites a legacy of community building as a tactic of survival within the confines of spatial dispossession. Anthony's turn to creating community by bringing both his parents and the party-goers into the space of confinement serves as a spatial irruption that allows him to disrupt cyclical stillness through psychological movement. Anthony's monologues chart resistant black geographies tied to the carceral state.

The juxtaposition of a scene that takes place before "In the Hole" in the video recording with Anthony's monologue highlights how transnational collectivities might manifest through shared engagement in sites of dispossession in the carceral state. Preceding Anthony's

monologue, the following scene takes place. The film fades in from a black screen and as it fades in, viewers hear the beginnings of a conversation between a middle-aged black male (R) and an older white male (J). During the fade in, the camera pans left to a close up (head and shoulders) of J (left) and R (right). J and R stand face to face with about an inch between their noses. Throughout the scene their noses touch due to their close proximity. The shot is angled in such a way that the audience sees J's upper back and R's upper chest. Both are dressed in the standard white t-shirt and jeans worn by the cast. The uniformity of the costume of the cast cites at least two specific scenes: prison uniforms as well as the association between the wearing of large t-shirts with jeans or shorts by brown and black peoples and criminality.

*Black screen.*

**R** (voice only): What's up homie?

**J:** I'm doing good man.

**R:** You feeling real good?

**J:** Doing REAL good.

**R:** For real?

*Shot fades in. Pan to close up of J and R.*

**J:** For real

**R** (yelling)**:** For real?

**J:** For real, for real

**R:** Who made this?

**J:** That shit got made on the stove holmes.

**R:** Technicolor didn't make this shit.

**J:** Nah.

**R:** Take a deep breath. (pause) It's that California cheese, everybody loves it!

**J:** Happy cows man. Happy cows.

**R:** Are you feeling indoors?—going up a lot of nostrils, up a lot of veins…

**J:** They smell this shit they got it.

**R:** Are you feeling it, though?

**J:** I'm feeling it.

**R:** Are you feeling the potency of it all?

**J:** Yea man—

**R** (*crescendo)***:** That shit is better than Viagra! You know that?

Everybody's getting' hard off this shit!

**J:** They all over me man.

**R** (loud)**:** Are you hard homie?

**J:** I'm hard man.

**R:** Are you for real hard?

**J:** For real.

**R:** (softly) Are you ready to die hard man?

**J:** If that's how it goes.

**R:** It's a live and die thang, you know that?

**J:** Yea man.

**R:** You can't take it back once you got that tattoo on your body.

**J:** For life.

**R:** For life.

**J:** For life.

As their dialogue slips in and out of public and private spaces, R and J speak, for the most part, in a black vernacular. The conversation begins in the public—salutations are exchanged. The conversation then moves to food which teeters on the boundary of public/private. *R: Are you feeling indoors?—going up a lot of nostrils, up a lot of veins…J: They smell this shit they got it.* In this iteration, food is public in the sense that the two prisoners are conversing about the making of a spread—a communal act whose product will be shared with audience members during the show. But in the discussion of the communal/public presence of the food and its movement into bodies, slippage occurs where the diction employed mirrors language associated with the use of illegal drugs, namely cocaine and heroin[51] which, throughout the past century, have been tied to differently raced bodies. Towards the end of the Vietnam War, American veterans were dealing with not only posttraumatic stress, but also heroin addictions. According to Congressman Robert Steele, in 1971, approximately 15% of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were addicted to heroin.[52] Despite this history, since the 1980s both the media and the United States government have articulated black and brown bodies as the main sources of criminality around the drug trade. [53] By highlighting Anthony's experience with the carceral state, the LAPD makes

[51] For a more detailed delineation of discourse around drugs in the latter half of the 20th century in the United States, see Curtis Marez's *Drug Wars*.

[52] Liz Ronk."The War Within: Portraits of Vietnam Veterans Fighting Heroin Addiction," *Time*, 24 January 2014, http://time.com/3878718/vietnam-veterans-heroin-addiction-treatment-photos/, accessed 21 August 2016.

[53] During the 1970s, President Nixon called for a "War on Drugs." Continuing into the Reagan administration, state sanctioned narratives demonized the usage of crack cocaine, linking the drug to black communities and criminality. Depictions of the "epidemic" including a plethora of images/narratives about drug-addicted black mothers and welfare queens, worked to cement the commonsensical imagery of black criminality.

visible histories of United States' involvement with the drug trade. Through *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters*, the LAPD connects U.S. imperialism in Asia and colonization in the Americas, illustrating not only the pervasiveness of hegemonic structures, but also that the shared experiences present in transnational sites of spatial dispossession map distant communities in a shared cartography of struggle. LAPD's repertoire thus points to hieroglyphics of the flesh that have yet to become intelligible as such. In order to grasp and convey the magnitude of the human hierarchal structure and spatial practices opposed to it, black geographies must be understood as created and inhabited by bodies that frequently not only do not read as black, but also undergo forms of violence that do not easily read as such—like Anthony's conditioned body. An understanding of blackness as a subject positioning rather than skin color, opens up potentialities for the resistant communities structures that refuse to coalesced around constructions produced and enforced by the carceral state.

Spread scene. *State of Incarceration*. Photo: Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty

*State of Incarceration* comes to a close with a scene that matches the LAPD's intentional cultivation of solidarity among marginalized groups in a racist, classist, heteropatriarchal society:

the making and sharing of the spread discussed in R and J's earlier dialogue. R narrates this scene and throughout the narration, the camera pans from R to the characters making the spread and zooms into a close up of the process. *R: Now that you're clean, you get your ramen, you get your tomatoes, you get your onions, you get your garlic.* Camera zooms out to a medium, overhead shot. Audience sees R with his arms almost fully extended in front of his body, parallel to the floor, reaching over the tarp laid out for the making of the spread. R's hands are flapping, invoking popular images of primitivism (e.g. shaman, witch doctor, and etcetera). During this pause in dialogue, the audience hears the shuffling of the actors and the items used to make the spread. After this short pause, R picks up his narrative and begins to give orders pertaining to the garlic. *Mince it down…it's the music of the garlic*. Upon this cue, the characters begin to make noises that evoke images of African tribal dances while pounding the garlic. They hold a clove of garlic in the palm of their left hand as they slap down on the garlic with their right. They walk around the space and continue this sequence until R yells, "Stop!" Like the repetition in Anthony's monologue, the repeated pounding highlights the continuous, cyclical nature of the prisoners' precarity. The pounding also accentuates the labor involved in navigating sites of spatial dispossession. The making and dissemination of the spread is a communal (classed)[54] act. In a dominant symbolic system that renders blacks less than human and actively creates obstacles to the formation and maintenance of black community life, the articulation of (collective) presence is a labor-intensive act. The "spread scene," as well as "In the Hole," illustrates some of the black geographies that manifest in response to the devaluation of black life and suggests the

[54] In the United States, ramen noodles are often a staple in low income as well as college student communities; they are relatively inexpensive, versatile (thinking here about the spread), and only require hot water to cook.

presence of undercommons in disparate sites of spatial dispossession. As an instantiation of collectivity, multiple people contribute to the preparation of the meal and in the production, the actors share the spread with the audience. While in that collective space gender matters in the sense that it often mitigates/affects the types of violences enacted upon the body and thus, the avenues by which one undergoes absentification, in that space of "nonbeing", the body becomes, to a certain degree, ungendered and unraced (or more accurately, raced as anything and everything but white). The opening up of the performance to audience members, which are seated in prison beds throughout the set, marks their bodies as part of the incarcerated community. Echoing Anthony's psychological seeking out for community, the cast attempts to map a cartography of struggle that implicates all bodies in the room, charging individuals with the task of combating racializing assemblages that devalue black life and place black geographies under erasure.

**Conclusion**

The current demographics of sites of spatial dispossession echo histories of the devaluation of black life in the United States. As indexed throughout the Los Angeles Poverty Department's performance archive, spatial dispossession is a complex, violent process. In capitalist sites of spatial dispossession, black and brown bodies are not only removed/re-placed, but also the capitalist logics that promote said dispossession create a circular narrative that naturalizes black and brown bodies as belonging in spaces of homelessness and incarceration. Both *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed* are play projects derived from the experiences of members of the Los Angeles Poverty Department who have lived or are currently living in sites of spatial dispossession. Filmic excerpts of both pieces are archived

online. As archives of spatial dispossession, it is important to address the ways in which technology mediates readings of the pieces. During the beginning of "In the Hole," the camera zooms in and out of close ups of Anthony's face. The camera then pans to the audience, emphasizing their presence. For the remainder of the scene, the camera zooms in and out of long and medium shots of Anthony. The shifts appear to attempt to align with Anthony's choreography; if Anthony uses mostly his upper body to convey meaning, the camera zooms in. If Anthony utilizes his lower body (while dancing for example), the camera zooms out to capture his entire body. Regardless of the range of the shoot, throughout the majority of the scene the online audience can see audience members of the Queens Museum production. This is not the case for *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed*.

Unlike *State of Incarceration*, *Chasing Monsters* was filmed by a LAPD member and that is reflected in the archive. The Africa scene begins as a medium shot of Africa's murder and the delineation of the crime scene with yellow caution tape and the white taping around Africa's body. For the remainder of the scene, the camera zooms in and out of close-ups and medium shots of the actors in the piece. While the viewer can see the audience in the medium shots, it is clear that they are not the focus of the lens; they exist as background text. In the juxtaposition of these two documented productions, the question becomes, "Who is this for?" The camerawork of *State of Incarceration* seems to suggest the production is for the audience—the cameraperson attempts to capture audience engagement and for a moment, moves completely away from the LAPD actors to capture a broader range of audience members. However, the camerawork of *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed* is about and for LAPD members and their communities. At no point in the filmed production does the camera focus on audience members. Throughout the Africa scene, the camera attempts to capture the corporeality of the actors embodying the

text. It appears as if the cameraperson's investment is in documenting the narratives of the LAPD performers and their attempt at making their experiences legible through both speech and embodied practice; the focus is on the visibility of a specific black geography—living with mental illness in Skid Row. Consequently, the film's aesthetic focus matches the play's emphasis on making the complexities of living with mental illness in Skid Row visible. Despite the discrepancy in filmic emphasizes, what if we view *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed* as examples of the articulation of presence, as spatial irruptions that forefront subjectivity? What if, through these devised pieces, the Los Angeles Poverty Department underscores not only the presence of obstacles facing communities of spatial dispossession, but also the presence of vibrant communities in these spaces that continue to flourish in opposition to the devaluation of their black lives? What future possibilities can be imagined?

## **Chapter 2** *Ghostly Looks: Visibility and Common Sense in the Medea Project*

> …there I saw a very young ghostess who hid herself under a small bush which covered the bottom of this tree. She ran out unexpectedly and when she ran out I saw her clearly that she was very ugly so that she could not live in any town of ghosts, except to be hiding herself about in the bush both day and night for her ugly appearance. But her ugly appearance was so curious to me that I was chasing her as she was running away to see her ugliness to my satisfaction, because I had never seen such a very ugly creature as this since I was born and since entered the Bush of Ghosts.[55]
>
> —Unnamed male narrator in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

> "Got ghosts? Disappearing? Where in the bush is urban America?"
>
> —Rhodessa Jones, *My Life in the Concrete Jungle*

In the opening of the filmed stage production of *My Life in the Concrete Jungle* (2006), a play by the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, both the video-watching and live audience are informed that the performance is inspired by Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola's 1954 novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. In the film, scrolling text (and ostensibly in the program for the live audience) gives the audience a synopsis of the abridged version of the novel that the women participating in the project read: "Once upon a time, in Africa, there lived a small child. When war came to his village, the child escaped into the Bush of Ghosts, the Land of the Dead. For twenty years, he wandered. Baptized by fire and hot water, he became like a fully dead person. Until one day, he found his way home." Drawing on Tutuola's imaginative and mythical

[55] Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 86.

work, the Medea Project questions the ways in which people (particularly project participants) live with and as ghosts as well as questions the location of the bush in the urban United States, and in doing so, marks the abjection of (primarily black) women from the realm of care and recognition. In the introduction to chapter 1, I explored some of the ways in which transparency becomes mapped onto bodies in sites of spatial dispossession. There I emphasized how the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) illustrates ways in which Skid Row residents articulate themselves as individual human subjects with histories outside their current conditions. In *My Life in the Concrete Jungle*, the Medea Project participants also resist the mapping of transparency by disrupting what Kara Keeling might term "commonsensical images."


The Medea Project presents *My Life in the Concrete Jungle* at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco. Performers include Gee Dee, Felicia Scaggs, Summer Shapiro, Tamika Chenier, and Andrea Wilson. Photo courtesy of the Medea Project

Building on Bergson's concept of affection, Keeling argues that common sense memory images are a collective set of images common to the popular imaginary that affect perception. Frequently, common-sense images manifest as clichés and, consequently, reify stereotypes such as the hypersexualized black woman. In these instances, it becomes clear that "[f]or those identity-based groups that traditionally have been denied access to the mechanisms of

representation, the politics of representation is primarily a politics of visibility."[56] I am interested in how the mobilization of the ghostess figure in the production ruptures common sense and the potential created when the memory-images called forth by perceiving the black, incarcerated, female body don't fit.

In the creative narration of their stories, the women incarcerated at San Francisco Jail #8 not only name and interrogate their dispossession, but also call on their audience to recognize their involvement in the women's subjection to and the repetition of the violences that frequent that space of nonbeing through a performative action I term "ghostly looks." Ghostly looks is a tactic that the specter figure utilizes or engages with to make visible the violences that enabled or ushered forth their dispossession. It is a performative spatial irruption that disrupts representational and ideological spaces like the popular imaginary. It is one of the ways that the specter haunts. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon argues that

> [i]f haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost[ess] is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place…The ghost or apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes *makes itself known or apparent to us*, in its own way, of course.[57] (emphasis added)

[56] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 44.

[57] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

For Gordon, the specter makes visible events, power structures, ideologies, and geographies that continue to haunt someone's/the everyday. I would like to extend Gordon's argument by adding that the ghost(ess) makes its historicity known. Grounded in real living people and their material experiences, the spectral figure refuses abstraction and speaks to the "origins" of its existence. Performing ghostly looks, the ghostess names the processes by which she was dispossessed. Due to the duality of "being there" and simultaneously "not there," not of this world yet of this world, I find the figure of the ghostess particularly provocative in thinking through the relationship between gender, blackness, violence, and vision.

I open this chapter with an epigraph from the eleventh chapter in Tutuola's novel, not only because the Medea Project's production (the subject of this chapter) is loosely based on the work, but also because I am interested in what the figure of the ghostess enables. Writers and scholars across diverse disciplines[58] have interrogated the productivity of utilizing the ghostly figure as a site of theorization. Achille Mbembe argues that specular experiences are "*extreme forms of human life, death-worlds*, forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead (ghosts)" (emphasis

[58] Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994) is frequently a point of departure for scholarly inquiry into the specter figure. Other notable works (not addressed in this chapter) include María Del Pilar Blanco's *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination*, and a series of anthologies published by Blanco and Esther Peeren. I begin my investigation with Mbembe's work because it specificity addresses the specter figure in the context of Nigeria, the setting of Tutuola's novel, as well as power structures prevalent in (post)colonial spaces of dispossession.

in original).[59] For Mbembe, people only enter the spectral realm through loss—the visit is never intentional. Employing Tutuola's work to explore what happens when male human subjects enter the ghostly realm, Mbembe posits that spectral worlds are sites in which the work conducted in the struggle for life becomes visible. Following Mbembe, I argue that by providing the space for previously invisible labor to come to the fore, the ghostly realm is an imaginative/symbolic site conducive to performative spatial irruptions. Although the fictional texts Mbembe uses to make his argument are situated in the context of mid-20th century colonial Nigeria, the spaces of dispossession engendered, at least in part, by capitalism that Mbembe dissects in Tutuola's text resonate with the Medea Project's engagement with the 21st century American prison system.

In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, capitalism serves as a catalyst for the narrator's displacement. The narrator enters the bush during his attempt to escape with his brother from slave traders. Due to his brother's injury, the narrator and his brother become separated and the narrator accidentally enters the Bush of Ghosts. As will be discussed in this paper, both Tutuola's narrator and the Medea Project's ghostesses enter the bush through violence tied to (global) capitalist enterprises (slavery and the prison industrial complex respectively). In "Nigerian Women in Prison: Hostages in Law," criminologist Biko Agozino argues that the history of the implementation of the prison in Nigeria (during transatlantic slavery) and the present-day imprisonment of women in Nigeria are directly tied.[60] During the colonial period,

[59] Achille Mbembe, "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola," *Research in African Literatures* vol 34, 4 (Indiana University Press, 2003): 1.

[60] It is important to note that Agozino also details how Nigerian prisons (unlike most of their western counterparts) also function as a tool of oppression of the elite as well, particularly when during the transition of different regimes of power.

Nigerian prisons were erected to house kidnapped Africans and other resistant Africans.[61] In modern-day Nigeria, women are frequently imprisoned due to their involvement in survival economies which are often necessary for survival in country subjected to decrees made by foreign aid providers (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) that propel the Nigerian government to cut funding from public programs that help serve as a safety net for poor Nigerians.[62] As detailed in the previous chapter (and further elaborated later in this chapter), in the United States, the attack on welfare and decrease in government spending on public assistance programs also has helped shuttle women into survival economies and engagement with self-medication. Although Tutuola's novel does not discuss women's incarceration, an analysis of the functioning of spatial dispossession of the ghostess figures and the Medea Project's mobilization of spectral figures highlights the shared conditions of historic and contemporary spatial dispossession articulated above. In addition, although the magnitude is quite different, both slavery and the prison industrial complex disrupt families through spatial dispossession. By using *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and the specter as frameworks for understanding women imprisonment in the United States, the Medea Project draws transhistorical and transnational connections between two disparate sites of black diasporic dispossession—two lands of the dead. Following the Medea Project's mobilization of Tutuola's specters, this chapter uses the figure of the ghostess to interrogate how the gendered specter helps us rethink the relationship between visibility, gender, and violence in sites of spatial

[61] Biko Agozino, "Nigerian Women in Prison: Hostages in Law," *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex,* ed. Julia Sudbury (New York: Routledge, 2005), 188-9.

[62] Ibid., 190.

dispossession as well as actor/spectator dynamics. What alternatives or survival strategies does it help us imagine?

**The Ghostess in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts***

Approached through an analysis of the ghostess characters, the gender politics in Tutuola's novel are quite complicated. Throughout his journey in the Bush of Ghosts, the narrator encounters several female ghostesses, the most notable being his future wives, a group of women who marry women because they were betrayed by men, and the television-handed goddess who compels the narrator to fix her disfigurement. The majority of ghostesses the reader encounters are powerful either through their class status, their magic, or both. The narrator's second wife, for instance, is a beautiful "Superlady" or ghostly therianthrope—a ghostess with who can metamorphose into animals—and the only daughter of the most powerful witch and wizard in both the ghostly and earthly realms. While the Superlady exemplifies her power and agency on multiple occasions including proposing to the narrator, saving him from imprisonment, and kicking him out of their home following an argument, her sole motivating force is to give the narrator pleasure. Like the aforementioned ghostesses, the Superlady's actions are heavily dictated by the narrator. In addition, the narrator, who serves as the authoritative voice in the novel, articulates ghost[esses] as possessing limited sentience when he leaves his first wife. During his departure, he notes, "Of course, when I thought it over within myself that however an earthly person might love ghosts, ghosts could not like him heartily in any respect."[63] Despite their potency, the narrator's wives are depicted as lacking depth of

[63] Tutuola, 64.

emotion as well as desire outside of the domestic, wife trope tied to Enlightenment ideals.[64] In declaring ghosts as lacking sentience, the narrator, a nonnative inhabitant of the bush, echoes colonial narratives (and their attendant power structures) about insentient black people. The subordination of female characters, and ghosts more generally, to the human narrator maps a continuation of gender hierarchies present in the colonial model onto a fictional text published on the eve of Nigeria's independence, suggesting the perversity said structure. While I find these ghostess figures provocative in thinking through gender politics in the novel, I am most interested in a female specter who makes a fleeting encounter with the narrator—the ugly ghostess.

Unlike the ghostesses featured in Tutuola's novel (who each have at least one chapter dedicated to them and their relationship with the narrator), the ugly ghostess lacks magic as well as class status. In the chapter of interest, the young male character has just escaped from imprisonment inside a pitcher in the 20th town of ghosts and runs away from the town. Eventually he stops to rest and decides to sleep inside an empty log. Unbeknownst to the narrator, the log belongs to a one-armed ghost. When the ghost returns and encounters the young "earthly person," the ghost falsely proclaims, "'Oh you are the one who is always coming here and stealing all my property whenever I go out, I will catch you this night, just hold on for a minute.'"[65] The ghost calls his friends for help and once again the narrator is on the run. Here, the narrator's status as an earthly person, an alien in the Bush of Ghosts, serves as a catalyst for

[64] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). In this text, McKittrick discusses how black women's geographies disrupt Enlightenment gender binaries.

[65] Tutuola, 84.

intentional misrecognition. The one-armed ghost knows that the narrator is not the thief (if indeed one exists), but he uses the narrator's humanness as proof of guilt. The narrator recognizes the racialized or species-ist discourse at play ("But when he [one-armed ghost] heard the words of 'earthly person' from me, he exclaimed…")[66] and the potential harms that accompany the accusation, including re-incarceration. Ironically, as the scene continues, the narrator performs his own (institutionalized) misrecognition of the ugly ghostess. While running, the narrator enters a bush that sounds alarms that indicate his location whenever he moves. Rather than finding a place to hide so the alarms will stop, he continues to run because, now, he is also chasing someone/thing—the ugly ghostess. As articulated by the narrator,

> …there I saw a very young ghostess who hid herself under a small bush which covered the bottom of this tree. She ran out unexpectedly and when she ran out I saw her clearly that she was very ugly so that she could not live in any town of ghosts, except to be hiding herself about in the bush both day and night for her ugly appearance. But her ugly appearance was so curious to me that I was chasing her as she was running away…As I was chasing her to and fro to look at her ugliness it was so this bush was blowing various fearful alarms and this was pointing out how I was running and how far reaching in the bush to the ghosts who were chasing me at the back to kill me. This young ghostess was so ugly that if she hid under a bush and if she looked at her ugly body she would burst suddenly into a great laugh which would last more than one hour and this was detecting her out of the hidden place she might hide herself…"It is better for me to die than to

[66] Ibid.

leave this ugly ghostess and run away without seeing her ugliness clearly to my entire satisfaction."[67]

The narrator's professed need to see echoes the scopophilia critiqued by Hartman, Fanon and others. Numerous scholars of the African diaspora across various disciplines have critiqued (sometimes implicitly) scopophilia, particularly in relationship to colonizer/colonized, free/enslaved, white/black power relations. In his article, "'What Ails You Polyphemus': Toward a New Ontology of Vision," Maurice Wallace engages with Frantz Fanon's canonical text, *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to elucidate Fanon's critique of monocularism as well as call for a "new ontology of sight."[68] According to Wallace, Fanon critiques scopophilia in two distinct ways: "everyday habits of seeing in racialized societies" and the "hegemony of vision" in philosophical discourse as well as in institutions and administrations of governmentality.[69] Wallace (through Fanon) emphasizes the ways in which constructions of race (and all the matter that circulates with them) color vision, particularly in relationship to viewing and understanding ones relationship to differently raced bodies. Analyzing a canonical example from Fanon's text, Wallace argues, "That the gazing little [white] boy cannot perceive the 'nigger' shivering, despite the logic of temperature, only quivering with black rage, confirms the monocular condition which I take to be emblematic of the difficulty racialists have of 'seeing' black

[67] Ibid., 86-87.

[68] Maurice 0. Wallace, "'What Ails You Polyphemus': Toward a New Ontology of Vision in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*," in *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African-American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 177.

[69] Ibid., 171.

subjects clearly."[70] While, here, Wallace points to the interpellation of (nonblack) subjects into a particular way of seeing that disallows the emergence of visible black subjects that do not fit neatly within preexisting paradigms of supposed blackness or black subjectivity, Wallace's argument resonates with the assumed criminality mapped onto Tutuola's narrator's body when the one-armed ghost sees his earthliness. Returning to the ghostess figures in the novel and the Medea Project, learned ways of seeing, or common sense, hinders the intelligibility of black subjectivity.

While the aforementioned theorists, their contemporaries, and new scholarship on scopophilia (Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* for example), have been pivotal in shaping my approach to exploring the relationship between vision, power dynamics, and race, my work attempts to re-route the focus from colonizer/colonized, white/black dichotomies. Instead, this chapter examines the ways in which gender affects these relationships as well as the ways in which both people of color and whites are interpellated into a monocular view of black women that both compels them to desire to see the gendered black body and simultaneously not to see black women's subjectivity. In other words, I am interested in the ways in which what Christina Sharpe terms "monstrous intimacies" can be on the one hand, acknowledged as monstrous, but one the other, through their mundaneness—the frequency with which these acts are committed against black women—are de facto accepted as not monstrous. In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Sharpe defines monstrous intimacies as "a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often

[70] Ibid., 173.

unacknowledged to be monstrous," which "involve shame or trauma," such as rape, for example.[71] Sharpe highlights the ways in which monstrous acts are reinscribed repeatedly as consensual and felicitous. Putting Sharpe's monstrous intimacies in conversation with critiques of scopophilia and my own work on spatial irruptions, "ghostly looking/looks" is an enactment of a performative spatial irruption that forces the spectator to see the monstrous intimacies to which the subject has been subjected to and/or forces the spectator to recognize their own ugliness, i.e. their complicity in these atrocities and in the rendering of the subject as flesh.

I specifically turn to the ugly ghostess as a point of departure for this chapter because her ephemerality, both within Tutuola's storyline and the structure of the text, echoes the Medea Project audience's fleeting encounter with the women participants. Although the performance is potentially not ephemeral since digital copies of the production are available for viewership, it is fleeting in the sense that not only is the live audience's physical proximity to the participants temporary, but the incarcerated women's engagement with the "free" world is also temporary; following the performance, they will return to jail, one of the many locations in the bush of urban America, a realm of spatial dispossession. Additionally, the specter's ghostly subject position as abjected abject—a ghostess who is "very ugly so that she could not live in any town of ghosts, except to be hiding herself about in the bush both day and night for her ugly appearance"[72]— is

[71] Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

[72] Tutuola, 86.

particularly provocative in that it maps a site from which one can make what was previously largely invisible, visible.[73]

In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Tutuola's narrator's relationship to the ugly ghostess and said specter's relationship to the ghostly realm exemplify the types of critique and investments I explore in the Medea Project. When the narrator proclaims that the specter laughs because of her ugliness, he assumes an interiority and consequently maps transparency unto her body. Despite his supposition, the narrator (and reader) cannot know the reason(s) behind the ghostess' affect. The ghostess refuses knowability through her constant flight. Throughout the chase, the narrator is never able to see her ugliness to his entire satisfaction. In this reader's reading of the scene, contained within the ghostess' laughter is the haunting of grotesque histories of African/black female bodies on display that include women such as Saartjie Baartman whose spectacularized body was put on display pre and postmortem. Perhaps when the ghostess laughs during the game of keep away, she is laughing at the narrator's uninterrogated drive to see and an African man's interpellation into a hegemonic way of seeing manifest in colonialism or perhaps she is laughing because by only enabling glimpses, the ghostess taunts the narrator and ultimately refuses to adhere to the gendered and racialized transhistorical logic of visualization. Perhaps none or both of these hypotheses are true. As abjected abject, as a ghost not accepted by ghosts, the ugly ghostess inhabits a unique position from which to interrogate the

[73] Relatedly, in her reading of Fanon, Sylvia Wynter argues that les damnés, the wretched of the earth, provide a subject position from which to imagine ontological sovereignty since "because of their systematic marginalization, they were forced to daily experience their deviance, their *imposed* liminal status with respect to the normative order, and to what it is to be human in terms of that order." David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," November 19-20, 1999, 135-136.

collusion of visuality, blackness, gender, and dispossession. Consequently, I turn to the figure of the ugly ghostess to think through the Medea Project's reimagining of Tutuola's novel within the context of women imprisonment in the United States. I argue that the participants in *My Life in the Concrete Jungle* and *We Just Telling Stories* (2000), a documentary offering a behind-the-scenes look at the Medea Project workshop and rehearsal process, interrogate conditioned ways of seeing, illustrating the pervasiveness of hegemonic structures' compulsion of interpellated subjects to see in a way that renders (incarcerated) black women's subjectivity illegible, as well as enact ghostly looks that forefront their audience's contributions to their present state of spatial dispossession.

### *The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women*

Unlike the dialogical structure of the Los Angeles Poverty Department, the theater company explored in the previous chapter, the Medea Project functions largely under Rhodessa Jones' artistic direction (although collaboration remains a key component).[74] In the words of the artist herself, "From the beginning, it has been mine. *I'm* the one that walks the floor. Oh, *yeah*. I take full responsibility. See, *always* Rhodessa puts the show together. And the shape of the show is mine"[75] (emphasis in original). The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women was founded by Rhodessa Jones in 1989 as part of Cultural Odyssey, an organization dedicated to supporting the work of Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor. Jones' "Big Butt Girls, Hard Headed Women" production was based on her experience teaching at the San Francisco County

[74] Rena Fraden, *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 46.

[75] Rhodessa Jones in Fraden, 46.

Jail and served as a catalyst for the Medea Project.[76] Each performance is structured around a particular myth in order to foster a sense of community for the participants, bringing women together as they share personal experiences that resonate with the themes present in the myth—hence the title of the project. Women who are interested in participating in the project are interviewed by Jones and her project partner Sean Reynolds (a social worker who has worked closely with the incarcerated performers since the inauguration of the Medea Project) and are informed of the participation requirements. While the first meeting usually has a strong showing, by the time of the scheduled performances, the number has usually dwindled down to six to twelve women due to a multitude of reasons including transfers to state prison, releases, lack of interest, and sometimes Jones and Reynolds ask women who aren't serious about the work to leave.[77] Working with women incarcerated in the Bay area (more recently, South Africa as well), Jones (and Reynolds) use theater to help women process their journey into prison, imagine alternatives to their current situation, and illuminate these women's experiences to a broader audience. As articulated by Rena Fraden in *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women*, "As Jones sees it, the defiantly imaginative and unreal space of the theater, a space that collapses time and genre, historical and mythical realms, allows the participants in the Medea Project to experience an alternate reality, one that can be changed, lived through differently."[78] During the workshops that take place for months before the actual performance,

[76] "About the Medea Project," *The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women*, https://themedeaproject.weebly.com/, accessed 22 April 2018.

[77] Sean Reynolds in Fraden, 79.

[78] Ibid., 49-50.

the participants are able to restage significant events in their life and choose a different path. Like the articulated goal of the *How I Got Over* from the Introduction, with Reynold's direction, the workshops serve as a form of drama therapy for the women incarcerated at San Francisco Jail #8.

***My Life in the Concrete Jungle***

This is about a girl.

This is about babies. Cities.

San Francisco. Oakland. Richmond.

This is about Army Street.

6th Street. The Helen Hotel.

When the days of dead luck came to the hood.

The girl was caught in the concrete jungle.

Another land of the dead.

Disappeared into the Bush administration.

Somewhere between the jailhouse,

The crack house, the 'ho house,

The White House—

Anaesthetized by Fire and Smoke.

She was missing.

Gone for several lifetimes.

Until this day she wonders:

Can she get back home?

-Fe Batle, *My Life in the Concrete Jungle*

*My Life in the Concrete Jungle* is a play by the Medea Project that premiered at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater in November 2005. Loosely based on Tutuola's novel, the production explores the intertwining of sexual and physical violence, gender, race, and class in the lives of the women participants at San Francisco Jail #8 and how histories of dispossession continue to haunt. While relating the women's experiences, the performance also showcases the women's willingness or ability to fight back against instantiations of violence and their precaritization. Within the play, the ghostess manifests in two forms—some women are represented as ghostesses while others have a ghost within them. In this section of the chapter, I will explore three consecutive scenes in the play that utilize the ghostess figure to interrogate the relationship between visuality and the concrete jungle: "The Ghost Within Me," "My Soul," and "I Wasn't Waving."

"The Ghost Within Me" scene. *We're Just Telling Stories*. Photo: Courtesy The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women

The production costumes and set design illustrate that the concrete jungle is one of many lands of the dead that make up the Bush of Ghosts. "The Ghost Within Me" scene is a dramatic telling of "The Ghost Inside", a poem by Nicole Stewart about a woman whose boyfriend frequently beat her and on one occasion, took her to a pier and threatened to kill her. Three cast members sit and verbalize the poem while the ensemble performs corresponding choreography

upstage. The two women who embody the narrator are inmates at the San Francisco jail and are dressed in dark-colored camouflage. The dark green, tan, and black camo matches the production's set which includes a stage floor and the upstage screen decorated with camo. The use of this specific pattern and colors mark the concrete jungle as related to the military and prison industrial complexes, two regimes that inhabit the bush and render both domestic and international othered bodies flesh through multiscalar forms of warfare, including the war on drugs, welfare, and SNAP; imperialist interventions; the war in Iraq; mandatory sentencing minimums; attacks on immigration like the elimination of DACA and racialized deportation policies; and etcetera. Affecting people's livelihoods by limiting options to economic advancement and/or criminalizing survival mechanisms, these regimes feed capitalism and vice-versa at the expense of the poor and people of color.[79] Within the scene as well as the larger performance, the two actresses' corresponding costumes mark them as belonging to the bush, as produced in part by assemblages larger than the geographically-specific structures and events that induced the women's spectrality. The embodiment of the narrator by two differently raced actresses (one white, one black) in addition to the fact that the women take turns verbalizing the poem rather than narrating in unison individualizes the women and in doing so, emphasizes the multiplicity present in the shared space of the bush. Unlike the rest of the production, during

[79] In addition to Agozino's article, for a global context, see Julia Sudbury's anthology (of which the article is part) *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex* (New York: Routledge, 2005) as well as Angela Davis article "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry" in Wahneema Lubiano's anthology *The House that Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 264-279.

"The Ghost Within Me" the audience learns that a specter (at least within this scene) lives within the women. Embodied by the other speaking actress, the ghost is the narrator's boyfriend.

Juxtaposed against the costumes of the two actresses, the brightly colored dress of the other poem performer (Gina Dawson, a professional dancer) illustrates that the boyfriend character does not inhabit the same ghostly realm as the narrators. As indicated in the poem, the boyfriend possesses the narrator—the narrator is a ghostess possessed. In *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, Esther Peeren argues that the ghost[ess]'s ability to haunt allows for spectral agency. Building on Derrida, she argues that "the ambivalent force of the *es spukt* [ghost], invisible yet not beyond being perceived and recognized, potentially allows the vulnerable ghost to struggle against the spectralizing systems by which it is produced as invisible and irrelevant. The idea is for the ghost to come to haunt or possess (in the sense of inhabiting and disintegrating) its conjurer."[80] In other words, the ghostess' spectral powers enable a form of dissidence, a haunting that can counter invisibility. By possessing the haunted, the ghostess can assert her presence bodily. However, "The Ghost Within Me" scene showcases that this notion of spectral agency does not attend to the specificity of black and other minority women's experiences of being rendered ghostly. The poem and its narration pose the questions "What happens when the ghostess herself is possessed?" "How does one exorcize one specter from another?" The "ghost inside" the women represents deep histories of precaritization, gendered, racialized, and classed violence as well as the participants' specific histories and relationship to violence tied to (in)visibility. In sites of spatial dispossession like the

[80] Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan, 2014), 20.

prison, there are limited possibilities for agency considering that the ghost that haunts is tied to the events and structures that contribute to the women's precarity as well as the fact that the performers from San Francisco Jail #8 are in fact currently incarcerated in a system that has its own attendant mechanisms of control. "The Ghost Within Me" scene shows that spectral agency must manifest differently for women of color, particularly in sites of spatial dispossession, because women of color paradoxically simultaneously exist as hypervisible and invisible. At the conclusion of the scene, the women repeat three lines from the poem "How long was I asleep?", "Did I die?", and "Who woke me up?" Within the context of the poem, the narrator says these lines after she wakes up from a blackout following a beating; however, the Medea Project repurposes these questions in the next scene to illustrate what a spectral agency representative of the material conditions of the women performers and others inhabiting the bush might look like.

At the tail end of the scene, Jones projects her voice and advocates for physical resistance. She proclaims "We're not having it. Hell nah. You put a gun to my head, you better kill me mutha fucker. Take him down. Take him down. There's a war on women in this world and we've got to know high-heeled shoes can be a very dangerous thing. Fuck him up. Fuck him up." As Jones completes her lines the women walk downstage in a predatory manner. When they reach the front of the stage, the women perform the "Kicking Dance," a staple of Medea Project productions. As described by Fraden, "In it [the Kicking Dance] the women stand in line and advance upstage (sic). At a certain point, they all together break out fighting, kicking, arms punching, not each other, but straight ahead, as if at some invisible foe. And then together, they stop, arms to the side, stepping back, en masse, continuing to watch the audience. Forward again,

they repeat the Kicking Dance."[81] The Kicking Dance happens during every Medea Project production and it allows the women to both confront the audience and act out their anger.[82] Due to the Kicking Dance's repeated presence, each iteration of the dance is ghosted by the one(s) before. In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory-Machine*, Marvin Carlson argues that ghosting is one of the key features of theater. As defined by Carlson, "ghosting presents the identical thing they [the audience] have encountered before, although now, in a somewhat different context. Thus a recognition not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity, becomes a part of the reception process, with results that can complicate this process considerably."[83] For audience members familiar with Jones' work, the reception of the production's kicking dance is haunted by earlier viewed versions. Even if the audience has never seen a Medea Project production before, the Kicking Dance still serves as a form of ghosting because not only have several participants performed in multiple productions (so the current rendition of the dance is ghosted by their prior enactments), but also each corporeal representation of rage is haunted by the histories of dispossession that produced the women's anger. In addition to portraying the them as dangerous foes, the women's ghostly looks in this scene highlight that past histories of dispossession continue to act in the present through affective responses to enforced precarity.

The synchronized elements of the dance make the power of the collectivity apparent. During the repeat, Jones continues her voiceover: "If you hit me I'll hit you back. You might kill me but I'm going to take one of your eyeballs with me baby. Take him down girl. Take him

[81] Fraden, 95.

[82] Jones in Fraden, 96.

[83] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory-Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 7.

down. Go for the nuts hunny. Go for the nuts. Those high-heeled shoes." In her verbal manifesto, Jones calls on the women to use an everyday, feminized object as a weapon against gender violence. Acknowledging that the women may not actually win the fight, Jones argues that regardless of the result, the women can make their presence and resistance felt. Spectral agency, here then, manifests as the women's/ghostesses' un-suturing of themselves from the "conjurer"—the perpetrator(s) that helped shuttle them into the concrete jungle. The move away from possession to detachment suggests that if the mechanism of dispossession is tied to monstrous intimacies, possession isn't a viable option for spectral agency since haunting is dependent upon the body (and sometimes recognition by) of the other. Rather than enact the agency depicted in Tutuola's novel by the majority of the ghostesses, the Medea Project ghostesses follow the tradition of the ugly ghostess who seeks disassociation. Additionally, by repurposing an accessory item during the Kicking Dance, the women disrupt entrenched ideologies of the passive female and the logic of visualization that mark them as a potential target/victim. Now the aggressors, the women continue to challenge hegemonic ways of looking in the next scenes, "My Soul" and "I Wasn't Waving."

Through choreography and blocking, the Medea Project interrogates the politics of visibility. The scene "My Soul" opens with the project participants on stage with their backs turned to the audience. The sonic environment lacks music and voice. Almost silent, the ambiance emphasizes the performers' hand dancing, another key component of Medea Project

"My Soul" scene. *We're Just Telling Stories*. Photo: Courtesy The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women

productions. Hand dancing is a set of hand movements created by Jones that women in the production usually perform during prayers or chants.[84] In the scene of interest, the following choreography takes place:

> The women stand with both of their arms down at their sides. The right arm comes up and bends perpendicular to the stage floor so that closed fingertips can lightly touch the forehead. The same arm then extends straight out, palm up. The elbow bends back into its former position, this time to allow the fingertips to touch the back of the right shoulder. The index finger (or multiple fingers) touches the heart. A one-handed wave (like a greeting or goodbye) ensues. The right arm bends so that the index finger, which is extended vertically, touches the chin. Then the arm extends out while maintaining the pointed hand gesture. The index finger (or multiple fingers) touches heart. Both arms extend up, elbows bent, and forearms cross while waving. The right arm is up, turned horizontally so it is parallel with floor while the left arm comes up, elbow bent so it's perpendicular to the floor. The

[84] Fraden, 98.

> right index finger is under the extended and open left palm. The women make a circular motion with their index finger as they bring both their arms down closer to the ground while maintaining the inverted L-shape with their arms. They point at the crowd with their right index finger. The women then point their index and middle fingers at their eyes, point at the crowd with their right index finger, and repeat the swirling/twirling motion made earlier except this time only the right arm is in use. The women point their index and middle fingers at their eyes. They extend both arms with elbows bent and their chests thrust forward, creating an aggressive W shape.

The ensemble repeats this hand sequence throughout the scene while one of the women turns around and delivers the "My Soul" monologue. Like the bush ghostess in Tutuola's novel that "would not wait or stop for me [the narrator] in a place to look at her ugly appearance to my [his] satisfaction,"[85] the women with their backs to the audience remain elusive. They contest compulsory visualization, which is historically tied to disciplining practices such as the mandated hypervisibility of the black slave. Across Africa and the diaspora, historically, knowing the female black body has included the subjection of black women to rape, genital mutilation, and other gender-specific violences that sought to render black women flesh.[86] As articulated by women in the Medea Project throughout the production, these monstrous intimacies continue to be practiced in our contemporary moment, highlighting the pervasiveness of power struggles tied to racialized gender difference that frequently result in sexual violence. By refusing the audience access to their faces, the women disrupt the politics of visibility—the

[85] Tutuola, 88.

[86] See McKittrick's chapter on Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent in *Demonic Grounds* for an example with thorough analysis supporting this claim.

insistence of the knowable black (female) body—and, in doing so, question the spectators' need to see as well as the violences often attendant to visuality.

The women's presentation of their backs, as well as the production lighting, emphasizes the women's silhouettes (which are visible on the projection screen they face) during the monologue scene rather than their physical bodies. As silhouettes, the women are unraced and ungendered. Like Africa's chalked outline (chapter 1), the silhouettes serve as "a form of remembering that is a blank form 'with its own deep origins in bodily absence and sentimental memory'."[87] Here then, the haunting represented by the ghostesses forefronts the silhouettes, pointing to an unknown meaning (for the audience) that haunts the monloguer's performance and consequently, confounds the spectator's ability to make meaning of the choreography. In essence, the ghostesses see without being seen, enacting what Derrida might term "spectral asymmetry." In *The Specter of Marx*, Derrida argues that spectral asymmetry occurs because "[t]his spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority […] and asymmetry according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion" (emphasis in original).[88] Faced with the performers' backs, the audience is not meant to see the ghostesses, but instead only engage with their silhouettes, which are hints of the performers presence rather than their embodied subjectivities. The ghostesses' ability to see the audience without being seen as well as view spectators through non-ocular faculties highlights their spectral potency. Cognizant of the role spectatorship plays in spectralization, the women do not need to see the audience to

[87] Sharpe, 155.

[88] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.

understand its contribution to the women's presence in the Bush of Ghosts. In addition, the women's spectral asymmetry reverses the hypervisibility and mapping of transparency that frequently accompanies it. The waving silhouettes disrupt the haunted's spatiality by changing the power dynamics between the performer and spectator. Thinking about vision and power dynamics in relationship to free and imprisoned, one sees that the reversals and critiques happening on stage also bleed through the border of performance into a lived reality that not only speaks to the mitigating role of gender, race, and class, but also to how these constructions function specifically in sites of spatial dispossession like the prison. Furthermore, the ghostesses cause temporal disorder as they indict the audience before the spectators are even fully aware of their hailing. While the audience can attempt to make meaning, the elaboration of the hand dancing post-monologue forecloses the heretofore ambiguity of the gestures.

By forestalling the meaning of their hand dancing until after the monologue, the performers question how bodily schema and its attendant histories affect people's interpretations. At the end of the monologue, the orator taps her wrist three times, signaling the ensemble to turn around and perform the hand dance for the last time. The words uttered during the final deliverance enlighten the audience of the meaning of the hand signals:

> (*crescendo)* Understand me. Back then, I wasn't waving. I was drowning. And you saw me. You were the only one who saw me. What's up with that?

The colloquial question that backends the scene suggests the women's familiarity with the audience and what/who they represent. Moving from an emphasis of their silhouettes to their actual embodied subjectivities (evidenced through forward-facing bodies, speech, and lighting),

"I Wasn't Waving" scene. *We're Just Telling Stories*. Photo: Courtesy The Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women

the women mark the audience's (learned) misrecognition. In his work on silhouettes (albeit in a markedly different context), Sean Metzger argues that silhouettes are "surface[s] without substance…that imply a notion of attachment."[89]

The juxtaposition of the silhouettes and the individuals narrating the hand dance highlight that when race and gender become attached to silhouettes—when surfaces become embodied (non)subjects—racialized common sense imagery affects people's perception of the women. The memory-images circulating in the popular imaginary that are called forth mark the women's signal of distress as a greeting rather than a call for help, suggesting that the women's distress (whether it's from mundaneness or from assumed insentience) is imperceiveable. For women of color, the popular imaginary is frequently a violent site of spatial dispossession. When the women turn around and repeat the hand dance with dialogue, they confront the audience about their complicity in the women's subjection to monstrous intimacies. This returns us to the

[89] Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, and Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 139-140.

synopsis of Tutuola's novel as well as Batle's performance (transcribed in this section's opening epigraph) which support Spillers' claim that through violence, the body is rendered flesh[90] or ghostly. In this performance, the ghostesses articulate that to be rendered flesh is to be placed in a carceral space that spans the affective, the representational, and the physical. This chapter now turns to *We're Just Telling Stories*," a documentary that highlights that the ghostly realm is a liminal space filled with ambiguity which allows it to function paradoxically as a site of absentification or spectralization as well as a space of healing.

***We Just Telling Stories (Slouching Towards Armageddon)***

Produced by Cultural Odyssey, *We Just Telling Stories* (2000) is a documentary film that covers the Medea Project's 1999 production of *Slouching Towards Armageddon: A Captive's Conservation/Observation on Race*, a play that uses the Greek myth of Pandora to address race and racism. The play premiered at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater on January 21st. The documentary opens with the Medea Project participants mingling with the audience post-performance. The incarcerated women wear white T-shirts over orange prison uniforms. Printed on the shirts is the word "diva" inside the international prohibition sign. The refusal of divas within the project marks the production's association of the term with a selfish individualism antithetical to the structure of the project. Instead, through pre-production workshops as well as the rehearsal process and subsequent performances, Jones attempts to create a communal space conducive to transformation, healing, and the imagining of other futures. Black writing frames the evocative symbol. Although the writing above the sign is illegible, it appears as if it mirrors

[90] Spillers' argument is elaborated in chapter 1.

the words below: "women saving their own lives." This simple statement marks what Mbembe might term "the work of life" or what Christina Sharpe calls the "wake work" the women perform in the project. Speaking to the reverberating effects of transatlantic slavery in the present (the wake), in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe defines wake work as "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme [of black death and suffering] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives."[91] By sharing their stories and deeply engaging with theirs and their fellow participants' experiences, the women simultaneously occupy the ghostly realm and move past it. Similar to the *My Life in the Concrete Jungle* production, the women also interrogate the audience's spectatorship as a form of privilege.

In its first moments, the documentary disturbs the logic of visualization. As the camera pans across the mixer, opening credits name the participants. The camera rarely pauses; it only does so to attach a name to a face. The disproportion of the names listed to the freezes makes it clear that not all of the women in San Francisco Jail #8 who participated in the project made it to the production. The opening credits are followed by a black title card with orange script stating "your request for entry has been approved." Utilizing prison language, the transition not only reminds the audience of the subject of the documentary, but it also suggests that the Medea Project and the women involved are granting the viewer access or permission to see the innerworkings of the project as well as vulnerable pieces of themselves. Working in a similar vein as the presentation of the women's backs in *My Life in the Concrete Jungle*, this reverses the power structure between spectator/performer, free/incarcerated by stating that the audience needs to ask in order to see. The film then transitions into black and white for the opening

[91] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 17-18.

workshop scenes in which the women share their experiences with sexual molestation, rape, and male violence with one another. In these scenes, the use of monochrome helps frame the women's narratives.

The utilization of a monochrome aesthetic sets up a narrative of progress by suggesting that the audience read the experiences as related to the past. After participants individually share their stories, the film showcases Jones and/or Reynolds providing different forms of drama therapy, including healing circles, affirmations, and supporting the speaking of the experience into existence. The framing of the women's stories narrates the transformative power of theater and illustrates why many people continue to support the project's work. However, by introducing the women through their relationship to trauma, the film narrative reinscribes victimhood and passivity onto the women as well as spectacularizes violence. Echoing Hartman's critique of spectacular displays of black suffering,[92] I argue that the use of monochrome during the women's narration of their stories and the framing of these scenes by the performance and rehearsal process in color mark trauma as the ghost that the Medea Project needs to exorcize. In addition to foreclosing the possibility to view the women outside the dominate lens of trauma, the film doesn't interrogate how the legacies of slavery contributed and continue to contribute to these women's experiences as if the perpetuators of the violence (against the women) acted in a

[92] In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman refuses to reproduce the graphic telling of Frederick Douglass' aunt beating at the hands of their master during her engagement with the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* "in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body."[92] Hartman argues that the such retellings reinscribe the spectacularity of black pain and prevent recognition of black suffering.

vacuum and their own conditions of existence are unrelated to their positioning in the wake. This is further evidenced in the transition from a black and white aesthetic back to color.

Punning the phrase "Be where" in the supertitle, the transition of the documentary's focus on the women's experiences to the rehearsal process opens with Jones aggressively confronting women who are not abiding by the rules set up for participation. In this juxtaposition, Jones is portrayed as anti-coddling, an approach framed as necessary considering the setting of the rehearsal space: jail. During the transition, the film easily slips back to color suggesting that the transformative power of theater has manifested successfully and that Jones' tough love approach works. The use of this filmic device occludes the fact that dealing with spectralization is not an easy process, and it is likely that the few months working with Jones and Reynolds may not have strongly (or positively) impacted some of the women. In the quest to convey the significance of the Medea Project, the film collapses the potential of theater with their edited presentation of the rehearsal process. Although the film blurs the process of subjectification, Jones' actions show that the artistic director is quite aware of the productivity of continued support of the women post-production. For *Slouching Towards Armageddon,* Jones recruited a number of organizations to help the women including the Family Violence Prevention Program which offered support for participants who requested counseling or emergency housing services.[93] In addition to securing outside services, Jones' work with the women on engaging with "the real" during the workshop process also points to her investment in providing the participants with tools they can continue to use post-production. To participate in the project, the women must agree to bring "the real". The

[93] Ibid., "Notes."

real emphasizes the material world and the participant's engagement with it. As elaborated by Fraden,

> Embedded in the command to "Be real" is the director's artfulness in commanding the women to be *more* real, to *say* what they know to be true more forcefully, to *touch* their tits and see what happens, to *feel* womanhood come to a point. She [Jones] never forgets how to appeal to what may be empowering in our common sense and apprehension of how women are shaped by their bodies, but she always also knows how to critique the assumptions we have about the ways things "just are."[94]

By emphasizing the experiential, Jones marks the body as a source of knowledge. She calls on the project participants to engage their corporeality and understand it as a locus of power. The implementation of the Kicking Dance and hand dancing are just two iterations of how Jones helps the women invest in their bodies. During the workshops, Jones and Reynolds facilitate conversations around gendered experiences, how bodies come to matter differently.[95] At the end of the performance scene shown in the documentary, the supertitle states "We should all be thankfull (sic) to these women who gave it up, who came with the real in order to heal themselves and each other and then had the courage to share it with you." The Medea Project participants showed courage in their decision to share their process of healing with the video-watching audience. Again, while I remain skeptical of the structure of the documentary which inundates the women with spectrality as if being ghostly is a core component of their being, I am interested in the film's capture of ghostly looks/looking. I now turn to a scene from the

[94] Fraden, 68.

[95] Ibid.

documentary in which Darcel(l)[96] Bernard, a black woman incarcerated at San Francisco Jail #8, vividly details a moment of spectralization. The monologue of interest is also reproduced in Fraden's *Imagining Medea*.

In her work, Fraden describes Bernard's performance thusly:

> …one of the most powerful and ominous stories told during *Slouching Towards Armageddon*. Darcell Bernard (Revenge), an older black woman, steps on to a darkened stage. The chorus of women stand behind her with masks on, punching their fists in a slow rhythm, dropping to the floor behind her as Bernard slowly tells this story, each sentence distinctly spoken, with long pauses between each phrase… [transcription of monologue]…There is silence, murmurs, someone is crying in front of me, and then the audience claps, somberly.[97]

Despite transcribing Bernard's entire monologue (which takes up a page and a half in the book), Fraden's only engagement with Bernard's story is through audience response. Encapsulating Peeren's critique of the emphasis on the haunted rather than the specter,[98] Fraden succumbs to

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[96] In *Imagining Medea*, Fraden spells Bernard's first name with two "l"s, whereas in the documentary, it is spelled with one "l". It is unclear which version is correct.

[97] Fraden, 10-11.

[98] In *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, Esther Peeren explores what she terms "living ghosts"—undocumented migrants, servants/domestic workers, mediums, and missing persons—as they manifest in cultural texts. As articulated by Peeren, she is invested in "a re-focalization that looks *with* rather than *at* the specter" (emphasis in original).[98] Although Peeren notes the ways in which power structures render some subjectivities and bodies ghosts and not others and attempts to reinscribe agency and resistance in the spectral figure, she does so by assuming that through her analysis of fictional text she can know and render visible real subjects' interior thoughts, motivations, and desires.

the pitfalls of uncritical engagement with the Medea Project and gendered black experience more generally. I return to this monologue and Bernard's rehearsal of it in the documentary in order to articulate the wake work Bernard and the ensemble perform in the piece—labor that Fraden occludes in her emphasis on audience response. Focusing on Bernard's narration and engagement with the camera during the retelling, I demarcate Bernard's ghostly looks.

In her graphic monologue, Darcel(l) Bernard retells her experience of terror and mutilation at the hands of an unnamed male.

> [He] said, *"Bitch, you finna come with me."* And pulled out a gun and stuck it in my ribs. Grabbed me by the neck…*It's broad daylight, hot as fuck, nobody sees shit.* And I said (a few undecipherable words) sir, I'll give you *anything you mother fucking want. You want some head? You want some pussy?* He wanted me to fight him and I did *and I got my ass kicked.* And then he ripped, cut my clothes off—*he had a switchblade.* Then the motherfucker tied me up cut off my backpack and tied me up. Had my arms behind my back and my ankles tied up. *And then he made me suck his dick. And then he fucked me. And then he cut my throat. And then he left* (audience hears Jones in background yelling at ensemble "What happened to her?"). I looked down there *was a big puddle of blood. Look like (pause) puddin'* or jello or something, it was all—just hella blood. *I umm* (long pause, looks away from camera) umm (cut to black title card with script: "she had the courage to tell it and to tell it repeatedly")…So my hand's untied, I hear somebody coming up *to the fucking roof and it's him.* I jump back on the ground, put my hands behind my back and laid there and played dead. Now this muthafucker, he's taking his time walking over to me and *I'm holding my breath for dear life. He pulls out his dick*

*and he starts pissing in my face. Turns around, pulls down his pants and shits in my face.*

(cut) *I am Darcel(l)*…[99] (emphasis in original)

Arguably rendered ghostly through the same mechanisms critiqued in "I Wasn't Waving" (*It's broad daylight, hot as fuck, nobody sees shit),* Bernard details one instantiation of material violences related to racist and sexist modes of seeing. Bernard was forcibly taken to a rooftop in the middle of the day and no one saw (or said anything if they did). In contradistinction to the racial-sexual visual logics that enabled the event, during the Medea Project rehearsal, Jones demands that the ensemble not only witness Bernard's retelling of the story, but also join Bernard in the ghostly realm to help tell it. *What happened to her?* Jones' aggressive call for the ensemble to return with Bernard to the site of injury that continues to haunt Bernard's present utilizes the imaginative and transformative potential of theater to relocate Bernard and her experience into a space of intelligibility. As noted by Carlson, theater is "the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts."[100] Performing choreographed movements during the monologue, the women serve as an extension of Bernard and locate themselves on the rooftop, presenting the audience with a modified memory that refuses erasure. Like ghosts, the women place themselves somewhere they're not supposed to be—at the scene of Bernard's rape. Disrupting linear notions of time and spatial possibilities, the ensemble joins the narrator in the past and in doing so points out that Bernard's life might have looked differently if someone had seen and not allowed "the devil" to take

[99] Transcription is from *We're Just Telling Stories*, rather than *Imagining Medea* which includes a longer version of the monologue with edits included.

[100] Carlson, 2.

Bernard to the rooftop that day. Echoing Jones' thoughts on this event, I believe that Bernard's experience is directedly tied to her race and gender. The prevailing logics of visualization enabled the repetition of monstrous intimacies. The ensemble's ghosting of the narrative indicts the audience as passive participants in the routinized sexual, physical, and emotional violence the women in the Medea Project were subjected to pre-incarceration. Not only did dominate ways of viewing black female subjects affect Bernard's invisibility, but they also marked her hypervisible as a potential target.

The rendering of the black female body as a hypervisible sexual object for white and black men's pleasure was produced in the economy of transatlantic slavery.[101] In her reading of Marlene Nourbese Philips poem "Dis Place—The Space Between [the Legs]," McKittrick argues that the poem addresses the ways in which the "space between the [black women's] legs" was utilized as a social construction as well as a material site of domination during transatlantic slavery. The logic of visualization[102] that marks black women as knowable (non)subjects continues to haunt post-transatlantic slavery. In our contemporary moment, black women and women of color in general continue to be viewed through racist, heteropatriarchal lens that engender monstrous intimacies that continue to be "read or reinscribed as consent and affection: intimacies that involve shame and trauma and their transgenerational transmission."[103] Throughout the scene, the scar on right side of Bernard's neck serves as a reminder of the

[101] McKittrick, 46-52.

[102] I pull this term from McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds*. Throughout chapter 2 "The Last Place They Thought Of: Black Women's Geographies," McKittrick uses the term to denote dominate ways of seeing tied to racial-sexual domination

[103] Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 4.

material effects of dominant ways of looking. In addition, Bernard's scar also reminds the audience that the story narrated on stage is real and indicates the physical, sexual, and emotional violence that happened to her. Its permeance disallows the abstraction frequently tied to theater as well as deniability of the event. After the narration and scenes highlighting the ensemble comforting Bernard, Bernard informs the audience that she's been in and out of jail about 35 times since 1990. Immediately after the declaration, a supertitle overlays Bernard's image: "The devil took Bernard to that kabuki rooftop one summer day in the year 1990." While in doing so the film makes a strong correlation between that experience of violence and Bernard's road to prison, Bernard's address of the camera during rehearsal indicts the audience as helping to shuttle her there.

Enacting ghostly looks, Bernard relocates the audience to the scene of sadism and forces them to contend with gendered violence that occurs in that paradoxical space of hyper/invisibility. During her narration, the film cuts between medium shots and closeups. The camera is perpendicular to Bernard and captures her pacing during the story's retelling. While Bernard addresses the camera throughout, she does not always directly look at it. Bernard only focuses her gaze on the imagined audience when she accentuates specific words and phrases, which are indicated by italics in the above transcription. In tandem with Jones' call "What happened to her?", Bernard's ghostly looking while recounting the vivid details of her violation forces the audience to bear witness to the monstrous intimacies to which she has been subjected. Bernard makes the audience cognizant of how, as a black woman, she is rendered hypervisible as a potential victim (to perpetrator), yet invisible to potential witnesses of that scene of violent dispossession; Bernard makes them see what happened to her. In concert with Bernard's

monologue, the film indicts the audience through a series of quick cuts and provocative title cards as the documentary comes to a close.

Through quick cuts between provocative images and title cards, *We're Just Telling Stories* reinforces that passive spectatorship contributes to spectralization. Mobilizing the "hear no, see no evil" monkey trope, the film cuts from a still of an extreme closeup of Bernard using her hands to cover eyes to another still of Bernard's hands covering her mouth. The film then cuts to a still of Bernard laying on ground with her right arm extended, index and trigger finger pointed miming a gun. The audience hears a gunshot as the film cuts back to the photo of Bernard covering her eyes. The image sequence ends with a quick cut to Bernard's face during the live performance. During this scene, the audience hears Jones in background: "The devil kicked in my front door and took me by surprise." While the devil ostensibly references the man who violated Bernard, within the larger context of the documentary and multiple iterations of the Medea Project, Jones' utterance also marks the devil as systems of power, or racializing assemblages, that shuttle black women into sites of spatial dispossession. Immediately following Jones' proclamation, the final sequence of orange on black title cards occurs amidst silence: "What the fuck are you looking at"/"Who is watching with you"/"Take them by the hand." The title cards and Bernard image sequence question the dominant logics of visualization and its attendant power hierarchy that mark the project participants as ghostly. With "What the fuck are you looking at," the documentary confronts passive spectatorship and the racist, classist, sexist memory-images that serve as an archive that many people call upon when they perceive the black female body; the documentary calls for the interrogation of common sense and audience engagement in a form of active looking that can build community and potentially challenge the violences of visuality. At the end of each Medea Project production, the incarcerated participants

name their matrilineage, including family members such as their children, grandchildren, mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. The matrilineage is a way for the participants to claim their histories and begin the process of healing. As articulated by Jones, "Claim everything. *Everything*. Let us begin with our mother's names, every scar we have, claim it. Every act. Every misappropriate action. Every mistake you made. *Claim* it. If we can claim it, if we can put a pile of it here, we can go through it and find the jewels, the baubles. We got to get rid of the shit, but first of all you got to claim it. It [the matrilineage] also helps to get you moving on."[104] Not only does Jones incite participants to take ownership of their experiences, but also to claim a history, a matrilineage that maps a transtemporal community and acknowledges that to exist means to live in a present that is haunted by transhistorical events that continue to condition the everyday.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, I'd like to return to the ugly ghostess and her laughter. While Tutuola's narrator is able to catch glimpses of the ghostess, the ghostess primarily makes herself known to him through bursts of laughter. Earlier I posited that the ghostess' laughter contains histories of racial-sexual domination; however, I would now like to examine laughter as a site of play. Despite the narrator's narrative authority, since he cannot see the ghostess when she hides in the bush, his claim that "if she hid under a bush and if she looked at her ugly body she would burst suddenly into a great laugh," is an assumption, rather than a fact. Instead, what if we view the ghostess' laughter as a sign of pleasure or delight in goading the narrator in a game of hide and

[104] Jones in Fraden, 108.

seek and in refusing to stay in sight? Might it indicate that finding moments of joy in a system in which one is abjected abject is both a form of resistance as well as a mechanism of survival?

Despite the documentary's overarching investment in depicting trauma, throughout *We're Just Telling Stories*, the film shows the ways in which Jones and other professional artists involved in the production create spaces of play. During the rehearsal process, the women play childhood games such as red light/green light and engage in dancing, impromptu song, and theater games. By highlighting moments of pleasure, *We're Just Telling Stories* confirms that joy remains present in carceral spaces as well as illustrates forms of community building and how play can be used to facilitate deep conversations about complex issues such as the intertwining of visuality, power, race, and gender. Furthermore, play becomes a vehicle through which one can address spectralization and begin to exorcize some of the ghosts that continue to haunt black women's present. The theater, as a site of play(acting), is conducive to the imagining of other futures and pasts, imaginings which are crucial to the political potency of the Medea Project. The productions are not simply for entertainment or to allow un(der)heard voices/experiences to be heard, they are also potential vehicles of change as they incite the audience to confront their involvement in the precaritization and spectralization of (black) women. In the next chapter, I continue my exploration of ghostly matters. However, the focus shifts from the spectral, a form of death, to the utilization of black girl's bodies and proximity to death to usher forth an improved "new world order." Chapter 3 investigates black death-birthing narratives tied to Hurricane Katrina that call on black girls and their affect in the name of progress.

## **Chapter 3** *Picturing Katrina: Queer Children and Black Death-Birthing Narratives*

> For every animal that didn't have a Dad to put it in a boat, the end of the world already happened. They're all down below, trying to breathe through water.
>
> -Hushpuppy, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

> …my experience of photographs of disaster that happen in Black spaces and to Black people is that they usually feature groups of Black people, to quote Elizabeth Alexander, in "pain for public consumption" (Alexander 1995, 92) whether those Black people are in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Sierra Leone, the Dominican Republic, Lampedusa, Liberia, or Haiti...
>
> -Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

I open with these two epigraphs because they question (implicitly or explicitly) the queer (trans)historic obsession with depicting blacks and their bodies as sites of disaster, disorder, dispossession, and death. Pulled from the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Ben Zeitlin, 2012), which serves as an allegory of Hurricane Katrina, the first excerpt showcases six-year old Hushpuppy Douchet's analysis of the immediate effects of the storm. While addressing the literal death (of animals), Hushpuppy also pushes us to consider other forms dispossession. If one considers historic and contemporary narratives of black people as inhuman (colonial/slavery narratives, insentient pickaninny stereotype, narratives around the murder of black people by police, etcetera) as well as the use of the Mississippi River during transatlantic slavery as both a trade route and an occasional site of freedom (some slaves escaped across the river), one might interpret Hushpuppy's claim as a forceful statement about living in what Sharpe calls "the

wake." Understanding the wake of slavery to entail multiple iterations of the key term (including vigils and ships' watery tracks), Sharpe argues

> …for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and to propose that to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's yet unresolved unfolding. *To be* "in" the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way for theorizing, in/for/from what Frank Wilderson refers to as "stay[ing] in the hold of the ship."[105]

In her short excerpt, Hushpuppy speaks from her position in the wake. Hushpuppy implicitly poses the question, how does one breathe through water [i.e. survive in a socioeconomic system] literally and figuratively thick with histories of black death, dispossession, and disruption? In doing so, she causes a performative spatial irruption[106] that claims a relationship between her current state of precarity and transhistorical and global assemblages. This chapter addresses Hushpuppy's opening spatial irruption through an exploration of the relationship between pain for public consumption, (black) girls' bodies, and imagined futures tied to what I'm terming "black death-birthing narratives." These narratives celebrate the creation of new life that is predicated on black death. While black death-birthing narratives abound in relationship to polyvalent forms of disaster narratives, this chapter focuses on the manifestation of these narratives in relationship to Hurricane Katrina because it remains a site in which the collusion of assemblages tying blackness to sites of spatial dispossession spectacularly and visually come to

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[105] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13-14. Emphasis in original.

[106] In chapter 1, I define performative spatial irruptions as one of the many ways in which people in precarious sites contest the homogenization (and/or erasure) of their subjectivities through everyday, spatial practice.

the fore, marking it as a key entry point in understanding the structure of black death-birthing narratives. Specifically, Chapter 3 puts the independent film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* in conversation with a discursive manifestation of this narrative in *People* magazine to investigate black death-birthing narratives that center on childhood and disaster. The juxtaposition of the two pieces suggests the wide breadth of black death-birthing narratives that center around the queer child—a child charged with reproduction.

**Methodology**

This chapter (and dissertation as a whole) is largely indebted to black feminist scholarship that highlights coterminous narratives about blackness, black life, and black abjection embedded within, as well as located tangential to, popular narratives around black life and survival. In particular, I align my work with black feminist scholars like Sharpe whose work investigates "current quotidian disasters in order to ask what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival."[107] My project analyzes performative practices in order to elucidate the hegemonic narrative structures at work as well as moments in which said structures are challenged. Like Sharpe's, my emphasis is not on providing solutions, but rather on processing how one might survive the everyday as chronicled in cinematic and other images of survival. However, my work departs from this body of scholarship in its specific sites inquiry and its privileging of performance analysis to interrogate a hegemonic structure that is markedly against black survival. This chapter utilizes mediatized images around Hurricane Katrina to

[107] Ibid., 14.

address the re-mapping of disciplinary structures and cultural practices historically tied to refugees onto Katrina survivors' bodies and the resulting material and symbolic violences against black women and girls produced/present in black death-birthing narratives. In addition, this chapter explores performative practices that interrupt said narratives and help one survive in an anti-black system.

This chapter also draws on queer studies and its positioning of the child as encapsulating nonnormativity. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*¸ Lee Edelman posits the Child as the object around which politics and the larger social order are structured. According to Edelman, since the organization of the social order is predicated on the future (embodied by the Child), anything not geared towards a future grounded in reproduction is a threat.[108] For Edelman, queerness is the origin source of liberal politics—i.e. politics that are not "'fighting for the children.'"[109] However, in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton moves away from Edelman's theorization and instead posits the child itself as queer. Stockton questions the notion of innocence attached to children and the violence caused by said attachment, particularly in reference to children of color and queer (in terms of non-normative sexuality) children. She asks, "But how does innocence, our default designation for children, cause its own violence? For example, how do children of color display that their inclusion in 'the future for our children' is partial, even brutal?"[110] Although Stockton does address the construction of race, she fails to deeply engage with the mitigating role it plays in

[108] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

[109] Ibid., 3.

[110] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

lives of queer children, and she also largely does not employ an intersectional analysis—two aspects I seek to address in this chapter. This chapter explores what happens when the innocent gendered (and raced) child becomes the source of (re)production of space, whether that is an imagined ecological future or affective zone of pleasure. In other words, what happens when the girl child, who lives in a site of spatial dispossession and is understood as in need of protection/worth protecting, is framed as having the power to affect possible futures, i.e. life after disaster? What performative spatial irruptions might she enact?

This chapter is also indebted to the work of critical refugee scholars. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, survivors of the storm who lost their homes or could not in effect return home due to the damage wrought, were articulated as refugees in the news.[111] This labeling was heavily critiqued by Katrina evacuees and prominent black leaders like Reverend Al Sharpton who remarked that "They [Katrina survivors] are not refugees. They are citizens of the United States."[112] Refugee scholar Yến Lê Espiritu has argued that in the United States imaginary the term "refugee" connotes desperation on part of the fleeing subject as well as the country.[113] When transposed onto majority black, low-income, displaced Louisiana residents, the term brings its historicity with it and in doing so, transfixes victimhood or the need to be saved by the state onto the citizens' personhood. While Katrina survivors are not de jure refugees, this chapter

[111] Mike Pesca, "Are Katrina's Victims 'Refugees' or 'Evacuees'?," *NPR*, 5 Sept 2005, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4833613, accessed March 8, 2018.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Yến Lê Espiritu. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Pres, 2014), 7.

takes up the term to explore the intertwining of domestic and global assemblages that work to manage and discipline Katrina survivors and refugee communities. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to address what it means to be a refugee, to inhabit a condition of stateless, in one's country of origin. This chapter places refugee studies in critical conversation with performance studies to investigate Hurricane Katrina as a specific instance of spatial dispossession, one which is simultaneously a site of homelessness and incarceration, as it manifests in cultural forms, namely *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *People*.

To begin to address the narratives that circulate around de facto domestic refugees as well as the disciplining structures involved in readying said refugees for (re)admittance into the national body politic, in addition to black feminist and performance theorists, I turn to critical refugee scholars like Aihwa Ong. In *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America*, Ong intervenes in refugee studies in at least two distinct ways: interrogating the refugee/citizen dichotomy and disrupting narratives of the passive refugee. In the first instance, Ong argues that sociopolitical structures shape the meaning of state-referential categories. As articulated by Ong, "the refugee and the citizen are the political effects of institutional processes that are deeply imbued with sociocultural values."[114] For Ong, studies of refugees that emphasize the role of the nation fail to take into account the plethora of local and state assemblages as well as everyday practices that help shape the material effects of the categorization citizen or refugee. Further, in her exploration of the role medicine plays in acclimating refugees, Ong's argues that "the biomedical gaze is not so much a diffused hegemonic power as it is a phenomenon

[114] Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 79.

generated by the complex contestation of refugee-immigrant subjects attempting to pursue their own goals and needs within the bureaucratic maze of American health and welfare providers."[115] In short, she expands her argument on the complex collusion of sociopolitical and localized structures to show that Cambodian refugees were not passively subjected to this hegemonic power. Rather, they frequently circumvented and used the system to meet their self/family-articulated needs. While this chapter does not heavily focus on acts of agency such as these, I do take up Ong's work on the roles the state and other actors play in the lives of refugees and the construction of narratives about the refugee more generally as a starting point to understand "civilizing" processes tied to disaster like Hurricane Katrina; I use refugee studies as a critical lens through which to understand the proliferation of black death-birthing narratives around Hurricane Katrina.

**Beasts of the Southern Wild**

Premiering at the 2012 Sundance film festival, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* has received critical acclaim on numerous fronts ranging from the acting and Zeitlin and his crew's embrace of magical realism to the ecological narrative it espouses. Through the character Hushpuppy and her relationship to the swampland environment, the film investigates alterity to an anthropocentric world. In alignment with posthuman discourse that advocates for a "rethinking [of] or relations to the waters with which we live and upon which we depend,"[116] *Beasts* performs the beginnings of a performative spatial irruption by disrupting the seemingly endless

[115] Ibid, 92-93.

[116] Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 23.

exploitative use of nature's resources that has characterized the West since at least industrialization and positing, instead, what posthuman feminist Astrida Neimanis might term "a more-than-human hydrocommons,"[117] i.e. a more symbiotic space in which humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment coexist. However, the film falls short of enacting a performative spatial irruption because its imagined, more sustainable future is predicated on black death. As a black death-birthing narrative, *Beasts* does not interrogate the conditions of possibility for the black subject (specifically the black girl child) but rather imagines a remaking of a world that maintains the status quo—an environment hostile to black life.

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Hushpuppy is queered by her symbiotic relationship to animals, the land, and water. Played by Quvenzhané Wallis, Hushpuppy is a young, black child who lives on the "other side of the levies" in the aptly named Bathtub. She inhabits a poorly constructed house made of bits and pieces of things, which is adjacent to her emotionally abusive father's home. Narratives that hail *Beasts* as a "sacred narrative" that "offers strange pedagogies about how we should live in a melting world" ignore Hushpuppy's precarity.[118] In her review of the film, Patricia Smith Yaegar argues that Hushpuppy's psychological trauma puts her "in a universe of children who've been neglected or traumatized."[119] Like narratives that argue that "Hushpuppy could be any child," Yaegar asserts universality. As detailed by black feminist scholars including bell hooks, Sharpe, and Jayna Brown, *Beasts* "isn't the first case of black

[117] Ibid., 2.

[118] Patricia Yaegar, "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* and Dirty Ecology," Review of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, directed by Behn Zeitlin, *Southern Spaces*, 13 Feb 2013, https://southernspaces.org/2013/beasts-southern-wild-and-dirty-ecology.

[119] Ibid.

children being depicted as insensitive to pain, or of black suffering and survival being used to symbolize American democracy."[120] Black people and black trauma have been used in numerous cinematic and other narrative forms to depict the triumph of freedom. Black children in particular have been depicted as uniquely resilient in the face of extreme trauma. Despite the fact the some of the Bathtub residents and children are white, the portrayal of Hushpuppy in *Beasts* does not break this mold. The film revolves around Hushpuppy's intensified precarity (poverty in addition to neglect and abuse not associated with the other children). By positioning Hushpuppy as the leader of the children (who follow her throughout the film), the narrative marks Hushpuppy as particularly resilient in comparison to her peers in this multitudinous site of disaster.

Related to the work I perform in this chapter, in his article "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," Tavia Nyong'o utilizes queer theory to interrogate the relationship between *Beasts*' ecological pedagogy and its representation of racialized precarity. However, unlike my focus on Hushpuppy, Nyong'o emphasizes the role of the aurochs. Comparing the film's usage of the extinct creatures with the historical relationship between aurochs and sovereignty, Nyong'o interprets the narrative function of Zeitlin and Lucy Alibar's (who co-wrote the screenplay with Zeitlin) aurochs as "our guide into a wilderness beyond human sovereignty and civilization collapse."[121] For Nyong'o, since the film blurs the line between real and fantasy through cinematic devices, a reinvention of

[120] Jayna Brown, "Beasts of the Southern Wild—the Romance of Precarity II," *Social Text* (blog), 27 Sept 2012, https://socialtextjournal.org/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-the-romance-of-precarity-ii/.

[121] Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol 21, no. 2-3 (2015), 250.

the history of aurochs, real catastrophe images, and the casting of actors from a Louisianan site of precarity, the historicity of actual aurochs comes to bear on understanding the narrative of the film.

In the 17th century, unaware of the fact that aurochs were already extinct, Polish King Zygmunt made a sovereign decree that mandated local protection of the creatures, which put other livestock and villagers' livelihood at risk.[122] Rather than marking the aurochs as free, this decree tied them to the state as protected beasts "whose wildlife was to be *fostered*, even if human life, in turn, had to be *disallowed* to the point of death."[123] Therefore, as argued by Nyong'o, reading this history alongside the film brings into question what lives are being disallowed, which Nyong'o rightly points out, are black and indigenous lives occluded in the film. In his work, Nyong'o notes the irony of the wide-acclaim of *Beasts* as a call for a shared sovereignty between humans and nonhumans, since the film and most of its critics fail to address the historical and material implications of depicting black bodies as a) more in-tune with the earth (read primitive) and b) as advocates for an alternative form of sovereignty when black subjects have often (and continue to be) deemed nonhuman. While Nyong'o begins to address some of the incongruities of the film narrative and lived materiality, he does not interrogate the ways in which the disaster narrative functions specifically in relationship to the queer black child, and consequently, his interests lie parallel to the focus of this chapter.

Although Hushpuppy is not the focus of Nyong'o's argument, it is worth noting the ways in which our analyses differ in the moments that Nyong'o does address depictions of

[122] Ibid., 249.

[123] Ibid., 260. Emphasis in original

Hushpuppy. *Beasts* is a loose adaptation of Lucy Alibar's play, *Juicy and Delicious*. Using Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's theory of incompossibility, Nyong'o argues that the existence of *Juicy and Delicious*' Hushpuppy and *Beasts*' Hushpuppy bear weight on one another as both represent "real" Hushpuppies, with neither one serving as the original, and thus affect analyses of the film. Like *Beasts*' Hushpuppy, Alibar's Hushpuppy is a kid living in poverty in the South (albeit Georgia, instead of Louisiana) with an abusive, dying daddy and missing mother. However, in the play Hushpuppy is a slightly older, illiterate white boy. For Nyong'o, the incompossibility of the two Hushpuppies queers *Beasts*' Hushpuppy since the protagonist "slip[s] between black and white, male and female bodies."[124] While Nyong'o presents a compelling argument, his analysis hinges on an abstraction not gestured to in the film. In other words, Nyong'o's investment in Hushpuppy is only tangentially interested in the material effects of casting Hushpuppy as a black girl and therefore does not attend to the complex processes that I explore, which include the ways in which said casting engenders the black death-birthing narrative structuring the film. Rather than focusing on abstraction, Chapter 3 engages with how Hushpuppy's blackness and femaleness elucidate a black death-birthing narrative tied to disaster in order to explore both the performative aspects of Hushpuppy's character as well as gender-specific disciplinary structures—structures whose antecedents lie in U.S. refugee policies and practices as well as a long genealogy of dispossession. Chapter 3 investigates what images of Hushpuppy do within the film and how the fictitious images relate to lived experiences of blackness in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

[124] Ibid., 254.

The opening scene of the film establishes an aesthetics of precarity that provides a reasoning behind Hushpuppy's unique connection to the land. Following a shot of the outside of Hushpuppy's home, the film cuts to the interior of Hushpuppy's house. Inside, Hushpuppy holds a baby chick up to her ear while making it a mud nest. In this scene Hushpuppy also feels and listens to a pig's heartbeat and another chick's as well as a leaf's (which she then eats). A voiceover ensues as Hushpuppy walks around the farm engaging with her animals. In the voiceover, Hushpuppy states, "All the time, everywhere, everything's organs be beatin' and squirtin' and talkin' to each other in ways I can't understand. Mosta the time they probably just sayin' "I'm hungry," or "I gotta poop," but sometimes they talkin' in codes.[125] In her opening lines, Hushpuppy conveys her understanding of the basic ties between humans and other animals—the fact of biological life. However, she also acknowledges difference and knows that she cannot understand everything that the animals are trying to convey. Throughout the film, Hushpuppy listens to other animals' inner sounds including a crab. Notably, she only listens to the internal organs of animals commonly consumed (chicken, pig, crab—two of which are eaten in the film). Hushpuppy's inquisitive interactions with animals sets up the film's extended ahistorical metaphor of predator versus prey that ends with Hushpuppy serving as an example of a better way to live with, yet still dominate, nonhuman creatures.

Although the predator-prey dichotomies analogized in the film take place in vastly different eras and physical environments, the aurochs and people on the dry-side of the levee function similarly. In the historical narrative of the film, during the era of cavemen, aurochs

[125] Lucy Alibar and Behn Zeitlin, "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* script," *The Internet Movie Script Database*, http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Beasts-of-the-Southern-Wild.html, accessed 1 August 2017: 1-2. Italics indicate emphasis mine.

reigned supreme in the realm of predators. It is only because of the Ice Age that humans gained control, or as articulated by Hushpuppy, “If it wasn't for giant snowballs, and the iced age. I wouldn't even be Hushpuppy, I would just be breakfast.” Here Hushpuppy notes that the Ice Age, a harbinger of glacial natural disaster, changed the food chain system with the elimination of the aurochs. Hushpuppy relays this information following a scene comparing the strange ways of people residing on the other side of the levee, who have “fish stuck in plastic wrappers,” “babies stuck in carriages, and “chickens on sticks.” The juxtaposition of the distinctions between the communities on each side of the levee and the auroch history lesson underlines the progression of human society, i.e. humans have replaced the aurochs. The juxtaposition also highlights the disparities between industrialized modern society and the precarious living conditions as viewed through the eyes of a young, black girl. In her description of the way people live on the other side of the levee, Hushpuppy romanticizes the freedoms present in the Bathtub. The images of jubilant Bathtub residents running freely, celebrating with drink, and dance that create this scene validate Hushpuppy’s claims. For Hushpuppy (and the film since it is largely structured through her perspective in both voiceover and point of view shots), the ways of modern society parallel the destructive nature of the aurochs. Replacing predators who could only be stopped by the Ice Age, the “developed” humans also attempt to dominate the earth and all its inhabitants. The Bathtub residents’ relationship with the world (and Hushpuppy’s in particular) represents an alternative to predation, a form of mutualism that still manages to pay tribute to the prevailing Christian doctrine that Man rules the land and all the animals that inhabit it.

The ecological move away from the predator-prey relationship establishes a queer temporality of progress that comes to a head in the last scenes of the film. Throughout the film,

Hushpuppy imagines that the aurochs are heading towards the Bathtub. The evening after the hurricane hits, Hushpuppy sits in the door frame and stares out at the underwater Bathtub. There is a beacon in the distance. The film has just cut from a close-up of the visual manifestation of Wink's terminal illness. As Hushpuppy stares at the beacon, she repeats a variation of the phrase from when she first punched Wink and learned about his illness—"Mama? Is that you? I've broken everything." The film then cuts to a series of close-ups and extreme close-ups of a sandstorm from which the aurochs emerge, charging towards some unnamed destination. In a voiceover, Hushpuppy proclaims, "Strong animals, they know when your hearts are weak. That makes them hungry and they start coming." The placement of two scenes suggests that the aurochs are headed towards the Bathtub because not only is Wink's heart weak, but also, the storm has intensified the Bathtub residents' vulnerability.

Hushpuppy's flight of fantasy foreshadows the Bathtub residents' eviction from their homes by hurricane relief entities who represent the ultimate predator-style of living Hushpuppy eschews. When Hushpuppy confronts the aurochs upon their arrival to the Bathtub, although the animals lie down in ostensible deference, Hushpuppy remarks "You're my friend, kind of." In this utterance, Hushpuppy proposes a more humane way to coexist with nonhuman organisms—up until this point the film has framed the aurochs as creatures dangerous to humans. With the aurochs imagined as alive, the past and present collide as more livable geographies are imagined to exist in a future in which humans reconnect with the land. In the narrative of the film, Hushpuppy serves as an exemplar of progress as regression, i.e. a return to a form of primitivity or at least deindustrialized society to create a more sustainable future. However, despite the fantasized move away from the unsustainable predator-prey relationship, both the current relationship and the imagined future depend upon black precarity—in both relationships black

proximity to death is not reimagined. Framed in a cultural imaginary in which "the transmutation from enslaved to freed subject never quite occurred,"[126] *Beasts* offers a cleverly hidden recycled colonial narrative in which the nation is built by black people who largely have yet to be recognized as human. Even though Hushpuppy, a black girl, serves as the harbinger of this new era, the narrative does not foresee an alternative to black death; Hushpuppy ushers forth a future not meant for her survival.

Hushpuppy's resilience and ability to face defiantly the aurochs while the other children runaway in fear comes from the positioning of Hushpuppy in a site of extreme precarity, both physically and emotionally. Except for the scene in the schoolhouse when Hushpuppy first learns the history of the aurochs, Hushpuppy only sees the creatures during moments of intense stress, such as the revelation of Wink's illness; the aurochs charge toward Hushpuppy when she is most intensely aware of her precarity. Hushpuppy turns to fantasy when something ruptures and affects her immediate environment, much in the same way the Ice Age changed the landscape for both humans and aurochs although on a smaller scale. In *Beasts*, not only has the storm re-made the Bathtub, but the (impending) death of Wink leaves Hushpuppy orphaned in a land of limited resources. As the aurochs travel towards Hushpuppy, the animals represent and foreshadow the encroachment of "regimes of human rights, citizenship, and property [that] for the most part all depend on individualized, stable, and sovereign bodies – those 'Enlightenment figures of coherent and master subjectivity'"[127] – on the Bathtub, regimes that seek to interrupt Bathtub residents' way of life and push them towards modernity. However, while the film is celebrated as

[126] Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 15.

[127] Neimanis, 2.

a triumph of an independent, minority community over modern society and represents Hushpuppy as leading us towards a more livable world, the black death-birthing narrative comes at the expense of a black girl who must be subjected to physical and emotional violence in order for the narrative to function, i.e. to provide a reason why Hushpuppy is so differently connected to the land and her animals. Hushpuppy turns to the land and animals because the material (and affective) conditions of her existence, her proximity to death, requires that connection for survival.

Hushpuppy turns to her imagination, land, and animals to make sense of the world because of her precarity and trauma. In a scene from the first half of the film, Hushpuppy searches for Wink Douchet, her father, who has gone missing. Hushpuppy first notices Wink's absence when he fails to show up for "feed up time." At least a day passes before Hushpuppy remarks that if her father doesn't return soon, she'll have to eat her pets. Following that observation, Hushpuppy returns to her house and begins to cook a stove-top meal consisting of old grease and canned cat food. Upon hearing Wink's approach, Hushpuppy leaves the house and inquires where Wink has been. The two have a falling out resulting in Hushpuppy fleeing back to her house. Once there, Hushpuppy turns up the stove, starting a fire. She then hides under a box, which has drawings on its interior, as the house burns—with her in it. Mirroring the editing structure of the previous cooking scene, the film cuts between Hushpuppy's face and actions. Here however, unlike the cooking scene, the juxtaposition of Hushpuppy's face with her actions showcases conscious decision making. The cut from a close-up of Hushpuppy's determined face to the steaming pot to Hushpuppy turning up the dial to ignite the fire is arguably the first point in the film that at least partially eschews victimhood because despite the fact the Hushpuppy's voiceover throughout the film connotes narrative authority, her frequent

flight to fantasy and misdiagnoses of the causes of problems and events undercuts her narrative credibility. Although the decision to burn down the house because of an argument is not a rational one and is, in part, an indication of the depth of Hushpuppy's trauma, it remains a spatial irruption in the sense that it marks Hushpuppy as an agent, allowing her a moment of subjectivity. Unfortunately, this spatial irruption is short-lived as the scene continues with mobile frames that follow Hushpuppy's trajectory from the kitchen to a cardboard haven that pictorially documents Hushpuppy's trauma.

After the fire starts, the point of view shot changes from Hushpuppy's perspective to a focus on Hushpuppy. The camera follows Hushpuppy as she leaves the kitchen, hops over the bed, and checks-in on the fire. The film then cuts to a shot that captures Hushpuppy crawling into the box. Once Hushpuppy is safely under the box, a voiceover ensues.

> HUSPHPUPPY (voiceover): If Daddy kill me, I ain't gonna be forgotten, I'm recording my story for the scientists of the future.
>
> *Hushpuppy draws a bigger figure giving her a hug as Wink's panicked fury intensifies outside.*
>
> WINK (off stage): HUSHPUPPY!? Where are you Boss!?
>
> HUSHPUPPY (V.O): In a million years, when kids go to school, they gonna know that once there was Hushpuppy and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub.[128]

During the voiceover, the camera cuts to a closeup of Hushpuppy's face, which is illuminated by firelight. The light emphasizes the spread of the fire and by extension, Hushpuppy's increasing

[128] Alibar and Zeitlin,16.

proximity to death. The film then cuts to a crude drawing of a sad, ostensibly female face on the cardboard box and immediately cuts back to a closeup of Hushpuppy's forlorn expression, thus suggesting the drawn figure is Hushpuppy. The affect espoused by both the real and drawn Hushpuppy faces, in addition to the lighting and voiceover, emphasizes Hushpuppy's precarity and ties it to Wink rather than the socioeconomic structures that produce the conditions in which the Douchets live. By vocalizing her potential impending death, Hushpuppy attaches a violence to Wink, one that will be played out to a much smaller degree as the scene continues.

What is less apparent in this scene is Hushpuppy's queer spatial irruption. In her refusal to be left out of history, Hushpuppy attempts to protect the possibility of her future (in the archive), which is not guaranteed in an anti-black system where the inclusion of children of color in a 'future for our children' is [always] partial, even [frequently] brutal."[129] By placing herself in a future not made for her, Hushpuppy also marks the mass exclusion of black geographies more generally from the archive. Although it is unlikely that the cardboard box will survive the fire, the repetition of this proclamation at the end of the film (*When I die, the scientists of the future, they gonna find it all. They gonna know, once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub*.) simultaneously marks Hushpuppy's investment in creating a legacy that lives on after her always already impending death and affirms the black death-birthing narrative in which Hushpuppy ushers in a new era of ecological human and nonhuman relationships. In *Beasts*, Hushpuppy's ecological relationship serves as a model paradigm for human future engagement with the world. Juxtaposed against the human-nonhuman story elaborated in the beginning of the film (predatory aurochs who could only be stopped by Mother

[129] Stockton, 5.

Nature) and the other side of the levees' relationship to the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants, the (attempted) preservation of Hushpuppy's story in the historical archive evidences Hushpuppy's deviation from the predator-prey model that has thus far (according to the film narrative) prevailed. In this scene then, Hushpuppy performs a queer spatial irruption by marking herself, a black girl, as the harbinger of change. In the imagined future described by Hushpuppy, people will know that Hushpuppy existed—blackness will exist in an archive from which the rich histories of black people have largely been excluded.

The limited presence of Hushpuppy's mother throughout the film marks Hushpuppy's queerness as a child fighting for the reproductive future of humans, people deemed nonhuman, and nonhuman animals. While Hushpuppy's mother is referenced throughout the film, the first image of her doesn't appear until the night after the storm when Wink recounts the story of Hushpuppy's conception. The audience learns that one day, while Wink and Hushpuppy's mom were "being shy," Wink fell asleep outside and, consequently, was at risk for an alligator attack. However, Hushpuppy's mom saves the day, shooting the gator (which she will, in the next scene, cook). With the bang of the shotgun, gator blood splatters over the pelvic region of the unnamed woman's white underwear, notably, the only item of clothing the woman wears. The dress of Hushpuppy's mother in the audience's first visual introduction mirrors Hushpuppy's opening act.

Stills of Hushpuppy's mother, who has just killed an alligator to protect Wink. From *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)

This parallelism symbolizes the potential woman to come (Hushpuppy)—protector, gator killer, procreator, and hypersexualized black woman. The symbolic transfer of sexuality to Hushpuppy marks Hushpuppy as a queer child, since, as argued by Stockton, sexuality and its attendant language cannot be attached to the Child due to its embodiment of innocence, and as an agent of posthuman gestationality. In thinking through the ways in which bodily waters (human and otherwise) facilitate reproduction, Neimanis calls for an investment in posthuman gestationality or "the facilitative logic of our bodily water for gestating new lives and new forms of life, never fully knowable…[that] challenges the primacy of human heteronormative reprosexuality as the cornerstone for proliferating life."[130] *Beasts*' narrative suturing of Hushpuppy to swampland underscores Hushpuppy as bodily tied to the Bathtub and its surrounding water. It is only through her close connection to the environment that Hushpuppy is able to lead us to a new ecological era. Here then, Hushpuppy's queerness becomes apparent not only through the transfer of sexuality from her mother to herself, but also through her watery birthing of a post-predatory-prey epoch. The queerness of the queer child is compounded by the alligator's involvement in her birth. The closeup of the blood splatter across the pelvic region of Hushpuppy's mom accentuates the vagina and in a symbiotic twist, the death of the gator brings forth new life (i.e. Hushpuppy) and Hushpuppy's mother is shown as queen of the beasts, much like her daughter, who will eat her pets if necessary. The emphasis on the maintenance of human dominion over animals even in the imagined shared sovereign world covers over the fact that it is the Douchet family's positioning in the wake, their habitation in swampland that provides the setting for the triumph of human over alligator.

[130] Neimanis, 4.

Although Hushpuppy's family in *Juicy and Delicious* also lives in precarity, precarity is not depicted as inherently tied to their persons. In *Beasts*, the Bathtub residents rejoice in their precarity and violently refute attempts to change their environment. Unlike in the play, which features a white, male main character, the Bathtub residents return home to the site of disaster following their evacuation from the storm. The opening images of the almost inhabitable conditions of the Bathtub in combination with pronounced images of destruction post-hurricane suggest the residents are pulled by some uncontrollable (read primitive) desire to return to that scene of precarity. As an allegory for Hurricane Katrina and the storm's aftermath, the film expands the espousal of, in the words of Rachel Luft, "the ubiquitous iconographic metonym for Hurricane Katrina[—]…the bodies of poor Black women"[131] not only to include the bodies of other black, indigenous, and poor abjected people, but also to elevate the prepubescent black woman to harbinger of a new ecological era that can only be understood through her proximity to death. While the film does conclude with the triumph of the Bathtub community and their way of life, and in doing so, posits the Bathtub residents' more symbiotic relationship with Mother Nature ideal, it only does so after establishing that the residents live outside the realm of the recognizably human (as understood by the dry-side inhabitants, i.e. industrialized society) and, consequently, naturally belong in sites of dispossession and disaster.

The violent removal of the Bathtub inhabitants to a relief center/shelter and the cleansing acts that occur at that location both depict the evacuees as at least partially at fault for their precarity and illustrate some of the violences involved in turning a refugee (or de facto

[131] Rachel Luft, "Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years after Hurricane Katrina," *Feminist Formations* vol 28, 2 (2016), 2.

noncitizen in this example) into a recognizable citizen-subject. The removal and subsequent shelter scene opens with a couple of white men who attempt to enter the Douchet's dwelling and force them to evacuate. The scene then cuts to a group of white men kicking in the door to the home of a white woman Bathtub resident. She resists, and the men physically detain her while yelling "Hold her down." The scene cuts back to the Douchets and the men are holding down each Douchet and yelling, "Stay down sir, stay down," while Wink yells "let her [Hushpuppy] go." The jarring visuals caused by the cuts as well as the unsteadiness of the handheld camera emphasize the use of unnecessary force on the Bathtub residents. The evacuee teams' overuse of violence seeks to establish the dry-side's dominance as well as portray their understanding of the Bathtub residents as violent, uncivilized, and disruptive to the otherwise civil environment (state). In addition, the use of the same degree of violence against a black man and a white woman serves as a spatial irruption since it pictorially marks that in sites of spatial dispossession, sometimes class or subject positioning relative to the state overdetermines treatment rather than the more visual mitigating constructions of race and gender. The relief groups' interaction with the Bathtub inhabitants also serves to reinscribe the predatory nature of dry-side inhabitants as compared to the prehistoric aurochs.

Directly before the altercation, the film cuts to back to the aurochs' journey. One of the aurochs is injured and, as its fellow aurochs cannibalize it, Hushpuppy's voiceover proclaims, "Strong animals got no mercy. They the type of animals that eats their own Mommas and Daddies." The immediate cut to the forced removal of the Douchets and Little Jo (the white woman) correlates the relief workers' and accompanying law enforcement's treatment of the Bathtub community with the aurochs' cannibalism. As this and earlier scenes attest, Hushpuppy pictures the Arctic (the former site of the aurochs imprisonment) rather than the swamp when she

has “broken everything” because the predatory nature of the aurochs is analogous with the dry-side’s whereas Hushpuppy’s home swampland symbolizes a future more ecologically sustainable then the one envisioned/mapped by the people above the levee who are, in the words of Hushpuppy (via Wink) “afraid of the water like a bunch of babies.” Furthermore, in this scene, more than simply reestablishing the predator-prey metaphor, the parental language maps primitivity onto the Bathtub residents’ bodies as they come to represent “the before” and the other side of the levee represents “the after” in the (state) narrative of progress. However, the incomplete substitution varies in that instead of consuming the Other, relief workers attempt to transform the Bathtub evacuees into recognizable modern subjects.

The official narrative surrounding the evacuation of Bathtub residents (which mirrors narratives about Hurricane Katrina) and the disciplining procedures enacted in the relief center(s) illustrate one of the ways in which the state and aid agencies draw on an archive of experience working with refugees to address displaced citizens. Following the altercation, the film cuts to the shelter. Largely filmed through Hushpuppy’s point of view, the oversaturation of white and blue that color the exterior and interior of the center, including the clothing of the workers and the de facto refugees’ blankets, gives the center a hospital vibe and connotes a feeling of cleansing. In her work on the polyvalent roles medicinal care played in 20$^{th}$ century Cambodian refugees lives in the United States, Ong argues that the state’s disciplining of the refugee into a body that fits into the national body politic emphasized cleanliness measures. She argues, “The prominence of desensing and sanitary measures drove home the ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’ message of cultural citizenship—good hygiene as a sign of democratic sensibility. Refugees had to erase the smells of their humanity, submitting to a civilizing process that can be measured out

in daily mouthwashes and showers."[132] Packaged as aid, sanitation and health requirements tried to remake the Bathtub residents into modern subjects that fit the national body politic, which loosely correlates to the standards embodied by the reigning capitalist society on the dry-side of the levee. Evidenced in the scenes in which Wink lies drugged up and sedated, as well as the "schooling" scene in which a white teacher yells at a kempt Hushpuppy, who, despite appearing to be docile subject characterized by her a blue dress attire and her neatly done hair, refuses to conform her deportment, the project of the relief center is to discipline (or if unable to, then subdue) refugees into democratic, capitalist subjects.

At the end of the shelter scene, the Bathtub residents break out of the center. Largely filmed as a series of quick, close-up cuts that track the residents' movements and the resulting scuffles, the scene highlights the chaos of the evacuees' escape. Although upon arrival to the shelter Hushpuppy remarks that it doesn't feel like a prison, when viewed in context of the hegemonic disciplining procedures part and parcel of the residents' forced relocation and stay at the center, the escape scene is reminiscent of prison riots, albeit with a differing degree of violence and different stakes. The demand of freedom or change in conditions in addition to the giving out of bus tickets—which pushes the refugees to an elsewhere—marks the correlation between seemingly disparate sites of spatial dispossession: homelessness, incarceration, and refugee camps. The breakout scene in *Beasts* makes visible some of the shared conditions of abjection and the crossing over of local and global assemblages in sites of dispossession.

**The Queer Child in *Juicy* vs. *Beasts***

[132] Ong, 97.

Unlike the play, which features a white, male Hushpuppy and his daddy, *Beasts* naturalizes Hushpuppy's precarity. In *Juicy and Delicious*, the reoccurrence of lemons flying at/through windows serves as a less than subtle metaphor for the well-known phrase, "When life gives you lemons…" In an early scene of the play, "Building a Boat for the End of the World," lemons fly through the window of Hushpuppy's and his father's (Daddy) house. As the script indicates,

> *Some lemons fly through the window.*
>
> *DADDY picks up the lemons and chucks them back out the window. They fly back in, and he throws them right back.*

The arrival of lemons throughout the play suggests that something is not right—Hushpuppy's situation is out of sync with a romanticized childhood filled with innocence. Also, noticeably in this scene, Daddy repeatedly returns the lemons from whence they came. In other words, he refuses the precarity they represent. However, this is not the case for Wink in *Beasts*. Although Wink refuses to be labeled as a victim, he advocates for Hushpuppy, himself, and his friends to remain in the path of the incoming hurricane. With the change in Hushpuppy's race from white to black, Hushpuppy's father changes from refusing precarity to embracing it. While Daddy builds a boat for his Hushpuppy to escape permanently the end of the(ir) world (Hushpuppy is destined to flee to Japan), Wink builds a boat to help his Hushpuppy (and himself) weather the storm; Wink refuses to leave and mocks the people who do. In a later scene, Wink and Hushpuppy (as well as other members of the Bathtub community) escape from a shelter to which they were forcibly brought. The cheers of the Bathtub community and the celebratory sound effects suggest that the audience is supposed to read this scene as a victory: the residents get to

return to home. Again, the insistence on precarity is celebrated. I argue that Hushpuppy's precarity is not interrogated because the future imagined in the film is not for Hushpuppy.

The opening pages of *Juicy and Delicious* set up a narrative structure that marks the futures imagined in the play as for the child, namely Hushpuppy. Significantly, in *Juicy*, during the time of the aurochs, the future of mankind was saved by cavemen, rather than mother nature (Ice Age). According to the teacher, Miss Bathsheba, cavemen went to war with the aurochs to protect their children out of love. She states, "And now, two million years later, here ya'll are. Proof that someone was taking care of you before they even knew you."[133] In her story of the aurochs, Miss Bathsheba establishes a politics of care and human agency that will be played out in Hushpuppy and Daddy's relationship throughout the play.

Hushpuppy espouses innocence and his need for protection through his status as an illiterate, white child. As mentioned earlier, Daddy builds a boat for Hushpuppy to escape the end of the world by migrating to Japan. Although it is unclear in the play why Daddy chooses Japan for his son's destination, Alibar's naming of Japan brings the country's close economic and military ties to the United States as well as the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster to bear on understanding the play's narrative. Taking place the year before the publication of *Juicy and Delicious*, the Fukushima nuclear accident was induced by the after effects of the Tōhoku earthquake. On March 11, 2011, the earthquake initiated a tsunami that hit the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and caused the plant's cooling system to fail, which in turn led to the leaking of radiation into the surrounding region.[134] Between the earthquake, tsunami, and

[133] Lucy Alibar, *Juicy and Delicious* (Diversion Books: New York, 2012), 4.

[134] Will Ripley et. al, "Fukushima: Five years after Japan's worst nuclear disaster," *CNN*, 11 March 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/08/asia/fukushima-five-year-anniversary/index.html, accessed August 28, 2017.

radiation leak, nearly half a million people needed to evacuate. Pinned as "the worst nuclear disaster since the 1986 Chernobyl incident,"[135] the Fukushima accident received extensive media coverage. The Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission found that the accident was foreseeable and preventable.[136] In her selection of Japan for Hushpuppy's destination, Alibar analogizes the disasters and marks them both as external to the people affected by the disasters, i.e. precarity and dispossession are not tied to their bodies. Furthermore, in both instances, relocation was a key component of dealing with the impending disasters and protecting imagined futures. Within the context of the play, Daddy devises an escapist strategy for Hushpuppy rather than a survivalist one (like *Beasts*). Although Daddy's plan is flawed since he sends Hushpuppy to another site of precarity, the white male child is not charged with ushering forth a new way of inhabiting the world because his life is deemed worth protecting. Returning to *Beasts* then, the narrative structure of the film charges black girl Hushpuppy with the responsibility of imagining a future in which the white male child is protected from approaching disaster, i.e. anthropogenic climate change. What I'm trying to get at is that *Beasts* substitutes the innocence afforded to the white child with a queer reproductivity that requires black death. Furthermore, the film's ecological argument, its black death-birthing narrative, illustrates that local and global assemblages that create and support the spatial dispossession of some people, but not others, collide across the ostensibly distinct barriers of citizen, noncitizen, and stateless and articulate a democratic, capitalistic system that only functions through the maintenance of the precarity of people deemed less than human, a category

[135] Ibid.

[136] Entire report can be found here: https://www.nirs.org/wp-content/uploads/fukushima/naiic_report.pdf.

the state needs to define itself against. In addition, even liberal pushback against this predatory model, exemplified in the critical acclaim for *Beasts*, call on black death to protect white futures. An analysis of *Beasts*, its reception, and historiography highlight that dominant past, present, and future models of American habitation have and continue to imagine the black body as a necessary expenditure in the project of livable futures. In addition, the material conditions tied to the shooting of the film further evidence the lack of interrogation of black precarity.

The setting of the *Beasts* and film site bear weight on one another. *Beasts* was shot in Montegut, Louisiana, a small town[137] in Terrebonne Parish that was heavy affected by Hurricane Lili in 2002—like *Beasts* and Hurricane Katrina, the levees failed. Demographically, 86.62% of Montegut's population identifies as "White Alone" with "American Indian Alone" coming in second with 9.09%, "African American or Black Alone" listed at 1.04%, and "Two or More Races" at 1.82%.[138] Statistically then, at most, 2.86% of Montegut's population identifies as black in contradistinction to New Orleans, a city in which "Black or African American Alone" comprises 60.17% of the population and "White Alone" make up 32.99%.[139] In addition the median household income for black homes in Montegut is less than one third of white households, $11,989 and $37,575 respectively.[140] In New Orleans, the gap closes slightly with

[137] According the 2010 US Census, Montegut's population was 1,503 people, down from 1,803 people in 2000.

[138] "Montegut, Louisiana Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts," *CensusViewer*, http://censusviewer.com/city/LA/Montegut, accessed 6 April 2018.

[139] "New Orleans, Louisiana Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts," *CensusViewer*, http://censusviewer.com/city/LA/New%20Orleans, accessed 6 April 2018.

[140] "Races in Montegut, Louisiana (LA) Detailed Stats: Ancestries, Foreign born residents, place of birth, City-Data.com, http://www.city-data.com/races/races-Montegut-Louisiana.html, accessed 6 April 2018.

black households earning slightly more than 37% of white households.[141] As made evident by these statistics, *Beasts* was filmed in a sea of whiteness and a geography hostile to black life and prosperity. While I do not wish to take away from the fact the production casted locals in film, and in doing, showcased at least some form of (capital) investment in practicing the ecological politics the film espouses, one cannot help but return to Nyongo's astute observation of the occlusion of black and indigenous people in a film that allegorizes Hurricane Katrina. Blacks were overwhelmingly and disproportionately affected by the storm and its aftermath. By shooting a film whose narrative champions minority resilience and victory in a site inhospitable to black life and requires a black girl's close proximity to death to the usher forth a utopic future, Zeitlin performs what I imagine to be the opposite of performative spatial irruptions. Zeitlin creates a transfiguration of Montegut (and the surround Terrebonne communities), turning it into the fictional Bathtub in which blacks' intensified precarity is celebrated and left uninterrogated. Epitomizing the black death-birthing narrative genre, *Beasts* fails to question why black people continue to be pushed "down below" and are left "trying to breathe through water."

This chapter now turns to a "real-life story" that illustrates what a nonfiction black death-birthing narrative might look like in the wake as well as the strategies one might employ to survive said condition.

**Media Depictions of Black Children's Bodies in The Wake of Katrina**

[141] "Races in New Orleans, Louisiana (LA) Detailed Stats: Ancestries, Foreign born residents, place of birth, City-Data.com, http://www.city-data.com/races/races-New-Orleans-Louisiana.html, accessed 6 April 2018.

Ranking as one of the costliest disasters in the United States,[142] Hurricane Katrina led to the death of nearly 2, 000 citizens in the Southeast. Other reverberations, including mass structural damage, contributed to the displacement of many residents and their designation as homeless in the media. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the bodies of most of the residents displaced were black, brown, and/or from lower socio-economic classes. While much scholarship on Hurricane Katrina has thus far emphasized the disparities in media representations of black and white adult bodies as well as government action pre and post the natural disaster, this scholarship often fails to pay critical attention to media representations of displaced youth.[143] This section is interested in post-Hurricane Katrina celebratory news representations of displaced, black children in human interest stories that tie homeless youth to the state. In the Maroney narrative elaborated below, I explore the ways in which this black death-birthing narrative is taken up and framed in a way that celebrates the effects of an action that was only made possible through a black girl's proximity to death. As elaborated earlier, the black death-birthing narrative genre is filled with stories about the triumph of the American way of life in the face of adversity that occlude the state's involvement in the creation and maintenance of that adversity, which, in the case of the Maroney-Brown story, is the enforced precarity of primarily black, low-income New Orleans residents. While it is outside of the scope of this chapter and larger dissertation to address fully this genre, my hope is that my preliminary investigation will serve as a starting

[142] Kim Fulscher, "Top 10 costliest natural disasters," *Bankrate*, http://www.bankrate.com/finance/insurance/top-10-costliest-natural-disasters-1.aspx, accessed May 6, 2015.

[143] An example of such scholarship includes the Special Hurricane Katrina edition of *Transforming Anthropology 14.1*. Organized by Tami Navarro, scholarship included works by Mark Anthony Neal, Maurice Wallace, Kevin Michael Foster, Fanon Che Wilkins, and Wahneema Lubiano.

point for interrogating narratives of patriotism/nationalism that mandate black death in the quest to protect a future "for the children."

**"Katrina Girl" and the Vet**

On March 24, 2015, *People* magazine posted the article "Help this Vet Find the Little Girl He Rescued from Hurricane Katrina" by Michael Miller on their website. The photograph accompanying the article is a medium closeup featuring the torsos and heads of former Staff Sergeant (now retired Master Sergeant) Mike Maroney and the (then) unidentified black girl depicted in the headline. The pair embrace: Maroney, eyes closed, smiling, in uniform with his right arm encircling the girl and resting on her back as he holds her up, and the "mystery girl", arms wrapped around Maroney's neck, eyes slightly opened, and smiling towards the camera. While Maroney is only partially attired in his government issued gear (he is not wearing his jacket), the inclusion of a visual of the inside of the helicopter as well as military vehicles in the background of the frame heighten the legibility of Maroney as a representative of the nation. An analysis of the formal elements of the picture, in addition to Maroney's (and the media's) narration of the child's effect on him, position the Maroney-Brown story firmly in the black death-birthing genre.

The image of Maroney and the unidentified child is another instance where a black girl's affect and precarious situation are utilized in a black death-birthing narrative that attempts to occlude racialized and classed governmental neglect. The representation of the black girl's innocence through the citation of her hug, smile, and affective response to the destruction of Hurricane Katrina are framed as catalysts of Maroney's psychological rebirth. About two weeks prior to the taking up of Maroney's story by several independent news agencies, Maroney posted

a nineteen-and-a-half-minute video on his YouTube channel about his role as a para-rescuer during Hurricane Katrina. Near the end of the video, Maroney finally narrates the event that has been taken up by the media. Maroney states,

> …she wraps me up in this hug and I'm just like, everything bad melts away, everything, all that matters is this little girl's giving me this hug and I'm just in heaven. And they snapped the picture and a lot of people were like 'Oh look, his sunglasses are on his head,' or you know, 'It's a fake.' If you look my eyes are closed and I am 100% enjoying that hug. That is one of the top five hugs of my life, and actually if nothing ever happened again, that hug made pararescue, my trip to New Orleans, my career—that hug made it all worthwhile.[144]

In this excerpt, Maroney articulates the girl's hug as transformative. For him, the girl's joy in face of Hurricane Katrina gives him an emotional reset. In the video, Maroney also claims that "If she didn't have her family with her, I would have kept her; she was the most beautiful girl ever."[145] Maroney's conditional statement marks the girl as both something to be possessed and as well as lacking agency. Intentionally or not, Maroney tells his audience that if the girl's family hadn't been around, he would have taken her for himself, regardless of orphanage status or the desires of the child. By positioning the black girl as a beautiful object, Maroney situates the story in a hauntingly familiar narrative in which black flesh is desirable and sought after to be consumed by white (colonial) subjects.

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[144] Mike Maroney, "New Orleans Katrina Story," *YouTube*, 11 March 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HDFW7OCrrA, accessed 8 June 2015.

[145] Ibid.

Maroney's statement and subsequent press releases press on this desire to consume the black child, propagating the consumption of the black girl's body through representations in commodity form. The photograph of Maroney and the girl first came into commodity form through its usage on Burger King placemats and AT&T phone cards back in 2005 when the picture was first taken.[146] In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the picture not only circulated as a visual representation of state efforts to aid Louisiana residents, but also served as evidence of black resilience and joy made possible through what Espiritu might term "the gift of freedom." In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, Espiritu interrogates the construction of the refuge(e) and marks it as a model through which to explore national and global assemblages tied to U.S. militarism. Using Vietnamese immigrants as a case study, she argues, "[T]he figure of the Vietnamese refugee, the purported grateful beneficiary of the U.S. 'gift of freedom,' has been key to the (re)cooperation of American identities and the shoring up of the U.S. militarism in the post-Vietnam era."[147] Understanding that militarized and other governmental response to the effects of Hurricane Katrina treated evacuees as de facto refugees, Espiritu's gift of freedom concept helps one understand the mass circulation of the Katrina girl images and the black death-birthing narrative that continues to frame the picture more than ten years after its initial introduction.

After about a ten-year lapse, the image resurfaced and was vigorously recirculated through websites, broadcasts, social media, and YouTube. All the news stories disseminating the

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[146] Kristin Davis, "Vet searches for Katrina victim in iconic photo," *Air Force Times*¸ 23 March 2015, http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/2015/03/22/vet-searches-katrina-victim-iconic-photo/25013623/, accessed 7 June 2015.

[147] Espiritu, 2.

Maroney/girl narrative included the #FindKatrinaGirl Twitter hashtag. The hope was that use of social media and the accompanying hashtag would help Maroney locate the girl. However, what this narrative fails to address is that in the 10+ years that have passed, the 4-5-year-old[148] girl pictured would have been a teenager and quite possibly not bear resemblance to the photograph. Furthermore, the narrative also fails to consider whether or not the black female youth would like to be "found." The narrative focuses solely on Maroney and what the hug did for him. This narcissist narrative not only fetishizes the black child's body without considering racial visibility politics, but also, in its false articulation of the Katrina girl as missing and the need to reunite the savior with the saved, it reinscribes the gift of freedom narrative, which paints a benign image of the military during a decade of increasing criticism of U.S. intervention in other countries, including Iraq and Yemen, as well as widespread domestic protest against discriminating practices utilized by the police and the lack of justice served for police murders of black people.

On September 2, 2015, *People Magazine* posted a follow up story: "'Katrina Girl Found'! Airman and the Girl He Rescued During the 2005 Hurricane Will Finally Be Reunited". According to the article, Maroney and LaShay Brown (referred to as 'Katrina Girl' in article) were scheduled to meet in New Orleans[149] that month even though neither of them live in Louisiana. Although it appears that the reunion in New Orleans did not actually occur, Maroney and Brown were reunited on "The Real," a national talk show, in September 2015. The hosts first bring out Maroney, who recounts the narrative articulated above and emphasizes Brown's effect

[148] Brown was actually three years old at the time of the original photo.

[149] The reunion doesn't appear that ever happened since the pair were reunited on "The Real" a few weeks later.

on him as well his decade-long search for her.[150] Then Brown is invited on stage. As one might imagine, an emotional scene of what Ong might term "refugee love" unfolds—one that neatly fits into a black death-birthing narrative that positions Maroney as patriot and Brown as a conduit for joy. In *Buddha is Hiding*, Ong defines refugee love as "a liberal variation of humanitarian domination, as enacted by refugee workers, social workers, the police, and some health providers, who in their various capacities provide pastoral care in the broadest sense of the term to refugees."[151] I would like to extend Ong's concept to include or state agents with seemingly benevolent intentions tied to de jure and de facto refugee practices and procedures. Further, I argue that refugee love also can be mobilized by transcribing care onto the precarious figure rather the state agent. In the Maroney-Brown case, Maroney maps care onto Brown's body, creating a heartwarming narrative that occludes the causes of Brown's precarity in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that led to the hug as well as the position of privilege from which Maroney speaks, which enables the unquestioning of a middle-aged military man's ten-year desire to find a (not) lost black girl. The subject position of Maroney, in his role as a para-rescuer, obfuscates the material conditions in pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans and the government's latent response to the storm. In addition to the live videotaping of the event, the reunion was also captured via photography, which was re-circulated by *People*.

Just days after *The Real* episode broadcast, *People* released their second follow-up news piece (written by Becky Randall) on the Maroney-Brown story: "After 10 Years Search, Air Force Vet Has Emotional Reunion with 'Katrina Girl' He Saved: 'You Rescued Me More Than I

[150] The Real Daytime, "It's a Tear-Jerking Reunion — Watch!," *YouTube*, 16 Sept 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7fLafv9-Vc, accessed 10 August 2017.

[151] Ong, 146.

Rescued You'. The article opens with a composite photograph that juxtaposes the aforementioned famous image and a picture of Maroney and Brown hugging on *The Real*. Like the original, the second photo is a medium shot emphasizing the connection between Maroney and Brown. The pair's pose mirrors the 2005 photo: Brown's arms are wrapped around Maroney's neck and Maroney's arms encircle Brown; both Maroney (notably in full uniform) and Brown are smiling. The juxtaposition of the two photographs highlights a time lapse. Placed next to the luminous photo aided by artificial lighting, the Katrina photo appears washed out and dated in contrast. In addition, the shadowing, caused by natural light, present in the Katrina photo serves the authenticity narrative espoused by Maroney. Likewise, the reversal of the height differential between Maroney and Brown further maps a linear cause and effect narrative in which a black child can grow up because of the heroic efforts of a state agent. However, a more nuanced investigation of the composite showcases the constructed-ness of the black death-birthing narrative cited here.

In the first photo Brown's gaze is directed at the camera, marking an awareness of the camera's presence. In the more recent photograph, it is Maroney who gazes at the camera. Additionally, unlike the Katrina image, in *The Real* photo, Brown's focused, slightly downward gaze suggests that there are multiple

AIR FORCE PHOTO BY AIRMAN 1ST CLASS VERONICA PIERCE; ERICA PARISE/WARNER BROS. TELEVISION

cameras capturing the reunion; her focus is on a camera adjacent to the one that captured the pictured photo. If this supposition is true, it begs the question why the photo with Maroney engaging with viewers of the photograph was chosen over the one with Brown. The change in subject focus from Brown (in the first image) to Maroney (in the second image) illustrates that the savior has become the saved; through her hug, smile, and queer affect, Brown saves Maroney emotional despair. Not only is Brown's affect represented as queer or strange in prevailing the Maroney-Brown narrative that highlights Brown's smile as indicative of her resilience, I argue that as a queer child,—one framed as given Maroney new life—the affect and affective structures tied to Brown are also queer since, in the dominant narrative, they are the sources of the rebirth indicated in the headline "You Rescued Me More Than I Rescued You," which is a quote by Maroney. This hypothesis is further supported by what remains in focus in each frame. As mentioned earlier, the Katrina photo captures military vehicles, which, while backgrounded, remain in focus. However, in *The Real* photograph, except for Maroney and Brown, everything in the frame is out of focus, suggesting the unimportance of the location of the reunion; unlike in the Katrina photo, the set of the second photo does not aid the national object black death-birthing narrative that celebrates American heroism while simultaneously backgrounding black death.

Despite media usage of Brown to articulate a black death-birthing narrative, Brown circumvents the inscription for at least a decade through her unvisibility—Maroney could not locate her. What does it mean to remain in/unvisible for so long in a system that is predicated on the hypervisibility of black bodies, particularly in a world of hypersurveillance? I argue that in the case of LaShay Brown, it was a spatial irruption. Simone Browne's *Dark Matters on the Surveillance of Blackness* locates visibility and imagery as sites of contestation. Drawing largely

on the work of Steve Mann (and to a lesser degree, McKittrick and Spillers), Browne situates the intersection of black resistance and surveillance as "dark sousveillance." "Dark sousveillance" is "a way to situate the tactics employed to render one's self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight."[152] While one could reasonably assume that Brown may not have avoided "being found" intentionally, I argue that intentionality does little to mitigate the fact that Brown remained unvisible in a society built on and still functioning under a logic of visualization that mandates black hypervisibility. If we understand Brown's unvisibility as part of a broader history of dark sousveillance (one inclusive of both intentional and unintentional actions), then Brown enacts a form of resistance by failing to be visible. In her un-locateability, Brown disrupts the continuation of a black death-birthing narrative.

**Conclusion**

*Beasts* and the stories around the Maroney-Brown picture function as black death-birthing narratives that center on the death of a black girl. Despite taking place in two different mediums, both narratives call upon a child living in a site of precarity to perform a reproductive action that doesn't support black life. An analysis of the formal elements of each index the ways in which editing and shot composition are used to produce black pain for public consumption. However, the Maroney-Brown photo differs from *Beasts* in that the articulation of a black death-birthing narrative is contingent upon the written and performance pieces about the photograph. Unlike a film, which frequently circulates through trailers as well as press reviews, photographs

[152] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters on the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) Kindle Edition, 21.

outside the realm of gallery-level artistry do not have a large ready-made audience. Maroney and his media accomplices needed to create a story around the photo that would appeal to a broad audience. Wrapped in a blanket of patriotism in the face of natural disaster, the Maroney-Brown story circulated (and continues to do so)[153] as a human-interest story. Even though Brown performed a spatial irruption in her refusal to be found for ten years, the black death-birthing narrative attempts to swallow up that irruption by using the large time gap to fuel the flames of a linear hero-savior narrative.

In the follow-up *People* story with the juxtaposed photographs, Randel informs her readers that since Hurricane Katrina, both Brown's and Maroney's families have faced economic hardship. As articulated by Randall, "Unfortunately, both families have hit hard times since Katrina (Maroney is injured and therefore cannot currently serve), so the pair was shocked and overjoyed when the hosts [of *The Real*] presented each family with a $10,000 check."[154] Echoing the spatial irruption in the Little Jo and Wink's forced removal in *Beasts*, this additional information points out that neither the state agent nor the black girl are free from the encroachment of the aurochs. In other words, as the destructive tendencies of capitalism pervade

[153] The most recent *People* story, "'Katrina Girl' to Bring Air Force Vet Who Rescued Her During Hurricane to Junior ROTC Ball" 'I Would Do Anything to Repay the Hug,' He Says," can be found here: http://people.com/human-interest/katrina-girl-to-bring-air-force-vet-who-rescued-her-during-2005-hurricane-to-junior-rotc-ball-i-would-do-anything-to-repay-the-hug-he-says/

[154] Becky Randall, "After 10 Years Search, Air Force Vet Has Emotional Reunion with 'Katrina Girl' He Saved: 'You Rescued Me More Than I Rescued You'," *People*, 20 Sept 2015, http://people.com/human-interest/air-force-vet-mike-maroney-reunites-with-katrina-girl-he-rescued/, accessed 20 July 2017.

the hierarchies of Man, more and more subject positions are pushed towards "the end of the world [that] already happened [for some]."

Detailed in Chapter 1, while race continue to be a strong mitigating factor in terms of spatial dispossession, class also profoundly affects one's life chances. As theorized by Henri LeFebvre, capitalism creates contradictory space. Drawing on Marx, Lefebvre argues that capitalism's structural emphasis on exchange value (interchangeability) rather than use value exerts pressure (backed by state actions) to homogenize. This attempt at homogenization creates contradictory space because while produced space *appears* homogeneous, it is built on heterogeneity that is artificially erased in the presentation of homogenous space. In other words, the state must continually act to produce the homogeneity required of capitalism that effaces sites of difference (local specificity, nature, regional specificity, labor, and etcetera).[155] State attempts at homogenization, in part, produce sites of spatial dispossession such as the displacement of black New Orleans residents during Hurricane Katrina. State endeavors to feed capitalism, which requires homogeneity, involve expelling black, brown, poor, and other non-conforming bodies. In an unsustainable, capitalist system of domination that privileges middle to upper class, white, heterosexual, male subjects, the intertwining of race and class becomes more complex as state and private agencies attempt to manage contradictory space—management that includes dispossession as a core strategy.

In contrast to Chapter 1, which emphasized spatial irruptions that disrupted notions of transparent space and made black geographies more visible, this chapter focused on the structure

[155] Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value," in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 189.

of black death-birthing narratives and the ways in which they highlight continuities between seemingly disparate sites of spatial dispossession: homeless, incarceration, and refugee camps. It also turned to moments that interrupt black death-birthing narratives and contest the compulsion of black visibility. Located in a human hierarchal structure that categorizes black life as nonhuman, black people have and continue to utilize diverse performative practices to render themselves in/out of sight in places of dispossession. Continuing the exploration of the relationship queerness, gendered bodies, and notions of the future, Chapter 4 turns to the performances of two songs from Amy LaCour's music album about the Great Migration *Any Place But Here*: "Solace" and "Letter from a Wife." The chapter analyzes the performances' tracking of the largely unacknowledged affective labor of black women during the decades-long mass relocation of blacks from the South to the North and West.

## **Chapter 4** *Amie Cota[156] and Queer(ing) Migrations*

*Hester walks along the street with her freshly written letter.*

**Hester:** "Darling Son," it says. "Its[157] spring again and so Im outside scrubbing the marble walk. Every day I wake at dawn and scrub. The same walkway Ive scrubbed every spring since we went to work for them. They arent as mean as when we worked here together. Ive got plenty to eat and I hope you do too. Love, Ma." Wish I had enough coins to include more. Well this is good enough. Next year we'll be picnicking. We'll have meat and cheese and wine and bread and apples.

*(Rest)*

No shame in telling a lie. "I still work for the Rich People." Ha! Better to lie than have him ashamed cause his mothers a babykiller.

*(Rest)*

"Darling Son!" it says, "Its spring again and so Im—"

I open Chapter 4 with this excerpt from Suzan-Lori Park's play *Fucking A*, "[a]n otherworldly tale involving a noble Mother, her wayward Son, and others,"[158] because through the use of repetition, it performatively marks the interstitial sites of gendered affective and domestic labor as well as their attendant violences in a space that is frequently a site of spatial

[156] Amie Cota was born Amy LaCour. While previous versions of this chapter used "Amy LaCour", this chapter has been updated to relate the artist's name change.

[157] Parks plays with punctuation throughout *Fucking A.*

[158] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Fucking A*, in *The Red Letter Plays* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2001), title page.

dispossession: black female representation.[159] The play invites its audience into an atemporal world that questions notions of labor and its intensities. Early on the audience learns that Hester, the protagonist, is an abortionist who, for the past thirty years, has been saving up to pay for the release of her son who was locked up as a child for stealing food from the Rich People referenced in the letter. Unable to afford the visitation price,[160] Hester's only contact with her son is through memories and letters, written by a scribe (Hester is illiterate), like the one listed above. When Hester finishes reciting the letter, she starts again. However, in the second iteration, the opening salutation is a permutation of the original. *"Darling Son!" it says…* Following her ruminations on lying to her son about her employment and her conclusion that a lie is better than provoking shame, Hester begins to re-read the letter, and in that reading, replaces the comma following "Son" with an exclamation point. The change in punctuation highlights Hester's affective labor re her attempt to maintain a connection with her incarcerated son, while shielding him from the grim realities of her everyday life, as well as troubles the ostensible fixity of the document. Although the letter is written, thus arguably stable (perhaps not in terms of interpretation, but it is at least fixed in the simple sense of what words and punctuation are printed on the piece of paper in question), because Hester is unable to read, her re-reading of the letter allows for a change in punctuation—a difference that makes her unnamed affective labor legible. While Hester's illiteracy evidences vast class-mitigated differences between herself and her employer, rather than focus on the obvious critique, I am more interested in the rupture made

[159] There exists a large body of black feminist scholarship, including work by Kara Keeling and Hortense Spillers, that interrogates the abjection of black women from the field of representation.

[160] This changes later in the play when her friend, Canary, gives Hester a gold coin which pays for the visitation/picnic with Jailbait, who the prison claims is her son.

possible by the disparity. Following Parks, in this chapter, I explore the productive possibilities of repetition of the written word outside of its original textual document.

Throughout the fields of performance studies and cultural studies, as well as other related disciplines, numerous scholars have cited the potentialities imbued in repetition and its diverse iterations: citation, mimicry, and surrogation, to name a few. Scholars ranging from Roach to Butler to Bhabha note that repeated acts can be interrupted and said disruptions open up the space for alterity, whether that is different subject positionings or contesting narratives. This chapter investigates Amie Cota's creation of (black) aural geographies in her transformation of poetry written by African American women during the Great Migration into music. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle,* Katherine McKittrick refers to geography as "space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations"[161] and from there argues that black geographies are "subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle."[162] Extending McKittrick's theorization, I argue that aural geographies are sound spaces in which music, voice, and/or other vocal gesture mark (for the listener) hegemonic structures as well as illuminate hidden, unseen, and/or underacknowledged black geographies. Related to Murray Schafer's concept "soundscape," which "refers broadly to any 'collection of sounds' across any historical or contemporary 'sonic environment,' such as the natural, rural, urban, and technological sonic environments,"[163] aural geographies map the sounds of specific

[161] McKittrick, x.

[162] Ibid., 7.

[163] Dustin Tahmahkera, "'An Indian in a White Man's Camp': Johnny Cash's Indian Country Music," in *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 148.

communities.[164] However, unlike soundscapes, the force of aural geographies lies in the ability to make visible racializing and global assemblages using sounds which may not be part of the sonic environment that the aural geography addresses. While aural geographies can stand on their own, they are frequently attended by the visual. Focusing on two poem-songs, "Letter from a Wife" and "Solace", this chapter charts musical performance as a cartographic tool in the mapping of aural and audiovisual geographies that highlight spatial dispossession and dissident responses to said dispossession.

While my project is heavily invested in the productive possibilities of repetition with a difference, this chapter (and broader dissertation) also is indebted to and draws heavily upon the scholarship of black feminists like Hortense Spillers and Kimberly Juanita Brown who map residues of the structures and conditions of slavery in contemporary assemblages, specifically in relationship to the abjection of black women and black female sexuality from the realm of the symbolic. In *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*, Kimberly Juanita Brown defines the afterimage — "a familiar distortion, as at once different and familiar —'dissonant' and polyphonic'— as a space of imagery unfolding. The time-elapsed significance of this unfolding is also a part of its force. Taking shape of the image before it, only altered, the afterimage requires the work of the viewer in order to be decipherable. To be known."[165] For Brown, the racializing assemblages (transhistorical and transnational complex intertwinings of structures and power systems that support current, uneven sociospatial organization), present

[164] While Joshua Kun is frequently associated with developing the term "soundscape" in *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), the term was first coined by Schafer.

[165] Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

during the antebellum period remain intact in our contemporary era, albeit in disguised form. Although occasionally one comes across explicit vestiges of slavery, more often these afterimages are cloaked—undecipherable to the untrained eye, or perhaps, more aptly, undecipherable to people who view said images through the hegemonic, racist, heteropatrichal lens(es) in which they have been trained. This chapter focuses on Cota's gesturing to the afterimages present during the Great Migration and contemporary forms of spatial dispossession in her performances as well as some of the ways in which the afterimage becomes intelligible through the reassertion of black female sexuality, presence, and labor in aural geographies.

On February 19, 2016, Cota previewed songs from her upcoming album about the Great Migration, *Any Place But Here*, at the Oakland Museum of Art in Oakland, California. No doubt cognizant of Oakland's history of grassroots organizing, Cota stages her performance in a location that was not only affected demographically (and all the effects that demographic shifts have on gendered inter-racial relations) by large scale black migration to the area during WWII, but also in a site that showcases the still present effects of that population shift in a myriad of ways. Spanning a large portion of the 20th century, the Great Migration saw the end of the First World War, the entirety of the second, and multiple iterations of black freedom strategies during the Civil Rights era. Cognizant of the fact that across the globe the African diaspora remains locked in heated battles against institutions and hegemonic structures engendering the spatial dispossession of black and other minoritarian groups in the 21st century, as well as the fact that these collectivities are subject to intragroup conflict due to differing ideological viewpoints related to gender, sexuality, religion, and other contentious categories, I understand my project as aligned with a body of scholarship attuned to the historic marginalization of specific groups of people within grassroots movements across the diaspora. Specifically interested in black

American liberation struggles that play out in everyday spatial practices, my project seeks to address black geographies that continue to be washed over in discussions of the Great Migration and more broadly, dissident black 20th century spatial practices—non-normative sexualities and imaginings of futurities that do not neatly fit within the assimilation/separation dichotomies to which narratives about black liberation struggles often subscribe.

Ostensibly Cota pulls the title for her album from Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy's book *Anyplace But Here*. Originally published as *They Seek a City* in 1945, *Anyplace But Here*, a book cataloging Negro migrations, was updated and republished in 1966.[166] Speaking to the development of the project in the preface of *Anyplace But Here*, Bontemps notes,

> We soon realized that we were dealing with currents that were still running vigorously and that we could not tell when or where they would crest. To that extent our book was premature. But the disasters ahead in Watts and Chicago and Harlem which were later to focus intense light on this fantastic population shift, with all its dislocations, could not have been foreseen. Nor could they have been understood prior to the events of the fifties and sixties, disclosing the depth and intensity of the Negro American's drive toward freedom. Needless to say, twenty years of change and unforeseen developments have made it necessary to recast most of the original chapters of the book and to add a number of new ones.[167]

In his preface, Bontemps, a Harlem Renaissance notable, librarian, teacher, and Louisiana Creole poet whose own parents made the journey west to California in 1905, uses analogies of moving

[166] "Preface to *Anyplace But Here*," *Chicken Bones: A Journal for Literary and Artistic African-American Themes*, http://www.nathanielturner.com/illinoiswpabontemps.htm, accessed 4 Sept 2016.

[167] Ibid.

water to articulate the effects of what historians now term “the Great Migration,” the mass migration of Southern blacks to the North and West from circa 1916 to 1970. He argues that in 1945, there were not structures in place that enabled people to envision the scalar effects the migration would have on socio-political organizing and practices of dissent. Echoing Bontemps declaration, in her commentary on her album, Cota argues that the effects of the migration are still cresting.

For Cota, ripples of the migratory currents are visible in present-day urban sociospatial organization. With that notion in mind, Cota crafted an album that attempts to wrestle musically with the complex relationship between the Great Migration and contemporary forms of spatial dispossession. As articulated by the artist:

> *Any Place But Here*, a song cycle composed for voice and string quartet, explores the themes of home and identity as reflected through the Great Migration, a 60-year span during which nearly 6 million African-Americans moved from the South to cities in the North and West.
>
> All songs in the cycle are composed using 20th century African-American poetry as lyric. The music, arranged for chamber ensemble, is influenced by the American roots traditions of blues, soul, folk and jazz.
>
> The character is a young African-American man migrating out of the South and heading toward an unnamed urban center. The songs tell of his hope as guiding force, his drive toward dignity, and his search for the elusive feeling of belonging in a divided country.
>
> This work is not intended as a history lesson. Rather, history becomes a lens through which we can view our current relationship to race and inequity in American cities. Current patterns of urban gentrification and displacement are informed by the

> massive demographic shift that was the Great Migration. When we know our past, we are better prepared for our present, for our future.[168]

In the creation of her album, Cota echoes Bontemps investment in chronicling and preserving of black heritage[169] (albeit through song rather than literature). Alluding to the complex temporal relationship between past, present, and future, Cota's musical narrative documents an investment in hope as a vehicle through which one might arrive at a queer futurity that is responsive to historic forms of spatial dispossession in the United States. In my work the term "queer" indexes both non-normative sexualities as well as positionalities that not only stray from the norm, but also, through their difference, engender an envisioning of a future that is impossible to imagine/see within the existing human hierarchal structure. Building on the work of Ernst Bloch, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Muñoz argues for a re-investment in affective structures (namely, hope and utopia) in discussions of queerness. As articulated by Muñoz, "…[Q]ueerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always in the horizon. I contend that if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon."[170] For Muñoz, queerness gestures to a "not-yet-conscious" futurity—a queer utopia. While my project is less interested in the perfection element often associated with the term,[171] it does take up queerness and queer utopias

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[168] Amie Cota, "Any Place But Here," *Amie Cota*, http://www.AmieCota.com/, accessed 1 August 2016.

[169] "Arna Bontemps," *Poets.org*, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/arna-bontemps, accessed 3 April 2018.

[170] José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 11.

[171] In his work, Muñoz also rejects the perfection element and instead locates the necessity and productivity of disappointment (9).

as ways to locate unmapped (and maybe even not-yet-present) black geographies as well as avenues through which one might contend with the afterimages of the Middle Passage, and more broadly, the transatlantic slave trade. Understanding the repetitious, transhistoric and transnational physical and symbolic spatial dispossession of the African diaspora as one of the core racist, heteropatrichal tactics of oppression utilized in the afterimage (of slavery)—"the figurative register of what gets left over when the eye no longer has the image before it,"[172] this chapter explores the afterimages depicted, as well as the queer futurities gestured to, in Cota's transformation of poetry written by black American women during the Great Migration.

Through her compositions and subsequent performances, Cota not only provides a genealogy of gendered black affective labor and dissident sexual geographies, but she also troubles notions of linear, forward-moving time by pointing to not-yet-conscious futurities present during the Great Migration. Here, dissident sexual geographies include homosexuality and inter-racial desire. Although Cota performed several pieces from her upcoming album at the Oakland premiere, this chapter focuses on only two of the songs, "Letter from a Wife" and "Solace". Unlike the other works previewed, both songs are adaptations of poetry written by black women.[173] I turn to the performances of these two pieces not only because they document the often under-acknowledged role black women played and continue to play in polyvalent liberation struggles, but also because through her performance of the pieces, Cota addresses complicated notions of black female sexuality and multiplanar gendered violence in the

[172] Brown, 13.

[173] Both *Letter from a Wife* and *Solace* are located in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970*, an anthology edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps that was published in 1970. *Solace* also appears in Hughes and Bontemps' 1949 publication *The Poetry of the Negro, 1745-1949.*

afterimage. Re-fashioning black female poets' works, Cota creates a musical archive that prompts questions about the ethics around her artistic portrayal of the Great Migration period. What might it mean to perform an imagined past presence of black (male) experience through the products of black women's artistic labor, which are then further mediated by the transformation of the poetry into chamber music channeled through an all-white female quartet and Cota's (Creole) voice? What current conditions necessitate performances that not only attempt to capture past (black) movement, but also articulate historical migration as directly related to current processes of dispossession?

Cota's *Any Place But Here* is not the first post-Bontemps text that revisits the Great Migration to elaborate un(der)told, un(der)seen, and/or un(der)heard narratives. There is a wealth of scholarship that deals with the Great Migration either exclusively or as part of a larger historical exploration (such as Steven Hahn's *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South*). Since it is outside the scope of my project to provide an exhaustive list of all literature pertinent to discussions of the Great Migration, instead I will briefly touch upon two works that speak to the intersections I explore in this chapter. Joe William Trotter's 1991 anthology, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, attempts to engage critically with the titled constructions in relationship to the Great Migration. Noting the need to "address the connection between migration, proletarianization, and southern black culture" (the need being evidenced through works like Nicholas Lemann's *The Great Migration and How It Changed America* (1991)) in scholarly inquiries into the Great Migration, the contributors use case studies from Norfolk, Virginia, southern West Virginia, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Illinois, Richmond, California, and the urban Midwest to

historicize the mass migration.[174] As indicated in the title, the anthology's emphasis on the collusion of race, class, and gender propagating and affecting experiences during the Great Migration highlights how said social constructions shaped the redistribution of the African American population. Building on this scholarship, Chapter 4 pushes their studies forward by adding sexuality, affect, and performativity into the discussion.

Another notable text about the Great Migration that intersects with my work is Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010). *The Warmth of Other Suns* is arguably the most widely-known work about the mass migration of blacks out of the South during the 20th century[175] (and it will probably continue to be as television producer powerhouse Shonda Rhimes is scheduled to create a historical television series based on the novel). Creating the book out of the 1000+ interviews she conducted, Wilkerson constructs a narrative that follows the lives of three individuals: a female sharecropper from Mississippi who moved to Chicago (Ida Mae Gladney), a politically conscious black man from Florida who migrated to Harlem (George Starling), and a Louisiana native doctor who seeks opportunity in California (Robert Foster). Nestled in a genre that encompasses a plethora of literary texts about the Great Migration,[176] *The Warmth of Other Suns* is written as a compilation of narratives, a style that supports the goal of

[174] Joe William Trotter, Jr., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[175] Although *Invisible Man* has arguably been more widely read, I would argue that generally speaking, critical reviews of the text less frequently make a direct connection between the narrative and the Great Migration, unlike Wilkerson's audience, which is prepped through the book itself about the book's relationship to the mass migration.

[176] Other texts include Patricia McKissack's *Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, the Great Migration North, Chicago, Illinois, 1919,* which is part of the *Dear America* series.

the work—to tell people's stories—and consequently, Wilkerson privileges the mechanics of narrative fiction, including focalization. While my work also stakes a particular investment in aesthetics—the ways in which one (or a collective) presents a story—, it differs from Wilkerson in that it also critically engages with constructions of gender, race, and sexuality as well as the aesthetics utilized in representations of said identity categories. Locating art and aesthetics as containers of "blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity,"[177] this chapter explores Cota's 2016 Oakland performances of "Letter from a Wife" and "Solace" and their gestures to queer utopias. Written by black women and performed by an interracial ensemble, *Solace* and *Letter from a Wife*, and the performance of them, pose questions about black female subjectivity, affective and domestic labor, and constructions of womanhood in the postbellum carceral state through the layering of time periods as 20th century poetry comes to life in 21st century song.

**Methodology**

If Chapters 1-3 largely investigate instances where commonsensical images naturalize blackness as always already criminal and predisposed to inhabit sites of spatial dispossession like prisons and homeless communities, as well as focus on moments in which black spatial practices challenge the validity of said images, then Chapter 4 marks a shift of interest. My invocation of the term "common sense" heavily draws upon Kara Keeling's work on the cinematic. For Keeling, the cinematic refers to the reception of images that involve sensory-motor schema that use memory and affect across medium forms. Building on Deleuze's reading of Bergson, she postulates common sense as shared motor contrivances that affect perception as well as a

[177] Muñoz, 1.

collective set of memory images.178 Keeling posits that the reception of images, in turn, involves cognitive processes that draw on memory-images that, she argues, are largely shared by the general population, i.e. "'common' sense". The called upon images often manifest in the form of clichés, thus aiding attempts to cement ready-made images through their re-articulation. Common sense is what enables bodies (or images of bodies) to be intelligible as black, criminal, poor, crazy, violent, etcetera. When one comes in contact with an image that challenges one's common sense, astonishment or shock (engendered by the mismatch) liberates the subject (at least momentarily) from viewing the object/subject of interest through the lens in which said subject has been trained. Rather than focusing on ruptures of common sense, this chapter focuses on instances in which commonsensical images are not challenged by other imagery that argue for a different reading of black bodies and subjectivities. Instead, Chapter 4 explores moments in which the visual imagery remains the same, yet the subject/agent views the same image differently due to a performative moment that re-orients that subject's perspective. Putting Brown in conversation with Muñoz, Chapter 4 explores audiovisual relocations, a type of performative spatial irruption, in Cota's performances that make queer utopias imaginable.

In alignment with both Brown and Muñoz's investigation of the productivity of affective structures through different art forms (Brown through visual art; Muñoz through poetry, photography, and stage performance), Chapter 4 explores affect portrayed in the Great Migration poems of interest, their musical transformation, and the resulting performances, which I viewed on YouTube. However, understanding queerness as "always in the horizon," I push Brown and

178 Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 14.

Muñoz's work forward by emphasizing the aural as a pathway that enables the envisioning of the not-yet-[queer]here in addition to identifying queer futurities/black geographies through visual means. In this chapter, I argue that through her performances, Cota uses audiovisual techniques to illuminate black geographies that speak to processes of enfleshment (i.e. violence enacted on multiple registers including the body and the symbolic) during the Great Migration while she simultaneously opens up space for the shining through of queer possibilities. Through her setting of poetry to music, creation of a Great Migration journey album, and Oakland performance, Cota offers her audience(s) traces of some of the affective structures present in numerous black communities around the United States during the Great Migration period. Through *Any Place But Here*, Cota creates an audiovisual archive that documents black (female) affective and artistic labor as well as marks queer futurity as a black geography.[179]

**Letter from a Wife**

Written by Sarah Carolyn Reese, a Detroit-based poet, "Letter from a Wife" addresses Reese's husband who was away in Mississippi organizing in support of the Civil Rights

[179] As indexed in the opening chapter, black geographies decode hieroglyphics of the flesh—undecipherable markings caused by physical, psychological, and/or affective violences that absent black peoples from a subject position. In that chapter, I explore the role movement plays in creating black geographies as well as illuminating them. However, this chapter investigates ways in which stillness, rather than movement, constitutes space and reveals hieroglyphics of the flesh.

Movement.[180] The poem was originally published as a broadside in 1967 by same titled press. In *On the Walls and in the Streets: American Poetry Broadsides from the 1960s,* James D. Sullivan loosely defines broadsides "to include *all* single, unbound printed sheets."[181] Gaining traction during the Black Arts Movement, the strong publication of graphically designed broadsides marked one of the ways in which black communities utilized the political potential of aesthetics. As noted by Sullivan, "A major goal of the Black Arts Movement was precisely to produce art that was useful in the struggles of racial politics…art whose purpose was liberation rather than sublimity."[182] Taking up this call, during the mid to late 1960s, Dudley Randall's Broadside Press published a series of broadsides that focused on shared sociopolitical concerns of black Americans. The series includes poems written by Gwendolyn Brooks, James A. Emmanuel, and Reese, to name a few. Intertwining art and the written word, the Broadside Series illustrated black investment in art, specifically poetry, for political organizing.

"Letter from a Wife" is not the first poem turned broadside that has been set to music. During the Black Arts Movement, black poetry and music frequently were understood as two sides of the same coin. Amiri Baraka, considered one of the founders of the movement, articulates it this way:

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[180] Rosemary Weatherston, "each object which your eyes beheld," *Poetry Blog: "A Work Day in Hard Times,"* 16 Feb 2017, http://sites.udmercy.edu/mission-and-identity/2017/02/16/each-object-which-your-eyes-beheld/, accessed 5 April 2018.

[181] James D. Sullivan, *On the Walls and in the Streets: American Poetry Broadsides from the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 12.

[182] Ibid.

> Poetry, first of all, was and still must be a musical form. It is speech *musicked*. It, to be most powerful, must reach to where speech begins, as sound, and bring the sound into full focus as highly rhythmic communication. High Speech…Black poetry, in its mainstream, is oracular, sermonic; it incorporates the screams and shouts and moans and wails of the people inside and outside of the churches; the whispers and thunder vibrato and staccato of the inside and the outside of the people themselves, and it wants to be as real as anything else and as accessible as a song -- a song about a real world, full of good and evil.[183] (emphasis in original)

For Baraka and others, the structure of black poetry enabled expressions of black life and black experiences that matched the dynamism of the people. Playing with language, black poets spoke to both mundane and spectacular conditions of existence in black communities in the 20th century. In 1966 folk vocalist Jerry Lewis set the first two poems in the Broadside Series, "Ballad of Birmingham" and "Dressed All in Pink" by Randall, to music. Continuing this tradition, Cota further "musicks" *Letter from a Wife* to expose the relationship between present forms of spatial dispossession and the Great Migration.[184]

Transformed into chamber music, "Letter from a Wife" opens with a cello solo. Cota begins to sing in concert with Helen Newby's cello as Newby completes the refrain that will support Cota's singing of the chorus throughout the performance. The switching of musical emphasis between Cota and Newby throughout the piece creates a dialogical structure that

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[183] "Amiri Baraka on New Music-New Poetry—A Live Recording Featuring David Murray and Steve McCall," *HardBop*, https://hardbopjazzjournal.wordpress.com/archives-alanysis/amiri-baraka-on-new-music-new-poetry-a-live-recording-feat-daivd-murray-steve-mccall/, accessed 6 September 2016.

[184] Cota.

mimics an imagined/symbolic relationship between the poem's narrator and her beloved. In the performance, Cota embodies the narrator whilst Newby takes up the position of the distanced lover. Although all members of the Amaranth Quartet, a San Francisco-based all white female group, are onstage with Cota, only Cota and the cellist, Newby, perform. While the camera primarily alternates its focus on Cota, the cellist, and their musical dialogue through close-ups and medium shots, there are moments when violist Erica Zappia and violinist Abigail Shiman occupy the frame. In contradistinction to Cota and Newby, Zappia and Shiman sit still—at times head bowed, eyes closed, at other times, rigidly sitting erect, head forward. In these scenes Zappia and Shiman's bodily performance suggests that the audience should either ignore the non-performing artists' presence or that the musicians are not involved in Cota and Newby's dialogue, despite the fact that Zappia is physically positioned between Cota and Newby. Both Zappia and Cota occupy downstage whilst Newby is positioned stage right. Located on Cota's (stage) right side, Zappia sits between Cota and Newby, facing stage right rather than the audience. Providing her side profile to a large section of her audience (and to all the video watching audience members), Zappia interferes with the audience's ability to engage with her. Placed between Cota and Newby, Zappia's body serves as a barrier to the performers' conversation and the audience's reading of the performers' relationship.

The poem "Letter from a Wife" reads as follows:

I retrace your path in my bare feet
Press my lips against your empty cup
Touch your clothes for now-gone warmth
View each object which your eyes beheld
Write your name and speak the same

I bless each day you elude the pack

Rehearse each word of love we spoke

Recall the vows your eyes declared

Your last touch lingers with me still

I face each day with dragging feet—weary heart

Apart-from-you takes half my strength

The rest I need for waiting.[185]

Mid-poem the narrator suggests that her beloved has not yet made it to their final destination—they're en route. *I bless each day you elude the pack*. Through her diction, the narrator evokes imagery of blacks being chased by the Klu Klux Klan and/or white slave catchers in pursuit of fugitive slaves. The speaker articulates both an acknowledgment and fear of the material consequences of living in a hegemonic system that does not recognize and/or respect one's right to life. In the Oakland performance, Zappia's body catalogs the physical distance between the narrator and her beloved. However, unlike the subjects of the poem, Cota and Newby are not physically far apart. Furthermore, as indexed both in the narrator's words as well as the two-woman performance of the transformed piece, the poem's narrator can affectively reach her partner through active, self-propelled engagement with their affective traces located in everyday objects and movements. Consequently, rather than cataloging affective or physical distance, Zappia's body, as representing a (spatial) obstacle between the dialoguers, instead highlights stillness as a process of enfleshment in human hierarchal structures that block black access to

[185] Sarah Carolyn Reese, "Letter from a Wife," in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc.), 413.

(queer) utopian futures in which the enforcement of black precarity is not the norm. In the performance, Zappia's blockage of Cota and Newby's dialogue illustrates the fact that despite the legal rendering of blacks as free, the structural barriers blocking black socioeconomic advancement (including unenforced legislation, lack of legislation attending to the effects of slavery on economic opportunity, institutional and overt racism, and etcetera) and overall survival continued to reign in the era of Jim Crow and continue to linger in the present. Here then, the positioning of Zappia's body, and Zappia's refusal to move to allow Cota and Newby or the audience to fully engage, serves as a visual index of not only, the aforementioned barriers, but because the performance takes place in our contemporary moment in a historically politicized city, it also names the anti-black assemblages (and their derivatives, including post-racial society discourse and affirmative action backlash) as still present.

By projecting imagery of Mare Island and its surrounding bodies of water during the performance, Cota calls upon the history of black migration to the San Francisco Bay area as well histories of black dissident spatial practice. During the first half of the twentieth century, Southern blacks migrated to northern California to escape Jim Crow and seek economic opportunities, some of which were available in naval shipyards. Although the West offered jobs, segregated and unsafe work conditions marked California as a place also hostile to black life. This aversion to black life was illustrated in the July 1944 Port of Chicago catastrophe and the government's response to black sailors at Mare Island who refused to continue to labor in unsafe work conditions. On September 14, 1944 fifty black sailors were charged with mutiny for refusing to load ammunition onto the Sangay at the Mare Island Navy Depot. Two months earlier, unsafe working conditions at the Port of Chicago led to the fatal explosion of ammunition that left 320 men dead, of which 202 were black stevedores. Even though the military recognized

the heroic actions by black stevedores to save the lives of their fellow sailors during the catastrophe, following the explosion, black sailors were not offered survivor's leave like their white counterparts. In early August, some of the men who were working at that port were transferred to the naval barracks on Ryder Street in Vallejo. On August 9, 328 of the Ryder Street sailors refused to work. Taken up by multiple news outlets, the event is known as the "Port of Chicago Mutiny". Over the next three days, the majority of the stevedores returned to work; however, fifty sailors did not and subsequently, they were charged with mutiny and court martialed at Treasure Island. All fifty men were found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years hard labor. This is just one of the histories of (spatial) black dissident practice that vocalist-composer Amie Cota calls upon in her premiere Oakland performance.

Black political resistance was also prevalent in the Bay era, and Oakland in particular, during the 1960s and 1970s with the formation of the Black Panther Party. Founded by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton at Merritt College, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was a militant revolutionary group that fought against state maintenance of black precarity. Emphasizing black nationalism, the BPP implemented on the ground survival programs, which included prison busing programs, food and clothing giveaways, and free medical services,[186] as well as advocated for armed self-defense[187] in cities across the United States including Winston-

[186] *The Black Panthers: Vanguards of the Revolution*, Directed by Stanley Nelson Jr., *PBS*, 2015.

[187] It is important to note that after the passing of the Mulford Act in 1967, the majority of the BPP practiced nonviolent forms of activism (Curtis Austin, "The Black Panther Party in Summation," in *The Black Panther Party in a City Near You* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 195-196.

Salem, North Carolina; Chicago; New York; and New Orleans, to name a few.[188] During the BPP's short, but prolific tenure, the organization fought for black freedoms and against unjust entities through their politics and resulting actions as well as through performance with the creation of a distinct protest aesthetic.[189] Fast-forwarding to the 21st century and the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Bay Area continues to serve as a highly visible site of black protest. By situating her performance in a city with strong history of black radicalism and activism, Cota puts past and present black dissident practice in conversation with mass migration, and in doing so, stages a conversation between current and historical forms of spatial(ized) resistance to oppression.

Interspersed among moving bodies, images, and objects, Zappia's still body marks fixity as a supporting structure of racializing assemblages. In the postbellum United States, hegemonic structures and institutions sought to fix blacks economically, representationally, and geographically. De facto and de jure racist policies hindered blacks' (particularly, but not exclusively, in the South) access to resources to better their socioeconomic status. Labor contracts that tied blacks to the continuation of plantation work literally kept blacks in the South. The circulation of stereotyped images through multiple platforms ranging from the spectacular, like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, to the more mundane, such as the branding of *Aunt Jemima*, functioned as visual manifestations of racist ideology about black subjection. The

[188] Judson L. Jefferies and Ryan Nissim-Sabat, "Painting a More Complete Portrait of the Black Panther Part," in *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 7.

[189] Davarian L. Baldwin, "Culture is a Weapon in Our Struggle for Liberation: The Black Panther Party and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 300.

diverse attempts at fixing the black body (and I use the term "body" rather than "subject" here intentionally) as abject, as less than human, and the ways those attempts affected the daily lives of blacks living in the South, propelled the search for "an elsewhere."

During the Great Migration, black Americans traveled large distances across the United States seeking economic opportunity and distance from Jim Crow. Although the Great Migration was a "voluntary" relocation, the agency involved in that movement does not divorce it from the regimes of violence that propagated the mass movement of black people out of the southern half of the United States. In their movements north and west to an "elsewhere", blacks re-spatialized their communities. While these migrants increased the span of black geographies through the establishment of strong communities in urban cities, it is important to note both that this production of space[190] was tied to material conditions that mandated movement as a tactic for black survival and prosperity, as well as the fact that the journey itself was neither easy nor free of danger—a fact which is highlighted in *Letter from a Wife*.

[190] While my work emphasizes individual and collective creation of space through spatial practices (including migration, day-to-day movements, and geographies) as acts of dissent and alterity more broadly, it is important to note that some scholars, such as Henri Lefebvre, have articulated spatial practice as an apparatus of state power. For Lefebvre, spatial practice "embraces production and reproduction…and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion" (*The Production of Space*). At the level of the social, spatial practice functions to reify state ideology expounded by attempts to manage contradictory space (i.e. the appearance of homogenous space that attempts to cover over the heterogeneity of capitalism's strutures).

During slavery, unauthorized black movement, whether it was a flight towards freedom or a visit to a nearby plantation, was an act punishable by law.[191] Because of its heavy reliance on unpaid black labor, the South needed blacks to remain geographically still—to stay in the South so that their economy could function. Following emancipation, Jim Crow and segregation laws, which served as afterimages, were used to control black access to geographic and economic movement and limit access to black futures outside the grasp of Jim Crow. Although no longer codified by law as such, blacks remained positioned as less-than-human in the 20th century United States, again, particularly in the South. Separating the poem's narrator and her lover (embodied through Cota and Newby's cello), Zappia represents the racist practices present during the Great Migration that prompted the lover's displacement. Since the poem has been converted into song and is performed as such, Zappia's placement between Cota and Newby also marks the presence of citational assemblages—present-day assemblages tied to similarly structured historic ones—that try to displace black and other racialized communities in our contemporary moment (through gentrification, incarceration, and etcetera). Connecting multiple time periods and temporal moments filled with obstacles to geographic and economic movement, the *Letter from a Wife* poem and performance marks the perversity of the hegemonic structures required to support the functioning of a carceral, capitalist society (originally, and arguably, continually) predicted on the enforced precarity of black people.

Through her vocal repetition and accompanying tone, Cota emphasizes the narrator's forefronting of communal/familial geographical disruption as one of the less visible violences of

[191] Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51.

Jim Crow. Although Cota does not change any of the words from the original poem, the song ends with a repetition that is not in Reese's work. *Apart-from-you takes half my strength/Write your name and speak the same/Apart-from-you takes half my strength/Write your name and speak the same/The rest I need for waiting.* Cota's repetition emphasizes the emotional stress experienced by the poem's narrator, who, living in the afterimage, remains separated from her significant other. Transatlantic slavery disrupted uncountable black families, homes, and communities. During the Great Migration, mundane and spectacular acts of racism necessitated black movement and frequently, only individuals or portions of families were able to make the initial journey north and/or west. In Reese's work, the narrator, who is physically distanced from her beloved, constructs a letter to her partner that details the affective and emotional labor involved in waiting: it takes "half her (emotional) strength" to survive the everyday as she continues to encounter her partner's affective traces. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed posits that emotions[192] shape the surfaces of bodies and through repetition, certain emotions "stick" to bodies.[193] She argues, "Rather than using stickiness to describe an object's surface, we can think of stickiness as an effect of surfacing, *as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*…We could argue signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used a certain way, again and again, then that 'use; *becomes* intrinsic; it

[192] While Ahmed uses the term "emotion" throughout her work (although she also frequently employs the term "affectivity") to describe what one might understand as the circulation of feelings among bodies, I use the term affect to emphasis the exteriority of the circulating feeling. Consequently, when I employ the term "emotion," I intentionally mobilize the term to indicate a relationship between feelings and interiority/psyche, which are historically associated with emotion in its psychoanalytic elaboration.

[193] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

becomes a form of signing."[194] Ahmed's critical engagement focuses on how certain affects (like disgust) get attached to some bodies and not others, however, I would like to emphasize affect's attachment to nonhuman material items as well as extend Ahmed's argument to posit that affect also sticks to repetitive acts. Mundane routines, such as the daily drinking of coffee from the same mug, become laden with affective potential when they are associated with a specific person. Furthermore, this potential is often only realized when there is a rupture—a break in the repeated action.

In "Letter from a Wife," the narrator retraces her partner's steps and presses her lips to their cup, affectively engaging with the departed other. Put another way, the narrator serves as her partner's surrogate to connect affectively with the one who physically is no longer present, but still affectively lingers. If we understand affect as circulating among bodies, then through contact with affect-charged items and reenactment of prior mundane actions completed by her significant other, the narrator engages with the affective traces left by her significant other. However, as noted by Joseph Roach (albeit in a different context) the process of surrogation is always incomplete, a failed substitution.[195] Therefore the narrator continues to experience emotional pain caused by the couple's separation. By emphasizing the narrator's labor to navigate the familial disruption engendered by the vestiges of slavery, Cota aurally maps affective labor as a condition of survival in the afterimage. If we recall from Chapter 1 that in her elaboration of processes of absentification, Spillers locates enfleshment in the symbolic realm, then one of the key interventions of "Letter from a Wife" and Cota's et. al's performance

[194] Ibid., 90-91. Emphasis in original.

[195] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2-5.

is that it pushes us to examine the possibility of locating hieroglyphics of the flesh embedded in aural geographies. For Spillers, evidence of gendered violences of slavery either is marked infrequently by the visual or "hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color."[196] Instead, these violences only become intelligible through investigating the symbolic to understand the mechanisms that render said violences unintelligible as violence. Cota's added repetition and tone in "Letter from a Wife" move us away from an investment in ocularism, which frequently renders gendered and racialized violence invisible, and aurally locate the affective violence inflicted upon the narrator, and in doing so, mark the aural as an underexplored archive of black experience. "Letter from a Wife" (and "Solace") gives us a glimpse of emotional/affective violence in the afterimage of slavery. I argue that Cota's work calls for a theorization of music(al performance) as a way to expose processes of affective absentification that are not easily discernable through other means.

Through detailing her affective labor in the letter, the narrator discloses what living in the afterimage during the Great Migration might look like and in doing so, articulates other ways of being in the world[197]—nonnormative ones. In his work, Muñoz posits that "[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[198] By "retracing", "pressing", "touching", and etcetera, the narrator pushes against the presentness of the specific manifestation of the afterimage in her life, while simultaneously making the destruction of black homes and community structures legible as violence. If the perverse supporting structures of transatlantic slavery continue to function during

[196] Spillers, 207.

[197] Muñoz, 1.

[198] Ibid.

the Great Migration, albeit in a different form, then by repeating the steps of her departed, the narrator not only affectively engages with her partner, but she also creates distorted repetitions (i.e. her own afterimages) and, in doing so, queers the afterimage. When Cota finishes singing the last line, Newby performs a minute-long cello solo. While the solo mostly emulates the opening, the closing solo is characterized by a stronger attack as well as pronounced variations in dynamics; like the poem's narrator, Newby performs a repetition with a change. Understanding Newby ('s cello) as representative of the narrator's beloved, the vigor of Newby's music suggests the departed's shared investment in a different future from the one with which the couple is presented. The distorted repetitions, or queer afterimages, enable the couple to "surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness"[199] and "to see a different time and place"[200]—a futurity queer in its being hospitable to black life and communities. It is this future that the poem's narrator reserves her strength to wait for and the beloved is in search of. However, through their embodiment of wife and "husband," Cota and Newby suggest that the queer futurity that the couple waits for is a sexually queer one as well.

Cota and the Amaranth Quartet's "Letter from a Wife" performance troubles the assumption of the narrator's heterosexuality by alluding to the possibility that the letter's addressee is a woman during a time in which dominant forms of black nationalism condemned homosexuality. Although the performance takes place in the present, in her articulation of "Letter from a Wife," as well as the broader album, Cota forefronts the fact that the lyrics for her compositions come from poetry written during the Great Migration and that she holds a

[199] Ibid., 5.

[200] Ibid.

particular investment in connecting the past to the present. In doing so, Cota notes her work as tied to her understanding of the past. Published during the Black Arts Movement, which has been heavily critiqued for its perceived sexism and homophobia, *Letter from a Wife* was distributed as a broadside in a heteronormative (hostile) environment. Viewed within its historical context (and arguably today as well considering that heterosexuality remains the norm), readers of the broadside might, using their common sense, conclude that the narrator of the poem is a heterosexual (biological) woman and that the addressee is a heterosexual (biological) man. However, through the embodiment of the narrator by Cota and the beloved by Newby (or rather, by the music produced with her cello), the "Letter from a Wife" performance questions those assumptions. Viewed from this angle, Cota's last utterance (*The rest [of my strength] I need for waiting.)* suggests that she is waiting for more than just the physical reunion with her partner; she is waiting for a change in the conditions of possibility for same-sex desire and nonplatonic relationships to exist—for a future in which expressing non-normative sexuality does not leave oneself "open for attack."[201] By remaining still and waiting, the narrator marks hope as a key component of queer futurities, which, in this case, are uncharted black geographies in the sense that they are located within a movement (i.e. the Black Arts Movement, and more broadly, the Black Power Movement) that sought to combat the articulation of black peoples as less than human, yet the movement inadvertently contributed to the maintenance of said human hierarchal structure through expressions of homophobia. Non-normative understandings of gender and sexuality within the black communities imagined to be part of the Black Arts Movement (or that

[201] José Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts", *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2, 7-9.

Black Arts Movement imagined itself to be addressing) had limited space to be visible. Bringing Reese's poem into the space of music and performance, Cota and Newby open up a reading of the narrator's stillness, of her investment in hope, as creating, or at least holding open, places for interracial (which also had limited space for visibility in a black nationalist movement) same-sex desire to exist.

Creating a composition that makes use of two differently raced female bodies, Cota gestures to possible black female queer sexualities and interracial desires that were not forefronted as black geographies, or positionalities that black subjects inhabit, by playing up *Letter from a Wife*'s focus on ephemera. In his introductory article "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," Muñoz marks ephemera as a site in which one can glean traces of performances/performative practices that often fail(ed) to make it into the archive. Linking this notion of ephemera with queer possibilities, Muñoz argues that "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things" can illuminate alternative/minoritarian histories. I quote at length:

> [Q]ueerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility…Ephemera, as I am using it here, is linked to alternative modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of

> those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself.[202]

When present in societal and community structures hostile to queer expressions, queerness frequently so thoroughly hides itself within these structures that it is not discernable unless one has the legend that enables a recognition and mapping of the traces that illuminate queerness' presence. In other words, one must inhabit a positionality that allows one to see queerness in heteronormative spaces that appear to be queer-less to the undiscerning viewer. Cota and Newby's musical call and response throughout "Letter from a Wife" calls attention to these traces, creating an audiovisual relocation that marks interracial, same-sex desire as a black geography.

In the performance, Cota (narrator) recalls memories of her beloved and through the medium of the cello, Newby responds. Rather than embodying the husband to which this poem is ostensibly addressed, Newby and her cello serve as ephemera—traces of the absent "body/subject/object of affection" and the structures of feeling tied to the couple's relationship. In a musical structure that connotes non-platonic desire, Cota and Newby's performance suggests past (present) (interracial) female same-sex desire. Throughout the performance, Cota and Newby engage in a call-and-response—Cota sings about the traces left by her departed other (embodied by Newby's cello and by extension, Newby), while Newby responds with the cello, acknowledging the physical absence of the narrator's beloved, as well as the departed's partial presence located in the ephemera. Disrupting heteronormativity through their dialogue, the artists perform what Muñoz might term a "queer act," which "stand[s] as evidence of queer lives,

[202] Ibid.

powers, and possibilities."[203] During the New Negro Movement and Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century (and arguably before then as well), within narratives of black progress, dominant patriarchal discourse has backgrounded the roles of black women. Historically, for the most part, the labor of black women in the struggles against a hegemonic system outside of the juridical system has been left out the archive. In a ruling episteme that often does not recognize black femininity[204] (despite the wealth of scholarship, artistic, and grassroots actions that work to do otherwise) and just as frequently erases or covers over black female (affective) labor, Cota offers a re-envisioning of poetry written by black American women during the Great Migration as a site in which one can locate dissident black female sexuality as well as transhistorical structures of feeling; Cota contributes to a growing cultural archive[205] that attempts to map "a beat for which there is no notation."[206]

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[203] Ibid., 6.

[204] Focusing on discourse in her 1984 article "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Hortense Spillers argues that in the dominant symbolic order, black American (read African American) women remain largely invisible. She posits that in order to locate examples of black sexuality, one must turn to performance. She argues that black female vocalists "suggest a composite figure of ironical grace. The vocalist is likely closer to the poetry of black female sexual experience than we might think, not so much, interestingly enough, in the words of her music, but in the sense of dramatic confrontation between ego and world that the vocalist herself embodies."

[205] Other artists who have contributed to this imagined archive of black female same-sex desire include Cheryl Dunye and Staceyann Chin, among many others.

[206] In his essay "Negro Poets, Then and Now," Bontemps argues that "[t]he poetry of the Negro is hard to pin down. Like his music, from spirituals and gospel songs to blues, jazz, and be-bop, it is likely to be marked by a certain special riff, an extra glide, a kick where none is expected and a beat for which there is no notation."

**SOLACE**

"Solace" by Clarissa Scott Delany is a one stanza poem which contains 46 lines. Born in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1901, Delaney was an active participant in the Harlem Renaissance and published four poems before her untimely death from kidney disease in 1927. The poem of interest, "Solace," was published in the black journal *Opportunity* in 1925 and won a literary prize.[207] In the transformation the poem into song, Cota breaks Delany's poem into multiple stanzas (or verses);[208] a brief vocal rest separates each verse.

My window opens out into the trees
And in that small space
Of branches and sky
I see the seasons pass
Behold the tender green
Give way to darker heav[y] leaves.
(vocal rest)
The glory of the autumn comes
When steeped in mellow sunlight
The fragile, golden leaves
Against a clear blue sky
Linger in the magic of the afternoon

[207] Eleanor Dore, "Clarissa M. Scott Delaney: 1901-1927," *The Black Renaissance in Washington*, www.dclibrary.org/blkren, accessed 4 April 2018.

[208] Cota also makes slight word modifications and preposition deletions. Word changes indexed by brackets. Delany version located in appendix.

(vocal rest)

And then reluctantly break off

And filter down to pave

A street with gold.

Then bare, gray branches

Lift themselves against [a]

Cold December sky

Sometimes weaving a web

Across the rose and dusk of late sunset

Sometimes against a frail new moon

(vocal rest)

And one bright star riding

A sky of that dark, living blue

(vocal rest)

Which comes before the heaviness

Of night descends, or the stars

Have powdered the heavens.

Winds beat against these trees;

The cold, but gentle rain of spring

Touches them lightly

(vocal rest)

The summer torrents strive

To lash them into a fury

And seek to break them –

But they stand.

(vocal rest)

My life is fevered

And a restlessness at times

An agony -- again a vague

And baffling discontent

Possesses me.

*(vocal rest followed by very brief instrumental rest)*

I am thankful for my bit of sky

And trees, and for the shifting

Pageant of the seasons.

Such beauty lays upon the heart

A quiet.

(vocal rest)

Such eternal change and permanence

Take meaning from all turmoil

And leave[s] serenity *(x2)*

Which knows no pain.

Unlike "Letter from a Wife," Cota's "Solace" composition makes use of the entire Amaranth Quartet. Also, the vocal register shifts in "Solace" are more pronounced. Through her targeted

trills, movements into lower registers, and stand-alone run as well as her instrumental composition, Cota makes visible aural geographies that illuminate hieroglyphics of the flesh related to affective violence. Here, the aural renders legible a type of injury that is attended frequently by invisible (affective) markings.

Through her strategic use of lower registers, Cota highlights the multiple iterations of hegemonic force utilized by the carceral state during the Great Migration period. Contrasting her vocality with the connotation of the lyrics, Cota makes her first forays into a lower register in the middle of second verse (*The fragile, golden leaves*) as well as around the middle of the third verse (*Then bare, gray branches*). Both lines of the poem illustrate a vulnerability that is discordant with the strength of the deeper register in which the words are sung. The stark juxtaposition of Cota's tonality with the lyrics foreshadows the ending of Delaney's seasonal tale. Further into the song, Cota returns to the lower register. However, unlike like the earlier moments, the change in register matches the force of the words of the poem. *Winds beat against these trees;/The cold, but gentle rain of spring…The summer torrents strive/To lash them into a fury*. Emphasizing the violence inflicted upon the trees, the deeper tone lasts twice as long as it did in verses two and three and consequently, marks the durational nature of the pain inflicted. Despite the articulated vulnerability of the trees in question and the differentiated acts of violence they endure during the change of seasons, they survive. *But they stand*. These three words close out the summer torrent verse as well as Cota's singing in the lower register. Cota attacks each word and marks both the resilience of the trees and the struggle involved in remaining present. If we understand Delany's poem as speaking to shared material conditions and concerns of black American communities during the first wave of the Great Migration, then Cota's composition marks the obstacles of remaining present within the afterimage, of waiting

for the seasons to change to open up space for the respect of black life. Within the poem itself, Delany emphasizes the polyvalent forms violence can take through a metaphor of the changing seasons. Analogous to the geographic and time specific forms racism can take (e.g. lynchings in the South, institutionalized racism, segregated cities in the North, attacks on affirmation action, and etc.) each season brings with it a different obstacle that the trees must overcome.

Channeled through Cota, whose Louisiana Creole grandparents made the journey west during the Great Migration period, Delaney's description of the cyclical violences of the afterimage speaks to gendered modulations.[209] Cota's musical articulation of the seasonal violences and her accompanying tonal shifts in combination with her phenotype, highlight a national history of miscegenation and sexual violence.[210] Although Louisiana's ante- and postbellum racial politics differ from much of the United States (due in part to its unique colonial history), in Cota's performance of Delaney's poem, the vocalist is not speaking specifically to a Louisianan history, but is instead weaving Delaney's work into a larger national narrative about black life during the Great Migration and its contemporary, still cresting effects. Beginning in slavery and continuing in its afterimage, the carceral state enacted gendered racialized violence

[209] Speaking to the relationship between gender, slavery and its afterimage, Brown notes, "Whether it functions as afterimage, double exposure, hyperembodiment, or the ocular and auditory meditation of a diasporic riff, repetition brings the figuration of slavery into being with the force of modernity. This is a phenomenon of the contemporary and is particularly suited to explore and expand on slavery's gendered modulations.," 13.

[210] I do not mean to suggest that Cota or her ancestors are products of sexual violence. Rather, I want to point out that not all mixed race children (particularly during slavery and the era of Jim Crow) were conceived through consensual relations.

against black women in both the material and symbolic realm. As Sarah Haley argues in *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity,*

> [t]he state institutionalized gendered racial terror as a technology of white supremist control, and often this state violence compounded intraracial intimate abuse that they [African American women] faced in their homes. State violence alongside gendered forms of labor exploitation made the New South possible, not as a departure from the Old, but as a reworking and extension of previous structures of captivity and abjection through gendered capitalism.[211]

The structure of the postbellum South's economy was predicated and dependent upon the criminalization and dehumanization of black life and state constructions of what the black woman was (is). Circulating ideologies of black (non)womanhood as everything that the white woman is not functioned to justify sentencing black women to chain gangs (unlike the overwhelming vast majority of their white female peers)[212] and domestic work in private white households. Low and unpaid black woman's labor as well as gendered racial violence, particularly in the South, although not exclusively, during the Great Migration period prompted, in part, grassroots dissent acts, or what Haley might term "sabotage practice."[213]

Cognizant of the need to combat racism and other forms of oppression in multiple sites, historically, black and other minoritarian liberation struggles/movements have employed diverse tactics and adjusted strategies as necessary based on location as well as trial and error, to protest

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[211] Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 3.

[212] Ibid., 8.

[213] Ibid., 3.

the devaluation and/or refusal of recognition of black life. In "Choreographies of Protest," Susan Foster elaborates a genealogy of corporeal protest tactics in her analysis of dime-store lunch counter sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement, Act Up die-ins, and World Trade Organization Protests through the framework of dance. Referring specifically to the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, Foster educates her readers on the intense rehearsal process sit-in organizers utilized to prepare protestors to exercise spatial dissidence effectively by making use of their bodies. Explicating the improvisational aspect necessary to this specific form of rehearsed protest, she argues that

> [a]gency does not manifest as the product of a transcendent state. Instead, the process of creating political interference calls forth a perceptive and responsive physicality that, everywhere along the way, deciphers the social and then choreographs an imagined alternative. As they fathom injustice, organize to protest, craft a tactics, and engage in action, these bodies read what is happening and articulate their imaginative rebuttal.[214]

Understanding the spatial dispossession of black Americans to be tied to cyclical, hegemonic structures, which may change names and faces, but at the end of the day, still serve the same purpose, Cota underscores Delany's articulation of the possibility of disruption through performance blocking (which engenders imaginings of individual and collective past movements of black people) and "imaginative rebuttal[s]."

Written during the first wave of the Great Migration, *Solace* catalogs the hope present in this era. *Such eternal change and permanence/Take meaning from all turmoil/And leave*

[214] Susan Foster, "Choreographies of Protest," *Theater Journal* Vol 55, 3 (2003), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tj/summary/v055/55.3foster.html, 412.

*serenity/Which knows no pain*. If one understands the structures at work, there is the potential to disrupt said structures. During the last verse of the song, Cota draws out the word serenity, enunciating each syllable and holding the note used for "-ty" for the longest count of any note thus far. The extension of the word suggests that serenity, as a state of condition, outlasts the "turmoil" caused by the changing of the seasons, i.e. the different (dis)guises of hegemonic power. Following the extended note, Cota repeats the line (*And leave[s] serenity*), this time trilling "ty" during the extension. As a pronounced change, the vocal embellishment calls attention to the line repetition—repetition with a difference. Mirroring the vocal fluctuations that earlier emphasized the trees' duress, the serenity trill marks the fact that bursts of freedom from the human hierarchal structure come in waves. Looking at the piece as a whole then, Cota's invocation of trills throughout the performance vocally illustrate black physical and affective toil. Her vocal wavering musically illustrates that despite the numerous forms of violence experienced by black peoples in the afterimage, black Americans were and are strong enough to not only endure, but also to overcome the conditions and structures of bondage that mark black peoples as bodies rather than subjects. As articulated by Christina Sharpe, "while the wake [of slavery] produces Black death and trauma—'violence…precedes and exceeds Blacks' (Wilderson 2010, 76)—we, Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake."[215]

Shifting the analogy from black communities to personal experience, the narrator of *Solace* (embodied by Cota) marks the violences of racializing assemblages as present on multiple geographic scales. Following the vocal rest after *But they stand*, the subject of the poem shifts

[215] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 11.

from the physical changing of the seasons to the narrator and her relationship to "that small space of branches and sky". Through this structure, the narrator suggests that there are parallels between the changing of seasons and her specific life experiences. In the first verse of this section, the poem's narrator articulates her life as "fevered" and "a restlessness." For the narrator, not only does that state of being produce pain and discontent, but it is a repeated, dominating sensation. *…again a vague/And baffling discontent/Possesses me*. Serving as the agent in the aforementioned sentence structure, the agony, at least in part, controls her. When Cota sings this verse, she ends it by riffing the last word—me. Moving through different notes while singing "me," Cota highlights the pervasiveness of racializing assemblages that support the carceral state by engendering black economic, affective, and physical precarity. Racializing assemblages permeate material, symbolic, and affective spaces on multiple scales and consequently, are hard to shake. Attacking subjects and subjectivities deemed nonnormative in the prevailing dominant structure, racializing assemblages enact forms of violence from the scale of the body to the national, if not global. This is one of the reasons one has to be removed or remove oneself from commonsensical modes of viewing in order to discern the structures at work as well as black geographies that are not visible through dominant frameworks of intelligibility. Serving as an aural geography, *Solace* (poem and performance) "represents affectivity's capacity to disturb the reproduction of social life by insisting on the existence of alternatives to existing organizations of social life, even if those alternatives are deemed irrational within hegemonic common senses, an insistence that upsets common sense's operative categories;"[216] *Solace* points to a queer utopia.

[216] Keeling, 137.

**Conclusion**

At the opening of this chapter, I articulated my use of the term "queer" to describe non-normative sexualities as well as positionalities that not only stray from the norm, but also provoke an imagining of a future not foreseeable in the existing hegemonic structures of capitalism. As this chapter comes to a close, it is important to point out that prior to the usage of the term in the United States to name certain peoples engaged in nonplatonic same-sex relationships, "Queer" was used to describe incarcerated black women. Drawing on the work of Spillers, Haley notes, "[t]he imprisoned black female subject was, in some ways, one vestibule to queerness; she was the 'principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world' or 'the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and 'other.'"[217] During slavery and its afterimage, the carceral state classifies black women as Queer (regardless if they use(d) that specific term or not) in order to criminalize black women and justify gendered racial violence due to perceived deviance from the norm. As indexed earlier, my usage of the term attempts to move away from its violent history and instead engage moments in which not-yet-conscious futurities become visible—moments gestured to in Hester's verbal letter and present in Cota's performances. Articulated by the composer herself as a project that explores the relationship between the Great Migration and present-day processes of gentrification and spatial dispossession, *Any Place But Here*, serves as an "imaginative rebuttal" to the racializing assemblages supporting the current socio-spatial organization that names blacks as less-than-human. Furthermore, in Cota's transformation of poetry written by African

[217] Haley, 5-6.

American women during the Great Migration era to lyric and song and the artist's subsequent performances, Cota marks black women's unique positionality in the human hierarchal structure as enabling black women to envision other ways of inhabiting the world.

Relegated nonhuman in the carceral state, black women and their unique experiences open up possibilities for reimagining a world not predicted on a racist, sexist, heteronormative regime of bondage. Pulling the term from Frantz Fanon, cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter argues that only "les damnés," the condemned or people positioned as expendable (such as the jobless, incarcerated, and homeless) can envision other ways of being in the world that do not rely on the current racializing assemblages in place. I quote at length:

> Because of their systematic marginalization, they [les damnés] were forced to daily experience their deviance, their *imposed* liminal status with respect to both the normative order, and to what it is to be human in terms of that order…we know about political sovereignty, especially with the rise of the state. We know about economic sovereignty, with the dominance of the free market all over the world, together with its economic recognition of reality. We do *not* know about something called *ontological* sovereignty. And I'm being so bold as to say that in order to *speak* the conception of ontological sovereignty, we would have to move completely outside our current conception of what it is to be human, and therefore outside the ground of the orthodox body of knowledge which institutes and reproduces such a conception.[218]

[218] David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," November 19-20, 1999, 135-136.

In other words, in a human hierarchal system that classifies people as human, not-quite human, and nonhuman, one cannot envision an elsewhere that does not correspond to the dominant ways of viewing and existing in the carceral state. Only individuals/collectivities that have been abjected, and thus paradoxically forced to survive both inside and outside of a structure that does not acknowledge their humanity, have that capacity. What I am arguing in the chapter is that Cota and the Amaranth Quartet's performances illuminate moments of sabotage practice by black women, who continue to be abjected in the afterimage yet somehow remain at "the heart of it,"[219] as avenues through which queer futurities become visible. In addition, the forefronting of imagined futures through classical music composed by a black woman is in itself an audiovisual relocation that marks that music genre (often associated with the wealthy and (white) privilege) as an underexplored black geography. By placing "Solace" and "Letter from a Wife" in deep conversation with one another, I aim to suggest that if we concentrate our attention on the aural in addition to the ocular, with the emphasis being on viewing with the aural rather than through dominant ocular faculties,[220] we might be able to glimpse our own not-yet-conscious futurities.

[219] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Film and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 174.

[220] In his article, "'What Ails You Polyphemus': Toward a New Ontology of Vision" (2002), Maurice Wallace engages with Frantz Fanon's canonical text, Black Skin, White Masks in order to elucidate Fanon's critique of monocularism as well as call for a "new ontology of sight." According to Wallace, Fanon critiques scopophilia in two distinct ways: "everyday habits of seeing in racialized societies" and the "hegemony of vision" in philosophical discourse as well as in institutions and administrations of governmentality. 5 Utilizing three examples from Fanon's text, Wallace fleshes out the violence committed through a monocular gaze while articulating an alternative gaze which "is capable of a multiplicity of perspectives" —a new ontology of vision which is "an epistemology and a

## Conclusion

Throughout "Resisting Spatial Dispossession: Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions in California and Louisiana," I have explored multiple performance forms to interrogate the structures enabling and supporting the spatial dispossession of primarily black women in California and Louisiana as well as performative spatial irruptions these women enact in said sites. As undertheorized sites of spatial dispossession,[221] homelessness and women's imprisonment (material and symbolic) are spaces in which collusions of a variety of assemblages that make up the gendered and classed racial state come to the fore. I turned to black feminist theory in particular because through its exploration of the nexus of theory and materiality, black feminist theory disrupts paradigms that occlude black (female) subjectivity and presence. By centering the black woman as the ruling episteme, black feminist theory exposes practices creating and enabling regimes of violence as well as forms of social life and community-making. Black feminist scholarship that centers the black female subject allows me to think through the dynamic relationship between performativity, black subjectivity, and black bodies by exploring both hegemonic and resistant practices in spatial dispossession with a specific emphasis on race, gender, and (at times) sexuality. My project posits that an exploration of the performative and

politics." From there, Wallace illustrates that bodies can act outside of the fixed frameworks of racist representation through body language.

[221] While there is a growing body of scholarship on women's incarceration, little scholarship exists on women who are/have experienced homelessness. Furthermore, to my knowledge, no scholarship exists that focuses on the interrelatedness of these two seemingly disparate sites of dispossession and privileges the experience of women in these sites.

spatial practices related to homelessness and incarceration illuminate the relationship between space, capitalism, and dispossession.

Spanning four distinct mediums (theater, film, photography, and music), "Resisting Spatial Dispossession" explores the role media plays in spatial dispossession narratives, particularly ones around and about black female subjects. In Chapters 1 and 2, I analyze community-based theater productions in Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively, that center experiences by (formerly) homeless and/or (formerly) incarcerated California residents. In Chapter 1, I show how the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a theater company whose fluid ensemble is composed of primarily homeless and formerly homeless residents of Los Angeles' Skid Row, cites performative spatial irruptions tied to members' experiences with both homelessness and incarceration in their productions "State of Incarceration" and Chasing Monsters From Under the Bed." Placing an analysis of the productions alongside personal interviews I conducted with homeless, formerly homeless, and formerly incarcerated individuals in Los Angeles, I mark not only some of the gendered responses to these specific forms of dispossession, but also that capitalist constructions of space create and maintain dispossession. Moving from Los Angeles to the Bay area, Chapter 2 utilizes the figure of the ghostess to interrogate the incarceration of black women and the ways in which the logic of visualization and common sense contribute to the violent dispossession of black women. In this chapter, I turn to Rhodessa Jones' Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women, namely the "My Life in the Concrete Jungle" production and *We're Just Telling Stories*, a documentary covering the company's production of "Slouching Towards Armageddon," and illustrate how global capitalist enterprises both past and present continue to shuttle women of color into the prison system and other sites of precarity. Both Chapter 1 and 2 highlight community-based theater as a way to

counter dominant narratives surrounding homeless and incarcerated individuals and, through citation, mark individual and collective resistance to enforced precarity. While the LAPD's productions explored focus more on the structures producing and maintaining dispossession, the Medea Project production discussed in Chapter 2 emphasizes the violent experiences of the ensemble members that helped engender their incarceration as well as the women fighting back. Together, the first two chapters illustrate community-based theater's ability to re-present history in order to challenge and disrupt commonsensical narratives and ruling hegemonic structures.

Exploring a spectacularized site of spatial dispossession, Hurricane Katrina, where narration has been a key point of contention (e.g. the labeling of Katrina survivors as refugees and Kanye West's claim the President Bush hates black people), I turn to two performance forms in which framing devices are integral to their production: film and photography. Chapter 3 addresses the representation of black girls and their affect in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *People Magazine*'s "Katrina Girl" article series. As a film, *Beasts* is a series of still images that were curated by the director and framed by the script, whereas the framing of the "Katrina Girl" photographs included the series of articles as well as press releases and social media posts. Elaborating what I term "black death-birthing narratives," narratives that celebrate the creation of new life predicated on black death, I argue that an examination of these engagements with Hurricane Katrina highlight that local and global assemblages that create and support the spatial dispossession of some people, but not others, collide across the ostensibly distinct barriers of citizen, noncitizen, and stateless and articulate a democratic, capitalistic system that only functions through the maintenance of the precarity of people deemed less than human. The last chapter, Chapter 4, turns away from an overt engagement with capitalism to focus on artistic expressions of black female affective structures.

When speaking to historical and contemporary resistance to hegemony in the carceral state, it would be remiss to not include musical performance considering the rich genealogy of black fugitivity[222] and storytelling through music. Consequently, Chapter 4 analyzes Amie Cota's transformation of poetry written by African American women during the first half of the twentieth century into a Great Migration journey album. Focusing on two of Cota's songs and their performance in Oakland, I map audiovisual relocations as an important tool in making complicated notions of black female sexuality and gender violence visible. "Resisting Spatial Dispossession: Contemporary and Historic Performative Irruptions in California and Louisiana" highlights the importance of utilizing black feminist epistemologies to chart performance as a cartographic tool in the mapping of spatial dispossession and the performative spatial irruptions enacted in those sites.

To conclude, I would like to return to the Barnes and Gottesman dialogue from this dissertation's introduction to parse out why performance, in particular, is an important site of inquiry for investigating and interrogating the multidimensional dispossession of black women and other subaltern groups.

> Barnes: There's something I'd like to change. (reads script) "I went to my mother's funeral high." You could probably say "I was so high that I couldn't shed a tear as I looked at her in the ground."
>
> Gottesman: I'm writing it down.
>
> Barnes: Yea, some of this needs to be changed.
>
> Gottesman: Because?

[222] Here I am employing Moten and Harney's mobilization of the term as elaborated in Chapter 1.

Barnes: Because it doesn't fit with the story.

Gottesman: It doesn't fit the story. Okay, normally an actor gets no say. And you know, if you say, "No, you know, I would never say that" it's like "Oh well, say it." You know, "find a reason," but this is really different because you created this piece so great, I got it, thanks.

In the introduction, I focused on Barnes' performative spatial irruption in the scene. I would now like to turn to Gottesman. As mentioned earlier, in her response to Barnes, Gottesman references a production tradition of conventional Western theater, namely the actor/director relationship. However, the archive that Gottesman engages does not match the structure of the work the Life Stories Program ostensibly attempts to create—dialogical performance. In contrast to the production history of many mainstream plays, there exists a strong history of theatre akin to Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed where participants' voices are critical in the creation of the performance (e.g. the Los Angeles Poverty Department, and the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women). Considering that one of the articulated goals of *How I Got Over* is to help the participants heal, the project should be interpreted in a performance tradition that privileges the experiential and embodied knowledge of the participants over strict actor/director roles. In other words, in her response to Barnes, Gottesman draws on an archive that doesn't match the conditions of the performance and more importantly, the expression of Barnes' (and perhaps others) narrative.

As suggested by Barnes, "I went to my mother's funeral high*"* does not address magnitude or the affective and corporeal responses tied to self-medication, which itself is at least partially engendered by material conditions produced by the carceral state. In a city in which African American's makeup 49% of the population, but almost 70% of the 18.6% of the city's

population living below the poverty line, and women ages 25-34 years old, and 18-24 years old, respectively, are the largest demographics living in poverty,[223] Barnes' claim to specificity (*You could probably say "I was so high that I couldn't shed a tear as I looked at her in the ground.*) stands in contradistinction to the Theatre Lab's attempt to "tell a pretty much universal story about how women can become homeless in this country."[224] Washington, D.C.'s particularities, as well as race, gender, and class, condition engagement with spatial dispossession, and as I have tried to illustrate throughout this dissertation, these particularities manifest differently (albeit relatedly) in diverse geographic sites. I open and close "Resisting Spatial Dispossession" with *How I Got Over* because not only does it evidence this claim, but also because the Theatre Lab's prolonged engagement with residents of N Street Village through the Life Stories Program, serves as an example of the use of performance to address issues prevalent to black women in one of my sites of inquiry, homelessness. In his *Of Borders and Thresholds: Theatre History, Practice, and Theory*, Michal Kobialka argues that theater practitioners can produce new spaces through spectator agitation. As stated by Kobialka, "Maintaining the condition of being perturbed allows for the creation of new alignments, which produce new intensities and new connections, as well as new sites, and ultimately, new modes of affectivity, action, and resistance."[225] Although Kobialka is speaking to the work of Brecht, Artaud, Boal, and Grotowski, his argument rings no less true in terms of relationship to the theater productions

[223] Statistics cited are for 2016. "Washington, D.C.," *DataUSA*, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/washington-dc/#intro, accessed 2 June 2018.

[224] Thomas Workman in *How I Got Over* (2014).

[225] Michal Kobialka, "Introduction," in *Of Borders and Thresholds: Theatre History, Practice, and Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 25-26.

emphasized in this dissertation, work by the Los Angeles Department and the Medea Project. All three productions explored "perturbed" audience members because they crossed (imagined) boundaries, and in doing so, performed spatial irruptions that disrupted the mapping of transparency onto the bodies of the ensemble and the characters they inhabited. Again, in Kobialka's terms, "Because the boundary exists less as a limit, 'every boundary is present everywhere, potentially. Boundaries are set and specified in the act of passage. The crossing actualizes the boundary.'"[226] The spaces produced or illuminated by the crossing of borders in theater are black geographies that highlight representational and material acts of dissidence. While "Resisting Spatial Dispossession" addresses multiple performance forms conducive to the study expressions of noncompliance or agency that are often hard to discern in sites of spatial dispossession, theater is a particularly provocative site of inquiry for addressing the enforced precarity of black women because it produces "a space from with the 'other' subject [can] speak."[227] Through the creative narration of individual and collective stories, the reworking of memory, and the address of the relationship of the experiences narrated to social, economic, and political realms, the theater can agitate the spectator—helping them to become dispossessed and subsequently relocated into an affective space conducive to action.

[226] Ibid., 14 and Brian Massumi in *Of Borders and Thresholds*.

[227] Kobialka, 10.

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