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"Let the world be a Black Poem:" Tierra Whack, Evie Shockley, and Douglas Kearney's Poetic Experiments Towards the End of Grammar

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in African American Studies

by

Kayla Jasmine Boyden

2021

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2021

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

"Let the world be a Black Poem:" Tierra Whack, Evie Shockley, and Douglas Kearney's Poetic Experiments Towards the End of grammar

by

Kayla Jasmine Boyden

Master of Arts in African American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor SA Smythe, Chair

I argue that Black contemporary poetry disrupts ideas of linear progress and neat conceptions of subjectivity. The poets I am thinking with explicate the complexities of Blackness that cannot fit neatly into the formulation of the modern liberal subject. I utilize Hortense Spillers' framework of the American grammar in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" along with other Black feminist thinkers and literary theorists to explore Black contemporary poetry's capacity for moving beyond the grammatical impulses of "the human." This project will add to an already rich and growing field of Black thinkers rejecting humanism as well as exploring the boundaries of tension between what is and what is not considered formal poetry. First, I look at rapper Tierra Whack's 2017 song "Mumbo Jumbo," which I argue utilizes incomprehensible sound to gesture towards an alternative to the American grammar. In my

second section, I analyze Evie Shockley's poem "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (Or the Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)" from her 2017 book *semiautomatic* as disrupting time through her re-appropriation of language. Finally, I read Douglas Kearney's poem "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)" from his 2017 edition of THE BLACK AUTOMATON as utilizing both sound and the written to depict the all-encompassing violence of grammar towards a new alternative.

The thesis of Kayla Boyden is approved

Shana L. Redmond

Sarah Haley

SA Smythe, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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We did it.

Introduction

> "We might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly kill us."
>
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"

Often described as the most cited piece of Black feminist thought, literary theorist Hortense Spillers' 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" is the most influential piece of criticism that I have read. It was first published in the Summer issue of *Diacritics*, a literary theory and criticism journal that offers "a forum for thinking about contradictions without resolutions; for following threads of contemporary criticism without embracing any particular school of thought" (*Diacritics*). As I've moved from one African American Studies department to another in my journey from undergrad to graduate school, I have encountered this text more than any other in my academic career to date. Spillers, taking seriously the journal's call, proposes more questions than answers, offering contradictions without easy solutions.

As a scholar interested in the Black American literary canon, reading Spillers alongside literature felt the most natural to me. I take seriously Spillers' claim in the epigraph about the violent capacity for language. But, as a Black person within the Academy, I find myself frustrated reading poetry and being told poems hold no "real life" implications. I am always making a case for the revolutionary capacity for language, as I (like many others) believe that language affects our lived reality. I return to poets like Amiri Baraka, who in his famous poem "Black Art" writes, "We want 'poems that kill.' / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns" (Baraka 149). Baraka in his poem argues for the importance of the Black Arts movement in freeing Black people from their subjugation through art including poetry. But what does it mean

for a poem to have capacity to kill both myself and my oppressor? There is tension in the multiple implications of Spillers and Baraka's thinking about the possibilities of language and poetry that are urgent for thinking freedom. I am interested in this tension between words that will kill us and the ability for words to kill. Contemporary poetry holds the capacity for thinking anew.

This project contends with Black contemporary poetry as it disrupts what Spillers names the "American grammar." Thinking with Tierra Whack, Evie Shockley, and Douglas Kearney, this project focuses on how these Black contemporary poets gesture towards modes of existing within the American grammar. Through disruption, I argue that these poets clarify modes of being that exceed the signifier "human." For them, "Blackness" as a concept does not need to fit neatly into the formulations of the "human" as it exists within our current semantic fields. By thinking with Black feminist and literary theorists, I explore Black contemporary poetry's capacity for envisioning spaces beyond language. This project will add to an already rich and growing field of Black thinkers rejecting humanism while also exploring the boundaries of literary genre as a vehicle to think beyond other genres, like the human. Tierra Whack in her "mumbo jumbo," Evie Shockley in her analysis of Harriet Jacobs and sex trafficked girls in the United States, and Douglas Kearney in his collapsing of the binary between the written and the spoken, all engage in acts of incomprehensibility that gesture towards a new mode of Black being. These spaces of incomprehensibility are what I argue represent a freedom from the subjugation created by frameworks of grammar.

This thesis fits within debates surrounding the necessity of the human as a viable category for those perceived as Black. Notably, the framework "Afro-pessimism" has sparked key debates within Black studies that I am in conversation with. In the context of the United

States Academy, the term is defined by Frank B. Wilderson III, Patrice Douglass, and Selamawit D. Terrefe in the 2018 entry on *Oxford Bibliographies Online* as

> a lens of interpretation that accounts for civil society's dependence on antiblack violence—a regime of violence that positions black people as internal enemies of civil society, and cannot be analogized with the regimes of violence that disciplines the Marxist subaltern, the postcolonial subaltern, the colored but nonblack Western immigrant, the nonblack queer, or the nonblack woman. (…) Afro-pessimists argue that critical theory's lumping of blacks into the category of the human (so that black suffering is theorized as homologous to the suffering of, say, Native Americans or workers or nonblack queers, or nonblack women) is critical theory's besetting hobble—a hobble subtending another false assumption: that all sentient beings possess the discursive capacity to transform limitless space into nameable place and endless duration into recognized and incorporated events. (Douglass, Terrefe and Wilderson III)

This theoretical framework has created debates within Black studies, most notably between the theorists Jared Sexton (an Afro-pessimist) and Fred Moten (arguably an "Afro-optimist") in a series of public essays in response to one another. I am not particularly interested in making a judgement about this debate within this thesis, as I am not an Afro-pessimist nor am I in binary opposition (which I feel is an unfair flattening of Moten's argument) as an "Afro-optimist." Rather, as a graduate student interested in the pursuit of knowledge, I am invested in reading and engaging widely with theoreticians regardless of their position within these debates. I am not interested in aspiring towards "humanness" or "aliveness." Instead, I want to indicate limitations to only focusing on those as possibilities for Black being.

More precisely, my work is in conversation with scholars who situate themselves within

Black feminist genealogies such as Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Hortense Spillers. These theorists work within Black feminist thought to consider what Christina Sharpe calls “Black exclusion” (Sharpe 42). They each create arguments that call into question the legitimacy of categories like “human” and “woman” through an analysis of Black womanhood within modernity. By no means am I arguing that these authors, as well as the many others not mentioned within this thesis, are operating at the same level of abstraction. For scholars like Hartman and Sharpe, Black feminist theorizing happens at the level of the quotidian such as in the lives of enslaved women at the scene of the plantation, or newspaper articles describing a Black girl being punished for writing on the wall of her school. Theorists like da Silva and Spillers theorize about ruptures and the advent of modernity through chattel slavery. Still, each create discourses on Black feminist theorizing beyond or outside of the human within our current grammatical field.

Importantly, while I seek to situate my work within this specific tradition of Black feminist theorizing, I do not discount other forms of theorization that are invested in a rearticulation of humanity to include (if it does not already) the human. I utilize other Black thinkers like Audre Lorde, Katherine McKittrick, and Angela Davis who by no means disavow the human within their own theoretical positionings. I hope my work can enter within these already tense and ongoing debates without disavowing one school of thought over another. Rather, I hope to illuminate possible limitations within grammar regardless of whether or not Black people aspire to be recognized as human.

For this project, I have applied the literary studies methodology of close reading to analyze the processes each of these poets enact to push us away from the domination of Western language and canon. I have broken this thesis into three distinct sections: first, an exploration of

Tierra Whack's 2017 song "Mumbo Jumbo" for its visuality and sound. I use Tierra Whack's accompanying music video along with her vocalizations together to read each moment of the song. Second, I analyze Evie Shockey's 2017 poem, "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)" where I focus specifically on intertextual analysis independent of sound which does not figure in this work. In the third section, I consider Douglas Kearney's 2017 version of "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER-MER FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)" and analyze both the text of the poem and the sound of Kearney's live performance of it. I utilize a close reading methodology that is influenced by Black studies' interdisciplinarity. My close reading practice does not separate sound from the written. Rather, I argue that sound and text have to be read together in this instance as part of Kearney's technique to subvert the domination of the American grammar. With this, I am able to highlight individual moments that are part of a larger and ongoing movement to dismantle the logics of grammar.

In order to avoid making these poems legible within Western academic logics, I do not want to consider these three texts within a traditional canon of Black contemporary poetry. I believe that these three authors work interact within a shared semantic field that allows them to exist next to each other in this project. I include Tierra Whack as a poet in order to disrupt the tendency to cast out rap music from a larger Black contemporary poetic tradition. Including Whack in a thesis about poetry, I hope to push upon the boundaries of what is considered a poem and why. The insights of each of these authors to push against traditional forms of representation through their poetic experiments are by no means completely excavated by my project, and I hope that this can be read both inside and outside the academy within larger conversations of Black studies, Black poetry studies, and Black literary criticism widely.

Returning to “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Spillers interrogates language and its capacity to literally kill. In the transformation from body to flesh that marked the Middle Passage, Spillers helpfully names the violence of language, reading practices, canons, and gender. Metaphors, similes, lists, and more create a semantic field that is littered with the bodies of enslaved African women rendered as nothing more than just property, or “signifying property *plus*” (Spillers 203). As she puts it, “Under [ethnicity’s] hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor” (Spillers 205).

Spillers’ work allows for multiple generative analysis which include reading her arguments as an allegory for more than language in its most literal state. I understand Spillers to be arguing about language and words at their core. Like Spillers, I read Blackness as a “metaphor for value” illustrating the real-life implications of language and syntax (Spillers 208). If we understand the metaphor of Blackness as the basis for the language of legal doctrines, methodologies, and even the construction of canons as Spillers proposes, then this also re-centers the violence of the Middle Passage within our current moment. Because the construction of modernity is made possible through the metaphor of Blackness, Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby” highlights the urgency in destroying the American grammar. To return to Spillers’ own language:

> The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an “American grammar,” begins at the “beginning,” which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the sub-Saharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture. We write and think, then, about an

> outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events. (Spillers 209)

This definition is important to fully grasp the implications of what Spillers is pointing out in her analysis of the "American grammar." Language is not just the playground of Western academics who weaponize it to maintain neoliberal and classist agendas. Alternatively, I argue that Black people's realities are shaped by the metaphor of "Blackness."

In an interview in 2007, Spillers explains that she wrote "Mama's Baby" in a state of hopelessness for the Academy, claiming that feminism and history could not account for Black women. As Spillers says it:

> I wrote ["Mama's Baby"] with a sense of urgency, with a need to tell something that had been told over and over again—I knew that none of it was new. (…) I felt that in 1986 and 1987 no one wanted to put a theoretical spin on this, I mean we really are invisible people. And I just kind of went nuts. (Spillers, Hartman and Griffin)

While not explicitly stated in throughout the text of "Mama's Baby," by virtue of Spillers' own writing practice, feeling finds itself woven into the fabric of the American grammar. Written just ten years prior, Audre Lorde explicitly takes up feeling and language in her essays that have since been republished in *Sister Outsider*. Lorde argues in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" that

> as they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. (…) This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me." We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. (Lorde 36)

While Lorde is theorizing specifically about poetry, her conceptualization of feeling is what makes possible Spillers' own experiment in prose. In other words, feeling and grammar cannot be read as separate from each other.

Poetry is a way to begin theorizing outside of the American grammar. To put it in Lorde's own language:

> [P]oetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (Lorde 37)

With this in mind, I believe in the possibilities of Black poetry, and particularly Black contemporary poetry, as a distillation of feeling that disrupts the foundations upon which the American grammar is built. Understanding poetry as inherently related to feeling, and that grammar itself is imbricated into that relationship, Lorde undergirds the entirety of this project, even when not explicitly stated. Feelings help to signal beyond the hegemony of language and syntax as we know it, therefore gesturing to a beyond that we cannot name as of yet. Black contemporary poetry is the most visible metric for movement outside current semantic representations as we colloquially understand them.

I begin by analyzing Tierra Whack's song "Mumbo Jumbo" within this framework as an act of untranslatability. Through her refusal to be translated, Whack disrupts her speakers' representations of her as a legible, rational subject. While arguably not a poet as recognized by formal definitions curated within traditional Western modes of study, Tierra Whack follows

larger tradition of Black poets located in the United States. Like the enslaved people on the plantation who had to rely on song to share their poetry, through the Black Arts movement, and into the bridge between rap and spoken word created by curators like Def Jam, Whack is connected to a larger Black poetry genealogy beyond just music. By exploring Whack's position within (and outside of) this tradition of Black poets, I argue that rap artists should not be separated from the larger conversations surrounding Black contemporary poetry. In her work, Whack does not utilize language to make a song but instead relies on unintelligible mumbling and humming to create rhyme and meter over a hip-hop instrumental. Whack's sound with the aid of the visuals from her music video portray the potential for thinking outside of grammar and canonicity.

Along with Spillers and Lorde, I position this song within larger conversations surrounding dissonance and sound within poetry. I frame this section with Édouard Glissant's 1992 essay "Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics" from *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. I argue that the formulation that Glissant provides between the written as non-movement and the spoken or noise as "essential to speech," is explicated in Tierra Whack's use of sound and the visual to subvert grammatical representation (Glissant, *Carribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* 123). Along with the music video and song, I analyze the attempted translations that Whack's song undergoes on *Genius*, a website dedicated to transcribing rap lyrics and allowing for members of the larger online hip-hop community to provide lyrical annotations. Beyond the questions of translation, this essay is also helpful to analyze noise, meaning, and nonsense as subversive tools created and used as alternatives to the violence brought about by the American grammar's attempts to fit Blackness into traditional categories like human and woman.

As well as Glissant, I engage Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* where they explore various forms of resistance to capture and embodiments of fugitivity. Following Moten and Harney's concept of the container/hold/undercommons as a language lab and space of "accompaniment," I am drawn to thinking about contemporary poetics like the ones enacted by Tierra Whack as representing more than just her singular song but as a larger act of genre building and world-making. I employ this framework to think alongside concepts like Hortense Spillers' vestibularity of Black women in order to argue that Whack's movement away from the growing genre of "mumble rap" has unlimited potential but is also a space of intense violence as her music video displays. I argue that *Genius*' annotated entry for "Mumbo Jumbo" attempts to assimilate Whack's rejection into language. This attempt at translation highlights the tensions between *Genius* as an archive and Whack's intentional decision to be un-archivable.

In my second section, I analyze Evie Shockley's poem "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)," which I argue uses the existing texts to disrupt concepts of teleological historical movement. In this poem, Shockley takes Chapter X from the 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and an article from September 2012 called "Sex Trafficking in the USA," by Yamiche Alcindor and places them into direct conversation. Centering Black girls, Shockley disrupts temporality and representation as it would exist for the liberal and singular subject. Within this section, I engage Black feminist analysis and practices of poetics to interrogate the limitations of grammar and the possibilities outside of it.

Reading the works of Glissant and Jacobs together, I think about the "abyss" as a space of disruption. In the first section of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant provides an analysis of what he terms as "the abyss:"

> Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 7)

In my reading of Shockley, I advance that the space of the abyss is a space of unlimited potential that allows for each trafficked girl in the poem to exist within death. In other words, their freedom is only found in its separation from grammar or a violent separation of flesh from value. Through their descent into the abyss, these girls find themselves experiencing both death and life simultaneously. This simultaneity undergirds the temporality of this section.

I also argue that through Shockley's use of Chapter X of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* raises questions about sexual freedom and agency. While not yet having run away from slavery, Harriet Jacobs in this chapter describes her relationship with a white man whose child she bears and, for that transgression, is cast out of her grandmother's home. Saidiya Hartman provides a helpful framework about sexual agency on the plantation in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* that I utilize in my reading of this poem. In the chapter "Seduction & The Ruses of Power," Hartman reiterates her claim about the "nonevent of emancipation" by providing a helpful reading of Harriet Jacobs' relationship (if we can call it such) (Hartman 116). The framework of consent, agency and virtue that Hartman provides aids in my analysis of the similarities between the women and girls about whom this poem is about. I theorize alongside *Scenes*, where Hartman warns of the dangers of recognizing

the enslaved as human. I think about how, by choosing the abyss, these girls are also choosing to abandon legibility by escaping grammatical subjugation.

In my final section, I analyze Douglas Kearney's poem "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)" from his book *THE BLACK AUTOMATON*. I argue that Kearney's performance at the 2011 annual meeting of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs utilizes both sound and the written word to imagine an alternative to the violence of the American grammar. Kearney engages language, symbols, and deployment of call and response in this poem to create a depth beyond what is printed on the page. Through his allusions to music, literature, and experience, Kearney moves from the singular and internal process of reading to a relationship between the reader, the page, and their specific knowledges in order to build rhyme and meter. By reaching outside of the text the reader has access to a new position where popular culture, Black literature, and Black poetics reassess the symbolic order. In this section, like the enslaved person Kearney is describing jumping overboard a ship into the ocean, I move with Kearney downwards by analyzing each stanza as they appear in the descent to the bottom of the ocean.

Kearney's practice offers clear evidence of his negotiations of the written and the spoken. In a 2015 interview with Danielle Legros Georges for *Solstice*, Kearney says:

> When I give a reading, I am extraordinarily alert to the fact that I am a body on stage in front of people, and being that body on stage, and the idea here is of a black body, comes with expectations. The kind of ways I navigate the space of danger, of ambivalence, is, I think, through a kind of cruelty. When I introduce the poem "Swimchant for nigger mer-folk," I say it's a peppy poem about the Middle Passage. And I look dead at the audience. (Georges)

Kearney's sentiment here is important for framing how I read his poem in my own work. Including the audience reactions from his 2011 reading, I engage with Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" alongside Spillers to understand how Kearney's performance calls into question the possibilities for Black subjecthood. I believe that the audience reaction, as well as Kearney's framing of the poem enact a type of movement away from neat representations of a teleological subject. In his 2011 recording of this poem, Kearney insists on including laughter as a way of exemplifying the limitations of joy as a way to destroy the violence (re)-enacted by the Middle Passage. By situating multiple types of feelings in my analysis, including my own, I propose that Kearney portrays the limitations of language in liberating Blackness from grammar.

Kearney's own literary criticism in *Mess and Mess and* further clarifies how cacophonous sound illuminates a methodology of moving away from grammar through illegibility. Using Kearney's own conceptualization of Glissant's din as "'black' plus 'noise' plus 'not a Latin prefix'" I argue that "SWIMCHANT's" unintelligibility gestures towards Spillers call for a new semantic field (Kearney, *Mess and Mess and* 32). This unintelligible space has its own temporality, not bound by a consistent meter or rhyme. My analysis of temporality in this realm is aided by Christina Sharpe's 2016 *In the Wake* which provides a conceptualization "residence time," or an oceanic temporality (Sharpe 51). By reading these two concepts together I argue that Kearney provides us with a blueprint for thinking beyond grammar.

Through this thesis, I hope to question the desire to be recognized by violent forms and histories. Returning to the epigraph for this introduction, I wonder how we can escape the violence of language that affects our lived realities? These three experiments in Black contemporary poetry are only a few of the many groundbreaking writers who are thinking beyond what it means to write and represent Blackness in the contemporary moment. Engaging

these works is more important now than ever in imagining a future that does not remake in the same grammatical structures that rely on death and subjugation as the metaphor of Blackness—rather they teach us what could lay beyond the oxymoron that "Black human" renders. These three poets each in their own way answer Hortense Spillers' call in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" to embrace the monstrosity of being unrepresentable by the American grammar as it currently exists. Borrowing from Amiri Baraka in "Black Art" this thesis seeks to explore what it means to "Let the world be a Black Poem" (Baraka 150).

Section 1

"Humble as a Mumble in the Jungle:" Tierra Whack's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Representations of Black Womanhood

There is arguably no website with more information on rap music than the one formerly known as *RapGenius*. In its new iteration, *Genius* has insidiously solidified its popularity through viral videos and deals with top streaming services to provide lyrics while consumers listen to music. According to their website, "[f]ounded in 2009, *Genius* is a unique media company that's powered by community, our in-house creative team, and the artists themselves. We serve music knowledge to over 100 million people each month on *Genius* and everywhere music fans connect across the internet" (*Genius*). Founder and CEO Tom Lehman claims that the idea for *Genius* came from conversations being had in his 2009 apartment dissecting clever rap lyrics. He and Mahbod Moghadam began annotating various works, including rap lyrics, Bible verses, and poetry like Emily Dickinson. According to co-founder Moghadam, he and Lehman started with the idea of building a universal annotator, originally called "Rap Exegesis" and shortly thereafter changed to "Rap Genius" (Moghadam).

As *Genius* grew in popularity, the problematic relationship between its creators and rap music became irreconcilable. Neither Moghadam nor Lehman had real investments in rap music. Moghadam describes this tension in his article "The CEO of my company, *Genius*, must be Black" where he claims:

> As soon as the site got serious traction, we started to get criticism, mostly from woke hipster white journalists writing for *Pitchfork*— talking shit because the CEO was white. Tom, the CEO, is not even a white guy who likes rap! He is completely ignorant of rap and wanted to learn more— that was the whole reason he built the site. I got very angry

> at these critics because I felt like they are missing the bigger picture— someday, I thought *Genius* would become so big that people would forget that our origins were in hip-hop, just like how lots of people use Facebook and don't know it was originally meant only for college students. I thought that when *Genius* became the "SOCIAL NETWORK OF CLOSE READING" it wouldn't matter that the CEO is white, or that he doesn't listen to rap. I felt like the critics were being myopic. (Moghadam)

By his own admission, Moghadam makes explicit that the *Genius* creators had little investments in rap music. Instead, they were attempting to create another social media network. In its earlier conceptions, Mike G, a rapper with the Odd Future Wolf Gang rap collective, began annotating his own rap lyrics. This was a pivotal shift for the website— rather than simply relying on an annotating listening public, *Genius* could capitalize on rappers providing a roadmap of what they actually meant. Moghadam created verified accounts for rappers to provide their own translations to references in their songs. To much fanfare in March 2012, prolific rapper Nas became the first verified account breaking down his lyrics to “Get Down” and paving the way for more rappers to become involved with the site.

As the website began to move away from being a “social network of close reading” and towards their current iteration as a “media company,” Rob Markman was brought into the company in 2015 when he introduced *Behind the Lyrics* videos. In these videos, artists sit in front of a yellow backdrop and provide their annotations in an interview style. These videos can be found on the *Genius* YouTube channel, as well as on Apple Music and Spotify on the artist’s profile. *Genius* has integrated itself into listening culture, pairing with both Apple Music and Spotify to provide lyrics, and even the ability for listeners to interact with the annotated tracks in real time.

Rap artist Tierra Whack released a stand-alone single “Mumbo Jumbo” October 6, 2017. Released simultaneously with a music video, Whack’s “Mumbo Jumbo” was subsequently nominated for a Best Music Video Grammy Award in 2019 but was beat by Childish Gambino’s “This is America” (*Genius*). While being interviewed about this song, Whack claims that the title comes from the song not having lyrics, she explains “[w]hen I’m recording, I usually just mumble and hum a melody and then fill the words in as I go. This time I just decided not to” (Skelton). “Mumbo Jumbo” was released as the last in a series of four singles (“Toe Jam,” “Child Please,” “Shit Happens,” and finally “Mumbo Jumbo”) separate from her debut 14 minute and 56 second visual album *Whack World*. Produced by RicandThadeus and Nick Mira, Whack focuses specifically on sound instead of lyrical content to experiment with the boundaries and expectations of what a rap song sounds like.

Her song has an entry on *Genius* with traditional lyrics, as well as lyrics on streaming platforms Apple Music and Spotify for the song. Not only that, but her music video includes captions across the bottom, seemingly written as nonsense that does not match with the sound of the music it claims to represent. Yet somehow, Whack is interviewed for a *Behind the Lyrics* video. As it starts, Whack claims, “Sometimes I feel like rapping, and sometimes I don’t wanna rap” followed by text that says, “[t]echnically, ‘Mumbo Jumbo’ has no real lyrics. So Tierra Whack made some up later and put them backwards in the music video’s subtitles” (*Genius*, “Tierra Whack” 0:01-0:09). Whack spends the next four minutes singing what has been recorded, matching the track that plays in the background of the music video, but on the alternating left and right sides of the screen we see the “lyrics” Whack provides in the music video such as “leachiM noskcaJ si ton daed” (*Genius*, “Tierra Whack” 3:28-3:30). Just as *Genius*

does with its other *Behind the Lyrics* videos, they break the song into traditional musical sections such as “Pre-Chorus,” “Chorus,” and “Bridge” despite the song resisting these categories.

Genius’ desire to make sense out of Tierra Whack’s music illuminates an inability for this archive to include new and fleeting experiments that transcend traditional forms. Rather than allowing Whack’s song to exist as it does without lyrics, *Genius* attempts to make her mumble into lyrics. Even the “lyrics” we are provided by Whack in her music video are “translated” through the invitation to *Genius* to perform a close reading of what she calls “random things, random thoughts” (*Genius*, “Tierra Whack” 0:12). Interestingly, they do not display the lyrics that appear on the *Genius* website, which include lines like “I hold my head up high and I wave real low/ I lift my hands, no lie, and run away, I know” as they would normally for other *Behind the Lyrics* videos, but rather they have Whack expound on her “wack facts.” Cycling between the *Genius* lyric entry with verified commentary by Whack, the *Genius* entry with captions from the music video, and the *Behind the Lyrics* video there are many slips in the language that are being transcribed and represented.

This tension between Whack’s sound, “Mumbo Jumbo’s” visuals, and the various *Genius* lyrical translations illustrate the precarity of representation through what Hortense Spillers calls “grammar.” What follows is a close reading of Whack’s vocalizations, where I explore how Whack’s use of feeling brings us beyond the confines of grammar and language. This close reading will also analyze the music video for “Mumbo Jumbo” which complicates the stability of the traditional Black woman subject. I argue that Whack’s sound experiment illuminates the failure of conventional Western grammar to make Black women legible as subjects.

During her *Genius Behind the Lyrics* video, Tierra Whack provides insight into the process of creating “Mumbo Jumbo.” She describes making the song after having a tooth pulled

and listening to the song, saying that "[h]alf the time I don't know what these rappers are saying, but I just like the way it makes me feel, you know what I mean? And that's just what we went with" (*Genius*, "Tierra Whack" 0:47-0:51). Whack alludes to mumble rap, a contemporary form often critiqued for its unintelligibility. Originating in Atlanta, Georgia, "mumble rap" (also synonymous with "trap" or even "SoundCloud rap" according to cultural critics like Ben Beaumont-Thomas) has become a polarizing and oft-debated topic between rappers, cultural critics, and the general hip-hop listening audience. According to cultural theorist Delon Alain Omrow, mumble rap can be first traced to Atlanta rapper Future's 2012 song "Tony Montana," followed by Chief Keef's single "Love Sosa" (Omrow 48). Similarly lumped into this category are rappers such as Lil Yachty, Migos, Gucci Mane, and even Drake.

The term "mumble rap" is a capacious project, encapsulating various rappers with different sounds, inadvertently creating a binary between the "lyrical" (rappers such as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole) with the non-lyrical. As one of the most polarizing intramural hip-hop arguments, mumble rap has been a major topic for various cultural critics such as Joe Budden and DJ Akademiks on *Everyday Struggle*, a morning show dedicated to popular culture and hip-hop. In 2017, Budden famously critiqued rapper Lil Yachty claiming, "I don't think that Yachty is hip-hop. I don't think that Yachty's label is hip-hop. […] Yachty is ruining the culture. Someone who should not be accepted in this f*cking culture" (Ortiz). Despite this, in the years that have passed mumble rap has become one of the most popular hip-hop subgenres as illuminated by streaming numbers and charts. For example, in 2020 Apple Music's most streamed song was "The Box" by Roddy Ricch, a mumble rap song that gained prolific status through its popularity through social media platform Tik Tok.

Critiqued for the ways it can be untranslatable, the new form of trap (meaning made in drug houses where illicit substances are manufactured and sold) called mumble rap relies on the slurred speech of its rappers to transcend the content of the lyrics. These rappers rely on feeling or affect to supplement the perceived (non)lyricality of their music. As Future explains recording his own song “Tony Montana,” “I remember being so f**kin’ high on this song, I couldn’t even open my mouth. When I listened back to it the next day, I was like man, what the f**k is this? But I loved it. Like, that sh*t sound raw, though” (Alyse). For Future and other artists, mumble rap is not simply about providing lyrical substance but is about the sound and feeling that their voice can provide. Recreational use of drugs such as codeine, promethazine, and Xanax mark the authenticity of this form, with rappers taking on names like Lil Xan and Smokepurpp making their drug use part of their public personas. At its core, whether they are actually under the influence of these drugs or performing a type of intoxication while sober, mumble rap is identified by slurred speech, the feeling of loud bass, and autotuned vocals.

Black women have attempted to enter mumble rap, using the form to rap about drug use, sex, and making money from an overwhelmingly cisgender heterosexual Black woman’s perspective. Rappers such as Asian Doll, Rico Nasty, Flo Milli, and Megan Thee Stallion have experienced varying success, often being criticized and siphoned into what was termed on Twitter in 2018 as “pussy raps,” meaning women rappers who rap about sexual freedom. Tierra Whack, while often described as an “alternative rapper” rather than mumble rapper, attempts to create a mumble rap song in “Mumbo Jumbo.” Her mumble rap is not classified through its subject matter, but by the fact that she attempts to encapsulate the feeling of mumble rap. Whack explains how she created “Mumbo Jumbo,”

> I just got my tooth pulled. I had the gauze and everything. I just remember going to the studio and pressing play to hear it back, the song that I did, and I was just singing it along. I was like, "Yo this is so fire! We gotta go, we gotta be at the dentist, we gotta do like…" I just put a whole, everything just came together. (*Genius*, "Tierra Whack" 0:32-0:45)

Whack describes herself singing along to her mumbling after recording the song, attempting to recreate her vocalizations that were made possible through the gauze in her mouth. Whack, like Future, listened back to her song and felt the song's importance. Rather than needing lyrics, both Whack and Future illuminate the importance of feeling for mumble rap in lieu of a discernable referent. Whack's gauze serves a similar purpose to the traditional mumble rapper's use of drugs to make her song legible within the larger mumble rap genealogy. Rather than following the traditional conventions of drug use that mark mumble rap, Whack creates her own lane through her choice to move forward with the song in its iteration without lyrics. This song does not fit into the conventions of "pussy rap" as there are no references to anything, yet neither is it understood as mumble rap because of the restrictions created by the form's exclusion of women. The song, however, sounds and feels like a mumble rap song. Whack's "Mumbo Jumbo" therefore elucidates the problematics of the current schematic that defines mumble rap, allowing for an alternative reading of the form that has the potential to be more inclusive. Her song will not ever be fully understood through the signifier of "mumble rap" but alternatively forces a re-evaluation of the form and its gaps in representation.

At its core, mumble rap relies on feeling to move the listener rather than content. Tierra Whack emphasizes this point in her own description of the status of rap, claiming "I just like the way it makes me feel" highlighting Whack's intervention through her song and of mumble rap

more largely as a form rely on its ability to be felt, or it's hapticality. In their text *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten introduce what they term as "hapticality in the hold." For these authors, those who have been moved across the Atlantic, or descendants of the enslaved experience an "unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others" (Harney and Moten 97). Harney and Moten provide a reading of Blackness in modernity as existing within the hold, or as the movement of things in an "interdicted outlawed social life of nothing" (Harney and Moten 93). Whack's "Mumbo Jumbo" can be read as existing outside of the "outlawed social life of nothing"— her work being held within and outside of the hold, or grammar of mumble rap. And, as I think about later in this section, mumbling more capaciously opens up possibilities for potentially escaping the domination of grammar and its subsequent Western logics.

This space as created by grammar, to borrow from Moten and Harney, is the "undercommons" of form and ultimately the grammar that attempts to name mumble rap as such. As Harney and Moten describe the undercommons' relationship to hapticality, they write:

> This is the sound of an unasked question. A choir versus acquisition, chant and moan and *Sprechgesang*, bable and babble and gobbledy-gook, relaxin' by a brook or creek in Camarillo, singing to it, singing of it, singing with it, for the bird of the crooked beak, the generative hook of *le petit negre*, the little nigger's comic spear, the cosmic crook of language, the burnin' and lookin' of pidgin, Bird's talk, Bob's talk, bard talk, baby talk, B talk, preparing the minds of little negro steelworkers for mediation. (…) In the absence of amenity, in exhaustion there's a society of friends where everything can fold in dance to black, in being held and flown, in what was never silence. Can't you hear them whisper one another's touch? (Harney and Moten 96-97)

Traditional, Black mumble rappers could be included in this extensive list of sounds that mark the lament of the undercommons. But through the exclusion of a song like "Mumbo Jumbo," mumble rap becomes the space of the commons, marked by language that forecloses the possibility for flight outside of its problematic nature. Tierra Whack's "gobbledy-gook" marks a theoretical space beyond the outside that mumble rap claims to represent. Harney and Moten's conceptualization of the hold, and further modernity, is rooted in the language or sound. For these authors there is no language beyond the hold, but Black sound (or lack thereof) outside of traditional language is the other side (or potential outside) of modernity. They provide the reader with various unrelated sounds and images, providing an expansive and robust analysis of language and its relationship to Blackness and modernity that I argue Whack's "Mumbo Jumbo" takes up in its praxis.

Through the condition of being Black, which Harney and Moten argue structures an inability to move within the hold, hapticality is the radical possibility for attempted love and care. As they put it, hapticality is "the self-regulatory powers the invitation to build sentimentality together again, feeling each other again, how we party. This is our hapticality, our love. This is love for the shipped, love as the shipped" (Harney and Moten 98-99). Whack's "Mumbo Jumbo" relies on this condition for radical possibility through existence in the hold that is always ongoing, not marked by the legal end of the transport of Africans across the Atlantic during chattel slavery. While Harney and Moten choose to utilize soul music as the medium for what they term as the "lament for broken hapticality," I argue that "Mumbo Jumbo" similarly embodies this logic and opens up the possibilities for thinking beyond the rigid boundaries created by the signifiers of genre and form. While she is not, and possibly cannot, be recognized as the same kind of rapper as Future, Whack's existence in the undercommon (or outside) is

marked by her haptic vibration against the mumble rap canon. Her haptic relation via her position outside of, but next to, mumble rap partially unmakes the forms rigid boundaries.

As an entry point into her undercommons, Whack begins her song in the same way that many mumble rap verses begin with the repetition of "Yuh." Whack repeats this phrase nine times, allowing for the listener to become comfortable within the constraint of mumble rap as a form. Whack does not yet expose that the song has no real language, but rather allows the listener to feel comfortable with the "Yuh" sounds that sound almost like the word "yeah." Yet, during the recording her mouth still is physically blocked by the gauze, distorting the sound to being somewhere between a sound and a word. This suspension tricks the listener into assuming this song is like the others created by mumble rappers like Lil Uzi Vert who famously started his own verse on "Bad and Boujee" (2016) with five yeahs back-to-back. Whack engages in what Glissant in his essay "Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics" calls the discourse of din. Glissant writes about Creole saying,

> To move from the oral to the written is to immobilize the body, to take control (to possess it). The creature deprived of his body cannot attain the immobility where writing takes shape. He keeps moving; it can only scream. In this silent world, voice and body pursue desperately an impossible fulfillment (…) Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. This must be understood. (Glissant, *Carribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* 123)

By repurposing repetition in the same way as mumble rappers like Lil Uzi Vert, Whack connects her work to a larger epistemology beginning with the slaves on the plantation that Glissant is writing about. And as a standard representation of mumble rap, as well as Black music more generally, the repetition draws a clear connection for a listening audience aware of mumble rap as a form. By engaging in a sustained repetition, Whack not only creates a connection to the

mumble rappers of today, but also the enslaved people that Glissant theorizes. Whack's unintelligibility becomes a mode of relation not bound by the temporality of today. Whack engages in a discourse with different temporalities through Glissant's din.

Although she utilizes repetition similarly to mumble rappers, she still is unable to easily be assimilated into "mumble rap" as a category. The frameworks I have looked at are only helpful in explaining Whack only insofar that they provide an overall way to analyze a monolithic Black experience without accounting for gendered experiences that deem Whack excessive even to Black forms. "Mumbo Jumbo" elucidates the problematics of not just the language of the human, but specifically for Black women. In her essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Hortense Spillers provides the linkage to think expansively about what I argue is Whack's intervention into a particularly masculinized other. In this essay, Spillers creates a historical genealogy with Calvin Hernton's *Sex and Racism in America* as the start of an exploration of Black women's sexuality. She writes:

> With the virtually sole exception of Calvin Hernton's *Sex and Racism in America* and less than a handful of very recent texts by black feminist and lesbian writers, black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb. (…) At this level of radical discontinuity in the 'great chain of being' black is vestibular to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for the society around her what a human being was *not*. Through this stage of the bestial, the act of copulating travels eons before culture incorporates it, before the concept of sexuality can reclaim and "humanize" it. (Spillers 153-55)

By specifically focusing on the Black woman within this analysis, Spillers bridges the distinction of gender in Whack's exclusion from the blossoming genre of mumble rap. For Spillers, music

emphasizes the possibility for making known Black women's sexual lives and capacity for subjectivity, yet Spillers describes the Black woman as relegated "to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome" (Spillers 155). This inability to be signified by language is what places Whack outside of Harney and Moten's conceptual "outside." Whack's gendered experience as vestibular to culture makes her enactment of the "mumble" in "mumble rap" unable to be consolidated within the constraints of genre even as it exists within the "outside." Because she is "awaiting her verb," I argue that Harney and Moten's framework, when read with Spillers' consideration of gender, articulates Whack's movement away from the structure of grammar.

This conceptualization of the vestibular nature of Black womanhood is made legible through the visuals of Whack's mouth being held open and unable to move. The accompanying music video for this song begins by showing two people shot at an angle from below. These two people wear white outfits that resemble hospital scrubs, walking through a room with red walls and a white ceiling. The walls reflect the light of the room as if they have been waxed and cleaned extensively. Visually, Whack's "Mumbo Jumbo" undercommons are explored through the space of this sterile room with red walls where she is looked down upon by two non-Black people in scrubs. If we are to read mumble rap within a larger advent of modernity that relies on cannons, genre forms, and standard conventions for legibility, "Mumbo Jumbo" in its initial "Yuhs" and shot of the sterilized room lure the listener into a familiarity based in Western logics and closer to the hold.

As the video and song continue, Whack begins to rap with a loud-drums and high-hat cymbals at 0:15 seconds. Visually, an image of Tierra Whack appears in a reclined position. The camera is above her, and the viewer takes the position of the people in scrubs, looking down at

Whack. Whack has a dental retractor holding her mouth open as she looks beyond the camera and attempts to move her mouth along with the song while being flanked on the left and right by the two nonblack people who opened the music video. On one level, Whack's vocalizations disrupt the expectations for the listener as she begins making sounds similar to recognizable words like "run away," "all day," and "ugh." Yet it is apparent that this is not language, as the words are never complete, instead trailing off and never coming fully into meaning. The visualization of Whack's mouth being held open becomes a representation of Whack's "mumbo jumbo," but also the physical barrier that stops Whack from utilizing verbs like "run." Whack's song itself embodies the "great discontinuity" between representation of mumble rap and something else entirely as well as between the signifiable and un-signifiable.

Tierra Whack's dramatization of her initial experience that rendered her unable to speak during the recording of "Mumbo Jumbo" is directly tied to the inability for Black women to be signified by language. Rather than simply placing gauze in her mouth, this music video transports the viewer to witness the dental appointment, which I argue represents an allegory for modernity, that creates the conditions for her inability to rap in language. Tierra Whack is awaiting her verb— to be able to talk through the removal of the structure holding her mouth open. She is physically restrained yet continues to speak unintelligibly throughout the song attempting to portray feeling through sound disjointed from language. The viewer is directly confronted with the violence of being unable to produce language when Whack moves as if she is grinding her teeth despite the unrecognizable dental tools being held towards her mouth by the dentists above her. Through Spillers', concept of the "paradox of non-being," or Black women's paradoxical existence in making subjectivity known through their own un-subjectivity, Whack physically is framed in opposition to the white scrubs that tower over her while she attempts

utterances. These sounds cause an affective response, relying on feeling to make itself known, while simultaneously illustrating the danger of creating outside of language through the visuality of her mouth being held open. These moments enact a complicated performance of "cultural vestibularity" where Whack is vulnerable to structures of restraint, and later physical violence, making her unable to produce more than just sound (Spillers 156).

At this point in the song, Whack has established a cadence that continually repeats with little change. While Whack has made it clear that there are no lyrics to this song for the sake of analysis of the sounds that she is making, the *Genius* entry which attempts to capture this song are helpful in my analysis. As it has been problematically transcribed on *Genius,*

> All damn night, been awake, aw yeah (No, yeah)
> Run away, baby hate my love (True, uh)
> Hoping I wouldn't wait on ya (It's true)
> Anything you says on you (They know, uh)
> Hoping I run away from love (True)
> Hoping I, I ride, aw yeah (I do) (Whack 0:17-0:48)

Without taking the actual words into consideration, this *Genius* entry helpfully marks the sound of each line's ending. The cadence and meter of the song become easily repeated for the next verse which similarly ends with a "uh" while visually marked by the two dentists looking down into Whack's mouth with tools in their hands (Whack 0:20-0:23). Each line continues ending alternately with "yuh" and "uh" until the sixth line, where there is no pause between the end of the line and the next one (Whack 0:24-0:39). This disruption calls into question the form and expectations that the listener had for Whack. What has felt like a standard form is made irregular through the use of an "o" sound, rather than the "uh" as it had been previously.

While already explicit through her choice to abandon language all together, I argue that through irregularities in form, Whack begins to move beyond simply brushing against mumble rap as a form and takes the listener further away from being recognized as a mumble rap song. Despite the instrumental and cadence of the song mimicking standard mumble rap, Whack visually moves us away from comfort within that form. The imagery of the white plastic mouth prop that appears throughout this section of the music video highlights an arrest in Whack's movement she sits under the gaze of the two dentists. Paradoxically, Whack is unable to move or speak while experiencing a dental operation on her mouth, yet Whack's song is moving beyond genre constraints and language. How can Whack theoretically push her experiment beyond the confines of language, while being unable to physically move from the structures— represented by the mouthpiece— that hold her hostage?

The nature of the music video as a form paired with the visual element of Whack sitting in the dentist's chair create tension between her embodiment in the music video and the sounds she produces. Theorist Rick Altman describes this process in his 1980 article "Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism." In this article he describes the relationship between the viewer of cinema and their relationship to the sound and images as they exist on the screen. Altman analyzes the classical narrative film and argues that, "In a political world, the right to free speech conveys a certain political power; in the narrative world, the right to speech invariably conveys narrational power, for by convention it carries with it a secondary right, the right to appear in the image […] *I speak therefore I am seen*" (Altman 68).

This logic is expounded upon at length through the entirety of "Moving Lips," but for the purposes of my analysis, I am most interested in Altman's exploration of gaps between the sound and image of films. In an exploration of dialogue in narrative cinema, Altman questions the

position of the camera in relation to who is speaking, and how the viewer is to make sense of the dialogue of a film. As Altman explains:

> If it is the dialogue, the language, the words which count, then why show lips moving in time with the sound track? We can best answer this question by recognizing the effect of those moving lips: they transfer the origin of the words, as perceived by the spectator/auditor, from sound 'track' and loudspeaker to a character within the film's diegesis. (…) Portraying moving lips on the screen convinces us that the individual thus portrayed— and not the loud-speaker— has spoken the words we have heard. (Altman 69)

The sound and image then must exist in unity to make possible our understanding of the film subject as that— subject. Altman continues this line of thinking claiming that through this unity, the screenwriter (or wordsmith) is eliminated from the film, and the viewer is made to believe in the "moving lips" on the screen are producing the sound that we hear (Altman 70-71).

While Whack's video is obviously not a traditional piece of cinema, Altman's conceptualization of the split between the sound-image is helpful in my thinking about Whack's performance throughout the "Mumbo Jumbo." In the moments of the video I have previously described, Whack's mouth is held open, yet she still moves her mouth as if to indicate that she is the one performing the track that is overlayed on the music video. Had her mouth not been held open she would make clear that she is in fact the one performing the song. Instead, we are left to assume that through the motion of her jaw while she sits in the dental chair is the equivalent of her lips moving. She attempts to "transfer the origins of the words" that she sings despite her mouth being physically blocked and worked on by the dental instruments held by the two dentists above her. An uncertainty is created through this physical blockage and it is unclear if

the vocalizations she is meant to be performing even match up with the sound that has been overlayed to match the image. This disarray calls into question her ability to hold "narrational power" as Altman would term it (or alternatively the ability for Black women to exist beyond the "paradox of non-being"). I argue that Whack is forced to abandon the impulse for narrational power in her desire not to utilize language. And in this abandonment allows for an imagining of something in excess of the signifiers that would attempt to capture the meaning of her song.

Within a majority of the music video, Whack is pictured seated in the dental chair where she does not move and is forced to endure intense bouts of violence. During the what is described as the chorus of the song in the *Behind the Music* interview, a close up on Whack's eyes are shown, moving left and right in a panicked way (Whack 0:59-1:01). Whack sings what sounds like "goodbye" as she sits in the chair, but she is unable to complete the word. This moment indicates a shift in Whack's comfort in the chair- the panicked glances indicate that she is experiencing discomfort or even fear. The eerie nature of the space she is suspended within becomes noticeable at this point as the camera moves away from Whack, allowing for a view of the full room with red walls and a white ceiling where Whack is being operated on. Musically and visually the spatiality of the song moves outwards and away, opening for the possibility of movement. Whack is not being restrained to the chair yet has to sit still while she is being operated on exposing the imaginative capacity for her movement. While she cannot move as to protect her mouth from further damage, the possibility for escape becomes clear as an analytic for thinking beyond the confines of mumble rap.

This dentist visit takes a violent turn during what is referenced in the *Behind the Lyrics* video as the "Bridge." The music video abruptly cuts to a scene of Whack in the dental chair as she had been previously (Whack 1:17). Whack utters what sounds like a sustained "oh" while the

camera is focused on her face (Whack 1:17-1:19). Her mouth is completely wide as she looks directly into the camera. The sound that she utters paired with the imagery of the video looks like Whack is in pain, possibly saying something similar to "ow" as the dentists continue to operate on her mouth. The two dentists operate on Whack as the scene continues and by 2:00 suddenly Whack is no longer in view. Rather, the camera is positioned as if the viewer is being operated on by the dentists who look down towards the camera. Both of the dentists look intently at the bottom portion of the screen as if the viewer is seeing this operation through Whack's vantage point. In doing this, Whack's experience becomes universalized. The viewer sits in for Whack through the camera angle, meaning the viewer imagines the possibility that the blood that stains the white skin somehow is also theirs. This disappearance and standing in of the viewers body for Whack's serves as a metaphor for Whack's positionality as a Black woman. To borrow the language Spillers provides in her essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Whack visually renders vestibularity through her disappearance. The viewer, willingly or otherwise is forced to contend with Whack's positionality as a Black woman in the dental chair, being operated on for what turns out to be a violent re-rendering of her mouth at the end of the music video.

The viewer is implicated in this discourse regardless of their race or gender, allowing for (albeit potentially problematically) the non-Black viewer to imagine Whack's particular experience as a Black woman. "Mumbo Jumbo" falls short in this regard, allowing for an engagement in Black women's suffering through Whack's dental visit but simultaneously obliterating her in the process. But more importantly, the Black viewer's own vestibularity is rendered legible in some ways through Whack's disappearance. While I am not arguing that all Black women (and perhaps what I am marking is not even only women) embody the same struggles, there is something about entering Whack's undercommons illegibility that is a

possibility for understanding *beyond* language. In letting the viewer sit in for Whack, Whack's vestibularity may be read as prematurely marking the violence that is yet to come through her dental visit, and bringing us, the Black woman viewer, with her. This vestibularity is played out through the violence of the non-Black viewer's disappearing of Whack, and the Black viewer's standing in as Whack while potentially problematic, opens up the outside of language.

More of Whack's blood stands out against the pale white skin of the person operating on her as the music video continues. At one point, the blood is shown dripping down their legs onto the white ground (Whack 2:09). Musically, Whack lets out another sustained "oh" while we see the person's red shoes planted firmly on the ground. The white operator both literally, while the blood drips down their legs, and figuratively, through the red shoes, wears Whack's blood on their body as they continue to operate. Black women's blood illuminates an unequal power dynamic between the those in white and Whack as a Black woman. As they operate on her, an interruption of the sustained "oh" does not stop the blood draping the white person's legs explicating the same logics and violence that the previous scene represents by having the viewer sit in for Whack. The blood of Black women does not cause alarm and the operation continues regularly. In other words, those working on Whack's mouth are calm because Black women's pain, as represented by blood, is a non-event. The blood becomes what Spillers terms as the "[mirror] for the society around her what a human being [is] *not*" (Spillers 155). The white body draped in Whack's blood elucidates the anti-Black violence that bounds Blackness within subjugation. Through the opposition of the two colors, a distinction between Whack's embodiment and the white dentist's subjectivity is made literal. Whack makes these structures visually legible instead of just theoretically through the use of her blood, marking what cannot be placed into language into a different non-linguistic register. The operation on her mouth makes

legible Whack's very illegibility—what Whack is forced to endure through her position as outside of the realm of the human opens her up for intense bouts of violence, while simultaneously drenching the nonblack human.

At the conclusion of the music video, Whack finally moves from the chair. At the 2:22 mark, she is shown standing with the red room as background. In this moment, we see her face with an overexaggerated smile. This new mouth looks unnatural and cartoonish, not moving while Whack cocks her head to the right while looking directly at the camera (Whack 2:22). As the outro of the song plays in the background, Whack walks into a dark city scene where she encounters three others with the same masked smile (Whack 2:23-2:45). This new mouth conceals her original mouth that was held open by the dental retractor. Marked by blood, this new mouth was physically created through maiming her body. She cannot change this expression and is forced to continually smile. The song at this point has no more "lyrics" and Whack's ability to continue vocalizing has been made impossible. These lips cannot move meaning that when she passes the other two people with similar implants in the street, she cannot engage in a dialogue to announce herself or protect herself. And while she is able to walk through this street, the nature of her mouth no longer having the ability to move serves as a literal visualization of the inability for Black women to assert themselves accurately through language. To return to the nature of Whack's vestibularity as a Black woman, she provides us a warning where Black women are un-audible and unable to move their mouths. This opens up a space for speculation—she is in a dystopian world, unable to utilize language before and after entering the dentist chair. In their attempts to assimilate her into this new world, Whack elucidates the violent processes of trying to transform her into something human-like the people outside. Whack warns us of the dangers of this type of assimilation through her own semantic field within the video and song.

The new mouth looks unreal and made of something like plastic. The already hyperbolized moment in the dental chair becomes even more outrageous. Even in describing it, I am faced with difficulties where language makes it nearly impossible to fully capture what Whack's artistry reveals. The end of the music video represents the "unreality" that marks Black women's lived experiences. To return to Hortense Spillers:

> The structure of 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. (Spillers 156)

The conclusion of "Mumbo Jumbo" elucidates what Spillers is urging the reader to think about. Absent of the language to represent herself, we hear just the instrumental outro of the song with no vocals from Whack. She resides in this dystopian world and depicts the moment where "language ceases to speak." Her vocalizations in the chair outside of a traditional language form do not save her from this transformation, but rather highlights the urgency of confronting these moments of violence. But is that break down necessarily a foreclosure? Perhaps it is worth reading this dystopian world as a potential beyond language that would be filled with fear, violence, and other negative affects rooted in the imagery that is marked through the second half of the music video. Whack represents a danger in being physically manipulated into silence, but

also a new world with possibilities not yet imagined and the violence of upending global systems of domination.

Against the work that is being done by "Mumbo Jumbo" there are currently two *Genius* lyric entries as well as lyrics on streaming services like Apple Music and Spotify. Her attempts at discourse beyond language are interrupted by translating what is not language into legibility. On the official *Genius* "Mumbo Jumbo" entry with annotations from Whack herself, we are provided a translated chorus as follows:

> I hold my head up high and I wave real low
>
> I lift my hands, no lie, and run away, I know
>
> And when I wave goodbye, they all wave hello
>
> And when I wave goodbye, they all wave hello (*Genius*, Mumbo Jumbo (Captions))

In following this translation with the sound of the song, there is potential for these to be the lyrics. Yet, Whack has stated in numerous instances (including on the *Genius* entry itself) that there are no lyrics. To put it plainly, the community of annotators are putting words into her mouth. Considering this with the self-narrated history of *Genius* as a social media of close reading, the violence of this translation is made clear— despite there being no lyrics, in order to be legible to an audience invested in the translation of Black art forms there must be a re-making beyond what Whack has stated in her own narration. This act of re-making silences Whack through violent translation. Whack's artistry and agency through the subversion of language is disregarded for the sake of legibility and archiving. The possibilities for her song are rendered immobile by the archive that *Genius* wants to create, and discourse surrounding her use of noise becomes rendered unnecessary. Or to put it bluntly as *Genius* user fakexanax comments: "isn't

the fact that the lyrics are unintelligible the whole point of this song lol" (*Genius*, Mumbo Jumbo (Captions)).

Whack's song highlights an important crisis in hip-hop known as the culture vulture or according to *Urban Dictionary*, "A scavenger, circling the media, looking for scraps of originality to add to their conceit" (Urban Dictionary). Often a racialized term, Professor Mark Anthony Neal in conversation with Taryn Myers claims, "Culture vultures do shape culture, because the privilege of whiteness, means that culture vultures have more access to entertainment and cultural platforms, as members of the so-called dominant culture" (Long). Where do culture vultures get their knowledge when it is not their communities making the references? Websites like *Urban Dictionary* and *Genius* make legible what should be illegible to these people. Unlike its problematic counterpart *Urban Dictionary*, *Genius* has solidified itself institutionally by pairing with Apple Music and Spotify, creating an app, and offering videos with artists to break down lyrics marking an important tension in the future of archiving Black popular culture.

Genius is different than a website like Reddit, with subforums created in homage to various hip-hop artists, or kanyetothe.com, a website dedicated specifically to all things Kanye West as its reach is felt every time someone opens Spotify or Apple Music to listen to music. The creators had no intentions of *Genius* being for rap, and only after the summer of 2020 uprisings in response to gratuitous police violence, do we get Moghadam's belated call for a new, Black CEO. *Genius* was created by culture vultures. And they are being rewarded with having one of the largest archives of rap music to date. With the example of Tierra Whack that I have provided, what is outside of the rap canon cannot find itself represented by this archive, which calls into question the ethics of *Genius*. There is no care for the artifacts that it holds, but

rather a rearticulation of the same white supremacist logics that rap music has resisted to begin with. Who is choosing what is represented in *Genius*' archive? What is being left out?

A staple of this very tradition, rap duo Outkast in their own prolific way provided us with a warning about these very questions. In their 2000 song "Humble Mumble," Outkast explores the political possibilities of rap music through the "mumble in the jungles." As if imagining the state of rap music 21 years in the future, rapper Andre 3000 and featured vocalist Erykah Badu sing in the chorus:

Humble as a mumble in the jungles
Of shouts and screams
That's the way the cracker crumbles
So I guess I've got to re-route my dreams (Outkast)

In thinking with the jungles, another term for the ghettos in some localities but also in the literal meaning as a jungle, Outkast recognizes their sound as part of a rap game filled with excessive noise. An already political song, thinking about critics unable to see rap beyond "guns/ and alcohol," the artists imagine the "cracker" (a colloquial term for white person) crumbling and no longer being necessary. Outkast's dreams are re-routed, avoiding capture from the white critic as its masked by the shouts and screams that surround them. As if laying the groundwork for Tierra Whack's experiment, this song cements the fugitive nature of rap in evading its capture. The mumble is more than just slurring of speech in the studio. It can serve as a potential analytic for evading linguistic representation and recognition from an archive created by outsiders like *Genius.* The mumble of mumble rap and adjacent forms like Whack's open up possibilities for Black escape.

Section 2

“A plunge into the abyss”: Black Girls in Evie Shockley’s “Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation’s Plague in Plain Sight)”

As a canonical text of African American literature, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* narrates Harriet Jacobs’ journey towards emancipation from slavery. Originally published in January 1861 under the title *LINDA: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, seven years concealed in Slavery, Written by Herself*, Jacobs published her text under the pseudonym Linda Brent. The text fell into obscurity because of its release during the political crisis that ultimately became the United Civil War (Painters xxv). According to “The Note on the Text” in the Penguin Classics edition of her text, it was not until 1961 that copies of a reproduction of *Incidents* begin circulating by Ayer Publishers and the Scholarly Press (Painter xxxv).

Before being taken up by Dorothy Sterling and Jean Fagan Yellin, it was understood that *Incidents* was a fictional text written by Lydia Maria Childs (Painter xxxv). In 1972, historian John W. Blassingame questioned the credibility of Jacobs’ text, claiming “the story is too melodramatic: miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page” (Carby 45). Blassingame is unable to conceptualize Jacobs’ experiences of sexual assault and gendered violence, and only through letters found in the University of Rochester Library and written by Jacobs did Sterling and Yellin solidify the “truth” of Jacobs’ narrative. Luckily, the letters existed in the archive, but what if they had not?

As if predicting Blassingame’s critique of her work’s credibility, Jacobs’ writes a preface attesting to the truth of her book. In this introduction, Jacobs explains “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at

the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (Jacobs 3-4). Jacobs recounts her experiences with sexual violence and chastity during her subjugation through chattel slavery. She elucidates the trauma of her slave master James Norcom threatening to deflower the then fifteen-year-old Jacobs. Norcom shortly thereafter began to build a cottage for Jacobs, forcing Jacobs to configure a way of escape to maintain her chastity.

While this happens, Jacobs found herself being courted by Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, who she calls Mr. Sands (Painter xv). This becomes the subject of Chapter X, where Jacobs describes her choice to pursue Sawyer/Sands in the hopes that he would purchase her. Ultimately, Jacobs becomes involved with Sawyer, claiming "I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me" (Jacobs 60). Jacobs acquiesces to what she believes was "something akin to freedom" and ultimately, finds herself pregnant with Sawyer's child. Upon telling Norcom, she is told she will be sold. Her grandmother calls her a disgrace to her dead mother and Jacobs is told to never come back (Jacobs 62-63).

These "melodramatics" play out in Chapter X through Jacobs' pleas to the reader. Afraid of being deemed illegitimate through the eyes of a white reader, Jacobs describes the moments where she is cast out because of her perceived sexual deviance despite her status as an enslaved woman without the ability to freely move. She was forced to choose— either be raped by Norcom or consent to sex with Sawyer. Both options for Jacobs are structured by the power dynamics of chattel slavery, making it impossible for either option to truly be a *choice* for Jacobs. In other words, Jacobs as an enslaved woman is coded as the sexually deviant despite her condition as enslaved property.

Evie Shockley's "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)" from her 2017 *semiautomatic* takes up questions of sexual exploitation of subjugated women. Shockley received her PhD in English from Duke University and currently teaches in the Rutgers English department. Shockley was born in Nashville, Tennessee and calls herself a Southern poet, claiming

> [Being a Southern poet is] thinking that racism wasn't much of a problem in other parts of the country; parts of the country; eating a cuisine that was originally developed under conditions of make-do and make-last; enjoying five- or six-month summers and getting "snow days" out of school when the forecast called for nothing other than "possible icy conditions"; knowing that my region was considered laughable almost everywhere else; assuming there was nothing unusual about finding churches on two out of every four corners; and believing that any six or seven people with vocal chords could produce four-part harmony at the drop of a dime—and that all of this informs my poetry, sometimes directly and sometimes in ways that might be unpredictable or illegible. (MacEwan)

Shockley is deeply informed by her Southernness and produces poetry for a specific community of people that often find themselves unrecognizable by poetic representation. Throughout her 2017 *semiautomatic*, Shockley utilizes Southern and Antebellum landscapes in her poems. Pictures of the Kudzu plant are found throughout passages, leaving the uninitiated reader to either learn about the plant, or remain confused. Breaking her book into four sections titled "i. o the times," "ii. the topsy suite," "iii. refrain," and "iv. blues modality," Shockley moves seamlessly through different temporalities to paint a fuller picture of Black life.

In this section, I argue that in "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)," Shockley complicates notions of progress when

thinking about sexual violence against Black girls. She takes lines from Chapter X in *Incidents* and completes them with lines from a September 2012 article written by journalist Yamiche Alcindor, "Sex Trafficking in the USA Hits Close to Home." These two varying temporalities collapse onto each other in the space of the poem. She takes us through various incidents in each of these girls' lives, ultimately ending with the girls jumping into an abyss. Shockley is able to bring the emancipation of Harriet Jacobs and the conditions of these girls in direct conversation with each other through the poem. Her poem disrupts teleological Black progress narratives and proposes a new and more complicated temporality. Through this disruption in teleology, Shockley is able to place these girls in an alternative realm where they are able to interact and ultimately open up the possibility for an alternative grammar unreliant on traditional temporal markers. Beginning with the final stanza of the poem, I move between stanzas based on their thematic relevance ultimately ending with a consideration of where these girls should go next.

It is important to sit with the Yamiche Alcindor's article in to understand how they parallel with Harriet Jacobs' narrative. Written for *USA Today*, "Sex Trafficking in the USA Hits Close to Home" follows the story of Asia Graves, who recounts her experience as a 16-year-old who was sold into human trafficking. Alcindor's article names sex trafficking in the United States as slavery and quotes former president Barack Obama as saying, 'When a little girl is sold by her impoverished family, or girls my daughters' ages run away from home and are lured – that's slavery (…) It's barbaric, its evil, and it has no place in a civilized world'" (Alcindor 2012). Filled with statistics, this article mainly follows Graves but also names other girls like Katariina Rosenblatt who like Graves works for a non-profit that trains officials in public schools how to recognize sex trafficking and support girls and women who are able to escape. The article names the various moments of brutality that these girls experienced such as drug use and sexual

violence to elucidate the depravity of the human traffickers. Ultimately, the story ends with Graves recognizing a girl from Backpage.com, a website formerly known for its role in human trafficking. She tells Alcindor: "'My main priority is making sure no child has to go through what I went through,' [Graves] said. 'If I can save one girl from not going into it or one girl who has already been in from going back, then I'm already doing more than enough'" (Alcindor 2012).

Shockley reveals what theorist Saidiya Hartman calls "nonevent of emancipation" by bringing these enslaved girls together in "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)" (Hartman 116). This framing of emancipation as not a moment of true freedom is a claim towards the shift of subjugation from slavery to what Hartman is calls "black subordination." She writes:

> This is not to deny the achievements made possible by the formal stipulation of equality but simply to highlight the fractures and limits of emancipation and the necessity of thinking about these limits in terms that do not simply traffic in the obviousness of common sense— the denial of basic rights, privileges, and entitlements to the formerly enslaved— and yet leave the framework of liberalism unexamined. (Hartman 119)

In other words, the non-event of emancipation is what makes possible the continued subordination of Black people into a recapitulation of slavery under different names. This sets the frame for understanding how Shockley's poem operates; since emancipation was a failure, the sex trafficked girls and Harriet Jacobs experience particular forms of gendered violence because of the ongoing nature of American chattel slavery. To put it differently, the "non-event of emancipation" makes it possible for Jacobs and Graves to have similar experiences despite more than 200 years separating the two.

Yet, I do not want to collapse the voices of the girls in this poem. I understand the non-event of emancipation to be framing this poem, but I do not want to insinuate that the girls from Alcindor's article and Harriet Jacobs to collapse into the same positionality. To be clear, I am not claiming that the girls from Alcindor's article are slaves. Rather, I would argue that they are enslaved in similar ways. For a moment I want to acknowledge that difference is still a necessary tool in thinking about these girls varying experiences. This difference does not foreclose the ability to read these girls as alternating speaking voices and even finishing each other's sentences throughout the poem. In order to ethically read these girls together without collapsing their experiences I utilize Audre Lorde's conceptualization of difference in her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." Lorde conceptualizes difference in this way:

> [W]e pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance. (Lorde 115)

Though Lorde delivered this speech to think about political difference between race, gender, and other positionalities, I believe that this conceptualization of difference is important in also thinking about the temporalities of Shockley's poem. Harriet Jacobs inhabits the position of a slave, whereas the other girls live within the aftermath of chattel slavery. While I believe that these girls in this first stanza (and throughout the poem) are experiencing an iteration of slavery, I want to be clear that the violence of the plantation is different than the Boston street that Graves mentions in stanza one. Following the framework that Lorde provides in her conceptualization of

difference, I argue that through their geographical distinctions (being the plantation and the Boston streets), the violence of both Jacobs' and Graves' experiences are elucidated and emphasized by each other. As I explore throughout this section, the temporal collapse into one for each of the girls in the poem, and through a comparison of their experiences, tensions and incommensurability gesture towards a new grammatical structure. In other words, the two temporalities come together and without Alcindor's article completing Jacobs' sentences the experiences of these girls would be unable to be read as commensurate. As Jacobs describes her own experiences, the women/girls in Alcindor's article's violence are made all the more concrete, and vice versa.

Shockley's poem takes these girls from their two separate temporalties, and places them in the space of the abyss as it is named in the final stanza of the poem. As these girls navigate their difficult decisions and experiences, they ultimately are forced to abandon legibility. Shockley utilizes quotes from Jacobs' narrative to begin each stanza, and throughout the poem each girl become increasingly concerned with the viewpoint of the reader. Often bordering on self-flagellation, Jacobs' lines attempt to show a remorse, as Hartman theorizes it, in order to appeal to a white women's sensibilities. In the final stanza, Shockley centers Jacobs' text rearticulating: "What *could* I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and / made a plunge into the abyss" (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 25). Notably, the only word italicized in this stanza is "could" which appear in Jacobs' own text italicized. If read within the context of Shockley's poem, in which the language of Alcindor's article is italicized, "could" represents a moment of cross temporal communication. The girls of the 21st century marked by italics throughout the poem interrupt Jacobs' question to the reader. This interruption is space for a new relational potentiality; rather than marking an action as complete with the word did, an

imaginative possibility is opened up when conceptualizing what "could" be done. The italics being present in the original text complicates the distinction between the two different temporalities. As if already knowing Shockley would be writing this poem utilizing italics, Jacobs' original text already includes these girls whether or not they ever interacted in a material sense. In choosing this quotation and pulling these girls from their lived experiences, movement is made possible from the present to the past.

This movement is marked by Jacobs' desperate plunge into the abyss at the end of the stanza. As an often-theorized subject, the abyss takes on a significant role in reassessing relationality throughout time. Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant thinks about the abyss as having multiple forms tied to Trans-Atlantic slavery in his *Poetics of Relation*, where he writes, "In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 6). Jacobs inherits this knowledge in her own lived experience as an enslaved woman, understanding that she must make "a plunge into the abyss" in order to start anew (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 25). Jacobs' italicized "could" brings the other girls with her, marking a new beginning for all of these girls.

Glissant further explains his concept of the abyss as a space for relation:

> Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. The populations

> that then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil). (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 7)

Glissant argues that what those who jumped into the abyss enacted was not actual death, instead they became part of a collective memory or knowledge for those whose history is tied to the belly of the slave ship and a loss of family. Jacobs' desperate decision is an almost parallel decision that the other young girls throughout the poem are forced to make. And by taking the girls with her, Jacobs allows them all to exist within the abyss where they are no longer tormented by sexual violence and trafficking. No longer is Jacobs speaking first followed by the italicized experiences of the girls from 2012, but rather in the abyss there is no need for the girls to interact within the distinctions created by the italicized and standard. What does interaction look like when these girls can interact without distinction?

To understand the temporality of Shockley's poem, it is important to understand the always ongoing nature of slavery in the time after emancipation. Black feminist thinker Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) provides a critical framework for thinking about Antebellum slavery as in progress that makes Shockley's experiment possible. Sharpe locates our temporality as one in the "wake" of slavery, writing:

> Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are eased. (Sharpe 15)

While I understand that these girls are in differently marked times, Sharpe's conceptualization of the wake illuminates the ongoingness of Black subjugation that each of these girls' experience. Glissant's abyss and Sharpe's wake are both rendered in the oceanic. While outside of the constraints of this thesis, I do want to make clear that within this spatiality, there is a temporal collapse illuminated by the similarities across time that Shockley is pointing towards. What could any of these girls do within the wake besides descend further within it? In other words, the wake frames the abyss as if the girls are jumping off of a ship that continues moving forward. Time is mediated by the institution of slavery, and the girls in their attempted escape end up plunging below it.

To understand this poem within the wake forces us to recognize that the violence of slavery was specifically lived through gendered sexual violence. In her influential 1972 essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Angela Y. Davis writes about the oppression and resistance of Black women on the plantation. She argues that sexual abuse of Black women on the plantation is

> generally explained as an outgrowth of the male supremacy of Southern culture: the purity of white womanhood could not be violated by the aggressive sexual activity desired by the white male. His instinctual urges would find expression in his relationship with his property – the black slave woman who would have to become his unwilling concubine. No doubt there is an element of truth in these statements, but it is equally important to unearth the meaning of these sexual abuses from the vantage point of the woman who was assaulted. (Davis 12)

Sexual violence was a constitutive element of Black women's subjugation on the plantation. This quotation is important for the stakes of this section as Shockley's poem I argue does the work of

"unearth[ing] the meaning of these sexual abuses from the vantage point of the woman who was assaulted" (Davis 12). This quotation and essay expound on the possibilities of resistance that were happening on the plantation which is beyond the scope of this thesis but felt necessary to include as to not make a claim that the women and girls who have experienced this form of violence were/are passive victims. Reading Davis in relation to Christina Sharpe's concept of the wake elucidates the insidious nature of sexual violence rooted in anti-Black slavery as still pervasive. In other words, Shockley's experiment is successful in portraying the unending nature of anti-Black slavery in the United States. It is also important to note that in my own reading of chattel slavery, I argue that while they enact resistance in various ways, I do not read their sexual acts within this poem as consensual. This therefore means that for the purposes of this section, I do not explore the possibilities for their sexual acquiescence. Ultimately, through the framework that Davis and Sharpe provide, I argue that the girls in Shockley's poem despite their physical distance, experience similar types of violence across time and space.

Keeping Glissant, Sharpe, and Davis in mind, I return to the beginning of Shockley's poem. Shockley begins with a selection from "Chapter X" in *Incidents* in standard text followed by italicized text from Alcindor's article:

> And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life,
>
> which I would gladly forget if I could. *Asia Graves looks*
>
> *straight ahead as she calmly recalls the night a man paid $200 on a*
>
> *Boston street to have sex with her.* (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 18)

Jacobs' name is not given to us in this stanza, nor in the poem at all. Yet, we are signaled to Jacobs' existence in the poem through an assumption of canonical knowledge in the title that mentions "Incidents." Shockley's intentional about her audience having a specific knowledge of

Incidents, as it is not only part of an American canon, but a specific Black Studies canon. Because of this text's status as canonical, the readers experience of reading "And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, / which I would gladly forget if I could." signals a recognized historical moment that does not require Jacobs' naming in the poem (or for the reader perhaps uninitiated into the academic world of Jacobs, a Google search immediately pulls up open-source versions of the text signaling Jacobs as the author). As the stanza continues, Asia Graves is named directly without transition beyond the change from standard font to italics. The lack of naming Jacobs allows for Asia Graves to be recognized as the person speaking directly to the reader, utilizing the first-person pronoun "I." Graves can be read therefore speaking Jacobs' words, as if she is looking straight ahead recalling her own experience in sex trafficking. These girls are all brought into a space together despite their difference in temporalities.

It is helpful to think about Shockley's poem through the framework provided by Saidiya Hartman in "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. In this chapter, Hartman provides a reading of Harriet Jacobs' narrative, complicating arguments surrounding sexual freedom of enslaved women during Antebellum slavery. Hartman argues that Jacobs' narrative attempts to "actualize something 'akin to freedom'":

> The crisis of seduction is ameliorated by the seductiveness of the narrative. Conforming to the readers' desires includes pandering to their sense of moral superiority only to topple the pedestal on which they stand and unmooring them in the storm of events. The narrative explicitly states that white Northern women cannot judge the slave girl by the same standards with which they judge themselves. The narrator's humbling appeal to the reader covertly forwards her own desires and secures a recognition of those desires. The

> identification of the slave girl as "victim" does not negate her role as agent. (Hartman 105)

Shockley's poem draws out the tensions of the "victim" as agent, particularly in the second stanza where she writes, "The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. *'If you/ want attention and you see that you're getting it, you just follow your/ feelings," senior Araceli Figueroa, 17, said. 'It's sad.'*" (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 18). As in the previous stanzas, Shockley follows the constraint in form that she created by starting with Jacobs' quote and ending with an introduction of Araceli Figueroa, a 17-year-old who in Alcindor's article talks with Graves as part of her advocacy work. Figueroa describes agency through desires and wants, "*If you/ want attention and you see that you're getting it, you just follow your/ feelings."* While the stanza is framed with "sorrow and shame," ultimately there is a discussion of an attempted agency rooted in feeling. Yet, to "*follow your feeling*s" is met with Figueroa's sadness, illuminating the difficulty in narrating agency and consent within systems of subjugation that rely on sexual violence like slavery and sex trafficking. How can agency exist when these girls are forced within a system that relies on their inability to consent? As Hartman argues, it does not.

Through the shared feelings of suffering, the girls in the poem are brought into a new kind of relationality on the page. In the third stanza of the poem, Shockley writes "It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you / the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it/ may. *A plague more commonly associated with other countries has/ been taking young victims in the United States, one by one."* (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 18). Jacobs' writing has thus far served as attempts to assuage her reader into trusting her as a morally sound narrator. To return to the previous Hartman quote, Jacobs is conforming to the reader's desires in this attempt

at self-degradation. Simultaneously, the language in italics follows the same kind of appeal. Alcindor's line appeals to the ideals of an American exceptionalism, where the "plague" of sex trafficking cannot be imagined within the United States.

Shockley rarely veers from the particularities in her form but does in the eighth stanza to provide us a direct quotation from Alcindor's article. Unlike the previous stanzas, which had been alternating between the left- and right-hand side of the pages, Shockley centers the following passage from Alcindor:

> *Though the scope of the problem remains uncertain — no national statistics for the number of U.S. victims exist — the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children says at least 100,000 children across the country are trafficked each year. Globally, the International Labor Organization estimates that about 20.9 million people are trafficked and that 22% of them are victims of forced sexual exploitation.* (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 19)

Still in italics, this quote marks an important departure from the form of those which preceded it. By centering the quote that includes the statistics about the number of girls forced into sex trafficking, Shockley forces the reader to reckon with the current reality of sexual violence against girls throughout time, or in the wake. The voice of Jacobs is not directly marked through this stanza, but rather we are directly addressed by a statistic as it stands alone. As indicated by its position on the page, there is a change in speaker and tone. No longer are we speaking to the dehumanized girls but faced with impersonal numbers. Each girl, including Jacobs and the girls of the article, become one of the 20.9 million trafficked people. For a moment we lose them within statistics illuminating the naturalization of structures that allow for the afterlife of slavery

to continue. Suddenly, the pattern of the poem has stopped highlighting just how unnatural these statistics actually are.

In doing this, statistics and numbers are unmoored from their position as ultimate truth or outside of the purview of grammar. By denaturalizing this moment, Shockley's poem calls into question the legibility of statistics. Applicable to this argument, Black gender studies theorist Katherine McKittrick helpfully thinks about the nature of numbers and statistics in relation to archives of Black death in her 2014 essay "Mathematics of Black Life." McKittrick argues that Black studies scholars must not continue reproducing violent moments within archives of chattel slavery, positing that numbers and statistics constitute the "mathematics of the unliving" (McKittrick 19). As McKittrick argues

> The numbers, the arithmetics of the skin, the shadow of the whip, inspire our insurgency as they demonstrate the ways in which our present genre of the human is flawed. (…) Put differently, we might emphasize how the demonic-in physics and mathematics- is a nondeterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and nonlinearity because the organizing principle cannot foresee the future. (McKittrick 23-24)

McKittrick is arguing for an alternative human that encapsulates Blackness within it through a denaturalization of the ledgers, deeds of sale, and other mathematical renderings of Blackness in the United States through chattel slavery. While the aim of my reading is not to rehabilitate the category of the human, McKittrick importantly depicts the ways in which numbers and statistics, like those used in Shockley's poem work to uphold the current status of human that makes possible Black subjugation. The statistics in Alcindor's article easily obscure the individual girls that Shockley hyper-focuses on. By choosing to have this stanza in the center of the page after building towards it, Shockley forces a reading that does not simply take the numbers for face

value. Rather, by utilizing McKittrick's argument about the problematics of numbers and statistics, this stanza's use of only statistics elucidates the inability for the category of the human (or the grammar of the human) to protect these girls. Departing from McKittrick's movement towards a new human, I argue that these girls must plunge into the abyss, outside of language, to live full lives. It cannot be through the current grammatical, numerical, or humanistic systems that these girls will achieve liberation.

"Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA" has an important shift in tone by the eleventh stanza, where Shockley takes a line from Jacobs where she directly criticizes her relationship with Mr. Sands. Shockley writes:

> Among others, it chanced that a white unmarried gentle-
>
> man had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances
>
> in which I was placed. He knew my grandmother, and of-
>
> ten spoke to me in the street. (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 20)

The first line break in this stanza separates "gentle-man," revealing the insidious nature of Jacobs and Sands' relationship. In this separation, the second line reads "man had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances," missing any adjectives either positive or negative. Jacobs' view of the relationship is separated from the man who obtains information about her. Notably, by the third line, Jacobs' grandmother has a relationship with the gentle-man, implicating her in the problematic relationship that occurs between the two. While an argument can be made imposing agency onto Jacobs in her choice to pursue Sands, I hesitate to include such an assessment here. Understanding that all of the girls within the poem are experiencing sexual violence, I believe that by virtue of her position as not only a child, but as enslaved in turn disrupts any notions of sexual agency in this situation. Her grandmother, who previously

provides Jacobs with “pure principles” is unable to separate the man from his gentleness, aiding ultimately in the relationship that Jacobs so desperately wishes to forget. In other words, her grandmother (for different reasons than my own) recognizes the impossibility of their consenting relationship for reasons related to chastity and womanhood.

As the stanza continues, Shockley writes: “*The perpetrators—increasingly/younger—can be other students or gang members who manipulate/ victims’ weaknesses during recess or after school, law enforcement/ officials say*.” (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 20). Under the watchful eye of her own grandmother, Jacobs is coerced into her relationship with Sands setting the stage for this similar action to be played out by “other students or gang members” in 2012 (or, 2014 when Shockley published this poem for the first time). In both situations, whether it is Jacobs’ grandmother or the supervisors on the playground, each of these girls are still coerced into systems of sexual violence. No one or nothing could protect these girls from the structures created within slavery and its afterlives. This type of sexual, and in this case gendered violence, finds itself within schools during recess under the similar watchful eye of an authority figure like Jacobs’ grandmother explicating how institutional structures make possible human trafficking to occur on the playground or afterschool. Both Jacobs’ slave master Dr. Flint and the “gang members” are not named, illustrating their presences as just the “gentle-man” or “perpetrator.” Mr. Sands can be both the gentle-man and young perpetrator on the playground because it more than just Mr. Sands— rather it is a structure that makes possible these sexually exploitative relationships to exist throughout time. In the lack of specificity that Shockley chooses, she illuminates how while the language of who is causing harm changes, violence is still being inflicted. Whether it is Mr. Sands, the master, or unnamed gang members, the grammar created

at the advent of chattel slavery allows for the names to change but the positions to remain the same.

Through descriptions of their captors, Mr. Sands moves interchangeably between the past and present in similar ways to Jacobs and the sex-trafficked girls. In stanza twelve, Shockley writes:

> He became interested for me, and asked questions about
>
> my master, which I answered in part. He expressed a great
>
> deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. *At night, she became*
>
> *a slave to men who said they loved her and convinced her to trade her*
>
> *beauty for quick cash that they pocketed*. (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 20)

Jacobs believes Mr. Sands' interest is expressed through sympathy that she reads as his wish to aid her. Sands' interests are not in Jacobs, but rather on her behalf as illuminated in her use of "for" in the first line, which is an announcement of the fungible nature of Jacobs in her position as a slave. The italicized section offers no proper nouns, instead it utilizes she, her, and they which allow space for Jacobs to step into the space of Alcindor's article. The "men" and "he" become interchangeable in their placements next to each other, blurring the distinction between seekers of sexual pleasure. Through promises of love and sympathy, all of these girls enter a coercive space where they are degraded for the sake of sexual exploitation. Because of the exploitative conditions of their subjugation, these girls cannot receive these things wholly. Rather, I argue that the inability for them to receive love and sympathy from their abusers, despite their own desires, complicate narratives of girlhood within Shockley's poem. Their desires are unable to be mapped clearly because of their status as kidnapped objects.

Desire becomes an important tool throughout the poem to explicate the powers of domination that hold these women within the bind of subjugation. In stanza 15, Shockley writes:

> So much attention from a superior person was, of course,
> flattering; for human nature is the same in all. *She was alone*
> *on a corner in Boston during a snowstorm when her first trafficker*
> *picked her up*. (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 21)

It is helpful to return to Hartman's analysis of Harriet Jacobs' sexuality in *Scenes of Subjection* to think about how desire operates in this stanza:

> [*Incidents*] illuminates the equivocations that surround agency, the unavoidable linkages of desire and domination, and the dangers of seduction. The nexus of desire, consent, and coercion that situates the discussion of the slave girl's sexuality perhaps entails a reconsideration of seduction that attends to the agency of the dominated in terms other than those we have previously considered, for if not a conspiracy of power, seduction in this instance enables opportunities for disruption and offers a glimpse of possibility in the context of peril. (Hartman 102)

When Jacobs writes "[s]o much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all," she not only is attempting to appeal to a white sympathetic reader but is also illuminating just how complicated her agency is in relationship to her courtship with Mr. Sands. The power dynamic is made clear in claiming Sands as "superior," emphasizes the direct link between her desires for freedom and flattery. In other words, freedom and flattery illicit similar tactics for upward mobility for Jacobs in this instance. While it is possible that this passage could be read, in isolation and on the surface, as an uncoercive moment, Shockley dismisses this possibility in her poem through her choice to pair it with the scene of "her" being

solicited in a Boston snowstorm. The imbalance of power between the two is clear. "Seduction"— if we can read it that way— of the girl choosing between freezing outside during a snowstorm and being picked up by a trafficker reveals the similar conditions Jacobs faced in her choice to "seduce" Mr. Sands to save herself from being sold. And while we know as readers that this attempt on Jacobs' part fails, forcing her to run away instead, in her lived experience Jacobs imagines "possibility in the context of peril." None of these girls know the outcome of these choices but by placing them together they create a relationality between each other to warn the reader. Their only choice for safety is through a descent into the abyss demonstrating the failure of grammar to free these girls. As the words and scenes change, these girls still have eerily similar experiences.

This warning continues throughout the poem but is marked by another departure from the standard form of the poem. As she did previously, Shockley centers stanza 21. It reads:

> I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of in-
> terest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is
> agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situ-
> ation has left her any pride or sentiment. (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 22).

In having this stanza stand alone in the center of the page, Shockley decontextualizes the quotation from its place within *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Rather than reading this quotation as speaking about Mr. Flint, the use of "us" in the first line of the stanza is a direct communication to all of the girls in the poem, regardless of temporality. The use of the metaphor of the "impassable gulf" illustrates the inability for Jacobs' and Mr. Sands to ever have a consensual relationship but simultaneously makes clear the difficulties in Shockley's project of bringing these girls together to represent sexualized violence. Jacobs empathizes with the girls

across time; she understands why someone may attempt to negotiate with/in systems of domination and subjugation like they all do in different ways. By decontextualizing this quote from Chapter 10 of *Incidents*, Shockley provides the space for these women to communicate despite their differences in how they experience violence.

Relationality becomes a complicated method of escape for these girls, often allowing for covert moments of survival within problematic systems. The poem speaks to the negotiations that these girls engaged in:

> It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to
> compulsion. *She stayed however, and found comfort in other*
> *girls – called "wife-in-laws"—who went to area schools, got their hair*
> *and nails done together and then worked the streets for the same man*. (Shockley, *semiautomatic* 22)

This passage dangerously can be understood as illuminating covert or hidden freedom. In her imagining of consent within this relationship, Jacobs similarly engages in a mode of being that are not only tied to enslavement. In spite of these disparate structures that result in their subjugation, these girls have acquiesced, choosing to "give one's self" than to "compulsion." They live full lives with their "wife-in-laws," getting their hair and nails done and even experiencing joy and potential mobility in some instances. And while I believe that there is space for this type of reading to persist, I am not interested in thinking about this moment as an indication of life, joy or freedom. These moments instead highlight the very insidious nature of relationality as a protective measure within social death. Returning to Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, her reading of entertainment becomes important in understanding how joy and subjugation become bound together for the enslaved, namely in the performance of the coffle:

> [T]he seemingly casual observations about black fun and frolic obscure this wanton usage and the incorporation of the captive body inn realizing the extensive and sentient capacities of the master subject. (…) If the excess of enjoyment imputed to the enslaved displaced what we would think of as disturbing circumstances, it did so only by obscuring violence and conflating it with pleasure. (Hartman 25)

Theorizing the "wife-in-laws" as a relational practice allows for readings that obscures the violent nature of the girls being trafficked. While I argue that these girls do exist as more than just trafficked victims, I want to also make clear that these moments of girlhood are complicated by the experience of being "an object of in-/terest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master." I am not sure if Shockley is arguing for this kind of a reading, but I argue that this stanza allows for a reading of relationality between the girls that simulates a life within death. I do not read this as a moment to "humanize" or impart a type of problematic agency. Instead, Shockley allows these girls to move within the stanza closer together as girls making-due within their condition of enslavement. By doing this and vacating desires of "humanization," I believe that this stanza gestures towards a communicative relationality that would push us beyond the grammars that hold these girls hostage. By describing the ways these girls make do, I argue that Shockley is signaling this relationality as a problematic rendering of agency.

Grammar for Shockley and the girls in "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)" is marked by a fraught relationship between Black people and language. In an interview in 2017 with Sarah Blake for the *Chicago Review of Books*, Shockley explains the importance of displacement in her text, responding

> Another way of putting this would be to say that language—or English, specifically, in my case—carries around a lot of freight beyond simple denotation, and in the context of

> the kinds of subject matter that I gravitate towards, that freight is fraught (…) We feel the operation of language, in these situations, as we might not feel it when the words are spooling out in ways that we can see coming, so to speak. (…) One of the challenges then becomes not allowing those strategies to become overly familiar to myself—I have to leave room for my own discovery and surprise. (Blake and Shockley).

As emphasized throughout "Sex Trafficking" and the entirety of *semiautomatic*, Shockley disrupts spatiality and history through her use of language and constraint. Working within the material of both Alcindor and Jacobs, Shockley pushes against the value of grammar and its possibilities for world making and future. She takes these girls from their positions within texts that hold them hostage and allows them the freedom to move by simulating the "plunge into the abyss" of the last stanza.

If English "carries around a lot of freight" to use Shockley's language, can English be stripped of its weight to imagine freedom? As expounded within this and my previous section, the American grammar that Spillers so aptly names is filled with opportunities for referencing towards something beyond it. Yet is that reference enough? In freeing these girls, Shockley has to rely on the space on the page and a jump into the unrepresentable abyss. I imagine that their disappearance at the end of the poem is not their death, but rather something else. I imagine that in the abyss, they are freed from their slavery and able to experience the joys of girlhood like getting their hair and nails done for no other reason than wanting to feel pretty. Shockley's poem complicates notions of agency and choice in relationship to sexual freedom and violence. And while it is true that these girls all could experience full lives, love and care despite their forced subjugation, I wonder what that does to allow them liberation. If I choose to focus on the moments of life in the poem, does that undo the moments of intense trauma that Shockley,

Alcindor, and Jacobs bring to the forefront of their works? As I explore within my next section, language and grammar cannot be our only means for imagining a future without subjugation. There must be new methodologies that include sound and language to think more expansively.

Section 3

Poetic Disruption: Violence of Rendering in Douglas Kearney's "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)"

The first time that I encountered Douglas Kearney was in my undergraduate capstone English class during the spring quarter of 2016. The class, entitled "Contemporary Black Poetry," was filled with poems of a time no earlier than 2010, written by Black poets and culminating with a research paper about Black contemporary poetry writ large. I was the only Black person in the class. And every week I braced myself for the onslaught of anti-Blackness masked as analysis. I was passionate about the field— I felt (and still feel) that the contemporary is often cast away as an isolated space of study in English departments, let alone the study of contemporary *Black* poetry at that. I, however, was unable to fully enjoy the class. I constantly found myself underwhelmed. I came to class prepared but held silent protests each week refusing to participate as I arrogantly thought that my own insights were *necessary* as the only Black student in the class (I was wrong about that).

On the syllabus was poet Douglas Kearney's 2017 printing of *THE BLACK AUTOMATON*. I found myself enthralled. His poetry looked like something I had never read before with each page filled with type face and symbols I had never seen realized into poetry. Pushing on the boundaries of language, Kearney's *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* utilizes hip-hop lyrics, canonical poetry, advertisements, and allusions to American popular culture to create a book of poetry that explores the capacity for thinking anew. The book is not broken up into sections, but rather is broken up by various illustrations such as a skyline with plumes of Black smoke coming out of each building (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 32-33). It's difficult to know where to start with each poem as they sit on pages, sometimes with words overlapping

or scrawling down the page. At its core, this text disrupts not just language, but reading practices as they are known in Western canons.

That week of class I was forced to confront Kearney's poetry as both written and as an experience to which we are meant to listen. As a class we watched a reading of "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)" done for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs 2011 conference held in Washington D.C. Still the most easily accessible version of a reading of this poem, I watched as the image of Kearney standing at a podium began with an explanation of the Middle Passage. Kearney sardonically says the Middle Passage was the transportation of enslaved Africans "across the old world to the new. Which was kinda a good deal because I would imagine if we didn't end up over here we wouldn't have had Nikes and bouncing cars so it's really not the type of thing I would argue about" (ahjapoet 0:09-0:22). We are unable to see anyone else in the room, but almost timidly a chorus of laughter begins. To my surprise, the same thing happened in the class I was sitting in. As he eventually begins the reading, filled with yelling, singing, whispering, and traditional reading, moments of laughter by both my classmates and the people of the recording made the reading all the more uncomfortable for me.

Yet, like a roadmap, this video is instructional for how to approach reading Kearney's experiment. In an October 2010 interview with Brendan Constantine for *LAist*, Kearney is asked about his reading practices. He says:

> When I give a reading, I am extraordinarily alert to the fact that I am a body on stage in front of people, and being that body on stage, and the idea here is of a black body, comes with expectations. The kind of ways I navigate the space of danger, of ambivalence, is, I think, through a kind of cruelty. When I introduce the poem "Swimchant for nigger mer-

folk," I say it's a peppy poem about the Middle Passage. And I look dead at the audience. (Constantine)

For Kearney, the performance of the poem is necessary for the individual reader to fully access how to read "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK." The poem describes the oceanic and, in a way, Kearney's performance of the poem allows the reader to stay afloat. Written in a non-traditional way, Kearney's choice to turn the axis of each page of the poem, varying typescripts, and sizes of font disrupt the traditional expectations that a Western reader would have in accessing a text. In his own practice as a librettist and poet, Kearney mixes poetry and performance in innovative ways that do not privilege the written or the spoken. The discomfort I felt (and still feel) listening to Kearney read his poetry is what brings me back to it constantly. The discomfort is not just from the nonblack people in the recording of the reading's laughter at slave jokes and throughout the poem at what borders on minstrelsy, but perhaps the interplay of boundaries that Kearney desires between reader, poet, and the written.

His project is a necessary intervention in the hegemony of what Spillers calls the "American grammar." Through an analysis of both Kearney's performance in 2011 and the written version of "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)" from the 2017 publication of *THE BLACK AUTOMATON*, I argue that Kearney's experiment undoes some of the violence of the American grammar. By choosing not to privilege either the written or spoken, Kearney's poem provides a blueprint for thinking both within and beyond Black subjugation through structures of anti-Blackness such as language and typeface. I will read both Kearney's performance in 2011 and the 2017 reprint together throughout this section, as both build upon each other in helpful ways. Like the person jumping overboard in the

poem, I trace the descent of this poem through providing a reading of it chronologically despite the poem's insistence in disrupting time.

Before further exploring the specifics of Kearney's poetic experiment, I want to situate my analysis within a Black feminist tradition. Specifically, I am following the framework provided by Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," which facilitates my reading of Kearney's poem as an act of rupture from the grammars that have created Blackness (Spillers 209). Spillers describes the listing of enslaved Africans in everything from ledgers to legal documents, writing:

> Everywhere in the descriptive document we are stunned by the simultaneity of disparate items in a grammatical series: "Slave" appears in the same context with beasts of burden, *all* and *any* animal(s), various livestock, and virtually endless profusion of domestic content from the culinary item to the book. (Spillers 226)

Spillers argues that this placement, along with metaphor and the semantic field that named Black women as both gendered and ungendered, allowed for the current symbolic order that renders Blackness as pathological. As she continues:

> To that extent, the project of liberation for African-Americans has found urgency in two passionate motivations that are twinned— (1) to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behavior that makes such syntax possible; (2) to introduce a new *semantic* field/fold more appropriate to his/her own historic movement. (Spillers 226)

Plainly put, Kearney takes up the task of destroying the metaphors of Blackness as they exist within the American grammar. In just looking at "SWIMCHANT" the text itself is not written as you would expect the standard book to be written. Its excessiveness is made clear through the design of the book with two horizontal pages connected from their tops instead of the

longer, more traditional, vertical book style. The text reads from left to right as most standard Western texts, but instead containing individual lines on each page the lines run from page to page, ignoring the standard border that is marked by the spine of a book. Words spill down the page, are bolded, and are in various sizes throughout the poem potentially making it difficult to find where to start reading the poem itself. Taking seriously the call from Spillers to break apart the laws of American behavior, even in just its appearance the poem demands a rearticulation of how it is to be read. If we are to understand reading as dictated by rules such as going from left to right and top to bottom, Kearney's poem represents a disorientation and rearticulation of the rules of reading and writing. I argue that this very rearticulation gestures towards the "new semantic field" that Spillers references in "Mama's Baby."

This new semantic field is a field of unlimited potentiality. In framing his poem within the confines of a joke about the advantages of trans-Atlantic slavery, Kearney does not shy away from what Spillers names at the conclusion of the essay "monstrosity" (Spillers 229). As she describes throughout the essay, Black women are pathologized through grammars that deem them in excess of terms like "woman." While Spillers concludes by specifically thinking about Black women, she writes:

> The problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to "name"), which her culture imposes in blindness, "Sapphire" might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment. (Spillers 229)

While I understand that Kearney is not a woman, I believe that Spillers' argument about claiming the monstrosity, or excess, of Blackness serves as an important tool in understanding the entirety of Kearney's performance both textually and, in its 2011 reading, aurally.

As he continues the introduction for this poem, Kearney reintroduces humor to mark the excessiveness of his poetic experiment. After further clarifying his point about the bouncing cars and production of Nike products, Kearney lists those who appear in the poem including music group Parliament, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Hayden, and concludes the list saying,

> And there are sharks in this poem because (…) sharks would follow the ships because you got people stacked like Ikea bookshelves and somebody'd get sick and you'd have to isolate them from the rest of your inventory. You'd get rid of them anyway that you can and so there's other reasons for that but that's there (…) and they would follow and eat them. (ahjapoet 0:58-1:16)

In the moments structured by laughter of the audience before, Kearney's simile of "people stacked like Ikea bookshelves" does not land like "Parliament— the funk group not the governing body" does. This moment makes clear the

> originating metaphors of captivity and mutilations 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. (Spillers 208)

The "kinda good deal" of chattel slavery represents a perhaps failed, and problematic, attempt at unmooring Blackness from chattel slavery— or without the invention of Blackness, there would not be the successes of modernity that constitute the "human" as a legible term. Simultaneously, the brutality of the simile describing the stacking of Black people under the slave ship, and the

transformation of people into "inventory" that are then thrown overboard reifies the impossibility of doing just that. In other words, the monstrosity of Blackness is made clear through the ways that Kearney introduces and frames his poem.

At its start, the poem does not utilize Kearney's words. Instead, Kearney invites Parliament to begin. Formed in 1955 by musician George Clinton, Parliament is a funk group based out of Plainfield New Jersey (NewFunkTimes). Directly referencing their 1978 song "Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)" Kearney begins the poem singing "*never learned to swim/but me sho can d i v e*" (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 62). As Kearney sings the first line of the poem, he does not sing it like Parliament in their song. Rather by the backslash in the poem, Kearney has added "*but me sho can d i v e*" which is not found in the Parliament song. While performing the poem, he recreates the "dive" on the page as it falls down page 62, and he moves his own body down, crouching behind the podium. Perhaps unprepared for the loudness of Kearney's singing, the feedback from the microphone almost renders Kearney unintelligible. Placed between two sections of bolded text, "*never learned to swim/but me sho can d i v e*" would traditionally be read as quieter than the large bolded black text in the poem. But as Kearney signals to us through his reading of this line, the loudness of the moment is not marked by what we traditionally would read as such. In other words, without his vocalizations the viewer may have misrepresented the possibility for the first line of the text to be loud.

Such a reading necessitates an understanding of the concept of "din" as a tool of ultimate protection and possibility. As mentioned in the first section of this thesis, Édouard Glissant's conceptualization of the discourse of din reappears in Kearney's text. To revisit, Glissant writes:

> Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. This must be understood. (…) It was the intensity of the sound that dictated meaning: the pitch of the sound conferred significance. Ideas were bracketed (…) No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise. (Glissant, *Carribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* 123)

Like the Parliament song, where it is difficult to make out what is being said because the vocals are masked by the loudness of the instrumentation, Kearney recreates a similar feeling through yelling into the microphone. Without the performance of the reading Kearney's loudness is lost on the page. The feedback of the microphone marks a step into the discourse of din as Glissant so aptly describes it. Kearney is not only shouting, but the reappearance of the disorienting feedback also serves to blur the boundaries between what is provided as language and what can exist in the liveness of it.

Kearney takes up the concept of din helpfully in his own work of literary theory *Mess and Mess and*. Published in 2015, Kearney explores various topics of consideration for not only his own poetry, but Black literary studies and studies of literature more widely in the section entitled "Din-" Kearney writes:

> Rooted in the Latin prefix "-in-" meaning "not," but not just (just in*just*) an in- but as much "din" as in "noise" from Old Norse "dynja" for "come rumbling down," but injust in- and din but as much a contraction of "dingy" as in Old English notions of "dung"; thus, "din-" is a prefix/modifier meaning "black" plus "noise" plus "not a Latin prefix. (Kearney, *Mess and Mess and* 32).

Taking Glissant's conceptualization of din and Kearney's further theorization, din is positioned as a type of Black noise methodology. Din moves across temporal frames, starting first as Glissant theorizes it with the slave on the plantation's extreme noise to Kearney's use of din as funk. Din's movement between space and time allow for Kearney's unintelligible noise that is a performative move which can move beyond the capture of language.

Din and its relationship to volume is not rendered easily through the traditional markers of bold and capitalized text in Kearney's poem. Rather than marking the next lines as louder through the large size and bolding of the font, Kearney drops to a low almost whisper during his performance reciting the couplet, " **O, VERMILLION SHIP – D'WAH-WAH OOO. / OVER MILLION SHIPPED. WAH-WAH-OO**" (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 62). The first "**D'WAH-WAH OO**" grows less and less legible as it is said into the microphone ultimately ending with intense feedback that muffles the sound of the "**OOO**" and "**OO**" of each section. To stay with Kearney in *Mess and Mess and*, he terms these moments as "dineffable." As he puts it, dineffable is "a state in which something, often because of extremis or intensity, can only be described via signal that seems noise" (Kearney, *Mess and Mess and* 33). The dineffability of Kearney's "**OOO**"s are marked by their inability to be picked up fully by the microphone, and therefore the listener/reader illuminating the illegibility of the "over million shipped." This moment is demonstrated by the crouched Kearney behind a podium and the italicized "dive" that frames the bolded text, elucidating the unknown person of the poem who has dived over the ship.

Multiple voices appear within the poem itself as they are marked following the tradition created by poet Robert Hayden in his pivotal poem, "The Middle Passage." Hayden oscillates from different viewpoints of both the enslaved and slavers onboard *The Amistad* during its 1839 slave revolt. Utilizing quotations, italics, and numbering, Hayden moves between various voices

and as literary critic and poet Kwame Dawes describes it, "[i]n Hayden's poem you see the way his work, in its commitment to the modernist impulse of using fragments of history, of song, of memory and of existing literature to create a work with epic ambition" (Dawes). In her 2011 article, "Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage," Evie Shockley argues that Kearney's poem is directly paying homage to Hayden's work through the use of multiple voices and a focus on the Middle Passage. Importantly, Shockley theorizes that,

> [Kearney's] yoking together (…) of multiple, incongruous, and incommensurate discourses assumes the possibility of critical distance from and resistance to the consumerist (and racist) mass culture that theories of the postmodern posit—an assumption not unrelated to the fact that his work both draws from and signifies upon African American culture. (Shockley, "Going Overboard" 796)

Through the reappropriation (or as Shockley would write it, signifying) of the italics and quotations of Hayden's poem, Kearney follows in the tradition set up by Hayden and other Black poets. Kearney marks these various voices both vocally and with the differences in the appearance of the text in a much more extreme way than Hayden— pushing his own work to the limits of legibility and depicting the extremity of the Middle Passage. While influenced by Hayden, Kearney takes the extremity of the Middle Passage even further revealing the very impossibility of fully representing its violence.

After diving over the ship, the next stanza replicates the motion of the ocean through the way it is typed across the page. Broken up into four lines, Kearney repeats "let yo fishbone slip 'omen/ let yo fishbone slip o men" physically breaking the line of each poem with a backslash (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 62-63). Distinctly different than the meter and voice of the first two stanzas, Kearney indicates pauses and stoppages through the use of the backslash

instead of other forms of grammar or a line break indicated simply by space. This stanza serves as a barrier across both pages of the text that must be breached in order for the experiments that make up the rest of the poem to exist. It is helpful to return here to the conceptualization of the abyss by Glissant that was laid out in my second section. In the act of diving overboard, the slave enters what Glissant terms as the "depths of the sea." As Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation*:

> The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. (…) In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 6)

The breaching of this repetition through diving, or being thrown, overboard portrays the violence of the Middle Passage. This repetition marks a movement forward in time, by moving the slave ship to its destination, the creation of slaves continues. But the choice for the first speaker to dive in and ultimately breach that forward momentum represents a disruption of that time. In other words, Kearney lets the diver disrupt the metaphorical transformation of human to cargo to slave. The "omen" or "o men" does not have to occur.

After breaching the repetition of the omen, Kearney allows the next four stanzas of the poem to move downwards as if floating. Rather than being able to read straight down towards the bottom of the page, the text moves horizontally between page 62 and 63 indicating a slower descent towards the ocean floor. Letting the text almost sit on top of each other, each stanza moves further and further down, almost to the bottom of the page. Both the Mako and

Hammerhead sharks make their appearance in these stanzas. Starting first with the Mako, Kearney writes from the shark's point of view claiming:

mako wish

ye black fish

mako feed

be black bleed

they's comp'ny

comin comin (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 62)

As if playing with the enslaved person who is sinking downwards, Kearney's speaker allows the slave to make a wish, but without pausing registers that an impossibility through the making the "black bleed." The verb of making, as it is signified through African American Vernacular English in this moment, clips the possibility that the original dive into the sea wrought for the slave jumping overboard. The speaker greets the diver in their descent while simultaneously talking to the Hammerhead and Great White sharks of the next stanzas to prepare for their upcoming meal. Paradoxically the moments of Black death are made both illegible and hyperlegible through the tone in Kearney's reading. By utilizing rhyming in the first four lines of this stanza, Kearney's tone shifts towards playfulness. This tone masks the true brutality of the conversation between sharks and allows for a surface level reading of Kearney's playfulness as an expression of joy or happiness. Yet, reading the full scene of the poem shows the brutality that this Black person's death represents despite sounding like an expression of happiness.

By the third descending stanza, Kearney's speaker shifts in tone. Kearney writes:

grate white jaw

AW! Great white

jaw-jaw juju

gnaw gnaw   NO! NO …

they's comp'ny

dinin dinin (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 63)

While he reads Kearney looks out at the audience, oscillating from the quiet animated voice he gives the first line to the almost unintelligible "AHW!" and "NO! NO…" that he yells into the microphone. Jarring in his reading, this stanza illustrates both a playful tone and the excessive nature of violence in the animated screams of the speaker in their encounter with the Great White's jaw. In the descent to the ocean floor, repetition reappears in this stanza to mark a similar death-making as the beginning of the poem's repetition that created the ocean waves. In the microphone feedback paired with the grotesque nature of the speakers' pleas Kearney complicates subjectivity for the diver. Instead of simply liberating the overboard person, the loss of hope marked by the questions of the previous stanza and transformation of the diver into "black bleed" through feeding Kearney's "AW!" and "NO!" call into question the possibility of stopping this transformation of person to chattel. Positioned beneath the stanza of the forward moving ocean, I argue that this stanza elucidates the inability for life within the sentencing of the African into chattelhood. Rather than redressing the violence of the Middle Passage that renders the mer-folk as inhuman (or literally dead), Kearney emphasizes the violence of slavery and its ability to be normalized through his playful tone. In doing this, he also emphasizes the shortcomings of frameworks that only seek to theorize joy; below the surface death is a continuum and must be dealt with regardless.

In homage to Hayden's practice of allusion to other sources like *The Tempest*, Kearney utilizes a line from Sebastian from the Disney 1989 film *The Little Mermaid*. Played by actor

Samuel E. Wright, Kearney mimics Sebastian's singing, "jus look at   de worl around you   right ere on   de ocean floor such wonduhful tings surround you   what more is you lookin for?" (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 62). Unlike the original version of the song, Kearney manipulates the meter through both the spacing of the text on the page and through his reading. As Kearney performs the poem, each space is marked with a smile where he looks beyond the podium presumably at the audience members out of the view of the camera (ahjapoet 2:30-2:41). In disrupting the meter of what can be presumed as the knowledge of the listener or viewer, Kearney again forces the pause where the viewer or reader may have continued. In disrupting the meter as it would be known by fans of Sebastian's singing, he complicates the steady, linear progression forward of his reading. In his poem filled with death and pleading, Kearney here offers—in as inauthentic and exaggerated a Jamaican accent as that found in the animated film—what can be read as a moment of comedic relief. Kearney's reading is uncanny in its disruptive practice and emphasizes the very unnatural nature of the singing crab as it exists in a poem about slavery. Like the joke that Kearney uses to frame the poem, this moment illuminates just how impactful those at the bottom of the ocean floor have been in creating the world of today (and its caricature).

There are various implications of including Sebastian within the framework of Kearney's poem. Sebastian the character, both originally and in Kearney's performance, has a broadly Caribbean accent though voiced by a Black American actor. While Kearney may be attempting to represent a diasporic Blackness through the inclusion of the accent, it is important to note that Sebastian's role in *The Little Mermaid* is the only film role occupied by a Black voice actor and it exists primarily as comedic relief. In *Scenes of Subjection*: *Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman analyzes the relationship between enjoyment and

terror for the enslaved. But it is important to recognize how the smile and performance read as a caricature, illuminating the limitations of Kearney's diasporic thinking. In description of the slave's "enjoyment" in the coffle, Hartman writes

> Contrary to our expectations, gaiety articulates the brutal calculations of the trade. The self-betrayal enacted by stepping it lively and enthusiastically assisting in one's sale underscores the affiliations of spectacle and sufferance. And, accordingly, fun and frolic become the vehicles of the slave's self-betrayal and survival. By stepping it lively and "acting smart," the captive was made the agent of his or her dissolution. The body of the slave, dancing and on display, seemingly revealed a comfort with bondage and a natural disposition for servitude. (Hartman 37)

Kearney's performance of the caricature represented by Sebastian exemplifies the very brutality of his playfulness. The pauses where Kearney's smiling face stays unmoved illuminates what could be read through the frameworks of liberal humanism as the "comfort with bondage" or caricature that the lines reference. Yet, the silence of these moments exemplifies the binding of gaiety with subjugation that Hartman is describes.

When Kearney begins his reading of this section, there are members of the audience who laugh along with the introductory words of this stanza. But as Kearney continues singing this part of the poem while smiling and staring beyond the podium, the laughter disappears. Without the imagery of Kearney's smiling face this moment is relegated to the reference of Sebastian as a cartoon character. The smiling performance that Kearney puts on forces the viewer to reckon with the insidious nature of chattel slavery's recurrence within the modern world. Only in the pauses does the laughter stop, highlighting the importance of that very disruption in unmooring the listener from the social cues that would render this moment comedic. The performance of

comedy or lightheartedness ruptures the somber tone of the speaker above it. What is comedic simultaneously explicates the same violence of the diver going overboard at the start if the poem. In other words, what is comedic simultaneously elucidates the same violence of the diver going overboard at the start of the poem. The comedic reprieve of this moment does not undo the violence of the previous stanzas, alternatively showing that gaiety and violence in scenes of Black subjection serve the same ends.

One of the poem's narrators describes the moment of Sebastian the crab singing, introducing a coherence to the poem through language instead of form.

> [so sang a pair of raggit claws/ scuttling cross the flo of silent seas. o, ye nigger merfolk.
>
> a lovesong fo songlubbers! it'll all be fin(e)$^{???}$]
>
> (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 63)

Observing the diver's descent to the ocean floor and their interaction with Sebastian, this speaker utilizes language similar to African American Vernacular English in order to describe the crab. Thanks to the spacing of the text, we, along with the diver, have made it to the ocean floor marking the end of the descent as it is placed near the bottom of the page. The stanza ends in uncertainty, marked visually with the superscripted question marks. In his own reading, Kearney alternates between "fin" and "fine" twice, creating a discontinuity in what is spoken and read once again. To alternate between fin and fine calls into question whether or not everything is fine— should we take the playful "raggit claws" "lovesong" to indicate that the drowning of the diver is fine? Perhaps the alteration towards fin represents not just the obvious reference to the fin of an underwater sea creature, but too a reference to the ending of a film. In other words, the finitude of the diver is not necessarily the end, and that lack of conclusion is also not fine. The ongoingness

of the Middle Passage cannot be rendered only through the subscript. It must be vocalized as it is by Kearney in his reading of the poem.

Utilizing loudness again, Kearney's reading builds in intensity in the next stanza where he says "**ATTENTION: NIGGER MERMAIDS, MERMEN & MERNINNIES CHAINED LIKE HOOKED & SINKED SARDINNIES: / DO NOT BLEED IN THE SEA. THE STAINS WON'T WASH OUT. WE AIN'T'NT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR MESS.**" (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 63). Evie Shockley helpfully clarifies this moment as a direct signification to Hayden's "Middle Passage," where he utilizes legal discourses to exemplify the "unthinkably miserable death" of slaves aboard *The Amistad* (Shockley, "Going Overboard" 802). Her analysis thinks about this moment as a commodification of Black language, as she argues that the double negative in "WE AIN'T'NT" proves that this speaker is white, claiming:

> Thus I read it, coming out of the mouth of this presumably white (slave-trading) speaker (…) Still, the line highlights the (il)logic of the disclaimer: under the law, if an enterprise posts a disclaimer, those with whom it does business are put on notice that responsibility for certain injuries cannot be attributed to it. Whether the enterprise should be held responsible is another question altogether, and one that the law does not entertain. (Shockley, "Going Overboard" 803)

The voice of this presumably white speaker finds itself read loudly by Kearney, taking up more vocal space than the parts of the poem that come before it. By utilizing loudness as well as the text as disclaimer (as Shockley argues), Kearney helps to emphasize the necessity of insider knowledge (or signification) to provide a way out of the American grammar. The moment that Shockley so keenly points to as being a non-Black speaker is only accessible to those of us who know what to look for.

This stanza also highlights the ongoing nature of the Middle Passage as it is represented in the poem. Even if we are to understand this moment as a representation of a white voice as Shockley is arguing that we should, the imagery of the Black "**MERMAIDS, MERMEN & MERNINNIES**" being unable to be washed out of the sea holds important implications for thinking about the Middle Passage. Instructively, Christina Sharpe in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* thinks extensively about the oceanic and what she terms as a Black "residence time." In her explanation of residence time, Sharpe describes the process of the ongoing cycling of water and organisms that break down dead creatures in the sea:

> [B]ecause nutrients cycle through the ocean (…) the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean today (…) Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which "everything is now. It is all now." (Sharpe 41)

The white speaker is asking the Black people overboard not to bleed in the sea because it is a mess, which, thinking with Sharpe, emphasizes the disruption of standard temporalities through something like residence time. In other words, on the descent down where the enslaved undoubtedly meets what can be described as a brutal death, their existence cannot just be washed out of the matrix of the ocean or the violence that took them there. To extend this metaphor even further, if we understand slavery to be a rupture that creates modernity through the dominance of the current semantic field as Spillers understands it, the inability for Black blood (or death) to be washed out of the fabric of the oceanic illuminates that even in the choice to dive, the violence of Black death is still not a freedom. "**THEE MANAGEMENT**" cannot reconcile the blood that still

exists within the ocean. Yet Kearney attempts to, at the very least, make it known through a disruption of temporality in rendering the death of the diving slave throughout the poem.

As we reach the bottom of the poem, one last stanza runs across the center of both pages 62 and 63, representing the ocean floor that we have been descending towards since the beginning of the poem. Kearney returns to an almost whisper chanting: "they's comp'ny haintin haintin/ can't re-member; c'ant remember/ o they's comp'ny haintin haintin/ the stains won't wash out" (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 63). "Haintin" could have multiple meanings in this moment. Perhaps a variation of "hating," this reading portrays the very anti-Blackness that allows for the speaker of the previous stanza to express their unwillingness to clean the mer-folks' mess in their deaths by different species of shark. But I think, more compellingly, the repetition of "haintin" represents a rearticulation of "haunting." If we read the overboard slave as continuing to haunt the speaker of the poem, it renders their existence as ongoing. Even in their death, the slave haunts, or continually reappears despite the previous speaker's desire to disappear them. Temporality is disrupted in this moment: rather than having the overboard slave move into silence, they continue to haunt the rest of the poem. The stains of Black death do not wash out, allowing Kearney to emphasize the Middle Passages' impact on the fabric of modernity.

Instead of thinking of the ocean floor as the end of the Middle Passage because it is the "end" of the poem, I argue that this articulation of the ocean floor illuminates the existence in residence time that Sharpe points us to. The poem itself does not render the Black person overboard within a steady temporality like Hayden's "Middle Passage," but alternatively allows us to sink below the surface. This sinking finds itself throughout time, starting with Parliament in 1978 to *The Little Mermaid* in 1989. Moving towards the bottom of the sea forces the reader to reorient their reading practice as moments in this poem sit on top of and next to each other in ways not

traditionally found in linear narratives. The action of reading can find itself rooted as a teleological practice— as the text moves forward, so too does the plot and time of the work itself. Kearney uproots us from this reading practice, ending the poem through a disruption of the prosody of the three "lines" before "the stains won't wash out" (Kearney, *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* 63). In other words, through a prosodic disruption and choice not to utilize a period, Kearney's poem can remain ongoing, unfinished and an opportunity to disrupt our reading practices.

In my initial readings of this poem in 2017, I felt unconvinced by the entire experiment of the poem. The disruption and lack of a coherent narrative was so disorienting for me that in some moments I was left frustrated that I was forced outside my comfort zone. The jokes and awkward laughing that Kearney invited through his linguistic experimentation felt out of place when thinking about the Middle Passage. Yet, I did (and obviously still) find myself returning to *THE BLACK AUTOMATON* and more specifically this poem. Kearney asks the reader to jump into the abyss with the diver, in the same way that Shockley in her "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)" allows for the girls of her poem to explore the abyss as a space of freedom. And even in observing the abyss through Kearney and Shockley's poems, I find myself unsure or unable to dive in with them.

"SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER MER-FOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE SET IN LAPIS)" observes the descent into the abyss as complicated and non-singular. Kearney's reading is discomforting, as is watching anyone attempt to encapsulate what is too gratuitous for language to fully reconcile. In leaning into what Spillers calls pathology, or something like the feeling of someone laughing at a funeral, Kearney highlights the limits to language and feeling as we currently relate to them. And in that this poem's existence on the borders of intelligibility pushes us towards something that is just beyond grammar. Rather than shying away from discomfort,

Kearney forces us to sit with it to productively reconsider what we understand as natural including grammar and language. In other words, in forcing us to sit within the abyss, Kearney's poetics attempt to claim the monstrosity, and re-make ourselves within the process.

Conclusion

"We want a black poem:" Meditations of Where to Go Next

In his 1965 poem "Black Art," Amiri Baraka controversially marks the beginning of the Black Arts Movement. Within this poem, Baraka navigates through war imagery, declaring:

> Whores! We want 'poems that kill.'
> Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
> guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
> and take their weapons leaving them dead
> with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. (Baraka 149)

As if understanding that Spillers would theorize on grammar, and that the Black Arts Movement would gain prolific status, Baraka calls us to poetry in order to imagine a rearticulation of the world as we know it. Entrenched in violence, Baraka wants poems ready for war illustrating the violence of what it would mean for the Black poem to be enacted and realized for its potential as a destructive force. In other words, the poem as it is created by grammar allegorically represents the world. Baraka is not concerned with the human in this stanza, but the capacity for the Black poem to destroy. Baraka expounds on poesis, or the capacity for world building, as something not inherently tied to growth. Baraka's poiesis is not for building. Instead, it's a poiesis hell bent on destroying the white world.

Baraka ends this poem declaratively. He writes:

> We want a black poem. And a
> Black World.
> Let the world be a Black Poem
> And Let All Black People Speak This Poem

Silently

or LOUD (Baraka 150)

After describing the end of the world, Baraka points us towards a world that is the "Black Poem." In many ways, I'm uninterested in the world that Baraka creates in 1965, but I am struck by the ways that Black poetry has taken up his call. In their own right, Whack, Shockley, and Kearney create a Black World. They gesture towards the Black Poem that the world should be. Perhaps a world of unintelligibility, irrepresentability, and freedom, the Black Poem represents violent capacities for rendering modes of being. And these modes of being are untied to the privileging of the human.

Throughout this thesis, I have looked at the various ways that the American grammar is undermined by various Black contemporary poets. I began with a consideration of Tierra Whack's in "Mumbo Jumbo" as an experiment in being untranslatable. Her mumbling disrupts the language of subjectivity by using no language at all. I then traced the role of canonical language in Evie Shockley's "Sex Trafficking Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in the USA (or, The Nation's Plague in Plain Sight)." While I did not focus on the sound of this poem, Shockley too engaged in a type of illegibility in her poem's use of grammar. Finally, I analyzed Douglas Kearney's "SWIMCHANT FOR NIGGER-MERFOLK (AN AQUABOOGIE IN LAPIS)" for its use of both sound and the written in gesturing towards a future of illegibility. While these works are not all directly in conversation outside of the confines of this project, I believe that through placing them together gestures towards thinking of a new type of relationality not tied to grammar or language as we know it.

This project is in no way complete. Nor is this project expansive enough to fully encapsulate what I feel cannot be represented by English as it currently exists. Part of the

dilemma of this project is the tension between what cannot be captured by language needing to be for the sake of legibility of this project. It is my hope that through this preliminary analysis I will have set the groundwork for moving closer to theorizing what feels impossible to theorize. These poets, along with poets within the contemporary and before it, have provided alternative ways for thinking beyond. In each of their own ways, they represent the impossibility for an ethical English language.

To take seriously Baraka's call means to undo the damage of the non-Black world as we know it. In untethering the world to the human, and tethering it to the poem, Baraka's call does more than speak to conversations about books and abstract concepts. Whack's position outside of the common or space of unprotected vestibularity offers a warning towards idealizing the world of the Black Poem. She intervenes in utopic or dystopic idealizations like the one Baraka provides. Perhaps Jacobs and the sex trafficked girls from Shockley's poem gesture towards a space more like the abyss. Building on Whack's vestibularity, these girls represent the possibility for freedom from routine sexualized violence against Black girls if they can be separated from the language of the human. Kearney provides a roadmap towards this world in his experiments with sound—both typographically and in his reading practice Kearney allows us to see what possibility for a Black World exist within the silences of a poem. The Black Poem provides an alternative mode of thinking and being, one that does not realize itself through linguistic representation. By privileging the Black Poem, everything can be undone, from the overdetermination of the human within the Anthropocene to white supremacy through the codification of law. The Black Poem provides a possibility for imagining a new Black World.

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