Black Feminist Literary Antagonisms: On the Human, Propertization, and the Plurality of Black Queer Intervention

By

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for my mother

Martha June Jackson, Ed.D. (1960-2018)

&

for the agender butterflies chasing sunsets toward/as home

and all their other forms

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Abstract

This dissertation conceptualizes *Black feminist literary antagonisms* as a critical hermeneutic and open-ended archive of literary and cultural production. Scholarship situated at the intersection of literary criticism, Black feminism, queer theory, and Black studies has explicated how liberal humanism and its attendant forms of relation and subjectivity are produced through Black abjection. This project enters this critical discourse, specifically through what has been referred to as Black feminist theories/criticism of the human conceptualized by Alexander Weheliye, with Black feminist literary antagonisms to illuminate how Black women writers of the 20th century problematized the dominant conceptualization of the human and the forms of relation it produces in two interrelated ways. First, I turn to the period bookended by the Harlem Renaissance and 1950 to assess how they forwarded critiques of strategies that were implemented at the turn of the 20th century in an appeal for the recognition of a full Black "humanity" and citizenship—strategies that both reinforced liberal humanist and capitalist values and structures, but extended a logic of *propertization* that consequentially re-emerged in the intramural. Propertization names how the discursive, physical, and sexual violence that Black women endure in the intramural creates and perpetuates an ongoing condition of availability and possession that both forecloses the possibility of their own self-actualization and renders their desire and pleasure unthinkable.

From here, this dissertation explicates an iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms through its conceptualization of the *black queer literary intimate.* I read the literature of late 20th century Black queer and lesbian writers to examine how these texts proffer their own queer antagonisms to the human and its structural, relational dynamics through intimacy, sex, and desire as critical pathways toward self-actualization. Taking on a plural form of intimacy, the black queer literary intimate captures the relationships with land and non-human life forms, pursuing Black queer ecological intimacies as a site of possibility that continues the work of exposing liberal humanism's violent rubrics and hierarchies while putting forth Black epistemologies and modes of being and relation. To conclude, this dissertation posits a final iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms through an examination of the history and work of the creative, literary spaces of a Black queer theatre company and magazine between the 1970s and 1990s to interrogate how these spaces foregrounded a coterminous creative and embodied ethos of brazen experimentalism.

Black Feminist Literary Antagonisms: An Introduction

"...on the part of the white agency is to encourage the acquisition of property among Blacks via Black capitalism, which, if the idea took hold, would probably serve to further intensify the stranglehold on women as property" – Kay Lindsey, "The Black Woman as Woman," 1970

"My Black feminism means that you cannot expect me to respect what somebody else identifies as the Good of the People if that so-called Good (often translated as *manhood* or *family* or *nationalism*) requires the deferral or the diminution of my self-fulfillments." – June Jordan, "Where is the Love?," 1978

Overview

This dissertation project begins from the central assertion that we should read Black women's 20th century literature as explicitly antagonistic toward a desire for legibility and recognition through liberal humanist and capitalist terms, asserting Black feminist literary antagonisms as a critical hermeneutic and an open-ended literary and cultural archive. Scholarship situated at the intersection of literary studies, Black feminism, queer theory, and Black studies has explicated how these terms and their attendant forms of relation and subjectivity are produced through Black abjection. This project enters this critical discourse, specifically through what has been referred to as Black feminist theories/criticism of the human conceptualized by Alexander Weheliye, to illuminate how Black women writers of the 20th century problematized the dominant conceptualization of the human and the forms of relation it produces in two interrelated ways. On the one hand, I turn to the period bookended by the Harlem Renaissance and 1950 to assess how they forwarded critiques of strategies that were implemented at the turn of the 20th century, often through Black socio-political and educational institutions, in an appeal for the recognition of a full Black "humanity" and citizenship—strategies that not only reinforced the naturalization of liberal humanist and capitalist values and structures, like the nuclear family as Tiffany L. King notes[i], but extended a logic of *propertization* that consequentially re-emerged in the intramural. In the context of this

dissertation, aligning with contemporary Black studies discourse, the intramural refers to the interpersonal, social, cultural, and political landscapes and relational dynamics of Black communities specifically in the afterlife of slavery. The concept of propertization attempts to name how the discursive, physical, and sexual violence that Black women endure in the intramural creates and perpetuates an ongoing condition of availability and possession that both forecloses the possibility of their own self-actualization and renders their desire and pleasure unthinkable, thereby structuring Black women's relationships to themselves, and their interpersonal and broader communal dynamics. The pervasiveness of this logic is a result of the aspirations toward inhabiting the "human" as individual, self-possessing, and propertied subject because that subjectivity is itself structured by these ideas that require violent possession, extraction, and abjection to be tenable.

My understanding of the propertied subject is, in part, informed by Grace Kyungwon Hong's theory of the possessive individual and her explication of its projected universal availability that she reads through U.S. cultural "narratives of development."[ii] In her monograph, *The Ruptures of American Capitalism*, Hong explores how culture, specifically the novel, was a site of mediation and purported resolution for the contradictions between the U.S.'s "universal" distribution and protection of property rights and capitalism's inherent exploitation and disenfranchisement. The propertied subject at its center was posited as equally attainable, despite the social constraints of racial and gendered differences, through the exercise of will and self-possession, which Hong argues allowed for the transcendence of these differences. However, the mythical nature of this "universal" subjectivity and the property relations that engender it is inherent precisely because the "unmarked" (white, masculinist) subjectivity and the property system cannot exist without the "enslaved antithesis" and its exploitation and exclusion. Dionne

Brand's *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck*[iii] similarly explicates the role the novel of the English literary canon has played in instantiating the white, male propertied subject as structuring liberal humanist subjectivity. In the text, Brand meditates on the idea of adventure as the contouring logic of narrative and the novel undergirded by a desire for capital and capitalist accumulation. In her reading of Daniel Defoe's 1719 canonical novel, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Brand extracts the way that the novel is both situated within the contexts of slavery and colonialism, imposing those things as given, while obscuring their violence and motivation for an adventure that is driven by the pursuit of related profits, though that 'adventure' is mobilized as innocent. Brand writes that Crusoe is preoccupied with "see[ing] the world" in such a way that seeing becomes a "working phrase for exploitation," where 'adventure' or 'seeing the world' all becomes a "euphemism or understanding for conquest—or profit, at least."[iv] This kind of motivation not only structures the novel and narrative, but also correlates with and asserts the proper subjectivity that we should all aspire to. On this, Brand says the novel "presumes affinity" with the reader and compels them to both identify with and adhere to the values and investments projected through the protagonist, while disidentifying with the Black vestibular characters who either embody or represent undesirable characteristics or are altogether invisible.

The second aim of this dissertation is to consider Black feminist literary antagonisms in the context of late 20th century Black queer and lesbian literature. In mobilizing the *Black queer literary intimate* as a hermeneutic, I examine how these texts proffer their own queer antagonisms to the human and its structural, relational dynamics through intimacy, sex, and desire as critical pathways toward self-actualization, resisting the logic of propertization previously outlined. Moreover, the Black queer literary intimate attends to the plurality of

intimacy present in Black queer literature that captures the relationships with land and non-human life forms, pursuing Black queer ecological intimacies as a site of possibility that continues the work of exposing liberal humanism's violent rubrics and hierarchies. This approach to reading Black queer literature also examines how this literature puts forth alternative Black epistemologies and modes of being in relation to the self, the natural world, and traditional configurations of home and family buttressed by themes of ephemerality, open-endedness, and transience.

The final aim of this dissertation carries forth this thematic thread to consider Black feminist literary antagonisms through the creative, literary spaces of a Black queer theatre company, magazine, and press between the 1970s and 1990s to interrogate how these spaces fashioned and embodied a practice of Black queer life and home-making undergirded by ideas of ephemerality, open-endedness, and experimentalism within the context of both self-actualization and form. Harkening back to the logic and pursuits of narrative and the novel that Hong and Brand elaborate, I am interested in how the process of understanding, defining, and inhabiting Black queerness for these literary, cultural workers coalesced with a formal experimentalism that refused an aspiration toward that kind of neo/liberal humanist subjectivity and forwarding its capitalist, imperialist project. In what follows, I explicate and contextualize some the contributions and contemporary implications of this dissertation, specifically its work of Black queer feminist literary preservation and its response to the re-emergence of rhetoric popularized in the 1970s and 1980s that attempted to delegitimize Black feminism and Black feminist literature as misguided, white-supremacist anti-Black misandry. On the latter, the contextualization maps the origins of this discourse through a subsect of Black cultural

nationalism and traces its reappearance through a controversial inflection point of Black contemporary cultural history.

Contributions and Contemporary Implications

Black Queer Feminist Literary Preservation

A critical aspect of this dissertation's contribution to Black feminisms, the study of African American and Black diasporic literatures, queer theory, and literary studies is its work of Black queer feminist literary preservation. I conceptualize this as both an ethos and a literary, intergenerational practice stemming from a desire to turn more critical attention to the underexamined, under-taught, and under-theorized work of Black queer feminist writers and cultural workers. On a methodological level, in the lineage of Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work*, this preservation work integrates interviews with a number of the Black queer writers and cultural producers it engages to emphasize how archival, analytical, and pedagogical engagement with their work should be taken up to deepen our understanding of the Black literary tradition and to take seriously what this work offers toward the central questions of Black and Black queer studies. Put differently, it asks how might an acknowledgement and engagement with this work expand our understanding of the Black literary tradition; what can/does the peripheralized and experimental work of these writers, creatives, and cultural workers offer toward broader questions about liberal humanism, relationality, theories of Black ontology, and the urgent project of the liberation of all oppressed people? Moreover, through a desire to expand the record of Black queer women and gender expansive writers and cultural workers who continue to be peripheralized, this preservation work makes space for them to meditate on their own histories, contributions, and innovations in the history of Black literary and cultural production. Relatedly, interweaving their voices into this work provides further access to knowledge of pivotal historical events, cultural moments, and influential interpersonal

connections with a level of nuance and specificity that contextualizes what can be found through archival research, while providing insight on what cannot.

The beginnings of my development of Black queer feminist literary preservation as an ethos and practice was initially sparked by reading Barbara Smith's 1983 foundational Black feminist text, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* and E. Patrick Johnson's and Mae G. Henderson's 2005 *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology.* In reading these texts in relatively quick succession as part of my preliminary examination preparation, I noticed that Black lesbian writer, Jewelle Gomez, contributed an essay to both collections meditating on the lack of disciplinary, pedagogical, and public attention to Black lesbian fiction. It struck me that, in the twenty-two-year period between the publication of those two texts, the possibility of Gomez's latter reflection suggested that her criticism had not been adequately addressed both in and beyond the academy. I wanted to further understand the factors that were contributing to this ongoing issue, which, of course, the *Black Queer Studies* anthologies were making space to explore to an extent. Furthermore, I also wanted to meet Gomez's challenge in a multi-faceted way by bringing to the fore their experimental, out-of-print, self-published, or otherwise difficult to access work while cultivating space for them to make sense of and share their own complex histories and understanding of their contributions. On the former, the work of *Sinister Wisdom's* Sapphic Classic series that, in part, reissues out-of-print Black lesbian literature (most recently Anita Cornwell's *Black Lesbian in White America* edited by Briona Simone Jones, a new collection of Pat Parker's poetry edited by SaraEllen Strongman, and a 40th anniversary reissue of Alexis De Veaux's experimental text *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poetry and Drawings*), Briona Simone Jones' edited collection *Mouths of Rain: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Thought*, and

Matt Richardson's work to reissue Cherri Muhanji's novel *Her* are doing the work of Black queer feminist literary preservation that I hope to contribute to in this dissertation.

Alongside my traditional graduate work, I have worked in an editorial capacity with a Black feminist platform, *Black Women Radicals*, which has allowed me to be in conversation with these writers, including Gomez, Alexis De Veaux, Cheryl Clarke, Gwendolen Hardwick, Lisa C. Moore, and Demita Frazier & Margo Okizawa Rey of the Combahee River Collective, supporting me in cultivating Black queer feminist literary preservation as ethos and specifically intergenerational practice. Before I was sure of my desire to write explicitly about Black queer feminist literary experimentalism as a kind of coterminous practice in self-making, I was able to be in conversation with De Veaux first in 2023 about her then forthcoming experimental novel *JesusDevil* published through AK Press. Because I was already familiar with her 2012 novel *Yabo* published through Lisa C. Moore's Redbone Press, I was foremost concerned with understanding the history of her formal experimentation from her earliest works on the stage in 1979 through her entire oeuvre, and how it connected to her thinking about Black gendered and sexual being, and Blackness broadly. What became clear to me in our initial conversation and in the subsequent archival research I pursued was that De Veaux was always interested in conceptualizing Black being and embodiment beyond the human and crafting new understandings of Black relationality. Relatedly, traditional formal constructions could not hold how she understood Black life and wanted to tell Black stories, pushing her towards non-linear narrative construction, mixed-form approaches, and elastic formal interpretations. A quote found on a piece of scrap paper in De Veaux's archive gestures towards this; she writes, "why can't a poet/write short stories/like a poet/why does a poet have to write short stories like a short story writer…" The interviews with De Veaux, Clarke, and Gomez that I conducted between 2023-

2024 for the platform, and their subsequent citation in a number of academic publications, reflects the generativity of this methodological approach and public-facing work in Black, literary, and queer studies.

Moreover, across the conversations with the members of the Combahee River Collective, De Veaux, Hardwick, and Moore, it also became clear to me that their associated organizational formations were loose and fluid, and that allowed for a kind of spontaneity, a multiplicity of creative pursuits, and an intermingling of contributors across projects toward an abundance of Black queer and lesbian creative production and political consciousness raising. For example, Clarke's sister, Breena Clarke, staged a performance integrating movement and song for Clarke's first poetry collection as *Narratives: a dramatic event* (featuring Hardwick), then briefly formed Narrative Performance Company to perform the piece across the country; the CRC hosted annual retreats that were distinct from their weekly consciousness raising meetings and communal political involvement with "members," and they never understood themselves to be a formal organization. Through these conversations, a thematic pattern of open-endedness and experimentalism was further illuminated for understanding their Black queer and lesbian feminist self-making, home-making, and creative practices while unearthing the depth of their creative, social, and political histories. In this way, the practice of Black queer feminist literary preservation makes possible one of the most robust histories and analyses to date of De Veaux and Hardwick's Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company[v] undergirded by an insistence on taking seriously the literary and creative contributions of Black queer and lesbian writers.

Finally, the work of Black queer feminist literary preservation in this project intervenes in the literary history of Black queer print culture to offer the most thorough history of and engagement with *Venus*—an underexplored Black queer magazine established in Atlanta that

operated from 1995-2007. Through this work, I consider its significance as one of the only Black queer southern publications in the late 20th century, interrogating its influence on the southern Black queer cultural landscape, its role in illuminating the marginalized literary contributions of people writing from the Black queer south, and how it made space for exercises in Black queer identity and self-fashioning. Although circumstances surrounding the magazine's end, which will become clear in Chapter Three, create difficulty around being in conversation with the magazine's founder and editor-in-chief, I was able to be in conversation with other members of the magazine's editorial staff to provide further context on the magazine's history and influence. Within the study of Black queer literary and cultural production, the South has and continues to be underexamined; this exploration of *Venus* and its widespread socio-cultural influence on the South and the representation of Black queer southern life and narrative is a necessary contribution to Black literary and cultural discourses.

On Black Male Studies

I want to also address the question of why a project like this, specifically the examination of how multiple forms of violence are enacted against Black women in the intramural as, in part, a consequence of a desire for inhabiting the human, remains a relevant, necessary endeavor. In our current moment, there is a re-emergence of a kind of criticism of Black feminism and Black feminist literature that was popularized in the 1970s and 1980s amidst the height of Black cultural nationalism and the Black Arts Movement. I will provide a brief mapping of that moment here to provide some nuance for my overall argument, specifically that even within a socio-cultural and anti-capitalist context that was rooted in a refusal of white aesthetic value, worldview, and subjectivity, the logic of propertization and the violence that undergirded it remained. Conceptualized as the sister to the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) aestheticized the political ideology and values of the Black Power Movement through its

poets, dancers, musicians, novelists, and playwrights. Integral to the movement's ideology was the belief in Black people defining the world around them on their own terms, and as an extension of this, formulating a Black aesthetic.[vi] Amid the movement's apogee, Larry Neal's 1968 movement primer simply titled, "The Black Arts Movement," emphasized a rejection of white aesthetic, history, literary canonization, and artistic criteria. Furthermore, foregrounding an alignment of ethics and aesthetics, Neal quotes another writer named Brother Knight, "Further, he must hasten his own *dissolution as an individual* (in the Western sense)—painful though the process may be, having been breast-fed the poison of individual experience."[vii] The multi-scalar implications and possibilities of Black Arts Movement ideology are brought into view—their critique of American individualism as it defined dominant, white aesthetics and culture speaks to the issues of capitalism and neo/liberal humanist subjectivity.[viii] Indeed, the call for a radical reordering toward Black self-determination and the cultivation of a Black culture irreducible to a "set of reactions" to whiteness included new social and economic organizations.[ix] Yet, the radical potential of this orientation was undermined, in part, by the pervasiveness of sexism and patriarchal dynamics.

The movement's dominant aesthetic and ideological landscape foregrounded avenging and recuperating Black masculinity and manhood, and this was exemplified both discursively and through the common use of phallic and "Black revolutionary warrior" iconography.[x] In Neal's essay, the movement exists to empower and mediate the experiences of Black men, or, "confront the Black man in his interaction with his brothers and the white thing … profound[ly] re-evaluat[ing] the Black man's place in America."[xi] Even on a textual level, Neal reserves mention of Black women movement contributors to two out of a list of ten "excellent playwrights" in the last two pages of the primer. Furthermore, Black women are positioned as

aligned with white values and power structures due to their status as the "breadwinners" of Black households. In this way, capitalism becomes a target of the movement specifically because of how, they argued, it disenfranchised and emasculated Black men while extending opportunities of socio-economic integration and success to Black women, fueling a belief that "the only free people in this country are the white man and the Black woman" (Lincoln, 100). The integration of Black phallic iconography, then, articulated a performative attempt at an empowered masculinity rooted in domination to resolve the Black male social emasculation and "castration."

Black women writers, both explicitly feminist and otherwise identifying, spoke at length to the flaws in this Black masculinist framework at the time. We need only turn to Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 edited collection, *The Black Woman*, for a wealth of Black feminist critique on how nationalist liberation discourses often hinged on the expressed peripherality of Black women's experiences and misrepresented the exploitation embedded in their socio-economic position. For example, Frances Beal's pioneering Black feminist essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," challenges the argument on the grounds that although Black women were experiencing greater access to job opportunities, they were primarily relegated to and exploited through domestic laboring for white families.[xii] Beal refutes the notion that this "integration" into the labor force provided Black women with the power to oppress Black men. Critics like Robert Staples and Amiri Baraka offered extensive commentary on Black feminist literature that claimed these writers were confused about the real origin of their oppression, that they lacked empathy and understanding of the structural conditions of Black men that informed their behavior, that they were not concerned with the plight of Black men, and ultimately that they hated Black men. In his 1980 essay "African American Literature and Class Struggle" that followed his turn to Marxist-Leninism, Baraka dismisses both Michele Wallace and Ntozake

Shange as two Black women who didn't *really* understand their oppression, calling their work "not advanced" and "confused" because of how it didn't get at the root cause of their experience—capitalism—with a socialist revolution as the ultimate solution.[xiii] Although the critical divergences between Wallace and Shange are obscured to forward an abstracted Black feminist literary ideological coherence, Baraka's criticism and the antagonism from other Black cultural nationalists and socialists extended beyond the Black feminist literary and cultural realm to the Combahee River Collective as Black lesbian feminist *socialist* organizers and theorists. In an interview[xiv] with Frazier that I conducted as part of a special series celebrating the organization's 50th anniversary, Frazier emphasized that much of the overt antagonism they experienced was from Black nationalists, socialists, and communists who took particular issue with their lesbian and feminist identifications. It could not be argued that the collective didn't understand the role capitalism played in their exploitation, as they were dedicated socialists. To be clear, I am not arguing that was the case for Wallace and Shange either; instead, I am arguing that the antagonism toward the Collective and Black feminists broadly reflected a refusal of engagement with the material implications and manifestations of power and gendered violence in the intramural. In his 1979 essay in *The Black Scholar*, "The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,"[xv] Staples similarly focuses his criticism on Shange and Wallace; while skirting the implications of Shange's elaboration of misogynistic violence in *for colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow wasn't enuf*, he passively excuses and minimizes it. He claims that Black men are simply "acting out" from a place of "festering rage" in response to their perceived failure at traditional embodiments of masculinity and manhood or "not being allowed to fulfill the roles that society has ascribed to them." While not naming exactly what he means by "acting out," he goes on to reinforce that articulation of manhood and

masculinity tied with Hong's "propertied subject" as breadwinner, protector, and leader of the family and community as a given; he does not consider the urgency of imagining new forms of Black masculinity. Despite his subtle acknowledgement of the violence at work both as a response to their failure of traditional conceptions of manhood and in the aspiration itself, he insists that Black feminist criticism is undermined by the fact that Black men have no structural, institutional power.

This rhetoric is what is emerging in our contemporary moment under the umbrella of Black Male Studies[xvi] both as a sub-field of Black studies in the academy that draws on philosophy and sociology and extends to the social media sphere as a point of connecting with Black people beyond the academy, creating a platform to process significant Black cultural moments through this frame. One of the most jarring and critical moments of the influence of Black male studies discourse that, again, figures Black feminists as antiblack misandrists who overstate Black men's ability to oppress them and lack an understanding of their social condition, was Tory Lanez shooting Megan thee Stallion in July 2020, and the social commentary and judicial processes that followed. The shooting took place in Los Angeles after Megan, Lanez, and Megan's close friend, Kelsey, departed Kylie Jenner's residence after a night out. While leaving, an argument ensued between Lanez and Megan, and although the details of the argument have been obscured, the height of the conflict resulted in Megan and Kelsey exiting the vehicle. After yelling at Megan to "Dance bitch!," Lanez fired multiple shots, striking her in her left foot. When police arrived, Megan initially told them that she had stepped on glass, fearing for Lanez's life at the height of the national George Floyd protests. Lanez was arrested for possession of a firearm, while Megan was transported to the hospital where she underwent

surgery to remove the bullet fragments. Three days later, Megan admitted that she was indeed shot and lied to protect Lanez.

Between July 2020 and December 2022 when Lanez was found guilty of assault with a semiautomatic firearm, possession of a concealed, unregistered firearm, and negligent discharge of a firearm, there was an influx of discursive spaces mostly between the Twitter and Clubhouse platforms often spearheaded by people who identified themselves as professors of and/or PhD students in Black Male Studies or non-academic social commentators who associated themselves with the ideology who committed to framing Megan as an unreliable narrator and liar both because she "lied" to protect him initially and also because of her "sexual promiscuity." Importantly, many of the profiles of these commentators featured works or iconography of Black revolutionaries and Pan-Africanist, socialists like Amilcar Cabral, attempting to evoke a particular Black radical tradition. The discourse and the associated #freetory campaign situate Lanez as a kind of Black male fallen soldier being framed and "crucified" on public platforms by Black man-hating women, Black feminists who delighted at the idea of a Black man rotting in prison before he was given his due process. Through the Megan thee Stallion shooting, these spaces opened a broader historical conversation about Black feminism and Black feminist literature, with frequent reference to bell hooks, Alice Walker, and others as a recapitulation of white feminist talking points that lauded violent stereotypes about Black men and treated them as disposable, while also reiterating Black men's lack of structural power and a focus on abolishing capitalism.

While one might agree that Black men do not have structural, institutional power in the way that white men do, there is a kind of power articulated in interpersonal and intramural dynamics that is sustained and reflected through discursive, physical, and sexual forms of

violence resulting from both the desire for that subjectivity and a response to that failure, as Staples claims. Moreover, in using this lack of structural, institutional power as a scapegoat for the material, quotidian forms of intramural subjugation, tucking them away to be resolved with the abolition of capitalism, Black women's experiences both remain unaddressed (or altogether invalidated) in the interim, and the promise of a future without this violence is mystified. Addressing the re-emergence of this rhetoric in this moment, particularly as it overlaps with an influx of tradwife and nuclear family social media content, is critical because of its demonstrated ability to reach a broader audience, shaping beliefs and values that not only affect one's perception of and engagement with what Black feminisms actually are, but also because of how it obscures the implications of capitulating to facets of liberal humanist values and ideologies, stoking a kind of passive conservatism. Understanding the impulse to dismiss the Black male studies contributors both in and beyond academia as minor figures, it is dangerous to underestimate their influence on the perception of Black cultural events, particularly those involving gendered violence, and the simultaneous extrapolation to broader ideas about the socio-political utility and relevance of Black feminism and Black feminist literature. Engaging Black feminist literature and the voices of Black feminist writers remains ongoingly necessary because of how they can be used to help us make sense of our current socio-political and cultural moment, offer strategies for how we might enact a different world in a quotidian and structural sense, and anticipate and respond to the emergence of this rhetoric both in and beyond the academy.

In what follows, I offer a brief engagement with Ntozake Shange and some critical texts that I understand to be foundational to Black feminist criticism/theories of the human, including the work of Alexander Weheliye, C. Riley Snorton, and LaMonda H. Stallings, positing them as

the theoretical underpinning of my approach to and defining of Black feminist literary antagonisms and my understanding of liberal humanist subjectivity. Conceptualized as a kind of "genealogy of the flesh" beginning from the work of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, this corpus of literature asserts the flesh as always already existing in relation to or lends itself to a critique of, even as it is produced by and remains constitutive of, the Western conceptualization of human as over-represented by its subject Man. Through this genealogy, I establish how Black critical theorists' explication of the inherent exclusionary, violent ontology of liberal humanist subjectivity subsequently informs the discursive, sexual, and physical violence that emerges in the intramural in the post-bellum period and is represented in 20th century Black women's literature.

Black Feminist Criticism of the Human: A Critical Genealogy of the Flesh

As exemplified by Baraka's and Staples' responses, and, more importantly, the abundance of Black feminist literary and creative production that has been inspired by and conversant with Shange's deep corpus since then, Shange's literary contributions are critical to the study of Black feminist criticism of the late 20th century. From her groundbreaking 1976 choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* to her 1994 novel, *Liliane*, Shange's oeuvre prioritizes the interior mindscape of Black femme madness or "strangeness" as embodied epistemology for exposing the material and psychic implications of patriarchal and white supremacist violence on Black women's being and self-fashioning. In line with this dissertation's mobilization of Black feminist literary antagonisms as archive and framework, which partly examines how these texts lay bare the persistent propertization of Black women's bodies and how this affects the possibility for their being and living itself, Shange's work is a generative entry point for thinking about this and broadly about Black feminist theories

of the human. In a pivotal scene in her 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*,[xvii] Sassafrass enters the dining room where she is greeted by two unexpected guests, brothers Howard and Otis—friends of her boyfriend Mitch. As she prepares to serve dinner, Otis shares that he brought a signed copy of his new book, *Ebony Cunt*, and shows everyone the special autograph, "for sassafrass . . . I know yours is good." In response, Mitch proclaims proudly to his friends, "Sassafrass got some of the best pussy west of the Rockies, man, and I don't care who knows it, cause it's mine!" (Shange, 87). As Sassafrass attempts to escape amid their raucous laughter, Otis insists on reading from the book with an accompaniment from Mitch on the saxophone and Howard on the tambourine. Otis invites Sassafrass to the center of the room to "sit in this barber chair and be the queen you are," and followed by their collective insistence and Sassafrass' ultimate acquiescence, Otis reads from *Ebony Cunt*. The book's title (*Ebony Cunt*), the performance of the poem, the men's collective participation, and even the possibility of the book itself evokes and underscores the kind of Black female disembodiment and abstraction that Hortense Spillers elaborates in her 1987 field-defining essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."[xviii] In an assessment of a "locus of confounded identities" that have come to define Black women, Spillers writes, "the terms…isolate overdetermined nominative properties…they are markers so loaded with *mythical prepossession* that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean."[xix] Otis' iteration of this discursive violence might be best seen through the collection's dedication, where he writes, "for my mama and my grandma and all the women I rammed in Macon, Georgia when I was visitin' my cousins at age sixteen." The slippage and loss of individuation for the Black woman through the Ebony Cunt abstraction at the center of Otis' writing and performance, both through its denigration and performative glorification, expresses an arresting from self into a collectivity that is then

produced as always in service to, available to, and/or possessed by others discursively and otherwise. The rearticulation of this violence in this intramural context arguably extends from what Spillers argues as the condition of the slave—one that consisted of the severing of the body from its motive will, a reduction of the body to the flesh which precedes it through gratuitous, totalizing violence.

Since the publication of Spillers' essay, many Black Studies scholars have taken up the condition of the flesh as an onto-epistemological position and framework in myriad ways. Alexander Weheliye's 2014 monograph, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*[xx] is a generative starting point for this genealogy, specifically because of his critical convergence of both Spillers and Wynter. To preface, in her 2003 essay, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: An Argument"[xxi] Sylvia Wynter constructs a historical and theoretical argument that outlines how the *present* Western conceptualization of the human and its subject Man(2) came to over-represent itself as if it was the human itself, and she reads this over-representation as the coloniality of being, as all other modes of being were viewed as an ontological lack to the West's "absolute self-description."[xxii] She goes on to argue that the "world of Modernity" in which Man became the Western conception of the human was instituted through colonial difference, and she charts a history of the two key, successive iterations of Man, which she marks as Man1 and Man2, to establish how colonial difference came to constitute the present sociogenic/ontogenic mode of being human. From this, at the center of Weheliye's project is the question of what other kinds of genres or modalities of the human are illuminated or made possible when we refuse the notion of humanity itself as synonymous with the white liberal humanist subject "Man," and instead think towards understanding humanity otherwise or beyond the perspective of this subject. Weheliye builds on

Spillers' conceptualization of the flesh to argue that racializing assemblages and its processes that discipline humanity into full-human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman is anchored in socio-political hierarchies in the flesh. As such, the flesh becomes a potential mode of relationality for those who have been excluded from the domain of the hu(M)an, a gateway to otherwise forms of humanity that "do not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of life as such." In asserting that the question or problem of the human should become a central interrogation and object of knowledge within Black/Black feminist studies, Weheliye takes Wynter's assertion seriously that to unsettle the coloniality of power, we must unsettle the overrepresentation of Man as human. This dissertation takes up this challenge by centering the problem of the human in the postbellum period while thinking about Black and Black queer feminist literature's explication of this ontological, epistemological, and relational problem's manifestation in the intramural, as well as how it posits alternative modes of being and relationality as models outside the confines of the human.

Relatedly, in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*[xxiii], C. Riley Snorton returns to the violence of the plantation and its specific contribution to the development of gynecology to consider how this violence produced Blackness as a fungible, ungendered condition, or "captive flesh," rendering gender mutable or revisable. Through this frame, Snorton brings Blackness and transness together to suggest that the "captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness."[xxiv] With this, Snorton illustrates the possibilities of fugitivity through fungibility—in its capacity for "ontological rearrangement"—by excavating narratives of the formerly enslaved who deployed "cross-dressing" or gender transitivity as a method through which to escape slavery and bondage. In this way, Black trans/fugitive narratives reflect Black gender as being "an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured

'outside' of gender's established and establishing symbolic order."[xxv] One critical point to consider between Weheliye and Snorton's work is the way they each conceptualize and extend Spillers' notion of cultural vestibularity. Where the flesh becomes a relational vestibule to other genres of the human for Weheliye, the captive flesh becomes the site or vestibule through which culture is violently produced for Snorton. Yet, if for Spillers, blackness as vestibular to culture describes how the black became a reflection of "what a human being was not," the vestibularizing paradigm that Snorton elucidates also marks how the captive flesh and the brutalization enacted upon it represented its condition as nonhuman. Snorton's vestibularizing paradigm through the gendered fungibility of blackness is also tied up in the problem of the human, as the rearticulation of the slave's condition is what continuously produced the human. Importantly, because I am not thinking through the context of slavery, I diverge from Snorton's use of the flesh as nomenclature and ontology for the Black women and gender expansive protagonists in the literature I engage for two reasons: On the one hand, while the perpetuation of discursive, physical, and sexual violence as crucial to the instantiation of the human subject and Black abjection is useful here, I hesitate to argue that the totalizing violence that produces the flesh through slavery extends to the postbellum intramural context. Instead, while recognizing the conceptual and ontological overlap in the varied ways scholars have theorized the flesh, I use blackness in its configuration as that which structures and is excluded from the domain of the human (and through which racialized gender is produced) as the onto-epistemological framework from which these alternative modes of being and relationality are conjured and practiced. Like Weheliye and Snorton, I am not asserting these ontological and relational alternatives as utopian sites of freedom; however, I am thinking through how these other modes emerge as antagonistic toward the violent, extractive logics of the human.

Calling for and asserting a critique of the human in Black/Black feminist studies becomes a critical point in the work of LaMonda H. Stallings as well, specifically through her 2015 monograph, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures.*[xxvi] Though Stallings' work builds less explicitly from Spillers' theory of the flesh and is more citationally and theoretically engaged with the work of Wynter, Stallings is generative in my conception of Black feminist literary antagonisms because of her rigorous attention to Black literature, specifically through her compilation and examination of funky erotixxx—a Black literary and cultural archive, or "literary tradition of the freaks," through which she theorizes the sensorial excess of funk as a critique of the human. Framing her argument on antiwork sex activity, sensuality and sensorial excess, and bodily pleasures, funk as multisensory and multidimensional becomes an analytic and method for theorizing and reading for Black performances and iterations of gender and sexuality that challenge the human, producing embodied practices and ontology of otherwise being as the Black funk freak. Through displays of sexual pleasure and corporeal spectacle, the freak as an ontology offers alternative knowledges and narratives of Black sexuality (sacredly profane sexualities). Stallings also meets Weheliye's challenge to centralize the question or problem of the human within Black/Black feminist studies, framing the text as an ambivalent Black feminist text to underscore how traditional Black feminist and womanist theories have not brought into question the problem of the human, thereby re-inscribing its power and foreclosing the possibility of locating other genres of the human.

Through this brief critical genealogy, I asserted a conceptual link between Sylvia Wynter's articulation of the human and Hortense Spillers' conceptualization of the flesh to examine how scholars have elaborated the flesh as an onto-epistemological framework to illuminate and theorize alternative ways of being in the world, to access other genres of the

human, and to illustrate alternative modes of relationality and sociality. This genealogy establishes the theoretical foundation upon which I conceptualize Black feminist literary antagonisms in this dissertation. Collectively, these works push the fields of Black and Black feminist studies to take more seriously the problem of the human and challenges us to consider the urgency of pursuing alternative modes of being and relationality. This dissertation takes up that challenge, not in the way of Stallings' ambivalence, but as an insistent Black queer feminist project that believes in Black and Black queer feminist literature and cultural production as theory and guide on the otherwise of the human.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one, subtitled, "Geographies of Entrapment and Intramural Logics of Propertization," begins the work of conceptualizing Black feminist literary antagonisms by turning to Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*[xxvii] and Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street*.[xxviii] Within the context of the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement, specifically how politics and embodiments of respectability and New Negro ideology structured Black educational institutions in the early 20th century to produce "proper Black citizens," I begin by examining the aesthetic excess versus aesthetic sacrifice dichotomy that Larsen mobilizes to expose the regulatory nature of these institutions on Black gendered and sexual being and the related reinscription of Western aesthetic values of beauty and ugliness as one facet of humanist aspiration. To this end, I consider the material history of conduct manuals as tools of corporeal instruction and enforcement. Moreover, in considering the protagonist's embodied and experiential tensions in that space, I trace the arc from this moment of contention to what I call her ultimate acquiescence to the entangled positions of wife, mother, and enforcer of Black gendered propriety at the novel's end. This results in what I read as her literal and figurative

death. I interrogate what her commitment to the nuclear family and aspirational womanhood as a resolve to her social illegibility meant for her self-actualization and access to desire, pleasure, and intimacy to argue for a reading of Larsen's *Quicksand* as assuming an antagonistic position toward liberal humanism and the forms of relation it engenders. Moreover, in the context of the continuation of the human as "universally available, propertied subject" through values of self-determination, personal responsibility, and hard-work, I read Black feminist literary antagonisms in Ann Petry's novel through how the street as spatial logic becomes vestibular to the production of Black/human distinction, exposing the racialized limitations of this liberal humanist, capitalist logic of individual responsibility and the violence and ethos of domination that subjectivity necessitates. Furthermore, I examine how she elaborates the conditional, relative access to power that emerges in the intramural, fueling the distinctly Black and gendered notion of propertization and possession rooted in a presumption of sexual access and availability, abstraction, and disposability of Black women in the novel. Like *Quicksand,* I read the novel's end as a figurative death for the protagonist for how the cumulative effects of the convergence of these forces shaped her possibility for self-actualization and futurity.

Chapter two, subtitled, "Queering Home Through Dionne Brand's Ecoerotics and the Plurality of Black Intimacy," continues an explication of Black feminist literary antagonisms through a reading of Dionne Brand's 1996 novel, *In Another Place, Not Here.*[xxix] Within the novel's Caribbean slavery and post/colonial, revolutionary context—with the 1979 Grenadian socialist revolution as a critical anchoring point—this chapter considers how a pluralized form of intimacy emerges. On the one hand, it explores how intimacy, pleasure, and sex become foundational to the processes of self-fashioning or awakening for the Black queer protagonists as a challenge to the propertization and violent forms of relationality that undergird it. Moreover, it

examines how intimacies exhibited between the novel's protangonist and land, plant-life, and other non-human life forms continue the work of exposing the ontological hierarchies of liberal humanism while offering an alternative theory of Black being and relation with the self, the natural world, and traditional configurations of home and family. Put differently, it asks how does Brand's understanding of Blackness and Black being as excluded from the realm of the human open pathways for thinking Black relationality differently, not in a romanticized sense, but as a challenge to the colonial, epistemological hierarchy of the human and toward a theory of Black life, relationality, and home-making exhibited through an orientation toward open-endedness, ephemerality, and transience?

Chapter three, subtitled, "An Ethos of Brazen Experimentalism in Black Queer Form and Being," concludes this exploration into Black feminist literary antagonisms by carrying forth themes of open-endedness, ephemerality, and experimentalism and turning toward Alexis De Veaux and Gwendolen Hardwick's Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company (1976, Brooklyn, New York) and Charlene Cothran's *Venus* Magazine (1995, Atlanta, Georgia). Here, I consider the notion of brazen experimentalism drawn from De Veaux's 1983 essay for *Essence* magazine "On Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits" to understand how the literary and creative experimentation of the Flamboyant Ladies—specifically through their individual and collective experiments with form and narrative construction, in addition to the integration of numerous artistic elements—was constitutive of or entangled with the fashioning of their Black queer embodiment through the space/portal of the flamboyant lady figure, particularly as a result of their disidentification with lesbian as an identity. Moreover, I consider how the emphasis on this entangled creative and embodied experimentation also foregrounded the incoherence between the Black queer being they were in search of and dominant forms of subjectivity, as well as how

dominant, linear narrative construction and formal rigidity could not hold or articulate the kinds of Black stories they sought to tell. This commitment to experimentalism also shaped their practice in Black queer home-making for themselves and other Black queer writers, artists, and cultural workers. In the context of the Black Arts Movement, Black cultural nationalism, and Black aestheticism, I use the structural open-endedness and experimentalism of avant-garde and free jazz as the sonic landscape of the era as a framework through which to read De Veaux's and Hardwick's approach to their Black queer creative, literary, and embodied ethos, charting an alternative triangulation that expands the possibilities of Black aestheticism of that era. While this dissertation predominantly focuses on texts that are understood as traditional forms of literature, Chapter three engages letters, speeches, and jazz music alongside and through its explication of the cultural and literary history of the Flamboyant Ladies because it was precisely through their creative and artistic multiplicity that their ethos of brazen experimentalism was cultivated. Indeed, I argue that their experimental ethos was purposefully in tension with the confines of traditional literature both in their mixed-genre and non-linear narrative construction and through their integration of other artistic elements. In this way, I pursue ephemera and other cultural and creative avenues because they explicitly engaged with and were influenced by these things; with this, I aim to more fully make sense of the Flamboyant Ladies' literary and artistic production, their existence as an organization, and the flamboyant lady as ethos. The elasticity of Black feminist literary antagonisms follows Dionne Brand's criticism of the novel and narrative linearity and their implication in re-producing the human to make space for unwieldy Black queer feminist literary and artistic production, asserting their experimentalism as a divestment from liberal humanist legibility.

The second half of chapter three explores the notion of brazen experimentalism through an examination of the understudied history of *Venus* magazine. It unearths the magazine's role in cultivating and spreading Black queer southern narratives, exploring the significance of this platform in the larger Black queer print media landscape where southern contributions were largely peripheralized. Moreover, it takes seriously *Venus'* influence on the growth of Black queer southern culture in Atlanta and beyond, challenging the stereotypical overrepresentations of Black queer southern life in mainstream discourses while providing space for Black queer southern folks to experiment with how the overlap of Blackness, queerness, and southern-ness was expressed and embodied. I zero in on how Cothran and *Venus* made space for marginalized Black queer southern writers who were sidelined in the mainstream but also in the literary and theatre scene in the city itself because of their overt approaches to writing Black queer sexuality. With another elastic approach to Black feminist literary antagonisms, this critical engagement is also a kind of cultural history because of how integral the magazine was to the socio-cultural landscape of the city and the role that Black queer literature played in the magazine itself. Brazen experimentalism not only frames the flexible, shifting content of the magazine itself, but also its daring approach to making Black queer southern life, culture, and narrative more visible and possible.

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[i] Tiffany L. King, "Black 'feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family," *Theory & Event,* 21, no. 1 (2018): 68-87.
[ii] Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
[iii] Dionne Brand, *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024).
[iv] Brand, 91.
[v] See also Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996" (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2010); Jennifer Herron, "'We Were Irreverent': Pushing Activist Limits Through 1970s Queer Women's Theatre" (PhD Dissertation, Tufts University, 2022).
[vi] Sylvia Wynter, "Black Aesthetics and the Black Arts Movement," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). In this article, Wynter speaks to the movement's pluralistic landscape, teasing out its critical divergences in both establishing and defining a "Black aesthetic" and in understanding the role of the aesthetic.
[vii] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review*, 12, no. 4 (1968): 30

[viii] Wynter, “Black Aesthetics and the Black Arts Movement,” provides important context on the history of aesthetics – specifically how the Enlightenment period saw the development of an aesthetic criteria that defined “beauty” through the inhabitation of or proximation to a Greek Ideal type (“whose reference was the color and physiognomy of the Indo-European people”). This archetype not only became the standard of beauty but also the referent for the “truest” human form and the “being to which all mankind should relate.” Through this, African (and African descended) people (who Wynter classifies as having “Bantu Ideal-type physiognomy” with the most hereditary variation from Europeans) became the marker of ugliness, with a “proven” physiological proximation to monkeys rather than humans. This was expounded upon by discourses of phrenology that determined the Greek Ideal type as a “bio-evolutionarily determined norm of beauty” through a facial angle furthest from that of apes, with African/African descended people representing the “marker of the least evolved modality of the human” with their pseudoscience arguing that Bantu facial angles were closest to that of apes. Wynter argues that this “evolved/nonevolved schema” translated to and fueled the structural devaluation of African and diasporic cultural productions and the superiority of white aesthetic overall, thus informing the Black Arts Movement commitment to creating new criteria for assessing Black art, refusing Western literary canonization, and dispelling the white aesthetic. Wynter’s explication here underscores and works in tandem with what she outlines in “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being” wherein she discusses the reinvention of Man as a political subject on purely biological terms during the West’s second period of imperial expansion in the 19th century – and this configuration of Man came to overrepresent itself as if it were the human itself, rather than understanding itself to be but one of many conceptions of the human. In bringing these two texts together, I use Wynter to ground my assertion about the implications and possibilities of Black Arts Movement ideology (as a critique of liberal humanist subjectivity) by illuminating how Man2 as a political subject and its biocentric foundation correlated to the development of whiteness as the determinant of aesthetics.

[ix] Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 33. In the primer, Neal engages Malauna Karenga’s argument about culture being the central aspect in the movement toward self-determination. Karenga offers a list of seven components of culture, which he argues is the “basis of all ideas, images, and actions. To move is to move culturally, i.e., by a set of values given to you by your culture.” These components include history, social organization, economic organization, ethos, mythology, political organization, and creative motif.

[x] Cherise A. Pollard, “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women’s Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 173-186. In this article, Pollard explores how Black women poets challenged the masculinist discourse and aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement illustrated through the figure of the Black revolutionary warrior and phallic iconography, arguing that for some male movement contributors, “the phallus is the ultimate weapon of social retribution” and a “palpable weapon against oppressive forces.”

[xi] Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 39.

[xii] For a more in-depth and preceding Black Marxist feminist analysis of this, see also Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!,” *Political Affairs*, 1949.

[xiii] Amiri Baraka, “African-American Literature & Class Struggle,” *Black American Literature Forum*, 14, no. 1(1980): 9.

[xiv] Demita Frazer, interview by emerald rutledge and Karla Mendez, *We Were Undeterred: Demita Frazier on the Complex History of the Combahee River Collective,* Black Women Radicals.

[xv] Robert Staples, “The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” *The Black Scholar,* 10, no. 6/7(March/April 1979): 24-33. Thank you to Dr. Alexandria Smith for being in conversation with me about Staples, this essay, and Black Male Studies.

[xvi] Tommy Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood,I* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017). Tommy Curry and this text are credited as foundational text to Black Male Studies.

[xvii] Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).

[xviii] Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Diacritics, 17, no.2(1987): 65-81.

[xix] Spillers, 65, emphasis added.

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

[xxi] Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3, no. 3(2002): 257-337.

[xxii] Wynter, 282.

[xxiii] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[xxiv] Snorton, 57.
[xxvxxv] Snorton, 74.
[xxvi] LaMonda H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champagne, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).
[xxvii] Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1928).
[xxviii] Ann Petry, *The Street* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, 1974).

[xxix] Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

Black Feminist Literary Antagonisms I: Geographies of Entrapment and Intramural Logics of Propertization in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Ann Petry's *The Street*

"And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child." – Nella Larsen, 125

This chapter begins an explication of Black feminist literary antagonisms by examining how a logic of propertization emerges and is perpetuated in the intramural as a consequence of liberal humanist and capitalist modes of relation and the terms of legibility they produce. I center Black women's literature of the early-mid 20th century, specifically Nella Larsen's 1928 *Quicksand* and Ann Petry's 1946 *The Street*, to understand how they elaborate the consequences of desiring legibility through liberal humanist subjectivity in the post-bellum era. To this end, I turn toward Black educational institutions (conceptualized as a kind of "home") and the Black domestic sphere for how they became the grounds upon which Black people aspired toward this recognition through notions of Black gendered and sexual propriety [i]and normativity. This chapter is concerned with how these novels expose the violent spatial, external, and embodied relational dynamics that are both sustaining and consequential to liberal humanist subjectivity and, as Tiffany L. King notes, its naturalized socio-political organizing logics of people and space; through this, this chapter draws specific attention to the implications and consequences of these humanistic aspirations on Black women's material, emotional, and psychological selves, which, through these novels, I assert as a kind of figurative death.

Black feminist literary criticism has long interrogated the interconnection of the Black family, Black domesticity, respectability politics, and Black sexuality in Black women's

literature of the long 20th century, albeit from various points of inquiry. However, a critical throughline of this discourse is how, beginning in the Post-Reconstruction era, the Black domestic and intimate spheres became the grounds for negotiating and appealing for the recognition of Black humanity through rigid articulations of Black domesticity and the regulation and suppression of Black sexuality. For example, Claudia Tate's 1992 monograph, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*,[ii] argues that Black women writers in the Post-Reconstruction era drew heavily on themes of Victorian domesticity to facilitate Black social mobility. Tate asserts that Black women's domestic fiction of the era did not explicitly address issues of racism and white supremacy, but instead, extrapolated Black women's narratives through a domestic lens to insure their protagonists' individual and familial success. These novels of "genteel domestic feminism" repudiated the pathologization of Black sexuality and domesticity, which dominated social and political discourse at the time. In extension and divergence from this analysis, Candice M. Jenkins' 2007 *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*[iii] explores how the purported deviance of Black sexuality was foundational to the "partial citizenship" of Black Americans and was deployed as proof of Black subhumanity. Because of this, Jenkins argues that the realm of the intimate and domestic, and Black sexuality broadly, became the grounds for desiring and aspiring towards "full citizenship" through Black sexual repression and regulation – often through the implementation of the precise ideals and values that were used to ostracize Black people, like the Republican family ideal and the cult of true womanhood. Jenkins locates the initiation of some of these recuperation strategies through organizations like the Black women's club movement in the late 1800s and the Black church. Jenkins argues that these recovery tactics perpetuated a kind of silence and vulnerability around Black sexuality, enabling what she calls "the vulnerability of blackness."

The republican family ideal of the 1800s emerged alongside the division of work and home into public and private spheres and normativized the nuclear family, which centralized a heterosexual family and a father-headed household.[iv] The nuclear family and household was intended as a microcosm or "small-scale mirror" of the nation-state. Moreover, the cult of true womanhood, which foregrounded purity as a crucial characteristic, sustained itself through the negation/abjection of 'lower,' read enslaved women, perpetually defined through what Black women were not. Importantly, Jenkins underscores the stakes of middle-class Black women's adoption of Victorian ideals of womanhood by noting that the pathologization of Black sexual behaviors and practices in the late 19th and 20th centuries fueled white, racist terror in the forms of sexual violence against Black women and the lynching of Black men. Thus, Black women's attempts at racial uplift through Black sexual regulation and repression was an attempt at being enfolded into the category of protected, pure womanhood. This becomes the basis of what she conceptualizes as the salvific wish—Black, middle-class women's *desires to sacrifice the sexual pleasure and agency of Black women for the sake and benefit of the larger Black community*. The idea of sacrificing sexual pleasure, and self-fashioning/actualization by extension, is a critical aspect of my work, but not through an understanding of purposeful or fully agentic sacrifice. I build on and diverge from Jenkins to think through this as an imperative of legibility through liberal humanist subjectivity, even if the possibility for that legibility is always, already foreclosed. With Tate's and Jenkins' contributions as critical to the foundation of this chapter, I expand on their work by forwarding an analysis that interrogates how Black women's literature not only expresses concern over the failures of respectability politics as a viable tool of challenging white supremacy and acquiring "full citizenship," but exposes how the desire for liberal humanist subjectivity was always already an impossibility. Yet, the aspiration itself

through the investment in liberal humanist values of subjectivity and relationality, or a response to an understanding of this failure, fueled the logic of propertization. On the one hand, this propertization perpetuated a kind of unthinkability of Black women's pleasure and desire, while foreclosing the possibility of self-fashioning. Relatedly, it produced Black women's bodies as perpetually available and/or possessed by others through discursive, physical, and sexual violence; this violence structured their relationship to themselves, as well as interpersonal and communal dynamics. My intervention shifts the terms from solely an indictment of respectability politics toward a reading of these texts as an indictment on liberal humanism itself. This shift opens a reading of this Black feminist literature as a challenge to divest from this kind of subjectivity altogether toward imagining and materializing liberated Black gendered and sexual embodiments.

A Lack of Acquiescence

Nella Larsen's 1928 novel, *Quicksand*, follows the errant life of Helga Crane. A young Black woman whose, at times, ardent disavowal of Black assimilationism and its many socio-political and religious regulating mechanisms leaves her chasing an elusive life wherein she can refuse an immersion in Black politics and quotidian debates, evade isolation and loneliness, and cultivate a sense of self grounded in the beauty of individuality. Raised, and subsequently ostracized, by her white family members in Chicago following her mother's death, Helga's resulting visceral understanding of race and white supremacy served as the impetus for this never-ending, contentious journey to belong while keeping the fragmented, and often contradictory, pieces of herself intact. However, this unresolved desire for belonging—for a "chance at stability, at permanent happiness" (Larsen, 108)—that often plagues and teases the lives of wayward Black women protagonists, ultimately leads Helga to a detrimental decision

quite contrary to her understanding of herself and desires for her life: a marriage to the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green resulting in her birthing and becoming mother to a seemingly never-ending number of children.

Moving through various locales, including Naxos (a southern, fictional town), Chicago, New York, Copenhagen, and a small Alabama town, *Quicksand* is set against a socio-political backdrop of permeating Black, middle-class respectability politics and racial uplift discourse carried over and transformed by post-Reconstruction era white supremacist violence—and the stereotypes of Black sexual deviance and excess that partly fueled it—alongside the purported racelessness or irrelevance of race in Copenhagen. From the novel's outset, Larsen establishes this context through Naxos—a school and community where Black children were trained and policed into respectable young men and women ready to be enfolded into dominant society, while the instructors, like Helga, were expected to embody and model appropriate racial and gendered behavior. The significance and legitimization of family, expectation of marriage, emphasis on collectivity, and normativized constructions of Black gender rooted in propriety became the primary sources of Helga's isolation.

In his article, "Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," Keguro Macharia reads the novel as a critique of Black Nativist discourse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—a discourse and social dynamic that sought to solidify "black hetero-futurity"[v] that was inherently middle-class (or aspiring), racially "pure," and privileged genealogical origin. Macharia argues that Helga is configured as queer throughout the novel as she is perpetually outside of normative time and practice, either through her disjointed filial dynamic and biracial identity that refuse the purist logics of Black Nativism or her "dysgenic" choice to marry Rev. Green—as he was a poor man from the south. Whereas, for Macharia and

Larsen's contemporaries, Helga's marriage to the reverend is strange in the *choice* of the man, I am interested in the decision itself – one configured as the ultimate resolve to Helga's ongoing transience and social illegibility. In finding Macharia's queer reading of Helga generative, this analysis diverges slightly from a focus on Helga's misaligned, queer comportment, and instead draws on Black feminist theories of the human as a critical framework to interrogate the meaning and consequences of these purported assimilationist mechanisms that produced her isolation—the material and psychic effects they had on Helga's relationship to herself and those around her.

My reading of the novel attempts to trace these relational dynamics through the ugly versus beauty, or aesthetic excess versus aesthetic sacrifice,[vi] dichotomy that is central to Helga's time in Naxos and, what I assert as, Helga's figurative death in the novel's end. Black and Black queer feminist scholars have accounted for the consequences of "a lack of acquiescence" (Larsen, 7) to the intramural demands of Black gendered and sexual norms, even within the context of Black and Black feminist study[vii]; and while this reading is interested in examining how social institutions, like the Black family, were mobilized as key pathways to seeking legibility as human, it is also concerned with the question of what is Helga left with even in her ultimate acquiescence to these socio-political imperatives? I juxtapose the novel's beginning and end because this notion of acquiescence—its possibilities, sacrifices, and foreclosures—are pivotal here, especially when we consider that Helga transitions from being insistent on a refusal of carving herself into the kind of woman that Naxos expected her to be, and her position as an agent of Black social and gendered propriety as the preacher's wife.

In the opening to the novel, the reader is drawn into Helga's miniature world—one limited to the four walls of her bedroom in the Naxos educational community. The aesthetic complexity as reflection of Helga's interiority and individuality is represented through a

proliferation of detail imbued with bright, striking colors and textures, like the “many-colored nasturtiums” that crowded the “shiny brass bowl.” The invocation of the wrinkled, almost ruffled petals of nasturtiums, with their range of single and two-toned colors—from rich, turmeric yellow flowers with soft red accents in the leaf-center to deep crimson flowers—usher a sense of textured beauty into the space. As Larsen begins to establish Naxos as destructive and lifeless, refusing “innovation” and “individualisms,” through stale and machine-like imagery, we might read the colored and textured/tactile intricacy of the nasturtiums (as well as her brocaded mules with their “strange embroideries”) as indications of Helga’s embodied incoherence with and disruption to Naxos’s insistent sharp-edged pattern. Alongside this, through the gentle, stated imposition of the “great” black and red lamp shade alongside the “long” bookshelves from which Helga’s bright-covered books had fallen, Larsen creates a sense of spatial and embodied expansiveness that is bolstered by the literal structure of the sentence on the page. A lengthy description of the room is encapsulated in one sentence, woven together through seven phrases, that read as though they are stacking on top of each other, suggesting a textual and aesthetic excess that threatens to spill over. While Helga’s room is large and spacious, there’s a critical duality at play: on the one hand, the dynamism of Helga’s individual expression is metaphorized through the vastness of the space and its adornments, yet the bedroom as the only place in the community in which she can have seemingly unmitigated access to this kind of interiority and explicit individual expression also creates a palpable tension and sense of confinement. The textual and aesthetic excess as embodied expansiveness that fuels the need for Helga’s escape articulates a geography of isolation that is both enforced and chosen, reflecting a relational dynamic in which Helga—in her fullness—cannot be held by Naxos.

Moreover, the embodied aspect of Helga’s expansiveness is made further legible when

she is juxtaposed with the purveyors of "ladyness": the dormitory matron, Miss MacGooden, and the unnamed dean of women. Larsen posits these women as emblematic of proper, respectable Negro womanhood expressed through a kind of uniformity that required the muting and suppression of the *possibility* of a defined individual expression. During the turn of the 20th century, Black conduct manuals[viii] were popularized by the Black bourgeoisie and the Black church to teach Black people of all class positions to embody "pure minds" and "impulses toward vigorous manhood and womanhood" as a means of dispelling stereotypical depictions and negative societal perceptions of blackness, thereby overcoming racism and white supremacy. In her article, "Childhood, the Body, and Race Performance: Early 20th-Century Etiquette Books for Children,"[ix] literary scholar Katharine Capshaw Smith further contextualizes this cultural phenomenon, asserting that, in the early 1900s, the Black elite turned towards conduct manuals in an attempt at racial solidarity across class lines because they were feeling the effects of white disregard for class distinctions amongst Black people via the emergence of Jim Crow segregation.[x] These conduct manuals and etiquette books navigated and espoused contradictory ideologies—a hypervaluation of and insistence on white standards, social norms, and practices, on the one hand, and racial pride and gestures toward Black militarism on the other. Smith's argument, however, is anchored in how conduct manuals exposed the performativity of racial character through their directives on embodying and performing white values and countering Black stereotypes via cleanliness, repression of emotions in response to antagonism (racial and otherwise) and overall expressive control, obeying authority, etc.

Conduct Manuals and the Limitation of "Naxos Negroes"

Two examples of notable conduct manuals of the period include: *Golden Thoughts on Chastity and Procreation*[xi] published in 1903 by Professor John William Gibson and *The*

Colored Girl Beautiful published in 1916 by E. Azalia Hackley, which contain extensive instructions on how a Black girl should work to become a lady, while also addressing the alternative path to social ostracism. Overwhelmingly, across the manuals, one important thematic throughline for "winning qualities" emphasizes the complex gendered expectation of self-sacrifice and service: "shield[ing] others at the expense of herself…when a sacrifice is made, she does it cheerfully" (Gibson, 75). Although Gibson nor Hackley deeply engage with color in their texts, both write extensively on the importance of personal appearance with Hackley remarking that "even colors talk" (Hackley, 71). Through this frame, Larsen deploys color and aesthetic more broadly as another category for demarcating ladyhood. Nearly exemplary of the ladyhood outlined in the manuals, Miss MacGooden and the dean of women as the trainers of the "ladies-in-making" are defined through their distinguished familial origins and also a kind of *aesthetic sacrifice*. When Helga decides to leave Naxos and visits Dr. Anderson's office to announce her departure, she is surrounded by women workers clothed in "drab" attire of "mostly navy blue, black, [and] brown..." (Larsen, 16). Although Larsen does not describe Helga's attire in that moment, at the novel's opening, Helga is dawning a "vivid green and gold negligee," which allows us to presume that she was wearing a vibrant, "queer" colored outfit in that moment as well. While waiting to see Dr. Anderson and recalling the dean of women's comments on the appropriate colors for Negro women—reflected in the attire of the women workers—the reader learns that Helga's appreciation for rich and complex colors and textures like "deep reds," "dark purples," "royal blues," and "clinging silks," represented, for them, an aesthetic excess and was one critical way that she was configured as discordant with the women and the broader Naxos educational community (17); one way in which the "gulf" between Helga as reaching for individual expression and actualization and Naxos as a Black rigid, righteous collectivity was

made manifest. Contrasting Helga and the other Naxos women emphasizes Helga's embodied expansiveness through the aesthetic excess and sacrifice dichotomy. If the uniformity and aesthetic sameness of the other women made necessary for establishing an aspirational, coherent Black, human subjectivity foreclosed the possibility of alternative Black embodiments and expressions, one might read Larsen as posing the question: is it possible to exist within the limits of Blackness as delineated by racial uplift discourse and develop a sense of self unmuted by its corporeal rubric?

In her conduct manual, Hackley offers a kind of answer to Larsen in her subsection on "Originality." Hackley's conceptualization of originality is grounded in an elimination of the "Ego (Self)" with an "aim to work for the good of others." One can develop more general or niche skills, which define the development of self, as long they are used in service to "advanc[ing] and chang[ing] the prevalent opinion of the Negro" (Hackley, 36). In encouraging one to be original in thought or ideas, Hackley clarifies that it must only come after one has first adhered to the proper ideas of others, followed by a display of "her cleverness through her *adaptations* (86, emphasis added)." Here, Hackley suggests that originality in idea or thought is only good when it builds on what has already been characterized as good and proper thought and puts forth new strategies toward this end. Originality, then, is distinct from (and "deadly") to what Hackley refers to as *exclusiveness* (92). Hackley asserts that the detrimental nature of exclusiveness, what we might argue that Helga embodies, is precisely that it is not in service to collectivity as a strategy toward advancing the race. Importantly, in understanding Naxos as a cultivator and representation of the kind of collectivity Hackley emphasizes here through its production of "Naxos products" or "Naxos Negroes," the influence of conduct manuals is particularly relevant given how they were often elaborations on lectures and visits to Black

schools (Larsen, 3). For example, in the foreword to Hackley's manual, she writes that her manual culminated from lectures that she gave to (Black) girls at boarding schools, with the first one being at Tuskegee Institute, suggesting that the lessons and their ideology were as integral to the overall curriculum as other areas of study. Furthermore, Smith's essay argues that the emergence of Black regulatory literature specifically written for children and young adults positioned them as the vanguard of cultural reinvention and racial progress. Smith asserts that children were tasked with embodying and representing an "innovative vision of Black identity" because of their corporeal malleability—they were thought of as a kind of "blank canvas" on which a Blackness that had been reformed by white cultural practices, standards, and behaviors could be constructed and displayed.[xii]

Larsen's critique of desiring legibility and recognition from whiteness through this kind of collectivity, and the logic and values that structure it, exists on multiple registers. On the one hand, I argue that she undermines the assumption of Naxos' production of the kind of blackness that would engender a seemingly *full* instantiation of Black citizenship and humanity through her use of the term "Naxos products." Though one could read this as simply a reinforcement of her comparison of Naxos to a machine, the remarks given by a white reverend at the novel's beginning amid Helga's sudden crisis suggests an impossibility of a correlation between a "Naxos product" and full legibility as human. Recalling the renowned white preacher's address to the audience of Naxos students, teachers, and staff, the unnamed reverend describes the model nature of "Naxos Negroes" as having a staunch awareness of their place, and by extension, an understanding of "when and where to stop" in their aspiration for progress (Larsen, 3). Historian Brian P. Jones contextualizes the role of wealthy white donors and philanthropists in the founding and financial success of historically Black colleges and universities, namely Tuskegee

University (formerly Tuskegee Institute, which Naxos is said to be based on) and Hampton University (formerly Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute).[xiii] In his book chapter, "The Contradictions of Tuskegee Institute, 1881-1960," Jones explicates the educational philosophy of Tuskegee established via Booker T. Washington, arguing that in following the direction of Samuel C. Armstrong (a white man), Tuskegee was defined by its emphasis on revaluing manual labor and industrialism amongst Black people and refusal of liberal arts education, orienting students away from educational and career pursuits that would destabilize white economic and social security. The emphasis on manual labor was so great that students were even responsible for the physical expansion of Tuskegee, contributing labor towards the construction of the buildings. According to Jones, Tuskegee (and Hampton) financially benefited from this industrial philosophy, as they held higher endowments than other Black colleges that focused on liberal arts educations, resulting from white investments, and later, federal government partnerships. For white philanthropists, investing in these industrial-focused institutions meant a tool for re-tying Black people "to the soil," tempering their aspirations for liberal educations, curtailing rural-to-city migration, suppressing social and political agitation, and maintaining the "counterrevolutionary social order."[xiv] We might read the unnamed white minister's speech as its own iteration of that counterrevolutionary order and ideology as he goes on to describe a Negro's desire for more than the "estate to which they had been called" as sinful greed and antithetical to God's desire for them specifically, even as the "best" Negroes (Larsen, 3). The reverend's language attempts to suggest and maintain an ontological distinction—an embodied difference inherent to their being as determined by God—between "Naxos Negroes," "other Negroes," and the unnamed and unmarked white, full human—a distinction which the Negroes, of Naxos or otherwise origin, could never fully compensate. Although there isn't an explicit absence of

reference to white people or a comparison, as in Negroes 'knowing their place in comparison to whites,' whiteness does not need to name itself to be already understood as the default position. Put differently, the lack of direct reference articulates whiteness as default. This is further understood when we consider how the reverend does not say, "*we* should be wary of avariciousness or desire to add to *our* earthly goods,"—as if God's expectations of and desires are universal—but instead foregrounds these ideas in a repeated singular use of "they." If the possibility of a full humanity is reserved for and bestowed unto white people—or produced through the very notion of Black exclusion/abjection—the reverend's remarks illustrate how Naxos was configured through an always, already delimited understanding of who and what Naxos Negroes could be.

Furthermore, an analysis of Miss MacGooden reveals another aspect of what I understand to be Larsen's critique. For a moment, I want to turn to a graphic in the *Golden Thoughts* conduct manual that frames the section partly titled "The Girl in the Home Looking Toward Marriage." In the graphic, a seven-year-old Black girl is in the center of the page, with illustrations descending the page to both her right and left. The images on the right instruct the path to successful womanhood, including "study and obedience," "virtue and devotion," becoming "a loving mother," and "an honored grandmother" (Gibson, 61). While on the left side, outlining a path to being a social outcast, includes the consumption of "bad literature," "flirting and coquettery," and "fast life dissipation," with an exclusion of marriage and motherhood (Gibson, 63). When the reader is introduced to Miss MacGooden—a "lady from one of the best families"—we learn that although she perceived herself as embodying the highest tier of ladyhood, she had refused to be married. We hear from Helga's internal monologue, "There were, so she had been given to understand, things in the matrimonial state that were of necessity

entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to" (Larsen, 11). In thinking about the aforementioned graphic, Larsen undermines her own rigid juxtaposition through unraveling this notion of a fixed Black womanhood for the purposes of assimilation, as Miss MacGooden—the woman with arguably the most influence and power through her role as a trainer and regulator of the Black girls in the dorm, does not fit perfectly into the mold. As much as Miss MacGooden might have thought she couldn't have been more different from Helga, their shared status of being unmarried blurs the apparent distinction between their embodiments of good and bad womanhood. However, Larsen does not throw the distinction into complete relief as Helga's lack of familial ties as a form of social legitimization and protection serves as a critical difference between herself and the true Naxos Negroes as a whole. Larsen's work here exposes how, the idea of Naxos Negroes is itself a fiction, structured by qualifiers that are not only constantly produced but are in an ongoing state of negotiation, again emphasizing their inherent fragility and exposing the failure of these aspirations. Where Miss MacGooden has the strength of her filial ties to "compensate" for her romantic unattachment, Helga knows that marriage is the one thing that would help legitimize her in Naxos, which is why her choice to call off her engagement to James Vayle—a Black monied and familied man—as one of freedom and refusal to "be made over" makes for a generative contrasting point to the novel's ending. I think of this moment as Helga's ultimate acquiescence and what might be understood as Larsen's most fervent display of Black feminist literary antagonism.

Quicksand as "appalling blackness of pain"

Following what felt like, for her, a penultimate moment of embarrassment with Dr. Anderson and a subsequent emotional and psychological unraveling at a makeshift church service, Helga finds herself returning to the question of marriage—in a more existential sense, a question of simplicity, practicality, legibility, and "happiness." Up until the moment of Dr.

Anderson's rejection, Helga's complicated disposition toward marriage and childbearing as an *intramural* societal expectation articulated an understanding of the pervasiveness and totalizing nature of white supremacy—and also its failure as a tool of protection and assimilation. In another chance encounter with James Vayle where he asks her about marriage, she responds, "Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirit, as Negroes have to endure" (Larsen, 96). There's a web of tension here – Helga's refusal to engage marriage and motherhood, which is configured as the pathway to happiness and contentment, is partly what fuels her sense of social isolation. And this tension comes to a head during and following the church scene where she first encounters the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green and informs her sudden decision to marry him a day later.

The circularity of the novel's ending exists on multiple levels—not only does Helga return to the question of marriage, but she also returns to the South and to the issue of propriety and racial uplift, albeit through the Black church. In the small, Alabama town, Helga's appreciation of deep colors and textures is not an indication of a kind of embodied and ideological expansiveness that cannot cohere with the Naxos Negro aesthetic, at risk of being muted out by its "drabness" and machinations. Instead, this aesthetic complexity gets leveraged against the "wild," poor, and backward "ugliness" of the town and its people. Previously, where the "drabness" was an aesthetic and embodied representation of a proper Blackness suffocated by a desire for white recognition, to which Helga was positioned as a rebellious, unreliable teacher or conduit for her students, it is re-signified as that which must and can be transcended through her capacity as Reverend Green's wife and the First Lady. The narrator says, "Her young joy and zest for the uplifting of her fellow men came back to her. She meant to subdue the

cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to help the other women to do likewise" (Larsen, 110). The moment between Helga's security, comfort, and the projection of her "unnecessary prejudices and fripperies," and the despair of her choice was brief. The rapid, yet heavy movement through time and space in the last fifteen pages of the novel, which might be likened to the feeling of sinking in quicksand, becomes a textual representation or metaphor for Helga's experience.

The temporal gaps, as she appears at the beginning of chapter 23 with three children birthed over 20 months, not only set the stage for Helga's disconnect from her wifely duties both in the church and in her home, which becomes the central concern of community members, but also a disconnect from herself. The sacrificial aspect of her role is marked by never-ending pain and illness, an invisibility to her husband (and everyone else) except for when she was "preparing for or recovering from childbirth," and an expectation to defer her questions and concerns to the Lord—to submit and be humble to a "superior wisdom" (Larsen, 117). This interpersonal and communal invisibility paired with the expectation for her to continue birthing children without question reflects a different iteration of the Black female abstraction that began this chapter, and this is furthered by the women's *collective* experience being victimized by the normalization of suffering and embodied abstraction. When Helga takes her concerns about her perpetual exhaustion, pain, and illness to women of the community, concerned that either she alone was incapable or if living "at the edge of health" was a shared experience, the women's consolation is grounded in that they had experienced all that and worse and had resigned themselves to reckoning "we's all gwine a be ti'ed til kingdom come" (Larsen, 116). Moreover, together it reflects the unthinkability of Black women's pleasure and desires and the impossibility for self-actualization under this rubric, reinforced through Helga's admission that

there was no longer time to think about beauty, let alone the "ordinary things of life, hunger, and sleep" (ibid). Following the birth of another child, the ongoingness of this suffering culminates in what feels like a complete, suffocating submersion in quicksand, into a space of both an "appalling blackness of pain" and also one where the opportunity for reaching herself again is possible—where the veil of religion, which she had leaned on to make sense of her circumstances in the small town as she had been instructed, was lifted (118). Although Helga glimpses at the sense and possibility of freedom through that liminal space between life and death, grasping at the hope of regaining her strength and leaving it all behind, the novel concludes with a barely-well Helga giving birth to her fifth child. Although one might read Larsen's ending as hyperbolic or overly-dramatic, overall superficially dismissive of marriage and the family, she does challenge us to think about the stakes of marriage and the family as tools for desiring legibility, for what they enact and normalize about the conditions of Black womanhood.

In what follows, I turn to Ann Petry's 1946 novel, *The Street*, reading Black feminist literary antagonisms through how the street as spatial logic becomes vestibular to the production of Black/human distinction, exposing the racialized limitations of this liberal humanist, capitalist logic of individual responsibility and the violence and ethos of domination that subjectivity necessitates. Furthermore, I examine how she elaborates the conditional, relative access to power that emerges in the intramural, fueling the distinctly Black and gendered notion of propertization and possession rooted in a presumption of sexual access and availability, abstraction, and disposability of Black women in the novel. To conclude this chapter and establish a transition to Chapter Two, I will return to a brief engagement with Larsen to further elaborate on the complex presence of intimacy in Helga and the Reverend's marriage to understand its interplay with

Helga's ultimate acquiescence to the compulsion of marriage and cisheteronormativity as a strategy for legibility.

Ann Petry's Vestibule and Logic of Black Entrapment

In 1949, Trinidadian-born Communist, journalist, and political theorist, Claudia Jones, wrote and published, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman."[xv] Writing from within the Communist Party, Jones addresses the party's altogether invisibility of the nuances of Black women's positionality, particularly during a period of what she referred to as American bourgeoise's super-exploitation and increased oppression of Black women as a "postwar reactionary offensive" and resulting from Black women's increased "militancy." Challenging mainstream or "Big Business" propaganda of American women's experience of "great equality," Jones explicates her assertation of Black women's super-exploitation through their integration into the workforce through the lowest paying jobs overwhelmingly as domestic laborers. Contextualizing this integration as partly due to Black men's sparse labor opportunities and Black women's subsequent role as breadwinners, Jones examines various reports published through the Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor to illustrate the severity of pay discrepancy between white women and non-white, primarily Black women, with white women having median earnings of more than twice as high. As a result of the convergence of these factors, Jones argues, "…in Negro communities the conditions of ghetto-living—low salaries, high rents, high prices, etc.—*virtually become an iron curtain hemming in the lives* of Negro children and undermining their health and spirit!" (Jones, 3, emphasis added).

Jones' essay anticipates or presages the kind Black of feminist criticism that would emerge in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*, for example, specifically the essays that

address the fallacy of Black women's labor opportunities as a reflection of their "success" and overall capitalist investment by elucidating the intricacies of their labor experiences and exploitation. Moreover, it reflects and provides a generative framework through which to enter the intramural dynamic that structures Ann Petry's *The Street*. On the one hand, it provides a material reference for the primary conditions of the protagonist's life both within her family and work opportunities. On the other hand, the street or the iron curtain become non-specific representations of the ongoing spatial production of Black abjection, an iteration of Spillers' notion of the vestibule in its delineation of non/humanity. In this way, I am interested in two interrelated points—1) *how* Petry negotiates and elaborates an understanding of the totalizing distribution of and exposure to that violence as it contours Black life and produces racialized gender; 2) *how* she teases out the conditional, relative access to power that emerges in the intramural, fueling the distinctly Black and gendered notion of propertization and possession. Relatedly, the capitulation to liberal humanist values and modes of subjectivity are not done in a wholesale, totalizing fashion by every character featured in the novel; indeed, it is not always expressed in those terms. Yet there is a simultaneity of the antiblack violence and abstraction of the street and the disparate, fragmented attempts at manhood or otherwise subjective legibility as a form of empowerment that are enacted through varied forms of brutality against Black women.

Set in 1944 Harlem, New York, *The Street* follows Lutie Johnson, a young adult Black woman on a steadfast journey to make a better life for herself and her son, Bud, whom she was single-parenting after her husband left her. Lutie embodied the aspiring Black upwardly mobile respectability politics of the time, and this was inflected by her role as a domestic laborer for a wealthy white family in Connecticut through which she cultivated a belief in capitalism and the ability to transcend the conditions of Blackness through what Claudia Tate calls, "willful self-

advancement," through personal responsibility, dedication, and hardwork. Echoing Grace Hong's sentiment of the projected "universal availability" of citizenship and propertied subjecthood, Lutie internalized the utility of white values and practices, the performance of Black gendered and sexual propriety, and necessarily expressed an ardent disidentification with her drunken father, his numerous promiscuous girlfriends, and the other kind of "wrong" Black people that inhabited the street. As the novel unfolds, however, a circularity emerges. It unravels these values through a constant cycle of inflection and deflection of her self-confidence and belief in another kind of future, and, relatedly, it ruptured her belief in the "goodness" of the kind of subjectivity structured by those purported values. Moreover, it exposes the "iron curtain" of the street as irreducible to any singular street in Harlem but as the organizing logic that was created precisely to inhibit Black transcendence or escape. Within and through this larger, structural realization are her experiences with William Jones, the super of her building, and Boots, the band leader who represented her chance to finally make enough money to leave the street. Like the ending of Larsen's *Quicksand*, the ending of *The Street* reflects a kind of figurative death for Lutie resulting from the convergence of both intramural violences through Boots' and Jones' competing desires for Lutie and the impossibility of structural reprieve or intervention. In what follows, I first examine Petry's geography and logic of entrapment, reading the street not as a physical location but as a spatial logic that produces the Black/human distinction as displayed through the affective, sensorial, embodied experiences of the community members. I then turn toward the inner dynamics of this community to explicate the different strategies through which fragmented legibility is grasped and how this produces a logic of specifically racialized gendered possession.

The Street as Spatial Production of Black/Human

In the first few pages of the novel, we follow Lutie as she searches for an apartment motivated by her desire to get her son away from her father and his apartment spilling over with the excess of his "raddled women" and as a representation of her first step towards escaping the conditions of Harlem. Though the novel begins here, we later learn that this pursuit followed her three-year tenure working as a domestic laborer in Connecticut for the Chandler family—a job she took to support her family after her husband Jim couldn't get a job. Lutie's exposure to that family and their "different values," and the power that money and capital provided them, became foundational to the development of Lutie's ethos or "philosophy" of transcendence rooted in capitalist values and the ongoing accumulation of capital. She "absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough" despite any set of circumstances or conditions(43). Believing that she and Jim had simply not "tried hard enough [or] worked long enough," Lutie left the Chandler's believing she could get herself and Bub out of "the street" through determination, meticulous strategy, and "careful planning," the will to fight the street's dreadful influence.

Although the compacted, repetitive reference to the "very careful planning" creates a sense of fragility and anxiety around her belief in it, Lutie enters the tenement building on 116th Street with this kind of mindset. After being instructed by Mrs. Hedges to ring the super's doorbell, Lutie is confronted by William "Supe" Jones whose eyes contained an urgent hunger at his first glance at her (Petry, 10). As he escorted her up to the vacant room, the impenetrable darkness and uncleanable filth with a never-ending assortment of cigarettes, sandwich wrappings, liquor bottles, and old movie ticket stubs littering the stairwell and each floor they reached created a sense of suffocation and enclosure, with the walls "reaching out for her…in an effort to envelop her" (12). The weight of the Super's footsteps punctured the otherwise gaping

silence, and his closeness exacerbated the asphyxiating atmosphere of the stairwell fueled by what she believed was his insatiable lust for her, feeling him "staring at her back, her legs, her thighs…[his]eyes traveling over her—estimating her, summing her up, wondering about her" (13). While taking in the smallness of the apartment, strategizing about how to conjure more space and air in the room, Lutie wrestled with whether she was projecting onto the Super, if his "aching" desire was really filling the tight space.

Following Candice M. Jenkins' reading of Lutie's sexual suppression[xvi], literary scholar Joy Myree-Mainor reads this sequence as not only a projection, but as a part of the unconscious of the novel, reflecting Lutie's own desire for a kind of sexual expression that is otherwise subdued because of her sexual propriety.[xvii] However, I read this sequence differently, not to argue that Lutie doesn't experience desire in the novel at all, but because from both the Super's and Min's (his 'roommate') perspective that we receive later, his desire for her is not only central to the shift in his relationship with Min as he becomes cold and violent. It is also his insistence on "possessing" Lutie reflected through his own recounting of that exact moment, and the lengths he would go to materialize this possession, including forging a relationship with her son that he later exploits, painting her walls different colors than she asked, etc., that are critical to the novel's entire narrative. Moreover, his fleeting encounters with women that are consensual but violently sexual—moments where he "went half-mad with a frenzied kind of hunger"—push up against this assertion of Lutie's suppressed desire (86). Petry centralizes the cumulative effect of the gnawing silence, darkness, dirt, isolation, and atmospheric, spatial suffocation—the embodied effect of this geography and logic of entrapment on Super and other members of their apartment community—as context, not justification, for Supe's disposition and behavior. Indeed, when Lutie entered the apartment building for the first time and noticed that there were only two

apartments on the first floor, she remarked internally, “One A must be the darkest apartment, the smallest most unrentable apartment, and the landlord would feel mighty proud that he’d given the Super a first-floor apartment” (7). The small darkness of this room, as the most uninhabitable in Lutie’s view, somehow figures as a better option than the others he had previously experienced. As we learn more about Supe, it becomes clear that his lifelong history of “deadly loneliness” from living in the basements of tenement buildings and boiler rooms on the sea to working as a night watchman for empty buildings had produced a feeling of total submersion into a kind of darkness akin to Helga’s black hole, as if he had been “buried alive in the hold” (86). Suggesting a kind of ontological, conditional continuity from the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Supe’s forced intimacy with this ghostly dark silence and isolation and loneliness, his “knowing the basements in this street better than the outside,” and his inability to be disentangled from the building reveals the spatial logic of the street as vestibule through which the production of the Black/human distinction happens, and by extension, the production of racialized gender. It underscores Katherine McKittrick’s[xviii] conception of “Man’s geographies,” which explicates how the invention of Man is coterminous with “geographic processes” and “sociospatial ruptures.” Although McKittrick reads the co-constitutive nature of Man and geography through the production of “unknowable” and “uninhabitable” land as knowable and habitable through slavery and colonization, I read the street as a version of “Man’s geographies” through the way it produces Blackness.

Moreover, from Supe’s vantage point, the One A apartment was a better option because he wasn’t sleeping next to the furnace in the basement. However, he remained sutured to the building, and this is exhibited by how we never see him leave the front of the apartment. The stolen moments that he spends outside are confined to the stoop, restricting his embodied,

sensorial stimulation to what can be sensed, seen, heard, and felt within his reach on the street. His personal geography traces and re-traces confined movements between his apartment, the basement, and the stoop. As Petry repeatedly evokes this animalistic imagery, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's intervention on the bestialization of Blackness in *Becoming Human* is instructive. I bring it together with my interpolation of "Man's geographies" at work here to read this movement and spatialization, particularly because Petry does not engage with this animalistic imagery to outright refute it for alternative representations of Blackness. In the text, Jackson posits what she terms the ontological plasticity of Blackness that structures both the human and the animal,[xix] by which she argues that "Blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable…produced as sub/super/human at once."[xx] Turning away from discursive and critical maneuvers within Black study that are concerned with refusing racialized animality or reading the animalization of Blackness as a form of dehumanization, Jackson reads African diasporic literature and art, like Morrison's *Beloved*, for how it "instead of performing a straightforward rejection of racially oppressive imagery, [Morrison's] text exposes the complexity and contradictions that produce blackness and animality…not through the refutation of bestial imagery but rather through its magnification and deconstruction."[xxi] A kind of magnification is articulated in a dream Lutie has that occurred when she came home one night and learned that Supe had been in her apartment, specifically into her closet. She dreamt of Supe as a part "human"/part animal figure, having been conjoined with his dog, showing "wolfish mouth and the dog's teeth—white, sharp, pointed, in the redness of his mouth" (Petry, 191). Through this figuration, the apartment building is chained to Supe's shoulders, and as he's being weighed down by the building unable to move except through a "painful, slow, horrible crawl," he emphatically begs Lutie to "unloose him" (192). When Lutie realizes that she has the key to the

padlock and goes to unlock it, he bites her, and she screams in horror as she watches her arm disappear. Following this moment, rats as representations of her community members, pour out of the buildings around her, each with a building chained to their hybridized bodies, repeatedly yelling "unloose me!" (193).

At first read, one might interpret Lutie's dream as a kind of anxiety stemming from and regurgitating the antiBlack stereotypes rooted in respectability politics that the instantiation of the liberal humanist subject (and her aspiration for it) necessitated and which colored her earlier embodied disgust at Lil, her father's girlfriend, and her corporeal excess. However, I read Lutie's dream, and its reference to Supe and other people in her community through animalized and other hybridized embodiments, as both an indictment of the fiction of white supremacist stereotypes as an inherent condition of blackness but also as an indictment on liberal humanism itself, specifically how the spatial aspect of the production of the human fuels a kind of internal destabilization. Put differently, the rendering of Supe as part "human"/part animal epitomizes Jackson's notion of ontological plasticity in his assumption of this corporeal hybridization; through it, Petry exposes and magnifies the effects of the spatial production of Blackness through filth, suffocation, isolation, loneliness, and enclosure. In this way, Petry does not reproduce the Black brute stereotype and other forms of animalized blackness simply as antiBlack imagery; she confronts this stereotype within the white supremacist imagination as necessary to its human contour and legibility, while making the reader face the embodied, psychological, and otherwise effects of this spatialized violence. This is reinforced in Lutie's anxiety manifest through her repeated reference to transcending the street because of *what it would do to her and Bud.* Indeed, Lutie's violent outburst towards Bud when she discovered him beckoning passersby to let him shine their shoes captures this distinct anxiety undergirded by both her understanding of the

production of racialized gender on/through the street and its effects. After recognizing Bud's voice calling out, "Shine miss?," the narrator tells us, "Then she slapped him sharply across the face. His look of utter astonishment made her strike him again—this time more violently..."(67). Bud's positioning on the street gets juxtaposed with the face of Little Chandler, the child Lutie was responsible for in Connecticut, wearing "gray flannel suits and dark blue caps and long blue socks and fine dark brown leather shoes...and your kid is out in the street with a shoeshine box" (ibid). Referring to Bud as just another "little n*gger," the production of racialized gender through the street situates Bud on a path toward a life relegated to the darkness and lacking futurity like Supe, who had helped him design the shoebox. It is precisely this darkness and "haunting silence[s]" that made Supe and Lutie's neighbors, small, "queer" and "strange."

Intramural Logic of Propertization

To briefly return to Supe and his "roommate" Min, Min's own kind of corporeal hybridization offers another reference for the kind of queer strangeness that manifested as consequential to the conditions of the street. After Lutie decided to rent the apartment at the beginning of the novel, Supe invited her into his apartment to take her deposit and write a receipt. With the sequence unfolding across three pages, the repeated reference to the "painful slowness" of Supe's receipt writing process metaphorizes the drawn-out feeling of the scene. In this time, Lutie surveyed every corner of the room, internally remarking on the poor quality of the furniture and upholstery, until this is interjected by her sudden notice of Min's presence. Figured as small and shapeless, indistinguishable from the chair because her dress and the chair were the same shade of brown encasing the woman's dark brown skin, Lutie describes her as having melted into and become one with the chair (23). Min's kind of absent presence in the

space, and her particular proximity to Supe, provides an entry point into thinking about the distinct intramural relational dynamics at play.

Within this context, it is Supe's intimate relationships with women that, like Lutie's ex-husband and other men in the novel, offer momentary reprieve, serving as a pathway for self-respect and actualization of their manhood. For Supe, his access to women is figured as something he is "owed" as a kind of retribution for and reprieve from living a life trapped in darkness. Unlike Lutie, who is initially driven by the belief in futurity elsewhere, Supe's desires are not presented through a kind of "outside" or beyond the street, but through predominantly fleeting, cumulative encounters with empowerment. In this way, his desire for possession and his belief that he is owed access to Lutie represents a fragmentation or fracturing wherein vestiges of what represents a man or subject is grasped through the subsequent subjugation of these women through their use/value to him, depersonalization, and disposability. For example, the kind of depersonalization that I'm referencing here is seen in the fourth chapter of the novel when we are given more insight on Supe's personal history. Interwoven with commentary on his job history are reflections on various women that he's had sexual encounters with, all of whom are nameless and faceless, presented in batches or clusters categorized by age and body type: "The rest of them had been bony women past fifty, toothless women past fifty, big ones and littles..."(98). Moreover, the narrator shares, "it didn't worry him that they left him after a few days because he could always find others to take their places" (86). It was his exhaustion with the "succession of drab, beaten, middle-aged women" that fueled the turn of his attention toward Lutie and his violent, possessive desire for her; and this is seen in the moments he sneaks into the closet in her apartment when she's away and crushes one her blouses "between his hands squeezing the soft thin material tighter and tighter until it was a small ball in his hands;" the feeling of suffocation

here mimics the moment he made a "choking, strangling noise" that startled Lutie when he showed her the apartment. Furthermore, it is reflected in the moment when he is in the basement with Bud to make the shoebox, and suddenly he becomes enraged at the thought of Lutie being intimate with anyone but him, and this is triggered by his belief that Bud must look like his father: "He could fairly see Lutie, brown and long-legged, pressed tight against the body of that other man...who had had Lutie when she was a virgin" (88, 89). This dynamic, that is undergirded by a kind of abstraction, depersonalization, violence, and presumption of access/availability is simultaneously magnified by other men's competing desires for Lutie, including Boots—the band leader who gives Lutie a job as a singer and Old Man Junto—Boots' white boss and owner of numerous apartment buildings and bars in the city. It is this competing desire for possession, not mutual connection, and its manifestation in the novel as cumulative abstraction and depersonalization of Lutie that produces the logic of propertization. It illuminates the relative, conditional power that manifests in the intramural, both in how it is wielded and how its limitations are exposed. To conclude this reading of *The Street*, I explicate the convergence of these forces

In the scene following her outburst at Bud, we learn that Lutie went out to Junto's neighborhood bar in one of her circular reflections on the im/possibility of futurity. As she was standing in the bar, the narrator tells us, "she still couldn't see anything—couldn't see anything at all but 116th Street...she tried to recapture that feeling of self-confidence she had had earlier in the evening...she rebelled at the thought of day after day of work and night after night caged in that apartment that would never really get clean" (147). This rumination frames and segues into her centered in the bar singing, "'There's no sun, darlin'. There's no fun, darlin,'" and following this moment, she is approached by Boots who offers her a singing job with his band. Through

their subsequent interaction, we learn that Boots is a monied Black man whose fragmented attempts at asserting a kind of legibility as a man and cultivating a sense of empowerment are informed by his own deep belief in capitalist values and accumulation, in the endless possibilities of personal responsibility and hard-work, in addition to his pursuits of women and thrill-seeking, dangerous behavior. Like Supe, he similarly experienced the kind of white-supremacist abstraction of Blackness and production of racialized gender through his labor as a Pullman porter, where he was a nameless, faceless attendee to white needs: "No Name, black my shoes. No name, hold my coat. No Name take my bags. No Name. No Name" (254). This motivated his desire to become Junto's right-hand man, which fueled a belief in his own kind of transcendence. Indeed, while on the walk to his car, Lutie began to remark on the other manifestations of the street's production of Blackness through the quality of food and clothing they had access to, "Withered oranges and sweet potatoes, wilting kale and okra…all of them sold the leavings, the sweepings, the impossible insalable merchandise, the dregs and dross that were reserved especially for Harlem" (153). In response to Lutie's condemnation of the condition, Boots' indifference reflected that the conditions were avoidable, "There's plenty of money to be made in Harlem if you know how…I ain't interested in how *they* eat or what *they* eat. Only thing I'm interested in right now is you'" (154, emphasis added). Though Boots signals that he understands himself to be beyond the namelessness of the "iron curtain" through this repeated use of "they," what his money *can* buy him and *could* buy others if only they tried, we know that this is unstable because he, like Supe, remains sutured to this neighborhood, and more importantly, to Junto.

As the novel continues to unfold, we are given more insight on Boots' pursuit of Lutie, that, like Supe, is not about mutual connection or genuine interest, but about how her presumed

accessibility to him, his possession of her, as another form of accumulation reinforced his fiction of transcendence: "It was more a matter of itching to lay his hands on her than anything else…was he in love with her? He examined his feeling about her with care. No. He just wanted her…It was simply that he didn't like the idea of anyone possessing her, except of course himself" (263). When Junto confronted Boots about Lutie, specifically to "keep [his] hands off her" because *he* had other plans for her, the fragility of Boots' perception was immediately made clear. Junto's warning, "If I were you, I wouldn't overlook the fact that whoever *makes a man* can also break him," exposes the production of racialized gender and how it structured Boots' relative assumption of power through the possibility of financial access he represented for Lutie and its entanglement with his leveraging of that possibility toward the presumption of sexual access. Boots' desires and perception of being brushed up against Junto's embodiment of the human as white, propertied subject in the street's production of the Black/human distinction, with his desires and interests superseding Boots'. I argue that Boots understood this fragmented grasp for legibility as one that was always a failure, though the ruse of an otherwise positionality was facilitated by/through Junto. A failure in the sense that, regardless of what he was able to buy, nothing was ever actually his because it was always made possible (or impossible) by Junto. This understanding, and how it influenced the *intramural* propertization, becomes clear in the time between Junto's command and Boots' response. Through his reflection on how Junto "could break him all right...," is a juxtaposition of Lutie as he "balances" and "weighs" her against the material benefits of his position as Junto's right-hand man. He decides, "Not enough…I'd sell *anything* I've got without stopping to think about it twice, because I don't intend to learn how to crawl again" (265, emphasis added). One the one hand, we see that all of the negotiations, considerations, and decision-making about Lutie and her use and value takes

place largely outside direct engagement with her, while simultaneously shaping her experiences. The depersonalization and abstraction of Lutie here as another one of his "things" to possess or discard perfectly captures how, for Boots and Supe, Lutie, in her distinctly racialized gender embodiment, is figured as integral to the structuring of their fragmented grasp for legibility both in their presumption of access to her and as collateral damage/default victim to the threat of its impediment or dissolution. In either iteration, the logic of propertization is at play because it hinges on her manipulation—her abstraction, exploitation, and subjugation.

For Supe, his final display of this is setting Bub up to be arrested as a way of punishing Lutie for rejecting his advances and his belief that she was dating Junto; this action, as a representation of the convergence of intramural and structural forces on her distinctly racialized gender position, finalizes the complete unraveling of her anxious, apprehensive, but insistent belief in her attainment of the human as propertied subject through "very careful planning," hardwork, self-restraint, and personal responsibility because of how it exposed its fragility—everything she had done to push back the street and its influence on her and Bud had failed. After coming home to discover Bud had been arrested and reaching the top of the spiral staircase that metaphorizes the enclosure, the dark, empty, silence of the landing inflected by Bud's absence intensifies the feeling of suffocation until she explodes, "And what did it add up to? She pressed closer to the wall, ignoring the gray dust, the fringes of cobwebs heavy with grime and soot…Only you forgot. You forgot you were black and underestimated the street outside here" (389). Supe's manipulation made her immediately vulnerable to further exploitation both from a white lawyer she consulted about getting Bub out of jail who knew she didn't actually need his services to get him out, but requested $200 anyway. This coalesced with Junto telling Boots not to pay Lutie for her singing to facilitate the possibility for sexual exploitation. When Lutie goes

to Boots insisting on needing to be paid, this pathway for exploitation materializes. After Boots lures Lutie to his apartment with a promise of providing the money for Bud, she finds Junto waiting there and realizes that the breakdown of her cabaret gig (and its subsequent possibilities) was orchestrated by him. In a penultimate moment of anticipation of Junto's "procurement" of Lutie, Boots decides that he is going to sexually assault Lutie as his own act of retribution against Junto for his representation of Boot's dehumanization, "after all, he's white, and a white man can have a Black man's leavings" (423). Of course, that retribution could not come in the form of direct harm to Junto, in fact it was not harmful to Junto implicitly either; through the intramural logic of propertization and the Black/human distinction, which converge like "circles that flow into each other," it could only be an act of violence against and domination of Lutie that would produce a fleeting sense of empowerment figured as balm for his own dehumanization.

At the novel's end, we see Lutie on a train alone with a one-way ticket to Chicago, fleeing Harlem after beating Boots to death. Unable to get Bub out of the Children's Center because she was now a "murderer," I read her exit as a kind of figurative death because the cumulative effect of these forces on her life had not only exposed the entrapment of the street but also ruined the one relationship that tethered her to the ground and gave her life meaning from her perspective. In this way, the train does not represent an opening towards a positive future, it represents the total dissolution of her driving forces. Ann Petry's iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms explicates the entanglement of the street as a geography and logic of entrapment that produces the Black/human distinction, and by extension, racialized gender *and* the conditional, relative access to power that emerges in the intramural fueling a logic of propertization rooted in possession, abstraction, exploitation, and disposability. In this way, her

criticism of liberal humanism and aspiring legibility through its terms is not about criticizing a desire for transcendence but an emphasis on the inherent exclusionary, exploitative, and violent nature of the liberal humanist, propertied subject and its attendant forms of relation. In this way, I read her novel as a challenge to abandon a desire for legibility and inclusion and to insist on an otherwise way of being and relating.

Larsen's Intimacy

To conclude this chapter, I want to return to Larsen and the end of *Quicksand* as a kind of segue into chapter two's discussion of pluralized intimacies. Much of the time we spend in Reverend Green and Helga's marriage is brief, only comprising about 16 pages of the 124-page novel, and this space is given to the narrator's description of the abrupt shift in Helga's experience from her sprightly beginnings of First Ladydom assuming her position as the new enforcer of Black gendered propriety to never-ending illness, suffering, invisibility and isolation, and childbirth. However, I want to bring attention to something that was somewhat peripheral or minor textually and narratively within this context. Although we know that there was some physical connection between Reverend Green and Helga because of her multiple pregnancies, there is a paucity of expression or commentary about desire, pleasure, or intimacy between them, suggesting a kind of disaggregation of pregnancy and childbirth from intimacy and pleasure. At first read, one might presume that this absence is Larsen assuming a more modest tone to capture the affective dimension of Reverend Green's position as a pastor and Helga's simultaneous religious entrenchment. Or, relatedly, one might also read this moment as partly reflective of Jenkins' salvific wish, which argues that Black middle class women of the early 20th century believed in Black women's sacrifice of sexual pleasure and desire for the sake of the broader Black community in response to the rampant pathologization of Black sexuality, asserting that the private, interior space of the home was the only appropriate, safe place for the expression of

intimacy and sexuality. From this perspective, one could argue that Larsen was illustrating this sentiment by withholding the interior of their 'private,' intimate moments from the 'public' view of the narrator and reader.

Yet, outside the frame of this possibility, there are only two gestures to desire within their relationship: one is a moment that, ironically, follows a longer reflection on the Reverend's characteristics and behaviors that Helga finds unattractive, and is nearly repulsed by, to the point of unconsciously "push[ing] him out of her mind" (Larsen, 12). Amidst the rumination on his most undesirable qualities that she accepts for the benefit of "stability," she asks, "What did it matter that he consumed his food, even the softest varieties, audibly? What did it matter that, though he did no work with his hands, not even in the garden, his fingernails were always rimmed with black? What did it matter that he failed to wash his fat body, or to shift his clothing, as often as Helga herself did?" However, according to the narrator, a kind of incomprehensible energy springs forth at night that was "emotional, palpitating, and amorous…with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason" (113). It is important to note that the Reverend does not appear within the commentary on this amorous energy, as the person igniting it nor as the recipient. This shift from naming him explicitly when recounting the things she is tolerating for a "greater" purpose to a brief comment on desire with no passive or active mention of him could be read as Larsen asserting the performativity of that ecstatic expression and destabilizing its presumed authenticity, even with the narrator's description of it as "devour[ing] all shoots of reason," which functions to validate the feeling through acknowledging its incoherence with Helga's feelings toward Green and also underscoring the Enlightenment influence of rationality on antiblack desire. Put differently, we might read this moment as the narrator also doing the work of attempting to convince us in the way Helga is described as convincing herself that she is

feeling beyond her disgust with the Reverend because of the reward of security, and the Reverend's absence in this context exceeds and, arguably, purposefully undermines the narrator's aim. The other reference to desire is expressed when Helga's illness begins at the beginning of Chapter 23, as the narrator recounts, "[she] tried not to see that he had rather lost any personal interest in her, except for the short spaces between the times when she was preparing for or recovering from childbirth" (114). The implied distinction between physical connection for the sake of childbirth and sexual pleasure expressed here is reiterated when Helga goes to the community of married women about her sickness and subsequent failure to maintain her responsibilities, where, again, reference to desire and intimacy is redacted and childbirth is foregrounded for the collective.

However, desire and intimacy *are* present, specifically between Reverend Green and other women of his congregation. From the outset of their marriage and Helga's arrival, the dynamic established between Green and the women is sensual, flirtatious, and reciprocal—on the one hand, it is presumed as part and parcel of the church's innerworkings and the Reverend's self-actualization, as the narrator remarks, "open adoration was the prerogative, the almost religious duty, of the female portion of the flock…the greater his own sense of superiority became, the more flattered they were by his notice and small attentions, the more they cast at him killing glances, the more they hung enraptured on his words" (111). Unlike the brief moment of desirous expression previously mentioned, where the Reverend does not appear, he is present here in a sort of ongoing, playful back and forth with the women, and the tension of this dynamic is only exacerbated when Helga is falling short of her first lady and wifely duties, when the women take pity on the Reverend for the "untidy" conditions of his wife and his unkempt home and children, "invit[ing] him often to tasty orderly meals, specially prepared for him, in

their own clean houses" (115). Not only does Green never assume any of the domestic responsibilities in his own home during his wife's illness, but Larsen exposes that the kind of sacrifice that underpinned Helga's wifely expectations, that foreclosed the possibility of the "pursuit of beauty" and the ordinary was never a sacrifice that Green was expected to make, as his needs—domestic and otherwise—were assumed and met by other, presumably unmarried women. While the quotidian or ordinary nature of Helga's life was shaped by this all-consuming sacrifice of herself, again, the availability of the women's labor and attention was integral to the church's function and the construction of the Reverend himself.

The presence of desire that is extramarital, and thusly sexually deviant, forces attention to the absence of the expression of intimacy within their marriage and the argument at the crux of Chapter 1. Importantly, Larsen is not making a moral argument here. For example, she is not necessarily commenting on whether the women and their behavior is "bad," as much as she is making way for us to interrogate the meaning of the lack of intimacy within their marriage, *particularly following Helga's illness*, alongside the erotic tension and dynamic between Green and the other women. Moreover, she is also illuminating that as the women represent a sexual deviance or promiscuity that suggests their collective inability to be wives inhabiting a space outside of Black gendered propriety, that promiscuity is ultimately inconsequential to the Reverend's character. Larsen's choice to exclude the expression of desire and intimacy within the place it would have been "appropriate"—Helga and the Reverend's marriage—with only Helga experiencing a lack of desire and intimacy as captured within the text, is complex. What takes place following her illness remarks on another critical aspect of the sacrifices of Helga's ultimate acquiescence to the compulsion of marriage and cisheteronormativity as a strategy for

legibility, and challenges us to take seriously the role of intimacy, pleasure, sex, and desire in the process of self-making and actualization for Black women protagonists.

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[i] Tiffany L. King, "Black 'feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family," *Theory & Event,* 21, no. 1(2018): 68-87.
[ii] Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[iii] Candice M. Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
[iv] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation,* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004). Federici's monograph offers additional historical context for this transition through an analysis that intervenes in Marxist discourse on the transition to capitalism by focusing on the experiences of (white) women at the time, particularly how the sexual division of labor both devalued women's reproductive and domestic labor inside and outside of the home [the presumption that it was a naturalized part of women's resources and contributions, thus not "work" and outside of market relations] and excluded women from the waged work force. The exclusion from the waged work force contributed to what she terms the patriarchy of the wage because it fueled women's dependence on men.
[v] Keguro Macharia, "Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 57, no. 2(2011): 255.
[vi] Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, "'A Plea for Color:' Nella Larsen's Textual Tableaux" in *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 21-48. Johnson's text foregrounds what she calls a "painterly" reading of Larsen's work through Archibald Motley's *Octoroon Girl* painting to explore both the role of the visual in Larsen's texts more broadly but also as a way of making sense of Larsen's critique of visual images and representations of New Negro womanhood that circulated at the time. Johnson explicates the co-constitutive nature of the visual and the literary in the formulation and perpetuation of mulatta iconography, exploring how Larsen (and Motley) both attempted to "modernize" the mulatta figure, while critiquing her socio-cultural consumption in both Black and white spaces through her projected exoticism and eroticism. Johnson's work is an important critical reference for understanding the role of the aesthetic in 20th century Black literature, particularly of the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro era. See also, Treva Lindsey, "Make Me Beautiful: Aesthetic Discourses of New Negro Womanhood," in *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.*, (Champaign: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 52-85.
[vii] See Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limits of Black Memory*; Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*; Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*; Mae G. Henderson and E. Patrick Johnson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*
[viii] Add footnote here on Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories*
[ix] Katharine Capshaw Smith, "Childhood, the Body, and Race Performance: Early 20th-Century Etiquette Books for Children," *African American Review*, 40, no. 4(2006): 795-811.
[x] Smith, 797.
[xi] John William Gibson, *Golden Thoughts: On Chastity and Procreation Including Heredity, Prenatal Influences, Etc., Etc.,* (Naperville: J.L. Nichols Publisher, 1903).
[xii] Smith, 799.
[xiii] Brian P. Jones, *The Tuskegee Student Uprising*: *A History,"* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).
[xiv] Jones, 31.
[xv] Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!," *Political Affairs*, 1949.
[xvi] See Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations.*
[xvii] Joy Myree-Mainor, "'I'm Craving That Kind of Love': Loss and Desire in Ann Petry's *The Street*," *Obsidian*, 12, no.1(2006): 47-59.
[xviii] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[xix] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 59.
[xx] Ibid., 3.
[xxi] Ibid., 87.

Black Feminist Literary Antagonisms II: Queering Home through Dionne Brand's Ecoerotics and the Plurality of Black Queer Intimacies

for the black queer weirdos—the agender butterflies chasing sunsets toward/as home, and all their other forms

Chapter 1 explored Black feminist literary antagonisms as a framework for 20th century Black women's literature by reading for how they exposed the propertization of Black women's bodies within the intramural as consequential to liberal humanism, capitalism, and the violent mode[s] of relation and subjectivity they produce. The analysis examined the Black domestic sphere and the Black 'home' broadly conceived to emphasize how Black women writers elaborated the implications and consequences of desiring legibility through liberal humanist subjectivity—these being the foreclosure of an embodied sense of desire, pleasure, and self-actualization for the Black women protagonists, as well as a configuration of being in perpetual service to others, both in interpersonal relationships and presumed in broader communal dynamics. These I read through the fallout of the cumulative violence against Lutie, both through the spatial logic of the street and its production of the Black/human distinction and the entangled violence of propertization as abstraction and disposability she endured. Moreover, I examined this through the aesthetic excess vs. aesthetic sacrifice dichotomy in *Quicksand*, and what I argued was Helga's literal and figurative death at the novel's end. I reiterate the aims and maneuvers of Chapter 1 here because this chapter is a kind of conceptual companion, continuing the exploration of Black feminist literary antagonisms, though to a different end. Here, I develop and mobilize a reading practice and analytical framework—black queer literary intimate—to consider how intimacy, pleasure, sex, and desire are integral to the processes of self-making and the reconceptualization of home for Black women and gender expansive protagonists in Black

queer literature across the late 20th and early 21st centuries that resist the kind of propertization that Chapter 1 addresses. Relatedly, the Black queer literary intimate attends to the plurality of intimacy present in Black queer literature that captures the relationships with land and non-human life forms, pursuing Black queer ecological intimacies as a site of possibility that continues the work of exposing liberal humanism's violent rubrics and hierarchies, but puts forth an alternative way of Black knowing and being in relation to the self, the natural world, and traditional configurations of home and family.

This chapter thinks with Jennifer Nash's field-defining critique of what she refers to as the Black feminist theoretical archive[i] that has been historically and politically preoccupied with reading visual culture and representation for the wound and injury to Black women's bodies to focus on the myriad ways in which intimacy and pleasure emerge in Black queer and lesbian literature as a critical awakening and survival force in the lives of their protagonists that deserves far more Black feminist literary critical attention—we only have to acknowledge that Matt Richardson's *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (2013), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), and most recently, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* remain three of, if not the only, contemporary works of Black feminist literary criticism that focus on Black queer and lesbian literature to understand this continued need.[ii] This, in addition to the peripherality of Black lesbian literature that Jewelle Gomez highlights in her contributions to E. Patrick Johnson's 2005 *Black Queer Studies* and the 1983 *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* edited by Barbara Smith.

In positing this juxtaposition of sexual encounters and dynamics of the cisgender, heterosexual relationships that comprise the incomplete archive of Black women's literature at

the center of Chapter 1 and the pluralized forms of intimacy in Black queer and lesbian literature here, I am not attempting to assert a romanticized or utopian depiction or analysis of queer intimacy and relationships. Indeed, as Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House,* urgently draws our attention to via an extrapolation of Hartman's notion of "archival silence," intimate partner violence in queer relationships is often obscured from the archive, communal discourses, and queer collective histories and memory in part because of the fear of adding to the pathology of queer intimacy fueled by the transphobia and homophobia that structures mainstream society. Furthermore, Machado asserts that this archival lack is further exacerbated by the already contentious relationship between queerness and "evidence." With this, the analytical turn here is driven by what feels like a generative contrast between the ending of Larsen's *Quicksand*, which reasserts that desire, intimacy, and pleasure was integral to Helga's loss of herself, and the beginning of Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, which starts with the protagonist's reflection on how the intimacy she shared with a woman was the true beginning of her life and the way outside of the ordinary where the possibility of desire for her was unthinkable, an "ordinary" marked by sexual violence from the man she was "given to."

Set across the postcolonial period of an unnamed Caribbean island—though drawing specifically on geographical aspects of Trinidad and Grenada—in anticipation of a revolutionary uprising reminiscent of the Grenadian Revolution and the Black Power Movement in Toronto, Dionne Brand's, *In Another Place, Not Here*, centers on the fleeting, intense connection between Elizete and Verlia. Elizete—a woman born and raised on the island who was abandoned as a child and whose quotidian life in the "present" of the novel is marked by unending hours laboring on a sugar cane plantation; Verlia—a woman who left the same Caribbean island for Toronto as a teenager to escape the paralyzing hopelessness of her home and community to

become "dangerous," develop her true Black self, become part of the Movement. In refusing a linear temporal and narrative structure, Brand moves between the "present," to Elizete's childhood through to her time in Toronto, to Verlia's childhood through to her time in Toronto and back to the island, meditating on the afterlives of slavery, Black belonging and relationality, the failures of assimilationist politics and strategy, suicidality, the rural/city dichotomy, and the liberatory possibilities of socialist revolution. Interwoven within these metacommentaries is a repeated return to their relationship and its remnants, both literally and imagined, as it unravels and remakes their sense of themselves and home even after Verlia's death.

In the final chapter of *Thiefing Sugar*[iii] entitled, "Breaking Hard against Things: Crossing between Sexual and Revolutionary Politics in Dionne Brand's *No Language is Neutral*," Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley explores what she describes as Brand's work of epistemological and erotic decolonization, not only against the structural manifestations of colonialism and western imperialism in the Caribbean but also counter to what M. Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing* refers to as the heteropatriarchal recolonization within the revolutionary regime, illuminating the transnational problems of masculinist discourse and ideology permeating Black liberation movements across the diaspora. On the one hand, Tinsley teases out Brand's epistemological decolonization in the registers of language, form, and content in a way that arguably anticipates and reaches forward in time to Brand's own meditation on the imperative undoing of colonial narrativization in her 2019 lecture "The Autobiography of an Autobiography of Reading," which was expanded to her 2024 monograph, *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck.*

Tinsley forwards her analysis against the backdrop of Brand's involvement with Maurice Bishop's socialist People's Revolutionary Government in Grenada, which came to power in 1979 following a coup to oust the corrupt neocolonial prime minister—Eric Gairy. Integral to the

PRG's political framework was revitalizing the country's education system as a foremost liberation strategy. Indeed, in his June 5th, 1983 speech at Hunter College in New York, Bishop remarked on the impact that this educational focus had on Grenadians, including reducing the illiteracy rate to 2% of the population due to the work of their Center for Popular Education Program, which made free secondary and university education. Moreover, Bishop stated that this educational focus that prioritized linguistic plurality and facilitated the acquisition of English and Creole, made Grenada a particular threat to the US because of the possibility of forging transnational solidarity with the 30 million Black people in the US. Through this context, Tinsley reads Brand's then new integration of Creole language into the 1990 poetry collection as fulfilling the party's "revolutionary promise."[iv] In the register of content, Tinsley asserts Brand's choice of the poem's geographic center—Blanchisseuse—a place named after washerwomen and charted from the sea's vantage point—as a kind of counter-cartography, doing the work of producing anti-imperial knowledge of the island and interrogating how and what we are able to see and know about a place through the violence of colonial mapping and perspective.[v] The conceptual entanglement between epistemological and erotic decolonization partly manifests through Brand's assertion of queer desire and intimacy alongside and through revolutionary imagery—a revolution that, despite its impulses, fell short in its reinscription of queer antagonism. Matt Richardson builds on this explication of epistemological decolonization[vi], queerness, and diasporic be/longing to explore Brand's erotic epistemologies in *In Another Place, Not Here.* Drawing on Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," Richardson considers how the erotic emerges in both pleasure and pain to activate an alternative consciousness and identity, and forward a "practice of diasporic belonging" across a variety of 'queered' connections within the text. This alternative consciousness intervenes to reflect a queer theory of home, where for

Black queers, home is embodied in each other, "in our lover's arms, and in the way we recreate gender and the Black body."

Tinsley and Richardson's meditations are generative here—Tinsley's work lays a foundation for contextualizing the decolonial and anti-imperial perspective framing Brand's oeuvre and the variety of textual manifestation through which they emerge, specifically relevant to the novel as it is non-linear with a destabilized understanding of the "present" in the narrative. Richardson's exploration of the erotic epistemologies produced in the novel and how they elaborate a queered definition of home is helpful as it pursues a similar set of concerns, particularly in considering Brand's queer theory of home and the significance of eroticism in self-making. However, this chapter pushes at the edges of Richardson's analysis to bring to the fore the critical epistemological interventions and strategies for daily survival made by the non-human actors in the novel that, in my view, anchor Brand's queer theory of home. The eroticism between Elizete and Verlia is critical to their renewed sense of self, even as the relationship itself is fleeting; however, to obscure the intimacy with the insects and land—entities that do not merely figure as markers of setting or imagery—and what this intimacy produces, is to miss out on the broader challenge to liberal humanism that I argue Brand is putting forth, and risks reinscribing the epistemological hierarchy that devalues the knowledge-making possibilities in cross-species engagement.

Across Black women's literature of the 20th and early 21st centuries, there are protagonists whose narratives are anchored in an intimate knowledge of and engagement with the land and the environment, often implicating what Katherine McKittrick refers to as Man's geographies and "landscapes of domination." We might look to Wild in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* whose mastery of the land and water aids in her refusal at legibility through notions of proper

womanhood and personhood more broadly, always escaping visual and physical capture but leaving just enough of a trace through the trail of a scent or the barely there caress on the back of one's neck to still insist on her presence. Or, we could turn to Connie in the Convent of Morrison's *Paradise*, whose garden that reaches nearly as far as the eye can see serves as an abundant resource grounding the Convent as a hub for the socially ostracized who encounter her home seeking refuge. Indeed, the chorus of Black women protagonists we can locate in this line of thinking and their micro practices toward liberation affirm what Chelsea Frazier asserts in her Black Feminist Ecological Manifesto, "Black women's ecological inclinations were rooted in an ecological world-sense alternative to what readily comes to mind when we think about the environment."[vii]

The theoretical framework of this chapter approaches Black ecologies and Black ecological thought[viii] as an expression of Black feminist critiques of the human, while drawing on Black queer and lesbian literary thought and criticism to anchor a plural understanding of intimacy in this analysis. Inspired by David Green, Jr.'s essay, "Cheryl Clarke's Clit Agency: or, An Erotic Reading of *Living as a Lesbian*,"[ix] wherein he elaborates on Clarke as "sexual outlaw" and her "unapologetically erotic" poetry that distinguished her from other writers of the bourgeoning Black women's literary renaissance of the 70s and 80s, I asked Clarke about the 'limitations' of metaphor, the emergence of erotic writing that foregrounded heterosexual intimacy, and the stakes of writing about lesbian sex and desire explicitly.[x] In response, Clarke named her motivations for this explicit representation as a desire to claim space for Black lesbian life and literature in the African American literary canon and to refuse acquiescence to hiding the depth of Black lesbian intimacy and eroticism in staking that claim—a stated expectation of Black political, academic, and socio-cultural landscapes at the time.[xi] For Clarke, it was also

about insisting on representing the fullness of Black lesbian life to Black lesbians and queer women who would be encountering her literature, to assert that they also deserved to see their intimacies and desires reflected back to them. In seeking a deeper understanding of Clarke's thoughts on metaphor, it seemed to me that Clarke's perspective wasn't that metaphor wasn't useful—despite her passionate critiques of folks like Audre Lorde and Ntozake Shange and their use of metaphor in their erotic writings as evinced in Green's article—but that the limitation of metaphor was the foreclosure of the kind of liberation she thought possible in raw depiction of lesbian sex and desire. Importantly, as Green notes, Clarke saw it as urgent for the language and discourses of Black women's sexuality and pleasure be liberated from "collard greens, and okra, from nights in Tamaris, from fierce animals, and some black male musician's tenor solo."[xii]

While workshopping the beginnings of this chapter as part of the Black Erotic Ecologies convening in the summer of 2024 prior to my interview with Clarke, I returned to Green's article because I was encountering a tension. On the one hand, I wanted to hold Clarke's critique of metaphor in agreeance with the importance of valuing the pornographic in the erotic in the cultivation of a "radical Black female subjectivity." On the other hand, it seemed that what I was encountering in Brand's novel was not reducible to a kind of sacrificing of the explicitness of lesbian intimacy through metaphor for the sake of social acceptance and capital gain—or even, that the presence and importance of various ecological elements and non-human animals within the text was to be understood as metaphorical at all. This point was especially important because of the presence of explicit sex and desire within the novel. Through this tension, it seemed necessary to first assert that there were various kinds of intimacies present, and though there is a thematic continuity between these various intimate encounters and relationships, Brand's ecological world and its elements are not present merely to help us sense the depth of feeling or

satisfaction of lesbian sex and desire or to obfuscate the ecstasy of the sexual encounters between the two protagonists. From this place, this chapter mobilizes the Black queer literary intimate in a reading of Dionne Brand's 1996 novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, in a way that takes seriously Clarke's belief in the radical impulse of the literary expression of sexual explicitness in the formulation of Black lesbian subjectivity and its place in Black feminist criticism, while also thinking beyond metaphor to consider the possibilities in cross-species intimate encounters within Black queer and lesbian literature to examine Brand's *Black queer ecoerotics*. Black queer ecoerotics attempts to name how intimate relationships between the Black protagonists and the land, water, insects, and flora and fauna ground the articulation of a critical self-fashioning or self-contextualization, as well as sites of respite, survival, and imagination amidst and against multi-scalar white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, colonial, and imperialist violence. Furthermore, I will examine how as the condition of Blackness within the colonial ontological hierarchy opens up the possibility for cross-species engagement exhibited through the cultivation of these intimate relationships, the pedagogical and relational interventions asserted by these non-human actors work to queer the traditional understandings of home, lineage, and family.[xiii] Finally, I will turn to Elizete and Verlia's relationship to consider both how the depth of sensuality and feeling in their relationship is foundational to their self-definition and how, together, they ultimately enact the redefined notion of home-making asserted through the cross-species engagements.

Here, the language of possibility, as opposed to some other kind of vocabulary that signals a fixed or total resolve, encapsulates the ways in which themes of ephemerality, transience, and imagination inform the practices of intimacy, ground these alternative theories of relationality, and resist fixed, romanticized solutions to the problem of anti-blackness.

A Reflection on Possibility and Imagination

In thinking through possibility, this chapter enters a discourse that has been a defining thread of Black studies for the last ten or more years—one that gets flattened within the seemingly polarizing dynamic between Afropessimist[xiv] and Afro-optimist lines of thought, or Black social death and Black social life arguments—and often implicating the question of the human. Much of the scholarship that deploys possibility in the context of Black practices toward liberation, either through fugitivity and subversion[xv] or an altogether orientation toward Black world-making as beyond the confines of white supremacy and antiblackness, ultimately wrestles with the question of the meaning of these practices, or put another way, asks what do they do? In one way, the discourse suggests that one forecloses the other—to take seriously the totalizing nature of antiblackness and the ontological condition of blackness is to understand that the potential transformative capacity of discourse does not apply and to maybe think notions of imagination and possibility exhibited through quotidian practices or narrative, for example, as futile for what is actually required for Black freedom. The Oxford Bibliographic entry for Afro-pessimism authored by Drs. Patrice Douglass, Selamawit Terrefe, and Frank Wilderson in part addresses this. In response to the chronic emergence of optimism in culture's emancipatory potential, they argue, "…the black (or slave) is an unspoken/unthought sentience for whom the transformative powers of discursive capacity are foreclosed ab initio—and that violence is at the heart of this foreclosure." On the other hand, much scholarship that turns away from Afropessimism—with some explicitly aligning itself with Afro-optimism—emphasizes the limitations of thinking Blackness across time and space as confined to a position of social death, if not exists in direct opposition to the Black social death argument, instead turning to Black

world and life making practices from the plantation through to our contemporary moment as evidence of Black life and living beyond the impositions of white supremacy—and a step further would be a position that insists on underscoring a Black *humanity*. Two notable examples that work from this position are Terrion Williamson's *Scandalize My Name* and, more recently, Kevin Quashie's *Black Aliveness.* Quashie's central objective is exploring the heterogenous, capacious Black world exhibited through the aesthetic imagination of Black texts—a world in which the humanness of Black people is a given, where the being of Black people is a given. Importantly, Quashie's position on the human is recuperative, arguing that the antiblackness of the world itself is antihuman, and that Black people are, in fact, human.[xvi]

As previously mentioned, this dynamic and complicated theoretical sub-landscape is one that often implicates the question of the human that adds a layer of nuance for understanding the various orientations across this ideological spectrum broadly, but specifically for terms like possibility which are often subsumed under or conflated with an explicitly anti-Afropessimist position.[xvii] Indeed, in reading the works of scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, who are both posited as theoretical anchors in Afropessimism as exhibited by their inclusion on the accompanying bibliography for the Oxford Bibliographic entry, one is met with a capaciousness and nuance with these terms that I find useful.

In this chapter, and in my thinking more broadly, is an understanding and wielding of possibility that turns away from the human and any proclamation of Black humanity in the liberal humanist sense, and instead seeks to understand how the Black practices of living and being in relation in the texts at the center of this chapter might serve as a guide—again, for exposing humanism's limits and imagining Black relationality beyond it. In a forthcoming interview I conducted with Christina Sharpe in August of 2024, her answer to my question about

this conundrum felt deeply aligned with my own position, mirroring a conversation between Sharpe and Terrefe entitled, "What Exceeds the Hold," which I first encountered following our conversation. When asked specifically about how her work manages the conceptual maneuvers between the globalized, multiscalar, and totalizing nature of antiblackness, or antiblackness as the total climate as she writes in *In the Wake*, and her exploration of tenderness, the possibilities latent in the quotidian, beauty as a method, and other "philosophies of living" in *Ordinary Notes*, she said:

> These are questions that I've been trying to tease out for a long time—if there's anything that escapes that totalizing nature of antiblackness, and if so, what is it? If so, who is it legible to? I don't think it lasts, but there is something that escapes that kind of totalizing violence if only for a moment, that we might register laterally in relation to each other diasporically. I think [that totalizing violence] doesn't foreclose the necessity of belief in the possibilities of imagination, as you write, so the stakes for me in holding those things together are the stakes of something like survival as we work towards the end of this brutal world…These kinds of practices don't bring about the end of the structures of domination… I guess I'm not willing to concede the power of the imagination, the power of the ordinary toward our making something else in the world.

Despite my attempt to encapsulate and present this discourse in a fashion that suggests a clear-cut spectrum of these arguments with their associated vocabularies for the purposes of clarity, this brief engagement emphasizes that what emerges is a kind of unwieldy transience where these loaded ideas move in and out of their presumed spheres to somewhat trouble this discursive dichotomy. Put differently, these ideas—possibility, imagination, etc.—are not rigid, and their malleability and movement evoke the feelings of ephemerality and transience that anchor this chapter.

The Samaan Tree Was My Mother, Woodlice Pedagogy, and Other Ecological Interventions

Although the novel commences with Elizete recounting her own new beginning—her deeply eroticized encounter with Verlia on the sugar cane plantation reminiscent of the satiation

that follows a cool drink of water amidst a day of cutting razor-like cane under a sun hot as a coal pot, I want to start with the second chapter that turns to Elizete's childhood. It begins, "Under the samaan tree is where I grow up. It was wide and high and the light between what it leave of the sky was soft and it look like a woman with hands in the air. A samaan is a tree with majesty and I think of this samaan as my mother. She wave from far and the sun pass through she, and she was my keeper." In this same paragraph, we learn that Elizete was abandoned outside of an unnamed woman's house who Elizete only refers to as "the woman they give me to." From the outset, Brand mobilizes the possessive or language that indicates possession to establish a juxtaposition between claimed and imposed or forced relation. On the one hand, Elizete's reflection on the samaan tree is colored with a sense of warmth, tenderness, care, and consolation—though the tree exists with a relatively short trunk, it has such far-reaching limbs that its imagery evokes a sense of her being shielded by and enfolded into the body of the tree. And this kind of visual framing recurs throughout the first sections of the novel, positioning the samaan tree as a motherly intervention as it, at times, stands literally between Elizete and the unnamed woman with its woody arc hovering over her. At other times, we learn that Elizete spends her days sitting underneath the samaan tree while the unnamed woman works on the sugar cane plantation, culminating in an assertion of its presence as a site of safety and comfort for Elizete. On the other hand, the reiterated reference to "the woman they give me to" articulates a disconnection or complex non/relation between the two of them that is never resolved before the unnamed woman's death, and in fact, frames the one-sided antagonism that fuels their dynamic, even as the woman teaches Elizete everything she knows about the plants around them, their uses, and how to care for them. Moreover, one could read the contrast between the light and brightness of Elizete's encounters with the samaan tree as the sun reaches her through the

covering of the leaves and branches with the shadowy, darkness of the room in her daily engagement with the unnamed woman. The linguistic distinction of a claimed verses imposed relation, though, becomes a thematic throughline for Elizete that not only drives Brand's critique of the notion of an autonomized self, the colonial, humanistic family, and the violent implications of their defining contours for blackness and Black people, but also is the basis for the person/land, insect, flora and fauna relationships.

If, as Brand writes, this community of Black people living in a continuation of many of slavery's quotidian violences and conditions and are "after…long past belonging," which I read as inhabiting a space where 'belonging' cannot capture their mode of existing and relating to one another, what might Brand be saying about Black relationality and the meaning of relationality as such, and how do these non-human actors intervene throughout the narrative to partly address this query? How is Brand's literary elaboration of a Black feminist critique of the human (or Black feminist literary antagonism) challenging us to think queerly of these cross-species relationships, not only for how they work against colonial, epistemological hierarchy, but also for how they establish a theory of Black queer life, relationality, and home-making mirrored through the ephemerality and transience of Elizete and Verlia's relationship?

I

Within Elizete's relationship to the woman she was given to, we learn that part of the unnamed woman's disposition was informed by her being descended from an enslaved ancestor who was brought to the island on a slave ship and given the name Adela. Adela was characterized through her refusal to see and engage her surroundings or pass on knowledge about it as it was told to her— referring to the place, "everything after the narrow passage to the new world…everything after the opening…" as Nowhere, "insisting so much is nowhere she gone

blind with not seeing" (19). This purposeful repudiation of seeing, knowing, remembering, and sharing had consequences and implications for her generations that were inflected with suffering—primarily seen through the unnamed woman—and compounded that already associated with slavery and colonial violence. At one point, the unnamed woman exclaims that all of Adela's generations, ending at her, were "all dead or might as well. And born unhappy and blight" (35). Yet, this unseeing and unknowing also reflected a refusal of colonial epistemology and indoctrination and ultimately facilitated a production of an alternative knowledge and relation to the land that was integral to the unnamed woman and Elizete's relationship, Elizete and Adela's spiritual connection, and Elizete's relationship to herself.

Brand narratively unsettles the significance of the colonial understanding of belonging while exposing its violence in the novel's slavery and neocolonial context. She defines this colonial understanding as that which prioritizes origins marked by a "great patriarch and property marked out by violence, a rope, some iron; [oppressors] who measured time in the future only and who discarded memory like useless news" (42).[xviii] Through this disruption, Elizete enters the unnamed woman's life as Adela's spitting image through no blood relation. As a result of this, the woman cannot stand to face her, which leads to a reoccurring moment wherein she forces Elizete to face the wall in silence as she rambles aloud about Adela's history and her descendants' inheritance of suffering while at times enacting physical violence against Elizete. In these moments, not only does Elizete listen for the details of Adela's life, but she occupies her mind by following the trails left behind by the woodlice wearing away at the walls. In attempting but failing to "work out the geography of their sandy paths…trac[ing] them home," she wonders if the paths themselves were their home, "their way of not being seen, waiting and listening." Brand's work here is two-fold—her meditation on the relationship between Blackness

and belonging presumes an understanding that the kind of subjectivity produced through Black abjection and had come to "over-represent" itself as the only kind of human being was not being inhabited by these characters.[xix] This context facilitates the de-prioritizing of the ontological hierarchy that prioritizes human life and thought by positioning the woodlice—a nonhuman entity stereotypically associated with destruction and being a nuisance, something to get rid of as its literally wearing away the wood in their home—as a kind of teacher or model for Elizete. The onto-epistemology of the woodlice as witnessed and imagined by Elizete offers a lesson or reflection on thinking of home as existing in the in between, in the liminal space that's difficult to pin down but is ultimately wherever one is. As much time as Elizete spends staring at the wall following the woodlice's paths, she is never able to actually catch or see them, but the proof of their home-making or the fact of a kind of home at all is "proven" precisely through the visibility of the paths themselves and their micro, sandy remnants, which requires constant movement, burrowing, and transience. This ongoing locomotion as integral to their home-making, then, turns away from traditional understandings of home that foregrounds fixed in place, stable configurations. Moreover, through this intimate encounter, the perpetual motion of the woodlice and the tunnels resulting from it become an imaginative portal—movement as portal, tunnel as portal—to another place, not here, where the possibilities of knowledge-making from and with woodlice is both valued and pleasureful. In her essay, "Insect Knowledges, Power, and the Literary," Monique Allewaert posits what she calls "insect luminescence," an epistemology produced through and exhibited by Afro-diasporic and Indigenous peoples under plantation colonialism that elaborates an experience with nature, producing knowledge from those experiences, and cultivating pleasure and art from those experiences.[xx] Allewaert's attention to these insect knowledges and how they emerge within West Indian aesthetic and cultural

productions as a reflection of a "constitutive relation with natural phenomena" is instructive here, as she considers how the enslaved and freed Black populations were in forced relationship to insect and plant life—slaves were made to "hand-clean field, gardens, libraries, and colonial archives of the bugs proliferating in them."[xxi] Although Brand stages this scene differently, the violent context through which Elizete is forced to face the wall, to encounter the woodlice's trails, fosters the opportunity for cross-species engagement that not only provides Elizete a sort of psychological respite and distraction from the unnamed woman's abuses, but also helps her think differently about home, belonging, and their defining features. Furthermore, although woodlice are traditionally misunderstood as pests, they are crustaceans that are incredibly valuable within the ecosystem—feeding on decaying material (like old wood) and contributing to the breakdown of organic matter, which in turn enriches the soil. The paths and the sandy remainder that Elizete remarks on—a residue which ultimately returns to the soil— are both a representation of their home-making *and* the beauty and generativity of what's made therein. And, this is a lesson that is particularly relevant for Elizete, whose life is marked by these continual processes of being given to someone and forced into differently abusive circumstances after being abandoned by her mother.

II

Before I continue with Elizete's ecoerotics exhibited through her relationship with the woodlice, I want to briefly meditate on the unnamed woman and how her own ecoerotics emerge within the narrative, particularly because of how they function as another kind of epistemological intervention for daily survival and for how that shapes this repeated encounter with Elizete. As I previously mentioned, much of the unnamed woman's miserable disposition is informed by her frustration with the generational embodied manifestations of Adela's actions—and her particular affliction was a never-ending headache that rang with the "jingle of old iron," resulting in her

ending her day with her head wrapped in a rum-soaked towel (34). The unnamed woman was known to the community as the single woman with no children who ran a market garden and had lucky hands, luck defined by the fact that everything she grew, did so with abundance. As the somewhat resident community gardener and farmer, the woman's knowledge of the surrounding plant life was rich—their medicinal uses, flavor descriptors, and the conditions necessary for their survival. In his 2018 article, "Plotting the Black Commons," J.T. Roane builds on Sylvia Wynter's notion of the plot[xxii] to forward plotting and the Black Commons as the social, cosmological, and geographic perspective that informed the historical and ongoing practices enslaved and freed Black people cultivate with and through the land that challenge colonial epistemologies and practices of extraction and dominion. As Wynter posits, the plot/plantation dichotomy was defined by a tension between the indigenous, autochtonous system, on the one hand, and the system owned and dominated by external forces on the other. The plot as represented by the indigenous system was undergirded by a belief in the growing of food for the sake of feeding the community and people, for human need, not for the profitability of the market.[xxiii] Roane builds a transnational connection between the women of the Chesapeake and the women of the market societies in the Caribbean to assert that, in being "rendered as 'captive maternals,'" they exist as the anchors of ecological knowledge that "created epistemic possibilities for alternative modes of land and water stewardship." The garden space as one iteration of the plot in Roane's formulation with his invocation of Joy James' captive maternal[xxiv] is useful here for understanding the unnamed woman, specifically how her choice to foreclose the possibility of giving birth through herbal intervention was usurped by the communal expectation for her to mother Elizete *and* her knowledge of and relationship to the land. As she is forced into a caretaking capacity, we also see the ways that her sharing her knowledge of the

plants and land became the primary mediator of her and Elizete's relationship, which set the foundation for the cultivation of a anticolonial epistemology and nomenclature through Elizete and Adela's relationship. Moreover, in the context of Caribbean market women, we might also read this practice of utilizing the plot to feed the community as an early iteration of what would become a critical agricultural strategy of the New Jewel Movement and the People's Revolutionary Government in Grenada, which sought to make the country agriculturally self-sufficient through the establishment of cooperatives. As Manning Marable notes, the PRG understood that the economic disentanglement of Grenada from the West could not happen without an increase in agricultural production and a turn away from the extractive monocultural and export market focus. Indeed, he writes, "Before the revolution, almost three-fourths of the Grenadian diet consisted of imported goods" (229).

However, the woman's personal, intimate relationship with the land also facilitated a necessary balm for her chronic illness—the woman's constant digging of her hands into the soil was the only thing that eased her pain. Every day as she worked in the garden of her front yard after working in the sugar cane fields, the narrator remarks that she sprawled out, rather than working on her knees or standing, burrowing her hands into the dirt, up to her arms, ensuring much of her body was touching the earth. Her daily encounter with the soil produced an erotics of burrowing that were multi-sensorial and mutually beneficial. The tactile nature of "plung[ing] her arms into the soil," pushing deeper and harder, while being sucked in by the "black earth where she was going" evokes physically intense, climactic sensual energy that produces an excess of bodily fluids, as she works herself into being drenched in sweat while being relieved by the earth's coolness (34). One could imagine the dirt under her fingernails, sticking to her arms, mixing with the sweat on her face, covering her legs as she is stretched out on the ground.

On the molecular level, the implications and possibilities of this encounter are even more striking. Though there is an abundance of research that has explored and proven that gardening is a relaxing activity, the woman's context, specifically that of the embodied manifestation of colonial and enslaved trauma, resists the impulse for a romanticized perception of her encounter. However, the presence of a non-pathogenic microorganism—*mycobacterium vaccae*—in soil has shown to trigger the production and release of serotonin in the brain into the blood stream, producing calming effects,[xxv] like what happens during sexual climax—or, riding a bike on a breezy, sunny afternoon or swimming in the ocean. Moreover, this palpable, erotic intimacy with the soil also facilitates an exposure to an array of smells (and, again, to the mycobacterium vaccae) through the closeness and deep, labored breathing of that ongoing movement, which encases her in the earthy, musky fragrance of the dasheen and yam roots piling around her and being held in the wetness of her dress, to the aroma of trampled greenery (Brand, 34). Allewaert's extrapolation of Leibniz's petit perceptions (minute perceptions) is useful here in accounting for the potential influence of mycobacterium vaccae, as the various pathways in which the unnamed woman is exposed to it fuels a kind of accumulation that works toward her relief, reflecting the impact and power of the infinitesimal, "escap[ing] observation," yet impacting that which is "observed and measured."[xxvi] And it is these conditions that provide the unnamed woman with maximum relief. The working and working of the soil—her constant "kneading and tamping and burrowing"—was the key to the production of her plentiful yield and "heavy provisions," underscoring the mutuality of this connection.

This erotics of burrowing is also oriented towards a kind of open-endedness reflected in the narrator's remark on "wherever she was going"—we know that in digging her hands into the soil, she is not "going" anywhere in particular, and this non-specific destination buttresses the

idea of movement as portal where the action itself is the purpose or the "ending." And, one could also read this relationship to the soil through her burrowing erotics as a quotidian home-making practice rooted in a daily intervention on the ongoing suffering that she is forced to experience in Adela's wake. As the narrator tells us, when the day ends, and the woman is forced to "…rise up, pull her hands from the soil, [and] slow her sweat," the ache from the iron jingling in her head creeps back in and the spirits return to torment her in response to her summoning them through "throwing words"—and, this vexed, antagonistic relationship with her ancestral spirits and the never-ending pain come together to structure her experience in her living space, which, in turn, fuels her violence towards Elizete. As Richardson's queered reading of the unnamed woman and Elizete's relationship rightly captures, family formations that are non-biological or heteronormative should not automatically be presumed as without violence, writing, "The novel rejects the expectation that an all-female environment is a space for nurturing."[xxvii] If a 'home' is supposed to be defined by safety, respite, care, and comfort, the woman's home is many things but that *for both of them*. When we learn that Elizete is forced to face the wall in every moment of interaction with the woman when they aren't in the garden, the narrator says it was as if "acknowledging would be like loving and she didn't want loving. And she didn't want Elizete to imagine loving so she gave her the wall to face" (32). An alternative reading of the woman's disposition would consider the difficulty of being forced into a caretaking position that one went to significant lengths to prevent, while also interrogating the kind of righteousness associated with caretaking and the implementation of maternal instincts. It is important to note how the woman uses the term grace when she reflects on Adela's actions. As she shares Adela's history with Elizete, specifically the Obeah Adela used that resulted in the death of her owner, the unnamed woman says, "Yet and after all she did not learn the grace of drying up her womb even

after eight children. She spill and spill so and she mothered not a one" (19). She goes on to say how the incomplete charm Adela used during her pregnancies caused the generational trauma and affliction of her lineage. The unnamed woman's act of grace was an attempt at a similar kind of refusal that Adela practiced, yet one also grounded in the recognition and consideration of the possibility for continued suffering and affliction, and attempts to disrupt that. I am not attempting to understate the severity of the unnamed woman's psychological and emotional violence towards Elizete. I am trying to consider what Brand might be remarking on regarding the captive maternal and agency, or the intersection of the condition of Blackness in the afterlife of slavery, agency/choice, and communal responsibility. Or, what does a Black feminist reading of the unnamed woman bring to the fore about Black relationality and traditional understandings of love? In the way that the community was described as past belonging, the narrator also states that, in the context of their experiences, relation, and history, love was useless, unnecessary, and "too simple" in that it could not help them survive, "Worse, you couldn't eat it. Never helped anything. It never brought anyone back from the dead or from the living" (40). The unnamed woman being compelled, then, to take Elizete in, despite her various attempts to wait her out, suggests that Black relationality particularly in the context of survival—and maybe the argument is that this is always the context in the afterlife of slavery—is disentangled from a kind of love anchored in choice and consent, mutuality, or a desire for connection. Their shared condition of living with and through the "bloodful clarity of rage," in response to the impossibility of "stanch[ing] the gushing ocean," of their ancestor's blood or "bandag[ing] the streaming land" of their own blood and sweat predetermined a dissociation or exclusion from these philosophies of love and belonging, presumed their insufficiency. Instead, this shared condition informed an imposed sense of responsibility to their collective survival that outsized these terms. To some

extent, grace, then, emerges as a kind of guiding principle (or ethos) structuring the understanding of this collective responsibility that is defined by consideration, compassion, recognition, and desire for survival.

Importantly, grace is buttressed by an understanding of the violence of white supremacy and antiblackness, and extends as a push against a desire for legibility through liberal humanist subjectivity—indeed, in the context of Verlia's journey to Toronto from the island to live with her aunt and uncle, she is disappointed by their overt desire to "become white," as in being driven by the possibility of a life trajectory of making their blackness small and becoming passive, invisible members of their white community and broader society. Their excitement about her presence is, in part, due to how she fills the gap in this dream for a nuclear family, "fill out the little picture," that they were unable to fulfill themselves (140). Through the narrator, we hear a bit of Verlia's rumination on their actions, "…they were offering her a pillow in their grave, in their coffin engraved in ice, ice, ice, in their donut smelling walking dead sepulchral ice. Instead they're saying yes, they're right…be as thin as burnt paper, taste dust, you're a nigger, be a good nigger, serve, find some nondescript white people…and genuflect" (150). Verlia understands that their request for her cooperation in this exchange, in this life of "dying quietly in acceptance" where "anything" is possible is their expression of love. One might read the period that ends the clause that begins with the interrogative of "if" but does not follow with the "then" to fulfill the conditional as not a question at all, but an assertion—"If this is love." Love then functioning as a relational principle that hinges on and forwards an investment in these death-dealing practices and values is unacceptable for Verlia in her desire to refuse this cementation and "grow into her Black self" (149). One might read Brand's assertion of grace over love as an anticipatory response to the question Axelle Karera posits in "Blackness and the

Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," wherein she proposes exploring the possibility for an "ethics based on the radically non-relational" (47,48) as an alternative to what she asserts as "relationality's inability to maintain its ethical currency when faced with the extended rupture that blackness sustains on ethics" (ibid).

For the unnamed woman, even within the communal configuration they maintained, she remained on the fringes, excluded from the kind of home embedded through this communal connection, denied the kind of grace that we've seen her attempt to extend both to herself and others. Although Richardson argues that the unnamed woman might have experienced exclusion over her attempt at a non-normative lifestyle, or one driven by her own perception of grace and consideration, the text suggests that her social ostracism and isolation had been lifelong, as she says, "I come in this world alone. Anybody ever give me anything? Anybody ever leave me anything? They ever even spit in their hand and say, 'look a dog'? Not a penny, not a piece of bread not even a memory" (30). Yet, in the garden, immersed deep in the cool, moist layers of the soil is where she is "quieted"—held, comforted. This sort of intermittent practice reiterates my earlier point about Brand's strategies for survival that are not invested in positing romanticized solutions to the ailments of white supremacy, antiblackness, and the myriad ways in which their effects manifest. The ecological elements that she rigorously tends to provide momentary opportunities for reprieve, care, and a sense of mutual connection that she arguably otherwise lives without, even as the notions of mutuality and consent are muddied precisely because without the soil, her misery would be all-consuming. In other words, the earth is her grace.

III

Returning to the original scene, I want to examine how the woodlice are configured in connection with the unnamed woman's evocation of Adela and Elizete's connection to her, and what this configuration facilitates on the question of belonging through their imagined relationship. As the unnamed woman's rambles turn to Adela, the woodlice emerge again—this time as the embodiment of the unnamed woman's words crawling over Elizete's shoulders, establishing an entanglement between the woodlice and Adela in Elizete's mind that is both comforting and recuperative. Because of the anger and repulsion the unnamed woman felt for Adela, which arguably hindered the possibility of any kind of empathy or understanding for Adela and her actions, Elizete attempts to recover Adela from the kind of dirty cloak of the woman's words and memory, simultaneously recasting the stereotypical image of and embodied/affective response to the woodlice. As the story of Adela embodied through the woodlice makes her "neck tremble," she describes the figure as "something brown and sweet…something thick like cake" (Brand, 33). The trembling is not that of anxiety or the physical aversion that one might feel or sense at the sight of a creature crawling on them, but of excitement and eagerness. Through this reconfiguration, the mobilization of the woodlice is reiterated as a portal, this time as a gateway between Adela and Elizete and further into another place that foregrounds the cultivation of an alternative epistemology of and through other ecological elements. Stripping away the bitterness of the woman's words as they are spat and thrown at her, she metaphorically dips the woman's words and Adela's image in the water of Moriah, repeatedly performing a cleansing ritual that reimagines her image from the dry, "wrung out," figure that feels harsh, stony, brittle, and contorted—read as partly a representation of Adela's perspective of Nowhere—to one that is "filled...billowy and wet" (33). For Elizete, this remaking of Adela that is rich, full, and beautiful, is entangled with how she chooses to see and

subsequently know her surroundings. Brand explicates the impossibility of return and the scale of the rupture of the slave trade and the door of no return through what becomes the emptiness of Adela's mind, which was, in part, an outcome of her trying to maintain the memory of and a map toward her 'home' on the other side of the "narrow passage to the new world." The narrator outlines the journey from the port to the plantation, and the realization that "Nowhere" was an impossible place to leave in both a literal and metaphoric sense as it was locked in by mountains on all sides with rivers intertwined, with the sea "near enough to smell and far enough to desire," left her with a knowing that the only possibility for return was death, which she ultimately pursues. The reimagination of the dry, emptiness of Nowhere and Adela through Elizete's mind becomes foundational to this cross-generational/ancestral connection, not in an attempt to impose a Western, colonial perspective of the land onto Adela's memory, but as an imaginative practice of recovery, connection, experimentation, and survival—recovery in the sense that, embedded in that loss of whatever traces of a map 'home' Adela attempted to store in her mind, she had also lost the memory of her "true" self. In reflecting on her understanding of Adela's purposeful unseeing and unknowing and her own desire to refuse the loneliness that accompanies that purposeful forgetting, she says, "Is you I must thank for that. Where you see nowhere I must see everything," beginning with the designation of the samaan tree as her mother. And, this choice to be oriented toward beauty over barrenness or abundance over nothingness fuels a practice in experimentation, as they work on and through each other to name the plants, flowers, herbs, birds, vegetables, fish, and trees as a kind of subversive knowledge rooted in the lessons that Elizete receives from the unnamed woman. Not unlike the "maintain[ing] [of] their own nomenclatural practices outside the classificatory system of dominant science"[xxviii] as Roane remarks of Black women of Virginia and Maryland in the post-emancipation context, the

relevance or importance of these plants and nonhuman actors is not in relation to their possibilities for commodification and exploitation, but most importantly as witness of and regard for their existence, in addition to what they offer towards sustenance, remedies for various ailments, and rootwork interventions.

Again, the significance of transience and movement emerges as Adela and Elizete's collaborative practice of naming is hinged on Elizete as a wanderer and witness. Although we get a different sense of Elizete in motion in Toronto, as in she describes the process of covering a lot more physical space, her movement on the island is more constrained, yet the extent and expansiveness of the names as they unfurl across the novel suggest a multiplicity of distanced encounters. Brand's *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck* is important to engage here, particularly her meditation and critique of the idea of adventure as the structuring logic of narrative and the novel, as it forces some clarity and distinction between the kind of open-ended movement I attempt to outline here and that which is always, already undergirded by a desire for capital and capitalist accumulation. In her reading of Daniel Defoe's 1719 canonical novel, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Brand extracts the way that the novel is both situated within the contexts of slavery and colonialism, imposing those things as given, while obscuring their violence and motivation for an adventure that is driven by the pursuit of related profits, though that 'adventure' is mobilized as innocent. Brand writes that Crusoe is preoccupied with "see[ing] the world" in such a way that seeing becomes a "working phrase for exploitation," where 'adventure' or 'seeing the world' all becomes a "euphemism or understanding for conquest—or profit, at least."[xxix] This kind of motivation that not only structures the novel and narrative, but also correlates with and asserts the proper subject that we should all aspire to be—on this Brand says the novel "presumes affinity"—stands in stark contrast to Elizete's movement. Her

wandering as an embodiment of the prioritization of witnessing with intention, curiosity, and regard in the context of she and Adela's connection is seen in the offering of names that capture what happens when one encounters it, the kind of sensorial experience it evokes or causes, or simply a description of how it looks, like draw blood leaf, stinging leaf bush, tear up cloth flowers, stinking fruit tree, or monkey face flowers (22, 23). These names, and others like donkey eye stone and blue finger yam posit a heightened sensorial attunement and experience that is especially important when we consider Adela's blindness and the sensorial, tactile nature of the unnamed woman's burrowing erotics. As I mentioned previously, the garden was the only place where a seemingly less antagonistic engagement was possible between Elizete and the unnamed woman. As we're introduced to their dynamic, we learn that Elizete's responsibilities grew from bringing the woman food to the sugar cane field while she worked to working with her in the garden pulling weeds, digging dasheen, then learning about the surrounding plants. The subtle suggestion of intimacy here that captures their physical closeness in this labor and also the possibility for knowledge-sharing that is tactile and multi-sensorial—identifying the various roots, vegetables, and plants, discussing their medicinal and spiritual uses, understanding their flavor profiles—makes way for a reading that assumes a similar sensitivity and attention, a kind of haptic orientation would manifest in Elizete as a strategy for and practice in survival.

Relatedly, the importance of movement or open-endedness is also captured by the suggestive or questioning nature in which the names are presented and also when and how they appear. While at some points throughout the novel, a list of birds, flowers, or bushes will emerge in the midst of a thought or rumination seemingly unrelated, at other times, they are followed by ellipses, signaling the possibility of continuation. Ultimately, this practice of a wandering, open-ended movement with an inflected sensorial attunement oriented towards beauty and abundance

as recovery, connection, experimentation, and survival becomes a manifestation of a home-making practice for Elizete that is grounded in the liminal space—in the act of the practice itself.

IV

In this final section of the reading, I want to return to the novel's beginning where we are first introduced to Verlia and are given a glimpse into the significance of her presence in Elizete's life. I want to consider how the juxtaposition between Elizete's connection with Verlia and Elizete's abusive dynamic with her husband Isaiah brings together many of the ideas I have worked through thus far, including the chosen versus imposed or forced relation, woodlice intervention as a method of respite and survival, the possibility of sensorial depth and pleasure, a refutation of love and turn toward grace, and ultimately, the idea of home as undergirded by movement and transience.

The first line of the novel is simply one word—Grace. From there, we hear Elizete as narrator describe the feeling of seeing Verlia while cutting sugar cane. For her, the sight of Verlia is cooling, satiating, chilling, somehow motivating, distracting from the misery and weight of the hot sun and the pain of the sharp cane blades "like razor," so much so that she mistakenly sinks the machete into her foot. The slow, steady flow of her description down the first page, at one point going on for six full lines without a period but with commas joining a series of phrases that each capture a different observation, feels reminiscent of the kind of image that might come to mind of the "sweat raining off" of Verlia's back, or the flow of blood from her foot "blooming in the stalks of cane"—it slowly creeps along, pausing at one point or another before flowing in a different or the same direction. As they are both engaged in this repetitive movement, sharply inhaling as they lift the blade before forcefully exhaling as they strike it down to cut the sugar cane stalk, we might read the commas as a textual manifestation of the

pauses embedded in the repeated motion. Up swing—pause (comma), down swing—pause (comma), all the while Elizete's gaze steady on Verlia. Even as the quotidian violence of the plantation hovers over this moment, Elizete's reflection creates a sense of patience and intentionality—a kind of witnessing. This page of close or careful (ironically, she calls herself careless) witnessing is, again, underscored by a heightened sensorial experience from the breezy feeling of a gush of air exhaled from Verlia's "wide mouth blowing a wave of tiredness away" to Elizete's inhale of the "sweet" fragrance of Verlia's sweat. We could harken back to the moment when Elizete imagined the woodlice crawling over her shoulder, causing the hairs on her neck to stand up, and envision a similar embodied response as Elizete feels the coolness of Verlia's exhale against her skin. Verlia's presence breaks open the possibility for pleasure, for something other than misery, other than pain for Elizete, and Brand presents this in immediate contrast with Elizete's violent relationship to Isaiah on the following page.

Although the specifics of how she ended up with Isaiah are unclear, the repeated reference to him as a "man she was given to" after the unnamed woman's death buttressed by the sexual violence, exploitation, and physical abuse she endured at his hands establishes the imposed propertizing relational structure. Elizete recounts how her being and the ordinariness of her life was defined through her service to him and her labor on the sugar cane plantation—"I born to clean Isaiah house and work cane since I was a child…all it have for a woman to do is lie down and let a man beat against she body…" (4). Importantly, the descriptions of her violent sexual encounters with him and their relational dynamic more broadly are framed as dissociated and disembodied experiences for Elizete, establishing an association between access to a depth of feeling and sensual/sensorial pleasure with a renewed sense of herself ignited by Verlia and this impossibility of pleasure or a sense of self outside of perpetual service with Isaiah. Indeed, at

one point, Elizete as narrator says, "I think to myself how I must be was sleeping all this time. I must be was in a trance because it was as if Verl wake me to say, 'Girl, put on your clothes. Let we go now.' It have ways of trancing people and turning them against they very self" (6). The dissociation and disembodiment of this "trancing" is further inflected when we consider a particular aspect of Isaiah's personal history, and the ways in which he uses Elizete's body as merely a vessel for working through or externalizing his heartache after being left by a Venezuelan woman whom he had fallen in love with. In being subjected to him "rid[ing] [her] every night," Elizete tells us, "I was a horse for his jumbie. His face was like the dead over me on the floor when he cry out for the woman who leave him as he ride me to hell" (10). Here, Isaiah is the sole willing, active participant, and Elizete's configuration as a "horse for his jumbie" reflects Spillers' notion of fungibility, the process of being reduced to a "thing for being for the captor,"[xxx] producing a kind of non-specificity where Elizete's particular being and presence is irrelevant for Isaiah's uses because, through this frame, there is no particularity or subjectivity to acknowledge. Elizete asks, "Who is me to want anything big or small. Who is me to think I is something" (4). Like the previous moment where the interrogative is set up but is usurped, the period here suggests an understanding of the cumulative violence animating her condition that is not anticipating a respondent to reply with something like, "You are somebody!" And this sets the stage for the unthinkability and impossibility of Elizete's pleasure and positive sensorial experience within her dynamic with Isaiah.

The dissociation and disembodiment, then, occurs on two layers—both in the realm of her configuration in relation to Isaiah and within her own experience of these violent encounters, and it is through this frame that the woodlice emerge for the first time in the text. After turning her head toward the woodlice tunnel while being forced to "lay down under" him, Elizete

imagines that she is inside the tunnel covered in sandy residue. Like the moments she encountered the traces of the woodlice during her daily experience of being berated by the unnamed woman as a child, the woodlice offer an imaginative psychic escape from the brutality of her real-world experience. This idea of burrowing toward/as safety, respite, or freedom appears as Elizete escapes to the sand quarry after working on the sugar cane plantation seeking solace from Isaiah. Surrounded by the pinkness of the sand, she vigorously burrows herself further into the dirt, like the unnamed woman, to no destination in particular, though she names places like Aruba or Maracaibo as potential sites of freedom. Yet, again like the unnamed woman, the action and catharsis of digging and "shoveling" in the sand, working herself until the sweat is "drizzling from her body" and she is "full up" and "split," is what provides her with a semblance of relief (34).

Despite the myriad forces working together to reinforce Elizete's positionality, something escapes. And that something is first ignited by and grounded in the use of "sight" or "seeing." Before I go further, I want to briefly consider how we might read Brand's choice to begin with Elizete's witnessing of Verlia on the sugar cane plantation before we are introduced to Isaiah, even though we know the latter relationship exists first. One might argue that this choice was Brand's own attempt to refuse the imposed totalization of Elizete's condition and to foreground that which escapes, to draw the reader first into seeing Elizete more deeply. This narrative choice is not one that suggests a romanticized resolve to Elizete's material reality, but that which escapes matters and deserves our attention because of what it awakens and makes possible in Elizete's embodied experience. Beyond the first moment of witnessing that opens the novel, within the first physically intimate moment between Elizete and Verlia presented in the text, Verlia says to Elizete, "Open your eyes, I want to see what you're feeling." This invitation to

vulnerability hinges on an acknowledgement of and valuing of her presence on its own terms, as well as the possibility of and investment in her pleasure or deep, sensual feeling at all. Not only is Elizete's sentient capacity possible in Verlia's mind—it is inherent, even if not yet to Elizete. And this is central to their engagement with each other, in addition to recognition, reciprocity, and care. The linguistic shift mobilized through Elizete as a first-person narrator from the receiving end or disregarded presence with Isaiah, to a presence that is initiating, indulging, active, and ecstatic emphasizes the imposed versus chosen relational problematic, while clarifying how the varied expressions of their queered intimacy were transformative for Elizete's understanding of herself. She says, "I sink in Verlia and let she flesh swallow me up. I devour she. She open me up like any morning…" (5). If the cumulative violence of the plantation and Isaiah, the repetitive beatings that she endured after her many attempts to escape him, were "how [she] wear away" and the things that she was sure of, then Verlia emerges as her "chance out of what ordinary," (4) as her grace toward a renewed self-understanding.

If you recall, grace as the guiding principle of relation within their community—and as a larger philosophical intervention—is defined by consideration, compassion, recognition, and desire for survival; and grace, as opposed to love because it was "too simple and smooth," is reasserted as what structures Elizete and Verlia's relationship, taking on much of this same meaning (75, 78). One might argue that Elizete's delight at Verlia and her/as "grace" being felt as a kind of theft of pleasure or feeling, "like thiefing sugar," also structures their connection as fleeting, if also capacious, rich, opening. If Brand's conceptualization of grace is an intervention on an understanding of Black relationality in the context of survival, then the stolen and/or impermanence of their connection presumes an alternative understanding of what it means to be in intimate relation, *queer* intimate relation, particularly in the context of revolutionary

anticipation and quotidian plantation logic and violence. This is reflected through Elizete's return to something akin to the sentiment, "And is all. And if is all I could do on the earth, is all," or "…like a shower of rain coming that could just wash me cool and that was sufficient (5,4). Indeed, Elizete and Verlia are not 'partners' in the traditional sense, and there are no shared associated dreams for their relationship (counter to the example proffered by Verlia's aunt and uncle where their home and ambitions as extension of their relationship reproduced whiteness, capital, and antiblackness), except liberation for the people, particularly from Verlia's perspective as she is the one directly associated with what we might argue is a representation of Grenada's New Jewel Movement. Verlia and Elizete's home-making practice, then, is undergirded by ephemerality and transience. As the fleeting nature of their connection gives shape to and is superimposed on the narrative organization of the novel, we move in and out, in a temporal sense, of their encounters both before and during what we might read as the U.S. invasion of Grenada on October 23, 1983. In attempting to construct a linear timeline of the novel's events, we know that by the time Elizete is in Toronto, the invasion has already happened, and Verlia has already died by jumping off the cliff into the ocean. These narrative returns to their relationship through Elizete's memory reiterate the idea of home being made wherever they are—from the bedroom they shared on the island to Elizete's memory. Their final moment together with their comrades culminate in a strikingly beautiful and tragic representation of the open-endedness of their grace and connection, both for each other and as individuals. Elizete and Verlia enter the cemetery to join their waiting comrades, burrowing themselves against a tombstone. As they waited in anticipation of the unknown, Elizete holds Verlia as they drift in and out of sleep under the sun. However, when the "Yankees crack open the air (243)," Verlia leads them to a fort on a cliff, refusing to die in the cemetery under the bombs, but instead

leading to a different act of grace—something like Adela's. Elizete and onlookers from the other side of the water watched as Verlia and her comrades ran off the cliff, some plunging into the ocean with their arms outstretched wide. Elizete as narrator ends the novel and says of Verlia that "she's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy (247)," and we might read the grace that bound their connection as always oriented towards somewhere else where the anti-black, imperial, colonial, white-supremacist brutality of this world was not a given.

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[i] Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
[ii] At the time of this writing, there are two additional works of Black feminist literary criticism that center Black lesbian literature that I know are forthcoming (from Drs. Stephanie Andrea Allen and Briona S. Jones) and will contribute greatly to the discursive landscape of Black Queer Studies, Black queer and lesbian feminism, and Black feminist criticism.
[iii] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[iv] Ibid., 206.
[v] Ibid., 204.
[vi] Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).
[vii] Chelsea Frazier, "Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto," *Atmos.Earth*, October 1, 2020, https://atmos.earth/black-feminist-ecological-thought-essay/. Alongside and in extension of Frazier's work, there is a wealth of Black feminist literary ecocriticism that considers how the violent extraction, exploitation, and abuse of the land and environment is an extension of/is entangled with the violence that Black women experience, as explicated through the work of Black women writers; see Carlyn Ena Ferrari, "(Re)Making Generations: Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Black Women's Ecologies," Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, 32, no. 4(Winter 2025): 925-945
[viii] Justin Hosbey, Hilda Lloréns, and J.T. Roane, "Introduction: Global Black Ecologies," *Environment and Society,* 13, no. 1 (2022), DOI: https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2022.130101. My understanding of Black ecologies and Black ecological thought is foregrounded in the definition posited by Hosbey, Lloréns, and Roane. In the introduction to this collection, they extend Nathan Hare's 1970 formulation of Black ecology to explicate how the processes of colonialism and slavery fueled a violent, extractive, and destructively transformative relationship to the land and ecological systems that has become "foundational to modernity." Alongside this, Black ecologies considers the histories of Black survival strategies and ecological epistemologies created within these violent contexts (and in their contemporary iterations) that also account for those imagined through Black expressive cultures. Integral to their Black ecologies framework is a troubling of disciplinary interventions like the environmental humanities and environmental sciences which sidestep or altogether ignore the significance and legacies of slavery and colonialism within their study of climate catastrophe and their strategies for combatting it, while also ignoring the important theoretical, historical, and strategic interventions of Black studies. Their work is generative for drawing a clear conceptual and theoretical connection between Black ecologies and Black feminist critiques of the human as their understanding of the fundamental alteration of our ecological landscapes fueled by colonialism and slavery is in part

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undergirded by Wynter's conceptualization of the human and Man's geographies, and what they refer to as "Enlightenment's epistemological revolution."

[ix] David Green, Jr., "Cheryl Clarke's Clit Agency: or, An Erotic Reading of *Living as a Lesbian*," in *Black Sexual Economies: Race and Sex in a Culture of Capital*, eds. Adrienne Davis and the BSE Collective (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 216-236.

[x] Cheryl Clarke, "An Archive of Style: An Interview with Cheryl Clarke," interview by Emerald Rutledge/emerald faith. *Black Women Radicals*, Date Published, https://www.blackwomenradicals.com/blog-feed/archive-of-style-an-interview-with-cheryl-clarke

[xi] Green, Jr., 223.

[xii] Ibid., 224.

[xiii] Monique Allewaert's monograph, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantation, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, in which she conceptualizes the parahuman as a condition inhabited by Black people across the diaspora as a result of colonial violence, which perpetuated fragmentation and corporeal dismemberment, is useful theoretical and analytical context here. In tracing the parahuman through Creole stories of the 18th and 19th centuries, Allewaert thinks the parahuman in horizontal relation to the animal and the human, examining how Afro-Americans leveraged the colonial condition of fragmentation and dismemberment to resist colonialism and assert iterations of personhood and being in relation to animal bodies—reflecting a "skepticism about the desirability of the human." Importantly, Allewaert departs from discourses and seminal analyses of Creole tales as symptomatic of colonialism and/or that aim to assert Black people's incorporation into the "real of the human." See also Joshua Bennett's essay, "Animalia Americana" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Black Body in American Literature*.

[xiv] In part because of the discursive dynamic that I am describing here, it seems necessary to offer a definition of Afropessimism—Douglass, Terrefe, and Wilderson define Afropessimism 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…[Afropessimism] claims that humanity is made legible through the irreconcilable distinction between humans and blackness, and [this] is supported by the argument that blackness is a paradigmatic position, rather than an ensemble of cultural, social, and sexual orientations. For Afro-pessimists, the black is positioned, a priori, as slave. The definition of slave is taken from Orlando Patterson who theorizes slavery as a relational dynamic between 'social death' (the slave) and 'social life' (the human)."

[xv] For example, see C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides* where he explores the fugitive possibilities of the flesh through Black gender transitivity, extending Spillers' flesh/body distinction to consider how slaves manipulated this lack of gender differentiation to escape slavery and evade capture.

[xvi] Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, Or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[xvii] See also Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: Afropessimism and Black Optimism"

[xviii] Brand's elucidation here resonates with how Spillers outlines the contours of lineage as a defining feature of the flesh/body distinction and the process of ungendering in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," where she writes, "Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those subjects that it covers in a particular place. Contrarily, the cargo of a ship might not be regarded as elements of the domestic, even though the vessel that carries the cargo is sometimes romantically personified as 'she.' The human cargo of a slave vessel—in the effacement and emission of African family and proper names—contravenes notions of the domestic" (214).

[xix] Wynter, "Unsettling the coloniality of being."

[xx] Allewaert, "Insect Knowledges, Power, and the Literary," *American Literary History*, 33, no. 3 (2021): 466.

[xxi] Ibid., 462.

[xxii] J.T. Roane, "Plotting the Black Commons, *Souls*, 20, no. 3(2019): 239-266

[xxiii] Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou*, 5(1971): 95-102

[xxiv] See Joy James, "The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal," *Carceral Notebooks*, 12(2016).

[xxv] Peter Dockrill, "This Odd Bacterium Appears to Protect Its Host from the Damaging Effects of Stress," *Science Alert*,

[xxvi] Allewaert, "Insect Knowledges, Power, and the Literary," *American Literary History*, 33, no. 3(2021): 460-480

[xxvii] Richardson, 142.

[xxviii] Roane, 260.

[xxix] Brand, 91.

[xxx] Spillers, 65.

Black Feminist Literary Antagonisms III: An Ethos of Brazen Experimentalism in Black Queer Form and Being

"I live in the light. Iridescent and brazen."

Alexis De Veaux, "Of Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits," 1983, *Essence Magazine*.

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"There are openings in that we call flesh.
We call the openings in the flesh, pores.
Minute orifices; vents.
Time, too, has pores,
Openings in its flesh; vents.
Through which we cross into our multiplicities, lives
Happening at the same time."

Alexis De Veaux, "FLESH:," 2014, *Yabo.*

To this point, this dissertation has mapped the various ways that Black women writers (queer and otherwise) have both exposed and challenged the manifestation of liberal humanist logics within the intramural, specifically how the propertization of Black women's bodies is necessitated by and leveraged toward an aspirational, though always failed, inclusion and legibility within liberal humanist, capitalist society. This idea of propertization attempts to capture how the possibility for self-actualization, desire, and pleasure is foreclosed and how Black women are configured in perpetual service to others—both within interpersonal relationships and broader communal dynamics. On the one hand, chapter 1 examined the Black 'home' and the Black domestic sphere within Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* through two frames—the aesthetic excess versus aesthetic sacrifice dichotomy and what I argue is the literal and figurative death of the main character, Helga, at the end of the novel—to understand how Larsen maps the implications and consequences of this humanist aspiration. If Chapter 1 does the more expository work, Chapter 2 continued the idea of Black feminist literary antagonisms by examining the idea of a black queer literary intimacy that is plural and expansive, encapsulating

the relationships with land and non-human life forms. Through a reading of Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here,* Chapter 2 considered how pleasure, intimacy, sex, and desire are integral to processes of self-making and the reconceptualization of home for Black women and gender expansive protagonists, resisting the kind of propertization previously outlined. Moreover, in challenging the rigidity of home exemplified in Larsen, Chapter 2 explored how themes of ephemerality, transience, and open-endedness cultivated through interpersonal and cross-species connections within the text posited a theory and practice of Black queer life, relationality, and home-making.

Chapter 3 continues this thematic thread by turning toward the literary and otherwise creative spaces of Black queer theatre companies, magazines, and presses—specifically The Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company and Salon of Brooklyn, New York (1977), *Venus* magazine of Atlanta, Georgia (1995), and Redbone Press of Atlanta, Georgia/Washington D.C/ New Orleans, Louisiana (1994). In doing so, an iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms emerges through an interrogation of how these literary, creative spaces fashioned and embodied a practice of Black queer life and home-making similarly buttressed by ideas of ephemerality, open-endedness, and experimentalism[i] within the context of both self-actualization and form. I am interested in the entanglement of these ideas, namely how the process of understanding, defining, and inhabiting Black queerness and developing a Black queer feminist politic was cultivated through mixed genre, elastic/unruly formal interpretations, and non-linear narrative construction. Through archival research, close-reading, and personal interviews with founders, I explore how these outlets embodied experimentalism and porousness in their structure, while also providing the necessary space for Black queer and lesbian women to explore experimentation in their work—and in some cases, simply a space to share their work in

community. This, in turn, helped cultivate and clarify their practice of Black queerness amid a myriad of exclusionary and antagonistic forces.

The literary overlap that took place between Lisa C. Moore's Redbone Press and Alexis De Veaux in 2014 with the publication of De Veaux's novel, *Yabo,* crystalizes what drives my interest in the formation, structures, and histories of these creative, literary platforms. With Redbone Press, Moore was an independent Black lesbian publisher in the lineage of Barbara C. Smith's Kitchen Table Press, with the sole responsibility of acquiring, editing, printing, and distributing her Black queer publications alongside her day job as an *Atlanta Journal Constitution* copy-editor in the Press's early years of the mid-1990s. The impetus for the Press's founding came when Moore was asked by her sister's friend if she had a book on Black lesbian coming out stories after perusing Moore's bookshelf. Moore began to pitch the idea to numerous presses and was subsequently rejected with claims of a lack of reader market. Between 1994 and 1997, she commissioned, acquired, edited, printed, and distributed a collection of stories herself under the title, *does your mama know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories.* Charis Books & More in Atlanta, Georgia became the first bookstore to take on inventory and sell the first ten copies of the book after initially rejecting it. With no intention of continuing to publish, she decided to do so when she was approached by Sharon Bridgforth at the Michigan Women's Music Festival in 1997. Bridgforth was looking for a publisher for her performance novel, *the bull-jean stories.* Often mistaken as a book of poems because of the text's stanza-like structure, Moore emphasized that the two collaborated in the editing process to make the text true to *its* form, experimenting with ways to highlight different character's voices by using bold and italics, the arrangement of text, etc. Moore went on to publish another experimental novel, *love conjure/blues,* with Bridgforth in 2005.

By the time of Moore's collaboration with De Veaux, De Veaux had established a decades-long career of formal experimentalism through her work as a playwright, poet[ii], novelist, and biographer[iii]. Although De Veaux had seen success with mainstream publishers like Harper & Row, Redbone's history and their convergence further reflected Black queer writers' and artists' sustained need for platforms and alternative publication outlets. This need was necessitated by both a racist publishing landscape *and* a shared desire to create and disseminate work where the rigidity of form and genre, both in terms of narrative structure and goal, were disregarded in service to a formal hybridity or experimentalism necessary for bringing Black queer narratives to life. Redbone Press and the experimental works of its published authors cultivated a literary practice that did not forward the colonial, imperialist project[iv] and subject through narrative and arguably required a de-prioritization of capital.

The collective divestment from that project, one linked with mainstream publishing's perception of market viability, shaped Moore's editorial and publishing philosophy and practice. In redefining the meaning of success in the publishing industry, Moore took her texts to the Black lesbian and gay readership she knew existed, arranging book readings and signings at women's music festivals, bookstores, bars, and other queer cultural venues across the country. Maintaining this independence from the mainstream market further facilitated or made possible the textual experimentalism of the Press' contributors. With this grounding of capitalist divestment, creative independence, and formal experimentalism in mind, I want to turn now to 1976, Alexis De Veaux and Gwendolen Hardwick, and the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company of Brooklyn, New York.

On the Flamboyant Ladies and an Ethos of Brazen Experimentalism

Across at least two moments, between February 8th and February 17th, 1976, as indicated by this bracketed period appearing in the top right corner of the page, Gwendolen Hardwick types and sends a letter to Alexis De Veaux.[v] It may be more accurate to say that she handwrote many iterations of the letter first before producing its final form on the typewriter with maybe her nicest sheet of paper that features a magnolia in the top left corner, hoping to avoid any strikethroughs, misspellings, or other minor errors.

Having attended a reading hosted through the Frank Silvera Writer's Workshop of De Veaux's play, *The Tapestry*, on February 16th, with the date marking a shift in the letter, Hardwick opens the letter by orienting herself in her own physical space—her study—surrounded by books, papers, magazines, and her plant Nonna. She bridges the distance between the two of them, bringing De Veaux into the room in more ways than one, as she notes that her eyes fell on Maya Angelou's 1971 Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry collection, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, specifically on Maya's photo that stretches across the entirety of the book's back cover. In the black and white image, Angelou's gaze is slightly to her right, as she wears a patterned headscarf, a ribbed, zip-up turtleneck, and hoop earrings. Her eyebrows are slightly raised, creating a barely-there furrow in her brow, as if she's maybe answering a question. Her mouth is somewhat open, offering a peek at the infamous gap between her two front teeth; this is what reminds Gwendolen of Alexis. The interweaving of these Black creative threads—Hardwick, De Veaux, Angelou—through this ephemeral, though deeply intimate, moment of reflection foreshadows a decades-long artistic undertaking (specifically between Hardwick and De Veaux) that carries forward and extends this distinct Black aesthetic focus in ways that could not have been anticipated from this minute noticing, though it remains underexamined. It's unclear if, at the time she was writing the letter, Hardwick knew that De

Veaux's play was being made into a short-film that would be directed by Angelou for KCET—a Los Angeles public television affiliate—and premiere in December 1976. One could choose to read Hardwick's mention of Angelou not as just occurring by chance, but as an intentional reach for connection that acknowledges and commends the significance of this anticipated collaboration. In our conversation, Hardwick noted that, although their meeting at *The Tapestry* reading served as their formal introduction, the two had indeed met two years prior when Hardwick happened upon De Veaux's reading of her then new book, *Spirits in the Street*. She coyly mentioned that, unlike the other guests, she did not request De Veaux's signature in the copy she purchased. This would be the thing De Veaux remembered when they met again.

As the letter goes on, Hardwick offers her reflection on De Veaux's play itself. In thanking her for writing it, she emphasizes her appreciation for De Veaux's commitment to presenting a Black woman protagonist with dimension, complexity, and substance amidst a frustrating creative and artistic landscape that still saw peripheral, reductive, and violent representations of Black women both in theatre and on screen despite the growth of Black theatre through the Black Arts Movement. *The Tapestry* is centered on the ambitious, focused 23-year-old Black woman protagonist Jet—a law student living through a heightened moment of stress as she prepares for the bar while experiencing betrayal by an impatient, cheating boyfriend and disc jockey close friend. She also contends with managing the daily imposition of the spirit-form chorus that lives in her shower. These spirits represent Jet's Savannah origins through her parents, the pastor of her home church, church members, and more broadly a conservative orientation that wanted to confine Jet to a certain embodiment of Black gendered propriety. They were insistent on pulling her back home to assist her mother with raising her siblings. Reflecting further on the presence of what she calls, "spiritual interlopers," Hardwick encourages De Veaux

to continue on the path of this kind of narrative experimentation beyond a mere aesthetic signification, but towards the end of raising the collective consciousness of the audience.

For De Veaux, the integration of spirit forms is entangled with her desire to usurp the temporal distinctions between past, present, and the future—to bring them all together on one plane. De Veaux's thinking about time and linearity, and particularly her turn away from these concepts as necessary in narrative storytelling, was significantly influenced by her reading of John Mbiti's 1969 *African Religions and Philosophy.* She found his writing on African notions of time—as opposed to its Western construction—and by extension, the nonlinearity of life and death, to be a more generative framework for understanding her own engagements with Black spirituality and Black life more broadly. Moreover, this philosophical turn would extend to her thinking and writing on interspecies, non-hierarchical relation between the "human"/animal/and plant life, most notably in her under-explored 1979 play *A Season to Unravel* and her 2014 novel *Yabo.* The influence of Mbiti's text on De Veaux's personal, literary, and philosophical perspective arguably reinforced the ways she had been associated with and would be continuously shaped by the Black Arts Movement and the development of a Black aesthetic as antagonistic towards liberal humanism through its challenge to white aesthetic values, interpretation, and valuation—the "destruction of white ideas and white ways of looking at the world,"—as Larry Neal notes.[vi] Yet, De Veaux's would come to necessarily reflect a commitment to cultivating her own iteration of a Black aesthetic that was distinctly feminist and queer, taking root and developing both in her individual work and through her numerous collaborative projects with Hardwick that would follow this letter for a least a decade to come. My approach to this explication of Black feminist literary antagonisms through the Black queer feminist aesthetic and practice produced between Hardwick and De Veaux is rooted in an

engagement with jazz, specifically the experimentalism and improvisation that was so definitive of the era's sonic landscape of free and avant-garde jazz. This approach, however, pushes at the triangulation of Black masculinity, Black aestheticism, and jazz to consider Black queer and lesbian creative engagements with the style's limitlessness as a pathway to self-making and literary, creative experimentation. Hardwick's letter, as the opening and frame of her eponymous correspondence file in De Veaux's archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, beautifully clarified the need for (and their mutual interest in) an artistic outlet that valued this kind of experimentalism, resisted one-dimensional representations of Black women protagonists, and, though not explicitly stated, invested in exploring and conjuring a multi-faceted practice in Black queerness.

To further frame this artistic collaboration within the context of the late Black Arts Movement and Black cultural nationalism, I want to briefly turn to Jason Robinson's essay, "The Challenge of the Changing Same: The Jazz Avant-garde of the 1960s, the Black Aesthetic, and the Black Arts Movement."[vii] In it, he explicates some ideological tensions and convergences between those at the forefront of the avant-garde jazz movement—like Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Sun Ra—and those who have come to be understood as the leading theorists and producers of the Black aesthetic, namely Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle. The rise of avant-garde or free jazz followed a shift from the tonal to modal style—in the tonal style, which was the technical structure of all previous jazz eras—jazz compositions were centered on functional harmony wherein each chord had a 'function' and was pulled toward resolving dissonance.[viii] Importantly, the modal style offered more improvisational possibilities for jazz soloists than tonal because of the open structure of the chord movement and the use of modes/scales beyond the major and minor key signatures to

shape improvisational choices. Free or avant-garde jazz took this openness even further in search of the freest musical expression, in some iterations doing away completely with tonal centers, functional harmony, and established tempo, while integrating poetic interjections, poem performances, and dance. It was this mercurial, unrestrained orientation that Robinson argues was taken on as a representation of "authentic Black identity," with Black writers integrating this kind of formal experimentation into their work through the "appropriat[ion of] musical characteristics, devices, and improvisatory approaches." The interpretation of this stylistic experimentalism as "authentic," or as a representation of an "essentialist" Black identity was at the crux of the ideological tension between Black aesthetic conceptual leaders who were insisting on an entanglement between the role of the artist and the marriage of aesthetics and ethics in artistic identity, on the one hand, and the more complex philosophies of the musicians themselves. Robinson argues that the Black aestheticists became prescriptive in their assessment of avant-garde jazz in a way that obscured these nuances. For example, Robinson highlights how although pianist Cecil Taylor was most fervently aligned with Baraka and other Black aestheticists on the role of the Black artist, Robinson reads musicians like Coltrane and Coleman as having a more universalist (or, in the case of Coleman, nationalist) approach to thinking about freedom from injustice, spiritual transcendence, and unity. Ultimately, Robinson challenges us to take seriously the ideological complexity of avant-garde jazz musicians and problematize what he believes to be a flattened perception of their work and philosophical beliefs, while still valuing the impact that jazz experimentalism and improvisation had on Black writers and other literary creatives of the era. However, within Robinson's argument is his own iteration of a conceptual reduction that presents an analytical limitation worth challenging—namely that most of the Black aestheticists as poets, playwrights, and theorists that Robinson engages are Black

men. I am particularly interested in how Robinson's choice implicitly recreates a simplified understanding of the Black aesthetic that obscures the conceptual tensions that other Black writers, specifically Black queer women, experienced in relation to this aesthetic and movement that, according to Larry Neal, was concerned with "confront[ing] the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West."[ix]

As I attempted to clarify in the introduction, which has been extensively written about, the radical impulse of the Black Arts Movement and Black aesthetic ideology was somewhat tempered by some predominant discourse, including the denigration of Black feminism, the mobilization of the Black aesthetic to avenge the emasculation of Black masculinity, the conflation of "homosexuality" and "lesbianism" with whiteness, and the refusal to both take seriously the contributions of Black women writers and account for the material implications and manifestations of intramural violence against Black women from its leaders. In stating this, I am not attempting to depict the movement or Black male aestheticists as simply misogynistic and homophobic. Indeed, many Black queer writers, including Cheryl Clarke, have reflected on relationships with people like Amiri Baraka that represent a dynamic where confronting homophobia was absolutely necessary and where respect (to some degree) and comradery were also present. What I am asserting here is that prioritizing Baraka as the representation of Black aestheticism and Black literary engagement with avant-garde jazz misses the nuances within the ideology and the Black Arts Movement more broadly. In this way, I am interested in the iterations of the Black aesthetic that we might read as conversant with avant-garde jazz in a conceptual sense but was not forwarding an "essentialized understanding of blackness" in the same way because they—Black queer people, for example—were already in a contentious

relationship with the predominant vision of Black aestheticism and excluded from its referential idealized Blackness.

In this iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms, I bring together the experimentalism and improvisation of modal and free/avant-garde jazz, particularly through the possibilities embedded in their structural open-endedness, with Black queer feminist creative projects to consider their articulation of a necessarily Black queer feminist aesthetic where experimentalism manifested in many forms, not in service of producing an essentialized Black/Black queer identity but as an opening toward Black queer self-making as an ongoing creative and embodied practice. On the one hand, the experimentalism emerged through form, both in their blurring the lines between genre—i.e., the novel, poetry, and performance works—and through their push against linearity in a structural and narrative sense. Entangled with this was also the opportunity for practices in self-naming that exhibited embodied and nomenclatural disidentification as they were immersed communally, politically, and artistically in both the Black cultural nationalist and women's movements.

Here, I extend the exploration of Black feminist literary antagonisms with jazz as part of the critical framework by building on the work of Black Performance Studies scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, specifically her conceptualization of the theatrical jazz aesthetic. Grounded in performance ethnography in collaboration with her partner and interlocutor, Black lesbian playwright and novelist Sharon Bridgforth, the theatrical jazz aesthetic names how the improvisational approach of jazz informs their process for creating performance works with the audience in real time. As they outline in an interview with Francesca T. Royster entitled, "Queering the Jazz Aesthetic,"[x] the entanglement of queerness and jazz in their Black performance method and philosophy is rooted in the transgression of Western embodied and

creative approaches, norms, standards, and values. Indeed, reflecting De Veaux's literary interpretation of a Black philosophy of time, nonlinearity, and being, Bridgforth outlines how the theatrical jazz aesthetic offers formal and narrative interventions by integrating a variety of forms and artistic mediums that shifts from one context to another and is contingent on the creative offerings and expertise of audience members. Furthermore, she foregrounds explorations of time and being where "the future/the living, the dead, the unborn coexist."[xi] This kind of Black philosophy also drives the structure and narrative of Bridgforth's performance novels, notably her 1998 *the bull-jean stories* and the 2004 *love conjure/blues* also published through Moore's Redbone Press. Although performance ethnography as a methodology is beyond the scope of this project, Jones' and Bridgforth's emphasis on the subversive work of jazz and improvisation as critical to their approach to Black queer theater-making and as a practice of Black queerness builds a generative intergenerational connection between De Veaux as, for me, a kind of predecessor and Bridgforth, that foregrounds a Black queer philosophy of time, form, and being. This connection also does the work of pushing at the triangulation of jazz, Black aestheticism, and Black masculinity, unearthing a lineage of Black queer aestheticism that engaged the jazz principles of improvisation and experimentalism as creative and embodied ethos.

"Iridescent and Brazen"

A year after Hardwick's letter, she and De Veaux co-founded and established the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company, described as an "experiment in poetic and dramatic form" that "dramatizes Black women's quest for self-determination," and remained a "loose coalition of artists from different genres." In a flyer for one of their first performances and in promotional materials that followed, the term "neomythic" appears. Predating Lorde's foundational term of biomythography from *Zami*, their deployment of neomythic encapsulated the coalescence of

their experimental structural and genre approaches with the ongoing process of individual and collective Black queer self-making. In the interim period between the letter and the company's founding, Hardwick and De Veaux collaborated on an "experimental workshop," subsequently presenting that work for the Artists Collective Retreat in Peekskill, NY and later at The Ear Inn/Art Cabaret in Greenwich Village.[xii] With the formation of the company as an outgrowth from this initial collaboration, the archive suggests the duo debuted their work as a more unified formation on Friday, July 14, 1977 with a program titled "Flamboyant Ladies Theatre in Traumatic Readings & Fantasy Featuring Gwendolen Hardwick and Alexis De Veaux." Their artistic strong suits complemented each other, with De Veaux as poet and playwright and Hardwick as an seasoned actor. Their porous organizational and creative formation made way for the eventual participation of different artists, a mainstay including Judith Alexa Jackson—a notable mime performer trained in France. Together, through this structure and in different iterations, they created and staged performances that integrated instrumental and vocal music, dance and other movement, in addition to monologues and other spoken word performances through an experimental and collaborative practice.

When asked about the origins of the name "flamboyant ladies," both Hardwick and De Veaux foregrounded their own personal and collective disidentifications with the term lesbian. Indeed, during that time, many Black queer women writers, community organizers, artists, and cultural workers were interrogating the utility and accuracy of lesbianism for their own sexual and political identification, workshopping and experimenting with alternative terminology in the process. For example, in her 1983 essay, "New Notes on Lesbianism" appearing in *Sojourner* magazine, Cheryl Clarke elucidated the kind of questions that grounded Black queer women's complex relationship to the term, including fear around the term's taboo, socially-maligned

position intracommunally and a disconnect between understanding the need for a political correlation with sexual preferences or “woman-bonding.” Through a brief engagement with alternative terms that emerged, like Alice Walker’s womanist/womanism, Clarke concludes the essay with a proud declaration of her own sexual and political identification with an expansive conception of lesbianism, claiming, “I name myself lesbian because I do not subscribe to predatory/institutionalized heterosexuality…any self-determined woman can call herself a lesbian if she is about affirming herself and other women.”[xiii] In our conversation, De Veaux remarked that she and Hardwick sought something bigger than lesbian that encapsulated a kind of daring or “brazen” comportment, politic, and creative praxis that pushed against what they experienced as the limitations of the predominantly white women’s movement, particularly regarding the entanglements (and implications) of whiteness, lesbian separatism, and capitalist aspirations on their own intramural investments. Relatedly, Hardwick’s emphasis on the need for alternative space in both an artistic and political sense was informed by having been deeply immersed in the Black theatre scene in New York and as a former political organizer. Recounting being a member of the Black Student Union at her local community college in New York in the early 1970s, the union modeled itself after Huey P. Newton’s faction of the Black Panther Party with Hardwick serving as the Minister of Information. Through that work, Hardwick orchestrated and operated a free breakfast program for Black youth through Concord Baptist Church in Bedstuy before the work was abruptly discontinued after the church was mysteriously bombed. Despite the opportunity for leadership through that avenue, she emphasized the rarity of that possibility going forward, remarking that many of the Black political organizing spaces she found herself in thereafter outright refused leadership positions for women and de-prioritized attention to the issues specific to Black women.[xiv] Moreover, as

gestured toward in her 1976 correspondence with De Veaux, this issue extended to the Black theatre space. In her experience, despite the movement's growth, the representation of complex, multi-dimensional Black women remained peripheral. In a 1984 *Heresies*[xv] feature on Breena Clarke's staging of her sister Cheryl Clarke's first poetry collection, *Narratives: poems in the tradition of Black women*, Hardwick underscored her frustration with the Black theatre scene while giving thanks for the opportunity to have been part of the show. She stated that the parts she found herself auditioning for in the mid to late 70s were "appalling…almost always written by Black men depicting Black women merely as ornaments, backdrops, or objects of frustration."[xvi] In the early to mid-1970s, Hardwick had trained and performed with Ernie McClintock's Afro-American Studio for Acting and Speech and his 127th Repertory Ensemble Theater where she had found a community of Black artists interested in merging Black political consciousness with "viable theater involvement" outside of the mainstream. When it was defunded, and she subsequently found herself "on the unemployment line…half-heartedly [going] the traditional path to various cattle calls and auditions" where she was met with these denigrating roles, the intervention of what would become the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company and the other queer work that followed is clear. Hardwick's exposure to the Black theatre scene was vast, providing her with a level of expertise and experience in pursuing this collaborative creative endeavor. Hardwick's meditation on the problematic of lesbian for herself as a term and identification was minor, only mentioning in a somewhat throwaway whisper that they didn't call themselves lesbian in search of something more. While Hardwick declined to give in-depth, direct commentary on her thinking about queerness in a personal and collective sense, she mentioned a number of women she had loved deeply. De Veaux's writing offers further insight.

In her 1983 essay for *Essence* magazine that was originally named "Of Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits" but would become "SisterLove," De Veaux traced two pathways of cultural and nomenclatural denigration and exclusion. On the one hand, De Veaux unearthed the moment, at age 13 in 1961, where her first queer yearning was pathologized. After sharing her desire for her Black woman teacher with a trusted friend and being called weird, a young De Veaux encountered "A Manual of Sexualis Homo Sapiens" in her grandmother's home, and saw herself reflected as embodying a "sad, social disease…unnatural…abnormal (at best)" (De Veaux, "Of Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits," 3). Understanding the intramural stakes of being Black, female, and "funny," De Veaux recounted the kind of suppression and isolation of being "terroriz[ed] into silence," underscoring the particular impossibility of Black queer sexual expression and desire. As the essay unfolds, the reader follows De Veaux's process of unlearning this pathology through a return to the various kinds of intimacies, sexual and otherwise, that she shared with Black women that were not devastating or repulsive or weird, but instead foundational, sustaining, beautiful. The multiple and varied encounters of intimacy was critical because, whether the youthful, familial closeness of sharing a room and bed with her sister, laying against the "soft strength of her body," the shared queer secrecy between she and her elder sister that was let loose over a cup of tea nearing the sister's early death, the sneaky conviviality between girlfriends teaching each other how to kiss boys, or the vulnerability in encountering her first lover, together provided access to an alternative knowing of her body and self against the Black gendered and sexual expectation of shame. This personal re-narration functioned to both recuperate her own self-image from the projection and cloak of that pathology, refusing to further consent and "collaborate with [her] own oppression…agree[ing] by omission to generations of negative sexual myths, piled historic and solid…" (De Veaux, "Of

Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits," 4). She foregoes a muted internal reconciliation to "live in the light…iridescent and brazen," in an attempt at "stumbl[ing] forward…in search of new words/a new path/new context for living and working together" (De Veaux, "Of Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits," 5). This pull towards togetherness also prioritized solidarity and connection with Black men. De Veaux speaks directly to the limitation of lesbian as a frame of reference and the subjugation of Black women in Black artistic, social, and political organizing spaces when she insists on this need to "still make bonds with my brothers and male friends," affirming the validity of their lives and experiences as Black men, while also "seek[ing] in male friends a respect for female worth. The ability to see me as powerful. And to see my work in the world not simply as 'women's work,' but as fundamental and important" (De Veaux, "Of Brazen Black Women and Feminist Pursuits," 7). De Veaux's criticism of an understanding of lesbianism earlier in the essay that was too simple and restrictive in its inability to account for her particular raced and classed experiences is reinforced through this assertion of her commitment to solidarity with Black men, implicitly addressing the beliefs and values of separatist lesbianism as incommensurate with the goal of liberation for all Black people. The whiteness of particular iterations of women's movement and lesbian separatist spaces stifled their ability to understand why Black queer and lesbian women would still seek and value solidarity with Black men, even as they suffered intramural violences.

On the one hand, the tension and plea De Veaux outlined was echoed across many contributions from other Black and Black queer feminists of the time, including Barbara Smith's introduction to the 1983 collection *Home Girls* and within the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement. Interwoven with their distinctly Black queer feminist socialist framework was a reflection on the issue of separatism addressed as such: "Although we are feminists and

Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race…"[xvii] On the other hand, akin to Clarke's identification with lesbianism, there were Black lesbian separatists who inhabited what I interpret as a kind of (dis)identification or a complex identification with lesbian separatism that underscored De Veaux's criticism in her 1983 essay. For a moment, I want to engage the work of Black lesbian separatists to respond to Julie Enszer's 2016 essay, "'How to stop choking to death: Rethinking Lesbian Separatism as a Vibrant Political Theory and Feminist Practice," wherein she offers criticism of the Combahee River Collective statement, specifically its suggestion of lesbian separatism's overwhelming whiteness both in its ideological representation and in socio-political organizing spaces. In part, Enszer addresses what she asserts as Combahee's "half-truths" by naming a number of "prominent women of color who identified with separatism," including Vernita Gray and Margaret Sloan-Hunter.[xviii] Challenging the presumed "racial binary between separatists and nonseparatists," Enszer argues that the "reality was more complex."[xix] While I agree that the reality was more complex, I push back against the idea that the complexity is adequately captured by the existence of Black lesbian separatists, nor does naming their existence fully address the issues that Combahee and others outlined. The 1988 edited collection, *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*[xx]—itself a robust, dynamic explication of the many critical divergences and convergences that might cohere under the banner of lesbian separatism—features four Black contributors (as far as their essays and/or bios identified them), including Sloan-Hunter (co-founder of the National Black Feminist Organization), Anita Cornwell, Vivienne Louise, and a woman writing under the pseudonym "Anna Lee."

In Anna Lee's first contribution to the collection simply entitled, "A Black Separatist" originally penned in 1981, Lee outlines her experience of and commitment to Black lesbian separatism as one of great difficulty because of her inherent vulnerability to "conflict with each of the groups from which she could reasonably expect support, nurturance, sustenance."[xxi] At the center of Lee's manifesto of sorts is an indictment on white feminists' inability to understand the implications of their whiteness on their political organizing strategies, specifically in the context of response to rape and understanding the complexity of the criminal justice system, sexual violence, and the indiscriminate criminalization of Black men as perpetrators. Importantly, Lee names the ways in which this problem within predominantly white feminist organizing spaces fueled decisions like an increased number police officers at rape crisis shelters. The lack of explicit attention to the nuance of the intersection of antiblackness and policing, Lee argues, "leads to the mistaken belief that more police officers or more female police officers would begin to alleviate the horrors wimmin face in being raped" (Lee, "A Black Separatist," 86). Lee concludes the essay by naming the kind of privilege that white women exhibit in being able to ignore and minimize the issues of race and racism. While Lee ultimately reinforces her commitment to separatism as an identity, it seems necessary to explicate the perspective of Black lesbian separatists in the broader discourse about lesbian separatism and whiteness because it clarifies how Black separatists' identification with lesbian separatism did not necessarily dispel notions of racism or, at the very least, the limitations of whiteness in lesbian separatist ideology and organizing spaces. Moreover, Lee's contribution underscores the importance of distinguishing and clarifying the difference between a conversation about the predominant whiteness of lesbian separatism and how that whiteness, either explicitly or implicitly, informed their guiding principles and accusations of racism. Indeed, in the introduction to the anthology

while speaking to accusations of racism, the editor writes, “Labeling separatists racist per se is a way of disagreeing with separatist politics without any real argument or debate over political differences. Merely hurling a label…is an effective tool of to avoid debate of the issues, to censor ideas and silence argument, especially criticism” (Hoagland, “Introduction,” 9). However, Hoagland herself does not directly engage with Black or other feminists of color on *whiteness* in her refutation of lesbian separatism being deemed racist, and the white lesbian response across the anthology to the problem of whiteness follows this, even as there are shared commitments to ending racism. I discuss this at length because, while I agree with Enszer’s emphasis on complexity and Ramzi Fawaz’s assertation that many feminists of color both within and beyond the umbrella of separatism espoused separatist ideology and principles[xxii], it feels necessary to consider how Black lesbian separatists understood themselves in relation to the broader lesbian feminist movement and how they echoed sentiments expressed by other feminists of color who distanced themselves, which pointed towards a problem of *whiteness*, if not racism.

Embodying what the Combahee River Collective noted as a position of simultaneous solidarity and struggle, De Veaux and Hardwick entered an ongoing process of creative self-making that linked their desire to construct and meet themselves anew, away from smallness, shame, and denigration and towards extravagance, experimentation, and brazenness with and through their performance practice. The kind of open-endedness of this creative and embodied ethos is in part reflected through De Veaux’s penning of the essay six years after the Flamboyant Ladies’ beginnings, restating her shared commitment to the journey of self-naming and actualization. The Flamboyant Lady as a marker of Black gendered and sexual unruliness, capaciousness, and exploration itself was structured by an orientation toward impermanence or change, or, put differently, no definitive/stable end. Even as they had decided on and pursued

that terminology as a creative and embodied practice of bold experimentalism, De Veaux's essay suggests that it wasn't a container for identity but an ongoing practice toward the freest version of themselves and their art which were continuously re-worked.

With the fluidity of their artistic structures, De Veaux and Hardwick, the theatre co., and their Brooklyn apartment located at 135 Eastern Parkway, across the street from the Brooklyn Museum and Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, became a kind of physical and conceptual home for their creative offshoots, and this porousness was further exemplified and sustained as their creative endeavors expanded. According to the earliest available record, by January 1980, Hardwick and De Veaux were advertising a forthcoming women's only Flamboyant Ladies: Saturday Salon modeled after Harlem Renaissance-era rent parties and salons. Indeed, as James Wilson has noted, the privacy of early 20th century Harlem rent parties in the more modest accommodations of rooms in tenement buildings and affluent homes made possible a vibrant subculture of covert and overt Black queer gendered and sexual experimentation and visibility for members of the Black working class and Black elite *and* provided an opportunity for a range of performance artists to workshop their acts before "find[ing their] way into a Harlem nightclub, in Black vaudeville, and perhaps eventually on Broadway."[xxiii] Importantly, scholar andre m. carrington's, "Salon Cultures and Spaces of Culture Edification," complexifies Wilson's analysis of the function of salons across and between socioeconomic class for raucous activity and sexual exploration; carrington unearths how certain salon spaces of the Black intelligentsia, including the homes of A'lelia Walker—also mentioned in Wilson's analysis from the perspective of lifelong Black lesbian activist Mabel Hampton who attended a queer sex party at Walker's home[xxiv]—and Jessie Fauset, served as a space of "rehearsal" and indoctrination into New Negro values in anticipation of a kind of high-brow public performance, curbing the influence of

"transgressive social spaces by educating Negro youth in preferred ways of cultural life."[xxv] In the lineage of the Harlem rent party as a generative and somewhat protected space of Black queer embodied and artistic experimentation, Hardwick and De Veaux built on the momentum of their successful Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company fundraiser in 1979 to envisage a gathering space as communal resource that served social, artistic, and political purposes, inviting attendees and contributors into an "environment that all flamboyant ladies deserve and demand."[xxvi] The urgency of this space was shaped by the desires that undergirded De Veaux's later essay—the possibility of collective recovery from the projected pathology of Black queer sexuality that was compounded by the whiteness and isolation of other queer social and political spaces, toward the brazen expression of Black queer desire, yearning, and being. Moreover, they wanted to create and provide access to peripheralized artistic production and raise political consciousness and engagement shaped by growing internationalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-war Black feminist perspectives that were particularly attuned to the experiences of women in the global south. Indeed, this collectivist, internationalist orientation was critical because of the rise of neoliberalism and neoliberalist subjectivity that emphasized a kind of individualism, self-advancement, and personal responsibility that fueled a socio-political passivity and divestment for the sake/benefit of the self. This kind of political passivity was particular detrimental in the bracketed period between 1979-1985, which was marked by an influx of revolutionary, anti-apartheid struggles in places like Nicaragua, Grenada, Palestine, Lebanon, and South Africa. As Wendy Brown notes in, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," "…a 'mismanaged,' life, the neoliberal appellation for failure to navigate impediments to prosperity, becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency."[xxvii]

On the one hand, in a social sense, a letter Hardwick wrote to De Veaux on January 10,1981 while she was away doing a show, reiterated the multifaceted purposes the Salon served by underscoring the tension Black queer women experienced with the predominant whiteness of the lesbian bars and social spaces even beyond New York. Recounting her observation after having gone out with a friend, Hardwick mentioned “doing a salon number” while there, attempting to intervene in this problem for the Black women in that community. In a political sense, two archival documents provide insight on the development of their political consciousness and engagement interwoven in and as a backdrop for the Salon. A flyer from a March 29, 1980 benefit hosted by the Women Free Women in Prison organization in support of the women in Bedford Hills Prison and *No More Cages*, a women’s prison newsletter, featured a Flamboyant Ladies performance. By 1982, the Flamboyant Ladies organized and put on a three-day event entitled, “Spring Offensive Against Nuclear Arms,” to contribute a Black perspective on the need for nuclear disarmament during the Cold War. Hosted from May 28th-30th in hopes of galvanizing Black support for the movement, asking and answering, “What is our involvement?,” the event featured speakers, film screenings, and a salon-style poetry reading and brunch, with performances from Jewelle Gomez, Toi Derricotte, Cherrie Moraga, June Jordan, and more.

De Veaux’s opening remarks for the event foregrounded the explicit goal of pushing Black people toward internationalist politics or an “international chorus of resistance,” mapping a connection between the Flamboyant Ladies as a “neomythic experiment” with an investment in understanding how the quotidian life of Black people in the United States was entangled with the ongoing acquisition and stockpiling of nuclear bombs and was simultaneously linked with the struggles of those in the global south. While demystifying the “out there” perception of the threat

by pushing the audience to visualize their personal, communal, and geographical references and investments as the jumping off point for solidarity and activation, De Veaux also foregrounded the potential detrimental effects on the land, water, and animal life. Her concluding poem titled, "Questioning Authority," which would appear in her 1985 self-published collection *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings,* began by asking, "why should trees or rivers or even stars be mega-bombed out of orbit? Why should you or me/or the neighbors across the alley/or the kittens/or the Flatbush avenue/traffic/disintegrate…" Beginning with the land and other ecological elements, De Veaux clarified their mutual, entangled vulnerability to destruction while unsettling the presumed ontological hierarchy that would consider the wellbeing of nonhuman plant and animal life as secondary or peripheral to human experience. Moreover, De Veaux stated plainly that attention to the multiscalar, destructive potential of nuclear expansion was essential because, how could one *not* witness? "How can you not think of the warmongers and the bomb manufacturers who say (to us) peace, in the world, on the subways, in our streets, is a hopeless dream?"[xxviii] The deepening of the Flamboyant Ladies' internationalist politics was further reflected through their individual and collective written work, with particular attention to the revolutionary, anti-apartheid struggles of those in Nicaragua, Grenada, Palestine, Lebanon, and South Africa. With the 1979 success of Maurice Bishop's socialist People's Revolutionary Government/New Jewel Movement in Grenada and the subsequent U.S. invasion on October 25, 1983 resulting in Bishop's assassination and the end of the PRG; the 1979 success of the socialist Sandinistas in Nicaragua and Reagan's subsequent ongoing intervention through the funding of Contras; the Israeli bombing and invasion of Lebanon in 1982 targeting the Palestinian Liberation Organization, resulting in the death of 15,000 Palestinian refugees and Lebanese people; and the movement to end the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Flamboyant Ladies

and salon participants' explicit engagement with and meditation on these struggles defined the kind of political consciousness developed in the space.

For both Hardwick and De Veaux, June Jordan, in particular, became a critical thought partner and interlocutor in the sharpening of their politics. Indeed, in addition to participating in the Salon, Jordan offered the keynote address/evening remarks for the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Co.'s second annual benefit on October 25, 1980 where she reflected on the limitations of an over-attachment to categorical identification in developing real political, structural analysis and understanding what is necessary for the liberation of all oppressed people. Jordan begins the address by saying, "Categories are boxes. They don't let you have any room to breathe. They don't let you have any room to grow. Any room for freedom," before reciting her poem "A Short Note to my Very Critical and Beloved Comrades." Jordan's sentiment here underscores a reading of the flamboyant lady as a divestment from a fixed identity and an openness toward an ongoing embodied development also informed by robust political consciousness and analysis. Moreover, Jordan's poetry collection *passion: 1977-1980* and her 1985 collection *On Call: Political Essays*, which featured letters and reflections from 1981-1984 like "Black Folks on Nicaragua," "Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There," and "Life After Lebanon" revealed an extensive engagement with the aforementioned issues, and the public and private correspondence between the three of them underscore this influence within and beyond the Salon space.

Through the Salon, De Veaux and Hardwick hosted Black queer and otherwise poets, novelists, drummers, documentarians, and other kinds of cultural workers to share and workshop their works-in-progress. In its earliest iteration (and presumably through its duration), many of the salon's presenters were invited to share, one of whom was poet, novelist, and playwright Jewelle Gomez. Gomez noted that the Flamboyant Ladies Salon was the first place she shared

the earliest versions of what would become her debut 1991 Black lesbian vampire novel, *The Gilda Stories* (though originally named and listed in the ad as *Scarlet Letter*) published through independent lesbian and feminist press Firebrand Books, and where she first heard June Jordan read poetry. Other featured participants included singer and songwriter Evelyn Harris—a member of the critically-acclaimed Black woman acapella group Sweet Honey and the Rock, Edwina Lee Tyler and Roberta Stokes—a notable drumming and dancing duet, and Monica Freeman—a documentarian whose films centered on the lives of Black women artists. The February 1980 salon series presentation included a screening of Michelle Parkerson's then brand-new documentary on jazz singer Betty Carter, entitled, *…But Then, She's Betty Carter*. A filmmaker and documentarian also committed to deep exploration of Black women cultural workers, Parkerson is arguably most well-known for her 1995 film *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde*. Parkerson filmed the Carter documentary between 1976-1980, with it primarily centered on Carter's 1979 performance at Howard University.

Betty Carter as Flamboyant Lady

"There's really only one jazz singer—only one. It's Betty Carter." – Carmen McRae

Although it's unclear how it came to be that Parkerson's newest film would be screened for one of the earliest Saturday Salons, I want to briefly linger on the integration and alignment of Carter's life and artistic experience into that space, particularly through this understanding of a Flamboyant lady as a creative and embodied ethos of brazen experimentalism. Put differently, in explicating Black queer and lesbian writers' and other cultural workers' relationship/connection to Carter, namely through this experimental ethos, I want to consider what happens when we position Carter as an alternative referent for avant-garde/free jazz, pushing against the aforementioned triangulation of jazz, Black aestheticism, and Black masculinity.

Born Lillie Mae Carter in Flint, Michigan, Betty Carter emerged on the jazz scene as a teenager in mid-1940s Detroit as the transition from swing to Bebop was percolating. Carter spent much of the earlier part of her career meditating on and experimenting with ways to vocally distinguish herself from well-known vocalists at the time, primarily Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn. Indeed, across a number of recorded interviews, Carter made repeated reference to the desire to establish individuality both in the tonal quality and texture of her voice. Because bebop was rooted in a challenge to the commercialization of swing and was informed by a shift from music that was in service to a dancing audience to an upbeat style that prioritized musicianship, technical complexity, and improvisation, Carter's distinct scatting technique combined with her airy texture facilitated an early career collaboration with Lionel Hampton beginning in 1948, in which Carter helped bring Hampton's band into the new approach while getting early career exposure to touring and the national jazz scene.

Biographer William R. Bauer's work in *Open the Door: The Life and Music of Betty Carter*[xxix] is useful here for understanding the technical and stylistic development of Carter's voice and approach, which he reads through a prism of "intentional unmeasured plasticity." Beyond her work with Hampton's band, Carter's vocal performance was defined by an experimentation that expounded on scatting to create entirely new melodic and rhythmic interpretations of jazz standards and other well-known songs, often in the moment, and that varied from one performance to the next, including for songs she had written.[xxx] As Bauer establishes through close technical analysis of Carter's vocal choices, despite the fact that improvisation and scatting was not new, Carter's demonstrated fearlessness in her performance approach, particularly around the bending of notes bordering on pitchiness, unwieldy melodic deviance, and complex rhythmic choices set her apart from other jazz vocalists at the time.[xxxi]

Indeed, in reflecting on her musical and performance philosophy in Parkerson's documentary, Carter remarked that her foremost priority was spontaneity and melodic reimagination, stating, "Every time I get on stage, I know it's gonna be different. It's off the top of my head…whatever happens that night. Now the next night, I totally forgot what I did the night before, so here it comes back again at me another way. That's okay, the tempo may be different. The boys may be feeling different. I may be feeling different. My ears might not be as clean that night, might not be as precise as I want them to be, but it's always different." Carter's openness to reaching as far as she could into the musical possibilities available to her, beyond what some might perceive as the acceptable limit especially for a vocalist, led her to cultivate a sound that made it possible for Ray Charles to describe her as having a "free jazz voice."[xxxii] This philosophy created a kind of tension and illegibility with both record executives and jazz critics. Bauer highlights a 1955 *Down Beat* review of her album of the same year, *Meet Betty Carter and Ray Bryant,* that perfectly encapsulates this discordance, even in the earlier parts of her career when her experimentalism was only beginning. After giving the album two out of five stars because of Carter's performance alone, jazz critic Nat Hentoff described Carter's performance as "grotesque," stating that Carter sounded like a caricature of herself, giving into "somersault[ing] instead of flowing." In conclusion, he argues that Carter would only see a successful career as a jazz vocalist if she learned the "naturalness and simplicity" of true jazz singing.[xxxiii]

Hentoff's review makes clear the precise problem that the emergence of bebop (and subsequently avant-garde, free jazz) illuminated and responded to—that the commercialization and abstraction of jazz facilitated a redefining of what "real" jazz was and could be, in many ways attempting to morph jazz into a legible creative, cultural product shaped by white aesthetic ideals and values. Amiri Baraka's 1963 essay, "Jazz and the White Critic," aptly clarifies this

point when he writes, "…most jazz criticism tends to enforce white middle-brow standards of excellence as criteria for performance of a music that in its most profound manifestation is completely antithetical to such standards; in fact, quite often is in direct reaction against them."[xxxiv] Though Baraka pays scant attention to Black women jazz vocalists and instrumentalists in his criticism, his condemnation of the white jazz critics' refusal to both take seriously the Black "socio-cultural philosophy" and context of jazz music/Negro music while simultaneously attempting to "formalize and finally institutionalize it," contextualizes how Carter's openness and allegiance to limitlessness or going "too" far, to the grotesque in a persistent, brazen manner, to divesting from a kind of legibility shaped by the convergence of liberal humanism and capital gravely impacted her visibility and overall success as a jazz vocalist.

A conversation with poet Cheryl Clarke was my introduction to Betty Carter, subsequently unearthing a web of specifically Black queer and lesbian admiration for the singer during the mid-late 20th century—this distinction was interesting to me because following this conversation, I would encounter veteran vinyl sellers, jazz enthusiasts, and others with deep musical knowledge from this period who had no clue who Carter was, underscoring this peripherality that I've named thus far. For her then newly-released edited poetry collection, *Archive of Style*, Clarke penned a poem simply titled, "Betty Carter," recounting her experience attending three different Carter concerts between 1963 and 1979. The poem captures Carter's regal on-stage leadership and the complex rhythmic and melodic choices that defined her style. In the second stanza that begins with Carter in motion, "Slic[ing] the air with her hand," the movement signals both a gentle, etherealness extending the texture of her voice and an unusual, forceful direction to her drummer; unusual in the way that jazz vocalists had been traditionally

positioned as secondary to instrumentalists and not as band leaders. In this moment that Clarke captures, Carter is not only not secondary, as Clarke reads the drummer's disposition as projecting a sentiment of refusal and denigration at an "old canary trying to tell me how to play my drums," she is instructive, guiding the reluctant drummer and the remainder of the bandmembers behind her lead into a "real behind-the beat/ 'Clang, clang, clang went the trolly'/erupt[ing] from her throat."[xxxv] Clarke's presentation of Carter's volcanic performance offers another illustration of Bauer's notion of Carter's intentional unmeasured plasticity that is buttressed by a distinct flamboyant embodiment and performativity that both necessitated and was reflected through her assumption of band leadership and otherwise creative independence.

Given my unfamiliarity with Carter at the time of our conversation, it wasn't clear to me exactly what Clarke meant when she mentioned that she didn't believe Carter had been recorded very well throughout her career. However, Carter's difficult history with record executives, both in her struggles with the arrangers she was forced to work with and, relatedly, with the labels' attempts to reshape her style and approach for pop, commercial viability established a somewhat irresolvable issue within the confines of mainstream musicianship. [xxxvi] Indeed, in an interview with long-time Black radio host Ed Love in 2976, Carter reflected on the 1960s and the emergence of Rock and Roll in particular, emphasizing the various degrees to which the prioritization of capital, as in "bring[ing] the white audience further into Black music" while extracting the music from its context, both sacrificed and isolated real jazz musicianship in both technical ability and creativity, as jazz musicians who refused to shift their sound were left without recording contracts.[xxxvii] Furthermore, this tension arguably compounded the already complex relationship Carter had with the limitations of studio recordings resulting from her own stylistic approach; for her, the ability to really tap into an expansive experimentation required an

audience and could not be accessed through constrained studio arrangements. In this way, Carter herself inhabited the space of a re-signified avant-garde[xxxviii] defined through a contradiction shaped by her simultaneous experimental jazz approach that distinguished her from all other jazz vocalists and isolated her within the landscape in the earlier period, and an insistence on a somewhat "pure" jazz philosophy that was, for her, its blackest, most culturally situated form. Carter's commitment to artistic freedom grounded in an unwavering allegiance to jazz music and an ethos of brazen experimentalism on her own terms resulted in the 1970 establishment of Brooklyn-based Bet-Car Records, with the first album being a live album recorded at the famous Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village. Over the next 12 years, Carter would release three additional albums including *The Betty Carter Album* (1976), *The Audience with Betty Carter* (1980, live) and *Whatever Happened to Love* (1982, live), before merging with Verve records in 1987, maintaining control over her artistic production and output, which included the release of another live album with fellow jazz singer, Carmen McRae.

The proliferation of live performances following her independence—and the subsequent increased success of her career—underscores the importance of live performance for Carter in tapping into the depths of her vocal experimentation and, thusly, an environment where she felt freest and most comfortable. Indeed, in Parkerson's documentary, Carter exclaimed that running her own label was freeing because she didn't have to consult a "board of directors" or "producer" about how to make her music, stating, "I'd rather ask a neighbor." As a Black woman jazz vocalist who was all too familiar with ostracization, Carter's role as record label CEO and band lead—managing the distribution of albums before deals were available to her and arranging the scores for performances and recordings—the masculinization of the all-encompassing leadership positions she inhabited further cast her as an anomaly. The context of this rare positionality

clarifies what Clarke gestured toward in the second stanza of her poem. Bauer notes that, during this period, Carter was often dressed in full suits with caps, leaning into the presumed masculinity and gendered nature of her musical and business undertakings as she faced accusations of lesbianism.[xxxix] As Bauer reads Carter's masculine garb as "transgender moments,"[xl] I argue that her experimentation in this corporeal sense further reflects how she inhabits the flamboyant lady as a creative and embodied ethos of brazen experimentalism; reading her through this prism allows us to consider how her insistence on creative experimentation, and what that insistence necessitated, was entangled with unruly Black gendered expression. Each facet of Carter's artistic practice was rooted in and in service to the cultivation of an environment where boundless experimentation was the driving force, not toward any definitive creative or embodied end, but always toward her freest articulation. Carter's embodiment of the flamboyant lady figure was exhibited through the insistence of limitless experimentation on her own terms, shaped by a hyper-valuation of craft and divestment from capital, and necessitating creative independence and leadership through unruly Black gendered expression. This, then, created a generative ground for inspiration, connection, and admiration with Black queer and lesbian writers and other cultural workers.

The Gap Tooth Girlfriends

Near to where Bet-Car Records was housed in Brooklyn, by August 1980, the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Co. was preparing for its next experiment in journeying toward and embodying Black queerness through creative practice. The Gap Tooth Girlfriends began as an 8-week writing seminar spearheaded by De Veaux that sought to bring together Black queer and otherwise women who shared the aesthetic feature of gap teeth; in what seems like a superficial point of connection, De Veaux's criticism of featurism and reflection on what is traditionally understood as an aesthetic flaw to be corrected had appeared across her work alongside

commentary on colorism, fatphobia, and homophobia from her childhood experience and across her life, arguably informing her impulse to extrapolate this line of inquiry through a community with this particular shared experience. The limited structure of the seminar reflects an open-ended and somewhat fleeting orientation that did not figure or pursue the Gap Tooth Girlfriend as a destination but instead as a site of generativity through which to interrogate desirability and intimacy, white supremacist beauty standards, Blackness, and Black queer aestheticism. It offered another portal toward brazen creative and embodied experiments in self-reclamation rooted in a refusal of the denigration of Black features.

The Gap Tooth Girlfriends included a number of noted Black lesbian and queer writers and cultural producers, including De Veaux, Gomez, Donna Allegra, Lorraine Bethel, Sapphire, Shirley Steele, Chandelle Markman, Karla Jackson, and Angela Salgado. Although the archive does not provide further insight into the seminar experience, at its close, the Gap Tooth Girlfriend participants decided to self-publish the work they produced as an anthology containing poems, short stories, and essays. De Veaux's introduction to the anthology encapsulates one of the critical points of this chapter—the pursuit of an alternative to lesbian for the Black queer women in this group produced creative experiments in naming that were not in search of a fixed identity but parts of ongoing processes toward their Blackest, queerest, and freest embodiment. The processual, impermanent nature of the project was inflected through De Veaux's choice to include a myriad of definitions for a gap tooth girlfriend, as both noun and verb. Interestingly, the definitions that comprise the noun section foster a sense of intangibility, with the use of ethereal language suggesting that they are amorphous and imaginative with no literal, embodied referent, hovering over or escaping both the reader and author. Of the seven, four of them stood out to me: (1) a river of women; (2) a consensus of breathing; (6) an insomnia of words; (7) a

fragrance of experiences (De Veaux, "Introduction," 2). Undermining the ontological permanence that a noun demands, the multiplicity of physical references like river and fragrance, known for constant movement, on the one hand, and eventual disintegration on the other, itself suggests a fleeting or ephemeral experience. The gap tooth girlfriend as verb, however, is somehow more tangible in that it reads like a series of shared commitments, including (1) to struggle, to differ, to risk visibility; (2) to overcome silence. For De Veaux, those shared commitments were the guide as there was no uniform, singular embodiment that they each entered or would exit this seminar experience with as exemplified through the intangible nouns; put differently, the openness to being seen did not hinge on being made monolithic or legible.

Moreover, conversations with De Veaux and Gomez emphasized the tactile, intimate nature of their self-publishing process. Gomez shared that they each typed up their own writing before coming together at Alexis' and Gwen's apartment to create the layout and order of the contributions. They conducted readings around Brooklyn to fund the printing, promising a copy of the anthology in exchange for a five-dollar donation. Indeed, according to a flyer found in De Veaux's archive, they hosted one of these "readings of prose and poetry of a particular nature in anticipation of their forthcoming anthology" on March 14, 1981 and another on October 8, 1981 at Womanbooks—a feminist bookstore in the city where Gomez also worked. Contributor Shirley Steele's partner, Ann Chapman, was the photographer who took the group photo outside of the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens that stretches across the front and back cover of the book. After taking the anthology to a local lesbian printshop, Tower Press, to be photocopied and assembled, Gomez noted, "we got this beautiful book back and delivered them to everybody. We didn't owe anybody any money. It really does look like we made it at home because we did…[but] it was a really lovely adventure. We were committed to doing it ourselves."[xli] The

process served as an extension of De Veaux's opening line in her introduction, "This is how we introduced ourselves to ourselves to produce the work/we kept saying eight weeks the work/but it was more."

The Gap Tooth Girlfriends would go on to have two additional installments, *The Gap Tooth Girlfriends II* (1982) and *The Gap Tooth Girlfriends: The Third Act* (1984), that featured different facilitators and contributors. By the Third Act, orchestrated by Hardwick, the Gap Tooth Girlfriends was a kind of derivative performance ensemble—integrating music, dance, and other performance aspects into their shows—offering standalone performances that would fund the publication of another anthology. The integration of an internationalist, anti-imperialist political analysis persisted in this edition, as they dedicated the anthology to one of their South African collaborators, Fatima Dike, and the country's anti-apartheid movement. Hardwick's offerings to the collection captured the multiplicity of the Flamboyant Ladies space broadly as a convergence or entanglement of political consciousness and the ongoing development of queer embodiment, desire, and expression. Echoing De Veaux's sentiments in her remarks for their Spring Offensive Against Nuclear Arms, Hardwick's poem, "I Wanted This to Be a Love Poem," navigates the simultaneity of yearning for intimacy and queer vulnerability with the imposition of Ronald Reagan's uninhibited nuclear weapons advancement and the atmospheric sense of impending doom. On the page, the interjection of Reagan's flagrant carelessness of the possibility of mass destruction under the guise of defense punctures the imagined, closed-off connection with the all-caps lettering and the text's off-set alignment at the end of the first stanza, "TOP STORY: RONALD REAGAN HAS STEPPED UP THE SPACE PROGRAM" (Hardwick, "I Wanted This to Be a Love Poem," 110). As the poem continues, the hypothetical or intended poem hanging in the backgrounded rooted in attempts at intimate connection outside

the frame of that affected by this political witnessing and implication is rendered impossible time and again as the proliferation of U.S. global invasions and their death, destruction, and destabilization enters the narrator's mind and accumulates on the page—"think[ing] about Grenada/wonder[ing] about Guatemala/remember[ing] Chile/like Guyana Angola Nicaragua" (Hardwick, "I Wanted This to Be a Love Poem," 111). We might read Hardwick's poem that goes unwritten not as a suggestion that one cannot or should not engage intimacy amid global catastrophe from a place of moral superiority or self-righteousness, but as an indictment of the self-preservationist, individualist neoliberal logic and mode of relationality of the time. This logic produced a kind of anti-sociality and influenced a pull towards socio-political disengagement for the sake of capital accumulation and human capital improvement. Moreover, the internationalist orientation of the poem reinforces its challenge to the reward of neoliberalism's socio-political disengagement specifically because of, as Brown notes, "Third World" vulnerability to neoliberalism in general as it "yank[s] the chains of every aspect of Third World existence, including political institutions and social formations."[xlii] Thus, the impossibility of the *other* poem for Hardwick as a kind of representation of hyper-individuality and self-interest becomes a challenge to cultivate a queer embodiment and practice that is not seeking to be a "successful" neoliberal citizen-subject that hinges on a turning away from witnessing, consciousness, and entanglement. Hardwick's meditation on the alternative forms of relationality that are necessary for our collective survival in some ways anticipate Brand's critical intervention on love, or the limitation of love as a framework for understanding communal responsibility and collectivity in the face of pervasive ontological and structural violences that I explicated in Chapter Two. If love emerges as a form of relation for the Individual—Hardwick ends the poem with, "I wanted this to be a love poem/maybe/I'll

surrender my heart instead," then, like Brand, she pushes us toward something else where the deepening of intimacy manifests through shared witnessing, collective mobilization, and commitment to survival.

Hardwick's final contribution to the *Third Act* was a letter she wrote to June Jordan dated June 4, 1982; written at the time of Israel's second invasion of Lebanon (after the first in 1978) in an attempt to dismantle the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Hardwick's tone reads as tense and activated at the "atrocities done to Lebanese and Palestinian civilians in the name of 'national security' for the state of Israel" (Hardwick, "Open Letter to June Jordan," 113). Again, she implicates the way neoliberalism encourages socio-political passivity and disentanglement through her own vulnerable expression of desire for "*only* pretty kimonos, vintage wine, fresh cut flowers in every room, friends that I love near… " (ibid., emphasis added). Like her earlier poem, the urgency for understanding the interconnection of the conditions of Palestinian and Lebanese people with her own lived experience and those of the Black and Hispanic working class in the East Bronx and elsewhere usurps that vision of "utopia." She turns away from the "inhumanity" of the violence structuring the colonial pursuits of Israel, the antiBlack police violence in Brooklyn, the "arrogance of Britain in the Malvinas," for a version of being that is intentional in witnessing and being "connected to the worldwide struggle" toward collective liberation, while also "making life" (ibid). Hardwick's insistence on making this kind of life defines her embodiment of the flamboyant lady as an ethos of embodied experimentalism in its antagonism to the violences of the human as she struggles toward an alternative mode of relationality and being in the world. In the first letter she wrote to De Veaux in 1976, Hardwick commented that she had tried her hand at conjuring her own remedy to the unsatisfactory roles she was encountering during auditions, saying, "it was/is merely an unfinished attempt…alexis, I

am an actress, my craft requires all my energies… I will leave the playwriting to the writers (for now…)" (Hardwick, letter to Alexis De Veaux, 2). Hardwick's contributions here and spearheading of the *Third Act* reflect stepping into her own creative experimentalism as a strategy in self-making. Although the Flamboyant Lady Theatre Company would come to an end about three years later, the flamboyant lady as a creative and embodied ethos would continue into the next millennium as exhibited by De Veaux's 2014 *Yabo*—a novel written with a poetic, stanza structure centered on the narrative of an intersex Black youth into adulthood as they journey toward understanding and cultivating their freest Black queer embodiment.

To this point, this chapter has explicated an iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms through reading the flamboyant lady as a creative and embodied ethos of brazen experimentalism structured by an investment in open-endedness and ephemerality. The Flamboyant Lady Theatre Company as a kind of creative, literary, cultural, and socio-political "home" with a loose, porous organizational structure explicated a distinct Black queer feminist aestheticism that refused the confines of Western, neo/liberal humanist constructions of time, genre, narrative, relationality, and being. This facilitated an ongoing, interwoven experimentation in a daring, visible, risky, and vulnerable Black queer self-fashioning and creative, literary expression. Moreover, in its work of Black queer feminist literary preservation, this chapter has brought forward the underexamined literary production even within this space, specifically in highlighting the *Gap Tooth Girlfriends* in both the first and third iterations as work that is largely inaccessible, and the work and voice of Gwendolen Hardwick, whose contributions in that space are more difficult to map because of an archival gap. The F/flamboyant L/lady as organization and ethos was a critical space for unruly Black queer beings

to experiment with and cultivate their embodiment of Black queerness amid a myriad of exclusionary and antagonistic forces.

Building on this, in what follows, I turn to Charlene Cothran, *Venus* magazine, and Atlanta, Georgia. In doing so, I consider how an ethos of brazen experimentalism materialized from the founder's goal of making space for the rich, ordinariness of Black queer southern life, allowing for a necessary, distinctly southern intervention in the larger Black queer print media landscape of the late 20th century. This experimentalism manifested through its flexible, shifting content—from the integration of serialized short stories, letters from closeted community members, roundtable discussions about Black gendered and sexual self-fashioning and nomenclature, spiritual contributions, community member highlights of those seeking partnership, among many others. Regardless of what stayed or was phased out across the magazine's tenure in Atlanta, it was a crucial, reciprocal space for the fashioning of Black queer southern gendered and sexual expression, and its work was always in service towards deepening the Black queer creative, socio-cultural landscape and forwarding complex representations of Black queer southern life and narrative against stereotypical discursive representations and iconography. Its expansive approach, specifically in its making space for peripheralized Black queer southern writers on and off the page, underscores my argument for its relevance and inclusion in this chapter. Here, I focus specifically on the first two years of the magazine's life before it moved with Cothran to New Jersey for two reasons: 1) This period marked such a significant, mappable growth in the magazine's lifespan, as Cothran maintained an always-updated list of places where the magazine could be found on the second page of every issue between 1995-1997, and the number of locations grew each month; 2) When the magazine moved to New Jersey/New York at the end of '97, its aesthetic and content shifted drastically,

not solely just from no longer focusing on Black queer southern life, but it implemented a much broader "Black queer life" framework. Moreover, I read the shift from the newsprint, grey and white paper, with only a colored cover in the first two years, to a glossy paper, full color production after its transition as the kind of aesthetic encapsulation of the delocalization of the magazine; this more generalized approach tamed the magazine's original experimentalism. Atlanta's *Venus,* however, embodied brazenness—through its humble beginnings, it was socio-cultural and literary force.

From the Black Queer South to the World:

In January 1995, Charlene Cothran launched *Venus* magazine following the death of her close friend, Venus Landin. In a case of grueling domestic violence, Landin was killed in a murder suicide by her former partner, Bisa Niambi, on March 2, 1993. In a dedication written in honor of the magazine's one-year anniversary in the December 1995/January 1996 issue, Cothran reflected on Venus' life, sharing with readers that Venus was born on May 17, 1961 in Saginaw, Michigan where she lived most of her life before moving to Atlanta.[xliii] A beloved Atlanta Black lesbian activist and community organizer, Landin served as co-chair of the African American Lesbian Gay Alliance (AALGA) and on the city council's Lesbian/Gay Public Safety Task Force, while also participating in Hospitality Atlanta, the Atlanta Lesbian/Gay Pride Committee, and ZAMI (which was formed in 1990 by a group of women formally in AALGA). She also mothered a son, Bobby Landin, who was 14 years old at the time of her death. Cothran and Landin's friendship was so significant that Cothran was with Landin three days before her death helping her to move out of the home she shared with Niambi and into her (Cothran's) home. Through the depth of this relationship, Cothran created *Venus* in a concerted effort to honor her friend's memory and build on her legacy of raising consciousness in and cultivating

dedicated community for Black LGBTQ+ people across the south. In her introduction to the magazine's inaugural issue, Charlene emphatically stated that *Venus* was created to center and "reflect the everyday lives of African American lesbians and gay men!," going on to frame the magazine as an on-the-page meeting ground and safe space for Black queer people.

Venus' Emergence

Cothran herself was a staple in the Black lesbian and gay community in the city prior to and as impetus for the magazine's formulation. Outside of her work as a realtor, Cothran helped to organize the National Lesbian Conference that took place in Atlanta from April 24th-28th,1991. The conference, which only occurred once though they had hoped to make it an annual gathering, was founded by Joyce Hunter, Michelle Crone, Kay Ostburg, and Urvashi Vaid following the peripherality of lesbian issues they witnessed at the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.[xliv] Centered on a theme of "diversity, solidarity, and empowerment," they endeavored to establish a cohesive, national lesbian political agenda, mending the problems of decentralization and fragmentation by building and strategizing around sustaining grassroots structures in service to addressing lesbian issues and improving the lived experiences of lesbians across the country. To this end, the conference featured over 30 caucus groups on a range of issues and specialized interests including Lesbian Political Prisoners, Lesbian Separatists, Deaf Lesbians, Rural/Land Lesbians, Lesbians in Recovery, Lesbians in Poverty, Southern Lesbians, Refugee Lesbians, Arab and Middle Eastern Lesbians, and Africanamerican lesbians.[xlv] These caucuses further reflected the conference's seemingly robust commitment to anti-racism, disability justice, and the development of a class analysis first exemplified through the structures of its decision-making bodies that required parity with a representation of 50% lesbians of color, 20% lesbians with disabilities, and 5% lesbians over the age of 50. Moreover, the conference featured panels and plenary sessions on a range of topics from preparing for retirement as a

lesbian to safe practices of BDSM, ecofeminism and anti-ableism to domestic violence and programs for lesbian adolescents and victims of sexual abuse. They included an array of art exhibitions, with a special presentation of Indigenous art.

While the archives and Cothran's own present-day erasure of her queer political advocacy and social influence somewhat obscure if she was a member of the formal Atlanta Lesbian Agenda Conference Committee, which established a home base on McClendon Avenue in the infamous Little Five Points neighborhood, Cothran (alongside Jocelyn Lyles and Charlotte Shaw) founded Hospitality Atlanta in 1990[xlvi], a welcoming committee of sorts dedicated to Black lesbians in anticipation of the Conference, and it was at this conference where Cothran began expressing interest in creating a magazine specifically for southern Black lesbian and gay people. Hospitality Atlanta would go on to become a socio-cultural hub for Black lesbians and other lesbians of color in the city, "maintain[ing] an agenda [of] providing social outlets, business networking opportunities, and information workshops," some of which included establishing a bowling league, softball league, and basketball team—according to Cothran's aforementioned dedication, Venus was often leading her bowling team to wins in the league. The organization also distributed a newsletter to the local women on its mailing list, which Cothran played a significant role in producing. When the mailing list exceeded a fiscally manageable capacity, beyond 2000, the newsletter ceased, further cementing Cothran's desire to establish a magazine that would be funded by advertisers. An interview with Black gay writer and archivist (who was also named as contributing editor at *Venus* for a short period), Steven G. Fullwood, indicated that this period saw an increase in advertising funds for HIV/Aids medication and prevention from pharmaceutical companies, which was a significant funding source for the magazine. Cothran's socio-cultural and political influence and presence was evident; amidst the

work of Hospitality Atlanta, she also served on the Fulton County Gay and Lesbian Advisory Committee in 1993 under then mayor Michael Lomax. Moreover, Cothran also worked to establish the Bayard Rustin Rally in 1996—an initiative to integrate a distinctly Black queer space into the annual Martin Luther King Day Parade held on Auburn Avenue. In a 1996 interview profiling her work on the rally and with *Venus*, Cothran's remarks capture the socio-cultural context in which the magazine emerged and the gap it sought to fill—Atlanta had long been understood as a hub for LGBTQ+ people, yet the dedicated space for Black queer people, in particular, remained disparate. As Cothran walked alongside the white gays during the MLK Day Parade in 1995 feeling isolated from the groups of Black passersby, her passion for both "strengthening the Black gay community" and increasing the visibility of Black queer people in the broader Black socio-cultural and political life amplified her previous work and shaped *Venus'* mission amidst an emergence of Black lesbian and gay social spaces that she herself helped establish.

Venus foregrounded educational and communal resources for HIV and Aids prevention and care, created pathways for community between those out and closeted, spotlighted intracommunal dynamics and divergent politics often mired by homophobia and classism, and wrestled with what some believed was the inherent tension between Black queerness and Christianity (and religion more broadly) – the latter of which became a defining point of the magazine's jarring transition in 2006. *Venus*' far-reaching vision allowed for further diversity in its content, as it also featured Black queer cultural workers, writers, and theatre makers, including the work of multi-hyphenate creators Shay Youngblood (*Talking Bones*, *Black Girl in Paris, Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*) and Shirlene Holmes (*The Cotsville Stories, A Lady and a Woman)*, whose narratives centered on the Black south. As the magazine grew, it also featured

interviews with folks like filmmakers Cheryl Dunye (*The Watermelon Woman*) and Patrik-Ian Polk (*Noah's Arc*) and authors Jewelle Gomez (*The Gilda Stories*), James E. Hardy (*B Boy Blues*), and E. Lynn Harris, among many others.

Importantly, Charlene posited the magazine as an anomaly, arguing that a magazine with its scope and focus had been all but nonexistent within the print media landscape. At first glance, one might disagree with Charlene's assessment, as the 1980s and early 90s saw an influx of specifically Black queer print media publications and platforms. Indeed, an August 1991 issue of BLK[xlvii]—one of the first magazines centered on Black queer people—featured a compilation of 21 Black LGBTQ+ periodicals and journals with a variety of frameworks and explicit political identifications and alignment, while providing an overview of Black queer print media history. For example, many of the publications featured were explicitly feminist (and otherwise political) or literary, while others took a more "lifestyle" approach geared specifically towards Black gay men while engaging politically charged topics. These included the influential *BLACK/OUT* magazine, which first published in 1986 and was associated with the D.C. based National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, with renowned Black gay writer, Joseph Beam, at its helm. There was also the late 1980s emergence of *Aché* on the West coast—a Black lesbian monthly magazine that sought to celebrate Black lesbian life, document its history and culture, and provide a space to process issues impacting Black lesbians specifically outside of the larger women of color community. In print from 1989 to 1995, Aché gained an international audience, though its frame remained regionally anchored, affectionately referred to as the "Bay Area's journal for Black lesbians." As reflected in these examples, many of the periodicals and their affiliate organizations highlighted in BLK's compilation were housed in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C., with only *one* being listed in the south. The absence of

southern voices and perspectives therein opens an interrogation of the impact and presence of the Black queer south in this larger Black queer print media network and publishing landscape.

Though *Venus* began four years after this *BLK* compilation, it remains a generative site through which to answer this question. In reinterpreting Charlene's position on the magazine as an anomaly, not in a generalized sense, but through its position and contribution as a distinctly southern Black queer literary and cultural artifact also emphasized by the fact that Cothran was the only Black lesbian founder/editor-in-chief represented in the United National Black Gay Press, we see how *Venus* disrupts what scholar Jaime Harker identifies as dominant discourses of gay magazines and print media: "out liberated gays in urban areas in the North and West and oppressed, closeted queers in the homophobic South."[xlviii] My exploration of Black feminist literary antagonisms through *Venus* homes in on its intervention in this discourse and a literary and cultural landscape that both stereotyped and invisibilized Black queer southern life and narrative. Moreover, it takes seriously what the magazine made possible for writers in the Black queer south who otherwise struggled to have their work published or engaged. Although the kind of experimentalism that undergirded *Venus*' tenure was less about an explicit formal literary intervention and explication of an alternative Black aestheticism, the brazen, shifting, and elastic nature of the magazine in terms of content and how it materialized a depth and richness of Black queer southern culture and community beyond the boundaries of its pages speaks to its overall significance and contribution. Though *Venus* began as a magazine that started out with the goal of representing the complex ordinariness of Black queer southern people, my engagement here will elucidate the dynamism of the magazine as a platform and its embodiment of an urgently needed, daring experimentalism.

Venus' South

In explicating how Venus responded to dominant discourses that figured the "truest expression" of queerness as a kind of southern impossibility and its dissemination of Black queer southern life and narrative across the world, it is crucial to interrogate what defined it as southern, particularly because it was not explicit in Charlene's framing. One might turn to the work of Reverend Dr. Shirlene Holmes and her short stories that were serialized in the earlier issues of the magazine, to answer this question.

Shirlene Holmes' Emphatic Black Queer Religiosity

Originally from Queens, New York, Homles made her way to Atlanta in 1989 to assume an assistant professor position in mass communications at Georgia State University where she taught speech, theatre, and African American studies; this followed the completion of her PhD in Speech Communication (Performance Studies) from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. She often referenced her time there as an inspiration for how she crafted the southern towns and Black southern experiences that existed in her narratives. Across the four of the first five issues of the magazine, Holmes creates the world of Cotsville, a fictional Black southern town. From the outset, Holmes immediately grounds the narrative in the tension between Christianity, Black queerness, and the South. In the first story, "Mary and Lou," printed in the February 1995 issue, readers are introduced to a young Black lesbian couple described by the narrator as part "woman to her heart" and part woman "with mannish ways" (Holmes, "Mary and Lou," 1). The town's atmosphere is heavy with the community's repulsion at the couple—Mother Martha with her immediate crawling flesh and queasy stomach at the thought of them; Clevertta with her ongoing excited anticipation of the day God came to "clean up their playhouse of sin" as she talked on the

phone to Theresa. This kind of discursive and embodied disgust was emphasized during the "get-acquainted" barbecue the couple held upon their arrival to the town, infiltrating their own home with an understanding of queerness as unclean and diseased or contagious. Holmes writes, "Clevertta sniffed all of the food before she ate it just to make sure it was sanitary. BettyLou wouldn't even use the restroom; she walked all the way home and had to pee so bad when she got there, she could almost taste it" (Holmes, "Mary and Lou," 2). The communal isolation the pair experienced was only fractured by an unsuspecting elder Black woman named Missionary Porter—a self-identified sanctified, "water-baptized," and "holy ghost-filled" woman who defended the couple publicly and suddenly began to frequent their home with fresh baked goods in tow.

Through Porter, Holmes troubles and recasts the figure of the missionary; as we know, Christian missionary work is inextricable from its history and ongoing colonial weaponization—how it has been a critical method by which Western colonial, imperialist projects have been justified. The villainization of traditional, indigenous spiritual practices as proof of the uncivilized, savage, sub-human being of indigenous populations across the world has been used as fueled the violent supplanting of these practices as a marker of salvation and civilization. Relatedly, in a more localized iteration, the missionary is an extension or representative of the church sent out into the community as a bridge, offering resources and other necessary services for those who are poor, hungry, homeless, or otherwise marginalized and suffering; the sharing of these resources can also be simply the dissemination of biblical messaging as a means of "bringing people to Christ." Whether through the distribution of material goods as/or spiritual resources, the missionary's work exists through the spiritual frame of religious salvation and

deliverance—if one gives their life to Christ, they will be saved from suffering and experience life abundantly.

In this way, though the couple apprehensively welcomed the woman's baked goods and her initial, mostly silent presence, it was undergirded by an expectation of future proselytizing and judgment. Upon Missionary's third visit, breaking the silence with her holy-ghost filled identification, Lou lamented internally, "Why did this old woman have to destroy this evening with a sermon, a testimony, a reprimand" (Holmes, "Mary and Lou," 4). However, the story Missionary shares is one of her own queer love, having found her way to Cotsville many years prior with her lover—an evangelist who, from the age of eleven, had decided she'd never be with a man. Missionary's recollection of their love and its meaning was tied up in a shared belief in God that was also an introduction to herself and affirmation of her own queer desire. She said, "I used to make her 'tayta pie and she read me the Bible. I ain't never heard of nothing like it. Seem like those folks in the Bible just got up and walked when she read to me" (Holmes, ibid). Holmes intervenes in the discourse about the incoherence of queerness and Christianity as Missionary and her evangelist lover were deeply religious and shared an intimate, queer love so rich and vulnerable that the woman died in Missionary's arms. Refusing to forego the emphatic religiosity of the south to make queerness possible or further weaponizing it against the couple to encourage their "deliverance," Missionary as communal bridge instead establishes an alternative lineage of queer being and existence, while reclaiming and situating an anchor of her religious belief and self-actualization through a queer ecstatic intimacy. Put differently, the depth of her embodied, sensual connection with the evangelist inflected both her knowing of herself and her religious belief, as she says, "I don't think I knew anything about myself till I met Margaret. Don't get me wrong; I knew God, but me. I didn't know about me. She learn me that I got every element

inside of me" (Holmes, "Mary and Lou," 5). For Missionary and the evangelist, there was no sacrificing of themselves for a relationship with God, and no sacrificing of God for the fullness of themselves, positioning their Black queer selves as coterminous with God.

Holmes leverages the figures of the missionary and the evangelist, two positions that are associated with a particular depth of spiritual belief, embodiment, responsibility, and purity to bring together the sacred and the repulsive or allegedly profane to exhibit an alternative expression of Black southern religious belief and practice that attempts to disentangle the violence of their traditional configurations from extensions and practices of communal outreach, care, and support. Missionary Porter's reiterated extension of spiritual resources in the form of still-warm baked goods and her presence, then, come with no message of salvation and deliverance from queerness but instead extend from a place of shared identification and an understanding of the need for queer comfort, nourishment, and belonging as by the story's end, she becomes "Mother Porter." Porter as queer elder, missionary, and mother-figure makes a critical narrative intervention in stereotypical overrepresentations of Black queer southern religious people as specifically closeted and self-hating, with the south as the place that needs to be left behind for their ultimate freedom; indeed, Holmes somewhat addresses this head-on as a number of the characters across the stories question why they *choose* to stay, and Mary and Lou's answer to this is simply their love for the South, for the place and the community they are able to foster. In this way, Holmes reflects what scholars of the Black south have insisted on, which is thinking the south as a place of multiplicity, irreducible to an overstated "set of historical moments and iconography," as Latoya Eaves writes.[xlix]

Even with this, however, the convergence of Black queerness and Christianity is not romanticized; it does not resolve the atmospheric violence of the town and Mary and Lou's

experience therein. Indeed, Missionary's public defense of them was complicated as it was not through a proclamation of shared identification with the couple and was also accompanied by a promise of secrecy following her "confession." The queer southern messiness of the story reflects the kinds of negotiations and contradictions that hover over Black queer life, contradictions and negotiations that are not reducible to ideas of a *backwards* Black *southern* identity. Holmes' engagement with Black queer religiosity through this small, rural community wrestles with the implications of close, communal intimacy and visibility in a religious, homophobic environment. It also actively undermines its projected wrongness and repulsiveness of queerness by establishing a lineage of queer existence, safety, and care through this queer, "sanctified" figure who saw God in herself, not despite her queerness, but through it, harkening the writing of someone like Black southern lesbian feminist writer and archivist Ann Allen Shockley and her 1985 novel *Say Jesus and Come to Me*. In this way, Missionary cultivates, embodies, and extends her own kind of queer freedom as balm and spiritual resource.

Despite the possibilities and necessity of Porter for the queer lineage she nourishes and protects, it is also important to note how Porter's role as queer missionary implicates a re-signified purity that she embodies that reinscribes certain values around queer, sensual, and corporeal excess that might be in misalignment with the queer Godliness or Godly queerness that guides her missionary work, suggesting a proper and improper/deviant queer embodiment. For example, Porter's embodiment of a good or righteous queerness is exemplified through her choice to break the silence of their third gathering with "baby girls, you all know I'm a sanctified woman" (Holmes, "Mary and Lou," 5). Although, as I argued, her sanctification is not in tension with her queerness, it still structures a kind of queer propriety or appropriate queer expression that allows her queerness and Christianity to co-exist. This contradiction especially emerges in

the story featured in the second issue of the magazine entitled, “Miss Sippie,” that recounts the events that precipitated Miss Sippie Lee escaping Chicago for Cotsville. When read in succession, the juxtaposition between Missionary/Mother Porter as saved and water-baptized at the end of Mary and Lou’s story and Miss Sippie as a tobacco-chewing, hair burning, root-working butch at the beginning of her own narrative captures this tension. Moreover, their polarizing embodiments of queer being and desire frame the story; while Miss Sippie is sitting on her porch burning her hair to stave off the possibility of “someone rul[ing] her spirit,” she “howls” out “Good Lord and a quarter” at Porter as she walks by “softly humming a song from Zion” (Holmes, “Miss Sippie,” 1). Miss Sippie’s queer embodied and expressive excess that reflects her not being “worried ‘bout Jesus” brushes up against and threatens to spill over, contaminating Porter’s contained, reserved, saved comportment. It creates an association between Miss Sippie’s alternative Black spiritual practice and a sexual, spiritual, and otherwise deviance that she needed to be delivered from. This distinction is further inflected through the narrator’s description of Miss Sippie’s sexuality—by this I mean her intimate engagement and corporeal expression. While in Chicago, Sippie was known for her promiscuity, avoiding love and commitment by “pick[ing women] up, danc[ing] them around, and put[ting] them back down” (Holmes, “Miss Sippie,” 2). She was also known for purposefully being in a relationship with a woman named Virginia who was married to a man, CeDell; according to the narrator, Monday-Friday, Virginia was CeDell’s, but Friday evening through Sunday, she was with Sippie. Sippie’s brazen sexual expression comes through in the description of her “hand[s] tender enough to rub the gals the right way…till they hollered for help,” hands known for the “diamond rocks she sported on her pinkies” (Holmes, ibid). Miss Sippie’s brazen gendered and sexual expression with her red hair, tight cummerbund, and full gold front tooth leaves her on the

fringes of Porter's queer lineage, but what is critical about *The Cotsville Stories* and these characters in *Venus* is that Holmes is not prescriptive. Sippie's story as a proudly deviant, not-Jesus *or* devil-fearing butch exists, boldly and brazenly, and this possibility adds complexity to the representation of Black queer southern narratives, life, and spiritual practice while also fostering an opportunity for queer readers of the magazine to see themselves in varied ways. And, the nuance of the Black southern queerness represented in Holmes' work through religious resignification and unruly Black gendered and sexual expression was buttressed and expanded through other kinds of written contributions to the magazine. Before continuing with how religious and spiritual reclamation became integral to the magazine's framing, I want to turn for a brief moment to Holmes' fifth story that never made it to *Venus*' pages, both for what it would have added to this representation of Black queer southern gendered brazenness that I've mentioned, but also for what Holmes wrestles with regarding the limitations of queer community and queer, religious and spiritual reclamation, even as she is invested in it.

Although Holmes' archive at the Auburn Avenue Research Library contains a facsimile receipt suggesting that a story had been corrected according to Cothran's edits and returned to her ready for publication, the story was never published. Holmes' archive does not contain a response from Cothran about its publication or any further correspondence between them. There is no evidence that the story was ever published elsewhere, so I uplift it here not only for how it reflects Holmes' commitment to the complexity of Black queer life but also because of how it anticipates another of Holmes' works, *Conversation with a Diva*, that is her re-telling of the life of a young, gender queer person living with HIV whom she met at a Marta Station, cultivated an intergenerational friendship with, and promised to tell his story following his death. The unpublished short story, eponymously named after its young, gender queer central character,

follows Weem's journey as he[1], like Mary and Lou, navigates the contentious environment of Cotsville. Weem, child of Mayretta whose death begins the story, has spent his life living under the snickers and laughs of family and community members as he first experimented with red lipstick as compliment to the "prettiness" of his face and "chiseled" cheek bones, then with "cherry red heels, women's clothes, and switching up the road...spending his days switching from boy to girl" (Holmes, "Weem," 2). Beneath the hostile atmosphere and Weem's air of queer confidence was both obscured intimate connections with men in the community who publicly harassed him and Weem's struggle with depression and self-harm. The softness and tenderness that Weem was able to access was through Missionary Porter, her sweet potato pie, and Mary and Lou's warmth when they rocked him in their arms, listened to his problems, and prayed over him. It was also through his mother who refused to follow his grandmother's advice to have him "put away." The story's end is a confluence of these themes, as Weem asks his mom for money as he prepares to go to the town tavern while externalizing his queer heartache by blasting and belting Aretha Franklin's "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman," she asks him to stay and read the bible to her instead, wanting him to avoid the tavern's rowdy drunkenness. While Weem reads from Revelations 22:17, "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come…," Mayretta dies. The death of Weem's first champion facilitated his own. It's unclear why Cothran chose not to publish this story. Yet, it is precisely its difficulty, the limitation of community and spiritual reclamation and intervention that could not save Weem, though it held him, from the weight of his own brazen, big life that it deserved to be told.

The kind of religious resignification and reclamation that Missionary/Mother Porter represented came to define a critical part of the magazine's ethos in supporting the self-actualization of its queer readership. Alongside the richness of Holmes' Cotsville, the

magazine's "spirituality editor" at the time, Kamau Ifoma, himself offered and integrated contributions from different kinds of Black queer religious and spiritual practitioners as a resource for readers to confront the pervasive pathologization of queerness in religious discourse and to assist with the conjuring of renewed Black queer religious and spiritual relational possibilities. Indeed, one of his first contributions to the magazine that came in the May 1995 issue was an essay entitled, "What's This 'Abomination' Thing?" where he encourages readers to disentangle their understanding of Spirit, their spiritual selves, and the spiritual as defined by "Love without condition" from Religion as defined by conditional love. Ifoma rehearses the common rhetoric of homophobic, specifically Christian believers, while re-reading the scriptural references that undergird this rhetoric to clarify and contextualize their meaning. He concludes the piece with a proclamation that asserts the convergence of spirit and Black queerness, "I AM NOT AN ABOMINATION. I AM HIGHLY EVOLVED. I AM SPIRIT EXPRESSING AS A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM UNCONDITIONAL LOVE" (Ifoma, "What's This 'Abomination' Thing?," 13). Through Ifoma and the contributors he invited, this work of spiritual recuperation was implicitly foregrounded in the magazine's framework. One notable contribution came in the January 1995 issue, which featured an essay from Duncan Teague, a community activist who did extensive work with HIV/Aids research and outreach in the Black queer community across the city through the Atlanta chapter of the Black and White Men Together organization and beyond. Teague would go on to become a minister with the Unitarian Universalist church, later establishing his own congregation with the Abundant Love Unitarian Universalist church.

Cothran, *Venus*, and Cultural Architecture

While the magazine made space for the kinds of written contributions represented by Holmes, Ifoma, and Teague, it also helped materialize other Black queer cultural and creative

experiences. For example, *Venus* co-sponsored the staging of Holmes' play, *A Lady and a Woman,* at Emory University in September 1995. Although Holmes' play was directed by Carol Mitchell-Leon, an incredibly influential Atlanta director, writer, actress, theatre director at Clark Atlanta University, and then-wife to Kenny Leon (then associate artistic director at Alliance Theatre), the archive (and conversations with other artists from that time) suggest that Holmes had difficulty being fully integrated in the booming Black theatre scene at the time because her work explicitly centered lesbian relationships. *A Lady and a Woman* was a Black lesbian love story between an innkeeper, Miss Flora, and a new guest, Biddie, set in the early 1900s in a small, southern town. One might argue that the difficulty of Holmes' experience, in part, can be further contextualized by the success of Shay Youngblood, fellow Black lesbian novelist and playwright whose plays were similarly extrapolated from her short stories and were staged a number of times at Horizon Theater—a pivotal performance venue in the city for local artists—and beyond. Youngblood's short stories, which primarily centered on the experience of a young Black girl being raised in Columbus, Georgia by a community of elder Black women following her mother's death, were published widely in lesbian and feminist publications from the mid-1980s before they were eventually compiled and published as *The Big Mama Stories* by Firebrand Books in 1989. Youngblood's first play, *Shakin the Mess Outta Misery*, which was directed by Glenda Dickerson (a self-identified womanist who had previously directed for Alexis De Veaux in New York), premiered at Horizon Theater in 1988, drawing on the characters and narratives from the collection. While Youngblood was deeply embedded in queer literary and creative community in Atlanta and beyond as a Black lesbian, queerness and lesbianism was peripheral or otherwise not present in her narratives themselves. This observation is not to suggest that for one's work to be queer or lesbian it must narratively centralize sexuality.

However, particularly in the context of the broader Atlanta theater scene, Holmes' explicit engagement with sexuality proved consequential, and a letter from Horizon Theater to Holmes dated August 28, 1997 suggests this. Although it's unclear which work of Holmes' they were rejecting, the letter stated the difficulties of finding the "appropriate mix of contemporary, gender-and racially balanced" works that could "still satisfy both [their] season subscriber and individual ticket buyer audiences."[li] Importantly, they emphasized that some of the best original work they received was unsuitable for the theater and its mainstage audience because of "non-linear narrative voice or subversive themes."[lii] As a result, they encouraged Holmes to submit for their then new low-budget initiative for "alternative" productions. One could assume the sex scene between the two women that occurs early in the play alongside their initial spiritual conviction and reconciliation captures this "alternative," subversive theme unsuitable for Horizon's mainstream audience.

Holmes' archive does not contain evidence of a response to this letter or any indication of a submission to this alternative programming, but the letter does help clarify Holmes' experience as a Black lesbian playwright and novelist who was foremost concerned with crafting narratives that dealt directly with the convergence of lesbian intimacy, spirituality, and the South and the consequences of this commitment. It also underscores the critical role that Cothran, *Venus*, and the broader Black queer network that sustained the magazine played in contributing to the possibilities of Black queer southern literary and cultural production. In 1998, Holmes would establish and operate SilverFinger Productions alongside longtime collaborator, S. Faybell Mahee, arguably to address the exclusion indicated in Horizon's letter. In their "Statement of Purpose" document found in Holmes' archive, they write, in addition to being a "womyn's theatre company…provid[ing] a political platform in the vehicle of the stage…," they also

emphasized, "it is also our mission to provide a place for …ground breaking playwrights of new themes and ideas, who otherwise would not be produced." We might read the establishment of SilverFinger Productions in its capacity as an explicitly political queer, experimental theatre in the lineage of De Veaux and Hardwick's Flamboyant Ladies.

The communal home of *Venus* and its socio-cultural influence was further exemplified through its role in establishing Atlanta's first Black Pride Weekend, which, since August/September 1995, has taken place on Labor Day Weekend. Many historical records of the moment mark 1997 as the city's first official Black Pride Weekend; however, in 1995, Black gay and lesbian businesses (including Cothran's Hospitality Atlanta) came together to sponsor and host a weekend of activities, including an African American AIDS Memorial and Candlelight Vigil (which would the following expand to include lives lost to breast cancer), a Soul to Soul Brunch, and the Official Black Gay Pride Party. The weekend's festivities were announced in the magazine's first "Black Pride Issue" released that August. In 1996, Holmes along with Duncan Teague established In the Life Atlanta—an organization dedicated to "serv[ing] the needs of Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transsexual people of African descent through education, advocation, coalition building programs and other activities." This organization became the official home of Atlanta's Black Pride Weekend and continued even after Cothran and the magazine left Atlanta in late 1997. Indeed, at the 1997 Black Pride Weekend gala, both Cothran and Teague were honored—Teague as a community activist and Cothran as "architect of Black Gay Pride." An architect she was.

Although Cothran did not use her inaugural editor's note to emphasize the significance of the South in its frame, it is defined as such through the kinds of Black queer southern narratives and socio-cultural experiences it uplifted and materialized. At its first printing in January 1995,

Venus could only be found in print in twenty locations across the city, including queer and feminist bookstores like Charis Books & More, bars, and restaurants—unless you were a subscriber, and the issue arrived in the mail. However, by the November issue of that same year, the magazine was available in *seventy-two locations across the country,* including Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Philadelphia—effectively infusing the South into the larger Black queer print culture network. Moreover, within its first two years, the magazine found its way across the pond, with a Black queer couple writing in to say how excited they were to have found the magazine after moving to Amsterdam from Atlanta. And, in another letter, a reader from the western coast of the African continent wrote to say that he was gifted the magazine by a loved one, sharing his excitement for the possibilities of community the magazine offered him as a closeted Black gay man. In the magazine's anniversary issue of December 1995/January 1996, Charlene argued that the magazine had come to be the fastest growing lesbian and gay magazine in the country.

Across its twelve years of publication, *Venus*, literally and figuratively, took the Black queer South to the world. In an unexpected turn for readers, advertisers, and community members alike, in 2006, Charlene Cothran wrote a feature for the magazine wherein she shared her re-coming out story—one of being humbled by God from her lesbianism with a promise to never lay with another woman. Instead of ending the magazine with that issue, Charlene told readers that she intended to keep it running in hopes of saving the lives of her fellow queer brothers and sisters living in sin. The magazine went defunct soon after as advertisers—who had once included *The L Word* —and community members obviously felt betrayed by Cothran. This ending leaves us with more questions than answers about how to contend with the fact of *Venus'* impact and its founder's renewed "sanctification," which includes harassing trans students at

Florida school board meetings from the perspective of someone with particular insight to the seemingly bereft nature of queer life. I engage with *Venus* here because, despite Cothran's communal failure, the magazine's influence and significance far exceeded any one individual. And, through her and the network of Black queer people that made it possible, particularly in its earlier years, *Venus* represented a bold, brazen attempt to make Black queer southern life more visible and possible.

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[i] See Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora*.
[ii] For experimental poetry, see, Alexis De Veaux, *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings*, (Diva Publishing, 1984). This text was re-released by *Sinister Wisdom* in 2024.
[iii] For her experimental biography written in poetic form, see, Alexis De Veaux, *Don't Explain: A Song for Billie Holiday,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).
[iv] See Brand, *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck.*
[v] [Gwendolen Hardwick Letter to Alexis De Veaux.] Alexis De Veaux Papers, Sc MG 802, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.
[vi] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement."
[vii]Jason Robinson, "The Challenge of the Changing Same: The Jazz Avant-garde of the 1960s, the Black Aesthetic, and the Black Arts Movement," *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 1, no. 2(2005): 20-38.
[viii] Importantly, it grounded one of the central tenets of jazz—that chord progressions informed or shaped improvisational choices. Additionally, the compositions were only produced in major or minor key signatures and were centered on standard, classical music theory. Even within the context of bebop, which, itself marked a transition period in the genre defined by a turn away from jazz in service to a dancing audience and toward a focus on refined musicianship with faster tempos, improvisation, and overall musical 'virtuosity,' the tonal structure remained. On the other hand, while the modal style maintained a tonal center, it had no functional harmony, and all chords existed on a kind of level playing field.
[ix] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement,"
[x] Francesca T. Royster, "Queering the Jazz Aesthetic: An Interview with Sharon Bridgforth and Omi Osun Joni L. Jones," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 25, no. 4(2013): 537-552.
[xi] Royster, 540.
[xii] [Flamboyant Ladies Flyer], Alexis De Veaux Papers, Sc MG 802, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.
[xiii] Cheryl Clarke, "New Notes on Lesbianism," *Sojourner*, 8, no.5(1983): 6; See also, Anita Cornwell, *Black Lesbian in White America*,
[xiv] Gwendolen Hardwick, in conversation with the author.
[xv]"Narratives: a dramatic event," *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art and Politics*, 5, no. 1(1984): 74-77.
[xvi] Ibid., 75.
[xvii] Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement," 1977.
[xviii] Julie Enszer, "'How to stop choking to death': Rethinking Lesbian Separatism as a Vibrant Political Theory and Feminist Practice," *Journal of Lesbian Studies,* 20, no. 2 (2016): 180-196, 191.
[xix] Ibid.
[xx] Sara Lucia-Hoagland, Julia Penelope, *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, (London: Onlywomen Books, 1988).
[xxi] Anna Lee, "A Black Separatist," in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, (London: Onlywomen Books, 1988).
[xxii] Ramzi Fawaz, "Breaching the Boundaries of the Lesbian Separatist Frontier in Avant-Garde Science Fiction Film," in *Queer Forms*, (New York: NYU Press, 2022).

[xxiii] James Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 30.
[xxiv] Ibid., 28. In one of her reflections, Hampton recalls attending a party at Walker's home where she was invited back into a small music filled room where women were kissing and laying with women and men were kissing and laying with men.
[xxv] andre m. carrington, "Salon Cultures and Spaces of Culture Edification," in *Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2015), 253.
[xxvi] [Flamboyant Ladies Salon Letter], Alexis De Veaux Papers, Sc MG 802, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library
[xxvii] Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 37-59.
[xxviii] [Alexis De Veaux Opening Remarks for Spring Offensive Against Nuclear Arms], Alexis De Veaux Papers, Sc MG 802, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library
[xxix]William R. Bauer, *Open the Door: The Life and Music of Betty Carter*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
[xxx] Although her songs "Open the Door" and "Tight" are well-known for the ways that she re-worked them in each of studio, live recorded, and performance iterations, another interesting example of this is the two recorded renditions of "Beware My Heart." The first version appeared on her 1964 *Inside Betty Carter* album. The second recording was released under a different name—"This Time" on her 1996 album *I'm Yours, You're Mine*. Notably, the title track of this album is comprised of 9 minutes of only scatted vocables.
[xxxi] Bauer, 28.
[xxxii]Bauer, 79.
[xxxiii] Nat Hentoff, "Betty Carter-Ray Bryant," *Down Beat*, 23, no. 8(1956).
[xxxiv] Amiri Baraka, "Jazz and the White Critic," in *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995), 179-185.
[xxxv] Clarke, *Archive of Style*, (Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2024), 10.
[xxxvi]Bauer, 90.
[xxxvii] Betty Carter interview with Ed Love.
[xxxviii] Often described in terms similar to that of the free, avant-garde jazz musicians, as Ray Charles exclaimed, Carter's musical philosophy and approach still differed significantly from that of notable free jazz musicians; this, in part because she did not view the genre as actually avant-garde because the approach had been done before by older, white classical composers. Furthermore, she believed the genre pushed Black audiences away due to its lack of a heartbeat or rhythm, arguably exacerbating the de-racializing of the art form with its largely white audience, while projecting an "authentic blackness."
[xxxix] Bauer, 135.
[xl] Ibid.
[xli] Jewelle Gomez in conversation with the author.
[xlii] Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," 43.
[xliii] Charlene Cothran, "Venus Landin Tribute," *Venus Magazine* 1, no. 12(1995). African American Gay and Lesbian Print Culture Collection, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American History and Culture, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.
[xliv] National Women's Groups, First National Lesbian Conference. April 24-28, 1991. MS Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Archives, ca. 1982-1994: Box 9, Folder 18. Duke University Library.
[xlv] Ibid., 110
[xlvi] Shirlene Holmes, "Hospitality Atlanta: A Welcomed Sight," *Fourth Tuesday Forum,* February 1993. Archives of Sexuality and Gender.
[xlvii] Mark Haile, "Pressing Issues: A quick history and survey of current Black lesbian and gay periodicals," *BLK*, August 1991.
[xlviii] Jaime Harker, *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminisms, The Women in Print Movement, and the Queer Literary Canon*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018).
[xlix] LaToya Eaves, "Black Geographic Possibilities: On a Queer Black South," *Southeastern Geographer*, 57, no. 1, 2017: 80-95.
[l] I read Weem as Black transfemme; I use he/him pronouns to remain consistent with the manuscript/text.

[li] [Letter from Horizon Theatre to Shirlene Holmes], Shirlene Holmes Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American History and Culture, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.
[lii] Ibid.

Conclusion

As I am writing this portion of the conclusion to my dissertation, it is Sunday, April 19th, 2026. In the days leading up to this moment, there have been two heavily publicized murders or attempted murders of Black women committed by their Black male spouses. Around midnight on April 16th, Justin Fairfax—former Black Lieutenant Governor of Virginia—killed Dr. Cerina Fairfax, an accomplished dentist and Fairfax's wife, before turning the gun on himself. Days prior, Fairfax lost custody of his kids and was ordered to move out of the home he previously shared with Cerina and their two teenaged children.[i] At the time of the murders, Cerina Fairfax was in the process of divorcing Justin, in the aftermath of sexual assault claims made against him by two women—Vanessa Tyson and Meredith Watson—in 2019[ii], and the subsequent alcoholism and isolation that followed. Several news reports state that Justin was due in court on Tuesday, April 21st as part of the divorce proceedings. Today, reports began to surface out of Shreveport, Louisiana of a Black man and National Guard veteran, Shamar Elkins, committing the deadliest mass shooting in the United States in over two years by murdering eight children while they slept, seven of whom he fathered.[iii] Elkins also shot and severely injured his wife, Shaneiqua Pugh, and his girlfriend, Christina Snow. Family members reported that Shaneiqua had decided to divorce Shamar, and he expressed "drowning in dark thoughts" in the weeks leading up to the murders. Shaneiqua and Shamar were reportedly due in court on Monday, April 20th to sign their divorce papers.[iv]

I begin the conclusion to my dissertation with the devastating material reality of these events and the long history of Black femicide, in part, to reassert that the violent logic of propertization and its physical, emotional, and psychological expression that emerges in the

intramural—which the first parts of this dissertation attempted to explicate—the representation of that violence, is not, and has never been, *a figment of the Black feminist literary imagination*. That violence is not hyperbolic. That violence is not isolated or an anomaly. That violence is not an exaggeration or overstatement meant to position the embodiment and expression of Black masculinity as inherently violent and irredeemable. My reading of this literature, particularly of Larsen's *Quicksand* and Petry's *The Street* and the narrative outcomes of their Black women protagonists, sought to understand how Black women writers elucidated the conditions that produced this violence. Moreover, I argued for reading their meticulousness as a clear *structural* indictment and a Black feminist insistence on a radical envisioning of a future that is not predicated on forms of being and relation that makes the conditions for this violence possible or inherent, while minimizing the experience, scale, and consequences of this violence and/or figuring this violence of propertization as something that will be resolved with the eradication of capitalism.

My conceptualization of propertization attempted to capture how the discursive, physical, psychological, and sexual violence that Black women endure in the intramural becomes necessary for and sustaining to the dominant forms of subjectivity, manhood, and masculinity that are aspirational and embodied, however fragmented and disparate or robust. This logic hinges on and perpetuates an ongoing condition of availability and possession of Black women's bodies that forecloses the possibility of their own self-actualization and renders their desire and pleasure unthinkable. As Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper notes in her reflection on the role of patriarchy and the aforementioned murders, echoing the words from Kay Lindsey in the epigraph to this dissertation, "Patriarchy teaches men that women and children belong to them, that they are property that men get to have, as a male rite of passage."[v] In other words, the

vestibular, ritualistic nature of this possessiveness, its quantifiability and accumulation, is treated as inherent to the process of becoming legible as a man through liberal humanist, capitalist terms. The failure, then, of attaining and inhabiting that subjectivity that simultaneously figures as a form of emasculation and lack of power, and the subsequent response to that failure, gets mediated in the intramural through violence against Black women and children. Put differently, Black women's bodies become the site through which Black male anxiety, anger, and despair about a kind of social and ontological failure is mediated. How else are we to make sense of the early reports indicating that both acts of violence occurred in response to the initiation of divorce proceedings? Cerina Fairfax's and Shaneiqua Pugh's choices represent intentional acts of refusal of the logic of propertization, specifically for what their presence signified and upheld within their marriages, and the implications of ending those relationships for their spouses informed the violence they subsequently suffered.

The possibility of connecting these material experiences to the work of Black women writers, specifically teasing out how they represent this violence, why they do so, and what this representation can teach us about its source and the modes of being and relation on which it is predicated was a driving force behind this project. In part, I wanted to dispel this re-popularized idea that this violence is, again, a figment of the Black feminist literary imagination, while also pushing back on this notion that to represent that violence is to present or render Black men as inherently violent. To this end, Black feminist literary antagonisms, the conceptual center of this dissertation, emerged from my interest in furthering the conversation between critical black studies and Black feminist literature in the vein of Black feminist criticisms of the human in three critical, interrelated ways.

Firstly, this dissertation explicated how Black women writers across the 20th century exposed, negotiated, and ultimately, from my reading, enunciated a kind of antagonism toward liberal humanism and the dominant modes and values of being and relationality (via personal, interpersonal, communal, structural, ecological, etc. engagements) that shaped the various iterations of the human and its often amorphous and elusive subject. In Chapter 1, it began with the period bookended by the Harlem Renaissance and 1950 to consider how Nella Larsen and Ann Petry posited criticism of the various strategies that were implemented at different scales across Black socio-political and cultural landscapes (via Black educational institutions, the Black church, Black social clubs, etiquette literature, etc.) at the turn of the 20th century to appeal for the recognition of Black humanity and citizenship. These strategies were committed to the cultivation and embodiment of a kind of Blackness that exhibited Victorian ideals of gendered and sexual propriety and other forms of corporeal regulation in service to countering the mainstream pathologization of Black sexuality and other forms of embodied, sensorial stereotypes/markers of Black subhumanity during the period, while often perpetuating values of individualism, personal responsibility, capitalist accumulation, and transcendence that defined what Grace Kyungwon Hong called the "propertied subject" or "possessive individual" of the 20th century. In asserting that these texts illuminate how these strategies and the desire for inclusion into the category of the "human" was an always, already failed project that reinforced liberal humanist and capitalist values that hinged on their exclusion and exploitation, I further argued that the performance of these strategies toward legibility—however disparate or robust they were—also perpetuated a logic of *propertization* in the intramural that produced a particular racialized gendered experience for Black women protagonists.

My reading of Larsen's *Quicksand* began by reading Helga's, the protagonist's, experience of peripherality and marginalization in the Naxos educational community. I explored how Larsen deployed an aesthetic sacrifice versus aesthetic excess dichotomy to signify how values of Black upward mobility, assimilation, and respectability were exercised through an adherence to dominant aesthetic and corporeal norms as a means of transcending the pathologizing stereotypes of Blackness and aspiring towards the recognition of a "full Black humanity." Helga's aesthetic excess, and her internal criticism of Naxos' machinations that smudged out the possibility for individual Black expression, positioned her on the fringes of this community and its aspirations, even as she was positioned as a kind of instructor and model for the children she taught. I read Helga's time in Naxos and relation to the other "purveyors of ladyness" as Larsen challenging this desire for legibility through whiteness and liberal humanist terms and exposing the fragility of the "Naxos Negro" precisely because, even as it was figured as this rigid, proper expression of Blackness, it was in an ongoing state of negotiation that no one perfectly embodied. Turning toward the end of the novel and what I read as Helga's ultimate acquiescence reflected through her marrying the reverend and becoming a mother, I argued that Helga's figurative (and nearly literal) death further exposed the violence of the dominant forms of relation and legibility that the nuclear family and the Naxos Negros represented, as Helga's position as wife and mother presumed an inherent self-sacrifice and ongoing servitude that left her in an "appalling blackness of pain."

The second part of Chapter 1 turned to Ann Petry's *The Street* to explicate how the street as spatial logic was vestibular to the production of Black/human distinction, exposing the racialized limitations of this liberal humanist, capitalist logic of individual responsibility and the violence and ethos of domination that subjectivity necessitates. Furthermore, I examined how

Petry elaborates the conditional, relative access to power that emerges in the intramural, fueling the distinctly Black and gendered notion of propertization and possession rooted in a presumption of sexual access and availability, abstraction, and disposability of Black women in the novel, particularly through the protagonist Lutie, and the physical and sexual violence she experienced from Supe and Boots. As the reading shows, Lutie's particular vulnerability to Boots was shaped by Boots' own understanding of his conditional, fragmented access to power and legibility that was filtered through and made im/possible by his proximity to Junto as white, propertied subject. Boots' final act of violence against Lutie was a result of the sense of disempowerment and emasculation he felt when Junto told him that he would be taking Lutie for himself. Like *Quicksand,* I read the novel's end as a figurative death for Lutie for how the cumulative effects of the convergence of these forces shaped her possibility for self-actualization and futurity.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation articulated an iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms through its conceptualization of the *black queer literary intimate.* I read the literature of late 20th century Black queer and lesbian writers to examine how these texts proffered their own queer antagonisms to the human and its structural, relational dynamics through intimacy, sex, and desire as critical pathways toward self-actualization. Taking on a plural form of intimacy, the black queer literary intimate also captured the relationships between the Black protagonists and the land, water, insects, and flora and fauna, pursuing *Black queer ecoerotics* as a site of possibility for critical self-fashioning and contextualization that continues the work of exposing liberal humanism's violent rubrics and hierarchies while putting forth Black epistemologies and modes of being and relation. To this end, this chapter centered on Dionne Brand's 1996 novel, *In Another Place, Not Here,* to first explore Brand's meditation on

Black relationality and the meaning of relationality as such, specifically through what I read as the pedagogical intervention of woodlice, the woodlice's cross-species relationship with the protagonist, Elizete, and the woodlice's figuration as ancestral portal. I argued that the onto-epistemology and home-making practices of the woodlice as ephemeral and transient, witnessed and imagined by Elizete, shaped her thinking about home as produced in the liminal space and made possible wherever one is. Moreover, I argued that through Brand's explication of how the violences of slavery and colonialism produced Black people as outside the realm of the human, she articulates a theory of Black relationality that values woodlice and other nonhuman knowledges, foregrounding other kinds of engagements with the land and other nonhuman actors that resist violent forms of colonial extraction and epistemological hierarchy.

Part two of my engagement with Brand's novel focused on the various ways in which intimate relationships with the land and the development of the characters' plant knowledge became the primary mediator of quotidian, interpersonal and structural violence and an epistemological, embodied intervention for their daily survival. Moreover, I argued that it grounded their individual and collective home-making practices and demonstrated an alternative relation to the land against colonial extraction and exploitation, deeply engaging with the unnamed woman and what I termed her *erotics of burrowing*. Moreover, I further explored Brand's meditation on Black relationality through the unnamed woman's relationship to herself, to the child she was forced to parent, and the broader community by homing in on Brand's criticism of love as a primary relational principle entangled with liberal humanism subjectivity as represented through Verlia's aunt and uncle in Toronto. In explicating the violence, inadequacy, and "uselessness" of love in the context of the Black community living on and around the plantation, Brand posits grace as an ethos or guiding principle, reflecting the imposed sense of

responsibility to their collective survival that could not be contained within the philosophy of love. The final section of my reading of *In Another Place, Not Here* turned toward the relationship between the two protagonists, Elizete and Verlia, to think about how their intimate, sexual connection countered the propertizing violence that Elizete experienced in her earlier relationship with Isaiah to provide an opportunity for actualization and activation of sensual, pleasurable capacity for Elizete, and how together Elizete and Verlia lived through a form of queer home-making rooted in a fleeting, ephemeral, transient relation that reinforced the aforementioned ethos of grace.

The final chapter of this dissertation posited an iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms through an examination of the history and work of the creative, literary spaces of a Black queer theatre company and magazine between the 1970s and 1990s to interrogate how these spaces foregrounded a coterminous creative and embodied *ethos of brazen experimentalism*. I began with a cultural and literary exploration of the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company founded by Alexis De Veaux and Gwendolen Hardwick in the mid-1970s. Drawing on the structural open-endedness of avant-garde, free jazz, which functioned as a sonic companion to the Black Arts Movement, I analyzed the formulation of their theatre company, its creative offshoots, their intervention of a Black queer feminist aesthetic, and their ethos of formal and embodied experimentalism through the figure of the flamboyant lady. I was interested in the reciprocal, co-constructed nature of their ongoing experimentation with Black queerness and their intentional practice of elastic/unruly formal interpretations and non-linear narrative construction, while reading these coterminous practices as their own embodied, socio-political challenge to neo/liberal humanist logics of individualism, personal responsibility, imperialism, capitalist accumulation, and rigid markers of gendered and sexual subjectivity. I

concluded Chapter 3 by extending this analysis of a Black feminist ethos of brazen experimentalism as another iteration of Black feminist literary antagonisms by turning toward *Venus* magazine and Atlanta, Georgia in the mid-late 1990s. In focusing on the magazine's first two years, I examined how experimentalism materialized through the magazine's shifting, flexible content—from the integration of serialized short stories, letters from closeted community members, roundtable discussions about Black gendered and sexual self-fashioning and nomenclature, among many others—and for what it made possible in the broader socio-cultural and political Black queer landscape in the city and beyond. I considered how this experimentalism was ultimately grounded in Charlene Cothran's goal of depicting the richness of Black queer southern life, positing a necessary, distinctly southern intervention in the Black queer media landscape of the late 20th century, countering stereotypical overrepresentations of the Black queer south.

My conceptualization of Black feminist literary antagonisms as a kind of critical hermeneutic and archive driven by an impulse to map the different ways that we might read Black women writers across the 20th century as forwarding a critique of liberal humanism and its dominant forms of subjectivity and relationality was not an argument that they all took the same approach to that criticism or a suggestion that all Black women and Black queer women writers exhibited a critique of or divestment from the human. However, I was interested in unearthing a lineage of Black feminist criticism of the human in the form of Black and Black queer women's literature to demonstrate their varied approaches to exposing the violence of liberal humanism and conjuring alternative modes of Black relation and being, and I was particularly interested in writers who, from my reading, made space for a kind of friction or antagonism to humanism, rather than recuperation. While recognizing the difficulty and limitations in attempting to map

this across different historical, socio-political inflection points wherein the embodied referent for the "human" or the "liberal humanist subject" was inconsistent, shifting, or amorphous, the pursuit of Black feminist literary antagonisms was a generative endeavor.

The future iterations of this work build specifically on the second and third chapters to further conceptualize Black feminist brazen experimentalisms, continuing an exploration of the coterminous practices of formal and embodied experimentation in the work of Black queer and lesbian writers of the late 20th century. In this way, I would like to continue the work of Black queer feminist literary preservation by deepening my cultural and literary exploration of Alexis De Veaux's experimentalist contributions both through and beyond the Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Company and beyond, excavating and homing in on her earlier work like *A Season to Unravel* (1979) and her novel *Yabo* (2014). In addition to furthering establishing a conversation between De Veaux and Brand, I would like to also situate De Veaux in conversation with Sharon Bridgforth. Finally, I am interested in pursuing deeper study of Black southern lesbian and queer literatures, building out from the work of *Venus* and Shirlene Holmes to understand the role that literature played in the growing vibrant culture of Black queer southern life in the 1990s.

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[i] Drew Wilder, "Justin Fairfax lost custody of his kids, was ordered to move out, court documents say," *NBC Washington*, last modified April 16, 2026, Justin Fairfax lost custody of kids, was ordered to move out – NBC4 Washington.
[ii] Jonathan Limehouse, "Who was Cerina Fairfax? What to know about Justin Fairfax's wife," *USA Today*, last modified April 17, 2026, What to know about Dr. Cerina Fairfax, wife of Justin Fairfax.
[iii] Zoe Sottile et. al, "A Louisiana man killed 8 children, 7 of his own. His family said warning signs preceded the tragedy," *CNN*, last modified April 21, 2026, Shreveport, Louisiana shooting: What we know about Shamar Elkins and the killing of 8 children | CNN.
[iv] Ibid.
[v] Brittney Cooper, "The Shreveport mass killing isn't just about 'mental health,'" *MSN*, April 20, 2026, The Shreveport mass killing isn't just about 'mental health'

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