CONDITIONS OF THE PRESENT

SELECTED ESSAYS

LINDON BARRETT

Edited and with an introduction

by Janet Neary

With contributions by Elizabeth Alexander, Jennifer DeVere Brody, Daphne A. Brooks, Linh U. Hua, Marlon B. Ross, and Robyn Wiegman

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MELISMA, *n.*

A melody or melodic sequence of notes. Usually spec. (in singing and vocal composition): the prolongation of one syllable over a number of notes; an instance of this.

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Preface: Contrary to Appearances

JENNIFER DEVERE BRODY

It is a pleasure to open this volume that collects and collates the singular work of the late Professor Lindon Barrett. The essays provide readers with an opportunity to engage with Barrett's prescient and probing ideas about literature, law, theory, criticism, the West, print culture, the Enlightenment, black feminisms, material violations, slavery, sexuality, capitalism, corporatism, and, preeminently, the conceptual conundrum of racialized blackness that obtains to them all. This collection gives us a better understanding of Professor Barrett's thinking that emerged over the more than two decades that he worked in the profession.

Lindon's brand of anarchical argument arrested all of us who knew him. For example, in the conclusion to his brilliant book, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, he wrote, "Whatever certainty race as an index of value would seem to provide is a false certainty dearly bought. The binary of race and the binary of value (which contrary to appearances are at least tripartite) are such compound falsehoods. . . . Indeed, one is left to assume—and the irony is profound—that there may be much less than one imagines 'of value' in value."[1] This passage suggests Lindon's quality of mind: his love of language, his complexity, and his commitment to an ethics of everyday existence. Lindon helped us to understand the violence that underwrites signs and figures of value. His theorizations of the forms and figures of racialized violence mark this volume, which can be seen, doubly, as a troubled remainder. Lindon saw how "value remembers itself by dismembering the Other"—and, in the face of such oppositions, Lindon saw double . . . and listened as he looked. The tripartite structure to which he alludes in the conclusion included sexuality—or rather desire—something he witnessed in the excess of the sounds resonating as material traces emanating, even breaking free, from captive (black) bodies. Such significations make waves

across space and time and move me to recall his own body now transfigured as ashes scattered among the waves of the Pacific.

Lindon and I had forged a friendship as "girls together," as Lindon liked to say, in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. I recall our first meeting in Philadelphia in the fall of 1987 outside a restaurant named Le Bus. Both of us were doctoral students in the English Department and became part of a community of scholars that included Kim Hall, Elizabeth Alexander, Roland Williams, Nicole King, Laura Tanner, and James Krasner. There, in that time and place, Lindon and I became neighbors, colleagues, collaborators. Then, Lindon was a vegetarian who fasted on Tuesdays in solidarity with folks who were underfed around the globe. We lived in a food-insecure area on the edge of the ghetto and used to drive miles to the suburbs in his brown Pinto in search of fresh vegetables. Lindon was a devotee of the short story (James Joyce's "Araby" in *Dubliners* and Toni Cade Bambara's "Hammer Man" from her collection *Gorilla, My Love* were among his favorites); he wrote a creative master's thesis about the singer Diana Ross and never tired of talking theory. His interest in multiple forms of textuality—exemplified if not epitomized by his work on "singing and signing" in *Blackness and Value*—was apparent in the first conference he organized after we had graduated from Penn. Titled "Contesting Boundaries in African-American Textual Analysis: Period Revisions, Theory, Popular Culture," the 1993 conference was held just after Lindon took a post as assistant professor at University of California, Irvine. It included nine scholars, all of us then junior faculty. The interdisciplinary gathering marks a watershed in my own thinking about African American textual analysis. As Lindon wrote in the proposal for the event, "the conference will present research arising from a highly expansive and re-definitional period [in which] the substitution of the word 'textual' for 'literary' attests to far-reaching changes within the field . . . [such that] poststructuralist theories . . . speak to the conditions of African American cultural expressivity and social reality." I remember the conference included a performance by the troupe Pomo Afro Homo. The current volume honors Lindon's commitment to various modes of textuality and to interdisciplinary scholarship.

It remains a privilege to be among his interlocutors—to bear witness to his diverse intellectual obsessions that centered on the problematics of value in the wake of the abolition of African slavery in the New World. His unfettered (a word I use explicitly) desire for thinking difference gifted him with a sense of openness and a rigorous commitment to theory. He wrote against prescribed notions of normativity and indeed lived his life according to expansive forms of fellowship. For us, dancing served as a way to solidify our friendship: by danc-

ing we performed communitas—and we seemed to be dancing all the time—in Philadelphia, DC, Chicago, LA, and San Bernadino. Even as we found solace on the dance floor, we knew that, contrary to appearances, the Southern California where we felt privileged to live and work as assistant professors was a dangerous place. Once, on a midnight ride in Lindon's drop-top Saab, we were stopped by the police. As we turned around in the driveway of a cheap motel, the squad car, manned by a single officer, pulled us over. The area skirts the city that Mike Davis writes about in his book *City of Quartz*, which was the home of white supremicists, abandoned factories, and the long arm of the then recently militarized LAPD. When the lone officer, who no doubt mistook us for an interracial couple—irony indeed—saw Lindon's UC Irvine ID, he waved us on without an arrest. We danced even harder that night and listened more carefully to the lyrics of Queen Latifah's hit song "U.N.I.T.Y."—one of the three songs that make me think about Lindon every time I hear them. Even now, it is easy to recall Lindon's luminous smile and to hear his effusive laugh.

As several scholars cited in this volume suggest, Lindon's scholarship remains critical in both senses of the term: its interest in blackness and value, in the violent virgule that split them both into multiple forms and falsehoods, has much to teach us. The idea behind what was presumed to be fair, implicit, rational and calculable served as an impetus for the albeit all-too-brief lifetime of inquiry that he pursued so passionately. Lindon's work elides, in the name of ethics, certain certainties in favor of expounding upon the excess value created by the African American singing voice, by inscriptions of marked black presence and other subversive forms. This scholarship allows us to see American failures and futures as well as their interrelation in more nuanced ways. I hope that your encounter with this brilliant work bodies forth meaningful insights and bears some trace of its author's extraordinary presence—of mind, voice, and body. I will close my remarks by repeating the inscription Lindon wrote to me in the copy of his book: "years and counting. Won't say the number. My friendship with you is one of the richest in my life . . . Love, respect and a couple of giggles. Lindon"

NOTE

1. Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 242.

Acknowledgments

There are many people to thank for the constitution of this collection.

John Carlos Rowe and Winston James, Lindon's friends and longtime colleagues, were the first to see the need for a Barrett essay collection. They gathered Lindon's body of work, safeguarded his unpublished papers, helped acquire permission to reprint essays, and entrusted me to edit the collection, for which I cannot thank them enough. They have been dedicated, encouraging, patient, and wise advisors every step of the way.

The collection would not exist without the unparalleled research assistance of Max Gottlieb, Nicole McBride, Arielle Irizarry, Maria Elizabeth Rodriguez Beltran, and Maha Haroun, who helped prepare the manuscript. Maha's exquisite labor, insight, and attention deserve particular mention. She is a phenomenal research assistant, and I am lucky to have worked with her.

The most unwieldy part of putting together a collection like this is obtaining permission to reprint essays in this context. Thank you to the many rights and permissions holders that enabled us to reprint Barrett's essays here on behalf of Lindon's estate, which is administered with care by Winston James and Barry Copilow: Marcia Henry with the Modern Language Association, Yi Deng at Columbia University Press, Louise Eyre and Kayla McLaughlin at Oxford University Press, Jeff Moen at the University of Minnesota Press, Ariane de Pree-Kajfez at Stanford University Press, and Shannon McCullough at Johns Hopkins University Press.

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I am deeply grateful to the collection's contributors: Jennifer DeVere Brody, Linh U. Hua, Daphne A. Brooks, Marlon B. Ross, Robyn Wiegman, and Elizabeth Alexander. Even though some of them did not know me, they signed on without hesitation, lending their formidable voices and brilliance to the project. These scholars not only provide important intellectual context for the essays and calculate their impact on the academy, but also traverse their own loss in the wake of his death to do so, effacing the bright line between the scholarly and the personal in a way that I admire and draw from.

Amy Parsons, Jennifer Brody, and Brandon Callender have each played multiple roles in bringing this collection to print (and are therefore thanked here in multiple places). They have been invaluable sounding boards and have helped me think through editorial decisions large and small—from the structure of the collection to typographical and stylistic decisions. I gratefully acknowledge their smarts, guidance, and support.

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I first learned how I might think about Lindon's work in a reading group he formed at UC Irvine in which we read other people's work. That group—Jeff Atteberry, Bruce Barnhart, Mrinalini Chakravorty, Naomi Greyser, Ginger Hill,

Linh Hua, Leila Neti, Arnold Pan, Amy Parsons, and Radha Radhakrishnan—remain the well I return to when I am puzzling out one of Lindon's ideas or wondering what he would think about something happening today. I hope we can celebrate the book's publication where we started our academic lives together, throw a copy into the Pacific Ocean, and pour out some rum.

Thank you to The Team, who have supported me in so many ways, including Lorraine Pirro, Susan McCloskey, Beth Neary, Amy Parsons, Tanya Agathocleous, Kyra Grosman, Coral Leather, Rebecca Goldberg, Cara Fitzgerald, Emma Heaney, Kyla Schuller, and Jordan Stein, with whom I talked over the project and who reminded me to celebrate each small success as the book came together. Amy Parsons, Linh Hua, Brandon Callender, Selamawit Terrefe, Susan McCloskey, Cara Fitzgerald, my sister Beth Neary, and my parents, Gwen and Jim Neary, all read drafts of my introduction, encouraged me, and improved it vastly.

My greatest thanks is reserved, as it is in all my academic endeavors, for Lindon himself. Thinking deeply with him has been a gift. Lindon's essays are hard, and engaging with them so closely made me smarter. Inhabiting his mind in the role of editor made me miss him both more and less.

As a facet of his incredibly rich intellectual life, these essays hold Lindon's own debts and acknowledgments. They bear the traces of a deeply engaged scholar whose thinking was enriched, but not bound, by the institutions of which he was a part: the University of Pennsylvania; University of California, Irvine; and University of California, Riverside. His lively—and sometimes epic—debates with colleagues and friends are evidenced in these pages. He was supported by a fiercely loving group of colleagues, friends, and family. I wish he was here to thank you himself.

I am grateful to Lindon's parents, Dorothy and Leslie Barrett Sr., who are generous, gracious, and open. It makes me happy to share this project with them.

Of the many things I have learned and continue to learn from Lindon, perhaps the most important is that academic rigor is not at odds with playfulness and joy. His vibrancy lit up academic space. In that spirit, it is my hope that this collection will continue the work of radically restructuring our understanding of the operations of identity and power, will make us ruthlessly guard pleasure and abundance in the face of institutional austerity, and will also inspire dance parties, which Lindon believed are essential to living a deeply engaged scholarly life.

INTRODUCTION. Unruly Knowledges

JANET NEARY

Our aim, even in the face of the brutally imposed difficulties of black life, is cause for celebration. This is not because celebration is supposed to make us feel good or make us feel better, though there would be nothing wrong with that. It is, rather, because the cause for celebration turns out to be the condition of possibility of black thought, which animates the black operations that will produce the absolute overturning, the absolute turning of this motherfucker out. Celebration is the essence of black thought, the animation of black operations, which are, in the first instance, our undercommon, underground, submarine sociality.—FRED MOTEN, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)"

A Critique of Criticism Itself

Conditions of the Present begins with a series of negations. In the first essay collected here, "Institutions, Classrooms, Failures," Lindon Barrett diagnoses the institutional aporia between African American literary studies and critical theory by considering the offhanded lament of a student in one of his African American literature classes: "No comment I have encountered from an undergraduate illustrates more acutely the strong sociopolitical, institutional, and intellectual tensions converging on the limited number of classrooms in which African American literature is taught than one offered rather confidently from the front row of a lecture hall filled with sixty or so students. I remember the comment as follows: 'I'm not sure how I'm going to write the paper for this class, because I've never been a slave and can't fully relate to this experience.' "

Observing how unlikely it would be to hear a similar remark in a class on Renaissance or Victorian literature, Barrett deconstructs the student's operating assumptions—that African American literature is reducible to a record of experience and that racial identity and experience are indistinguishable—to identify the peculiar elision between text, historical experience, and identity that accrues to African American literary studies. "Textuality," he reminds us, "is always a locus of authority, the fixed site of an author; African American literature, however, takes its place in the cultural system in which authority—self-authority or any other—has been traditionally denied the texts' authors."[1] By contrast, critical theory is treated as the disembodied domain of abstract thought—defined in opposition to praxis or political expediency. This divide, Barrett argues, amounts to an obfuscation: "It should be made clear to students that the dangers of conflating the experiential and the discursive are the dangers of diminishing the issue of power."[2]

Barrett prompts his readers to consider the role of power in the way "what stands as experience, in fact, comes to stand as experience" ("The Experiences of Slave Narratives"). In pursuit of this question, he draws a direct parallel between the literature under consideration and our formulation and devotion to fixed critical categories, particularly "the assumed stability and independence of rubrics of identity," writing, for example, that "an understanding of slave narratives that esteems them for more than their supposed fidelity to an unrecoverable past allows them to complicate what people in the United States believe and what they think their beliefs are based on."[3] In another essay, he asserts that "it may be misleading to believe that cultural doxa in need of explanation does or would correspond—as a matter of course—to those categories offered by the culture under investigation in the first place" ("Identities and Identity Studies").

However, for Barrett, the diagnosis is also in large measure the cure. To recognize that African American literature has been institutionally positioned in opposition to the abstract work of critical theory is to shift our focus to the cultural system that produces the division and to disrupt the conservative pull of their separation: "If African American literature and critical theory appear to fail each other," he concludes, "then this failure itself is highly instructive in pursuing an understanding of both fields" ("Institutions, Classrooms, Failures"). From this vantage, the rhetorical and intellectual matter of African American literature and the historically grounded, ideologically bounded nature of critical theory can come into focus. By opening with the assumptions governing what African American literature is not, Barrett shows the revelatory potential of recasting that horizon itself as the subject of inquiry, trans-

forming the boundaries, limitations, and ultimately the failures of each field into a productive moment of disorientation and dislocation.

This first essay in the collection reveals the agility that characterizes Barrett's thinking: his ability to stand inside a field—to be "in the position of theory" as he puts it—and see its constructedness, its implications, and its dialectics; to see how it has been constituted by that which it sets aside, renounces, or refutes ("Institutions, Classrooms, Failures"). Rather than adopting the organizational logic of the text or system in question, he examines how that logic came into being, asking, for example, "Do opposed formations—racial blackness and whiteness, for example—share a colluded ground?" ("Identities and Identity Studies"). What is at stake in this shift from text or object to cultural system is a clear-eyed view of power and its operations. Thus this first essay, like all of the essays in this collection, reveals not only "the dangers of conflating the experiential and the discursive," but also that "when these dangers remain unacknowledged, authenticity seems to emerge through the variables of space and time independent of all matters of social power and cultural regimes. Categories of meaning appear given rather than produced" ("The Experiences of Slave Narratives").

Throughout his scholarship, Barrett eschews the assumed, the given, and the expedient in favor of an analysis of texts' material and intellectual conditions of production. With an acute understanding of the historical constitution of African American literature in particular, and a keen sense of the importance of rhetorical analysis in the treatment of these texts, Barrett advances our understanding of the operations of power in both the texts under consideration and the critical categories we use to address them; in short, Barrett offers us a critique of the practice of criticism itself.

The Collection

In the spring of 2012, I received a call from Winston James, Barrett's literary executor, asking if I would be interested in editing a collection of Barrett's essays. James and John Carlos Rowe, longtime friends and colleagues of Barrett's, were in the last stages of assembling the manuscript of his final, epic monograph, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, which he had been close to finishing before his life was violently cut short. In the course of collecting and collating material for the book, they uncovered two unpublished, stand-alone essays and reencountered a number of Barrett's published essays that were striking in their prescience and urgency. Rather than include the unpublished works as an appendix to the book (a proposition they considered),

they envisioned an essay collection that would showcase the scope and import of Barrett's thinking and writing beyond *Racial Blackness* and his field-defining first book, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. As one of Barrett's final doctoral students at UC Irvine, I had studied nineteenth-century African American literature with him since 2002, when I took my first class with him on slave narratives, which became my field of study. His essays—and the joy of working with him—taught me how to think and provided the foundation for my academic life. Recognizing the importance of a Barrett essay collection, I immediately said yes, eager to share the vision of these essays more broadly, but was also overwhelmed by the significance of the work and the depth of my loss, which are entangled. Editing this book has been another intellectual gift from Barrett, who has given me so much, and it is, for me, a labor of love. I live and work in Lindon Barrett's debt, in the best possible ways, and I hope, here and elsewhere, to do it justice.

Conditions of the Present: Selected Essays collects the full range and scope of Lindon Barrett's work for the first time. In addition to presenting the two previously unpublished essays discovered by James and Rowe, *Conditions of the Present* collects all of Barrett's published essays except those that were reworked into *Blackness and Value*. Traversing autobiography, slave narrative, fiction, pop culture, and journalism, these diverse and compelling essays confront critical blindnesses within both academic and popular discourse. In them, Barrett presents precise readings of cultural and literary texts, speaking across institutional divides as well as the separation between the academy and the street. Characterized by their dense rhetorical precision, the essays "highlight the power and coercion that gives shape to subjective and social structures."[4] The through line is his tireless commitment to interrogating the processes of consolidation and division that grant certain people status while withholding recognition from others. At the center of each essay is a sophisticated analysis of desire, and Barrett puts his analysis of race—as a set of libidinal prohibitions calculated to produce and preserve certain phenotypical traits—to a striking set of conclusions. Whether he is analyzing the autobiographies of Lucy Delaney, Langston Hughes, or Dennis Rodman, articulating the relationship between mercantilism and the formation of U.S. nationalist discourse, or addressing the phenomenon of the hip-hop eulogy, Barrett's goal is to explicate the interrelationship of desire and subjection and to bring to the fore the relations of coercion and violence so often recast as efficiency or progress. Located at the nexus between African American literature, cultural studies, and critical theory, the essays augment and challenge received notions of materiality and individuality through their deployment of Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and queer theory.

The collection organizes Barrett's critical output into four parts, each prefaced with an introduction by an important voice in American studies orienting scholars to the work of the essays collected there. Part I, "In the Classroom, in the Academy: Situating African American Literature, Theory, and Culture," introduced by Linh Hua, focuses on the institutional status of race, literature, and critical theory in the classroom, the text, and the discipline. The first two essays argue—as discussed above—that the institutional situation of African American literary study can be productively brought into conversation with the literary texts themselves. The final essay in the section, a previously unpublished, full-length review essay of John Carlos Rowe's contribution to American studies, turns from the classroom to the broader situation of African American literature within the academy by way of a careful analysis of the trajectory of Rowe's scholarship. Taken together, the essays in this part reveal the centrality of African American aesthetic and critical production to the workings of the academy, which would understand them as marginal or supplementary.

Part II, "Gestures of Inscription: African American Slave Narratives," introduced by Daphne Brooks, brings together Barrett's field-defining essays on the genre. Opening with his foundational essay on literacy, the body, and authority, followed by his influential readings of William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* and Lucy Delaney's *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, Barrett identifies "the spurious homology" between literacy/whiteness and illiteracy/blackness, revealing the symbolic function of literacy within the slave narrative through readings of ex-slave narrators' presentations of their bodies in a variety of contexts.[5] According to the cultural logic of race in the United States he outlines, the black body is understood in terms of "obdurate materiality," while the white body signifies beyond its materiality, "attain[ing] its privilege by seeming to replicate the dynamics, the functioning, of the symbolic itself."[6] By appropriating literacy, ex-slave narrators overturn the mind/body split, the primary exclusionary principle that has cast blackness outside of Western notions of humanity. The three essays in this part show how the treatment of "the vexed African American body" is "the central textual dilemma for ex-slave narrators" and its management is a key strategy of authentication ("Hand-Writing"). The essays analyze the inextricability of representations of literacy and the body in order to intervene in the discursive constructions of race that obtain in the narrative, in the courtroom, and in the national imagination.

Part III, "Imagining Collectively: Identity, Individuality, and Other Social Phantasms," introduced by Marlon Ross, collects what are arguably Barrett's most urgent essays on notions of individuality, race, and identity, focusing specifically on the imbrication of black masculinity, sexuality, and violence across

a broad range of cultural discourse. In these essays, Barrett brings together a cultural history of the U.S. advertising industry, the commodification of young African American men in the NBA, and narratives of racial and sexual coming of age—including Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Hammer Man" and Dennis Rodman's autobiography, *Bad as I Wanna Be*—to elucidate figures of racial violence in the most quotidian exchanges, such as the marketing of NBA stars or the perfunctory "Have a nice day" that punctuates consumer exchange. Always keeping in focus race as "a set of libidinal prohibitions," Barrett's readings demonstrate that "public circulation of private desires seems the constitutive project of subjectivity itself."[7] Consequently, "race, gender, and sexuality, as popularly prescribed, are mutually reinforcing terms of ideal and abstract efficiency that, in their co-implications, promote even more attenuated forms of 'efficiency' within the most intimate circuits of human exchange" ("The Gaze of Langston Hughes"). Barrett's critique of the constitution and maintenance of individual subject positions in this part is situated at the productive intersection between queer theory, literary analysis, and black feminism, showing the irreducibility of "the homoerotic, the feminine, and race . . . to the discrete terms of queerness, femininity, and blackness" ("The Gaze of Langston Hughes").

Part IV, "Calculations of Race and Reason: Theorizing the Psychic and the Social," introduced by Robyn Wiegman, most fully articulates Barrett's challenge to the foundations of modern subjectivity at the nexus of race, capitalism, and the nation. The essays in this part chart U.S. racial thought through a detective story by Edgar Allan Poe, a previously unpublished analysis of the critical reception of African American women's writing of the 1890s, and an account of the origins of U.S. national discourse in the mercantilist episode of the late eighteenth century. The questions posed in his essay on late nineteenth-century African American women's writing, "Family Values / Critical Values," express the overarching concerns of all the foregoing essays: "If race and family amount to sometimes competing, sometimes conflated sets of prohibitions on the discharge of sexual energy, by what means . . . do these prohibitions fuse purposefully with the strict protocols of capitalist consumption? What relations do these sets of prohibitions on the discharge of sexual energy bear to a national culture fully engaged in . . . the social and psychic relations of incipient consumer capitalism?" The final essay answers these questions by turning from the literary to the historical. Analyzing the stakes of the interrelationship between federalism and mercantilist capitalism, Barrett grounds a psychoanalytic account of subjectivity in the historical phase of transatlantic modernity while at the same time enriching our understanding of the discursive emergence of

the basic unit of the democratic state: "the people." The title of the collection as a whole is drawn from Wiegman's introduction, in which she affirms that these essays, like all of the essays in the collection, "are not only performative instances of Barrett's ability to register and rework the epistemological conditions of the present; but also articles of faith, quite literally, in the possibility of criticism as the venue and vehicle for dismantling the calculating mind as the supreme figure and fiction of white racial essence."

Knowledge Arriving Recklessly

One of the most valuable contributions of *Conditions of the Present* is the sustained, overarching challenge these essays present to the individual subject as an analytic horizon for both academic and popular discourses of identity. Positing what he calls the "subject-effect," Barrett asserts that "the self . . . is always a questionable fiction," remarking that it is "most remarkable for the abiding insistence placed on it rather than its utility or relevance."[8] Moreover, the "subject-effect" is constituted by our attempts to secure and control the "unruly," "unreasonable" force of the libidinal, which is ultimately Barrett's powerful working definition of race:

> Race, conceived as a set of libidinal prohibitions, reveals a peculiar circuit which works to stabilize and ensure the transmission of identifying phenotypical traits from generation to generation through the mechanism of procreative heterosexual practice, because the visibility, recognition, materiality, and certainty of race depend precisely on their tenuously guaranteed stability—the color of skin, the texture of hair, the shape of noses, eyes, buttocks, etc. Race begins to seem a peculiarly libidinal complex, a sexual scheme conscripting desire in apparently absolute ways so as to position gay and lesbian sexuality (whether interracial or intraracial) not simply as a breach of normative gender roles, but, moreover, as a breach of, a challenge and antithesis to, racialization itself in the same manner as miscegenation. ("The Gaze of Langston Hughes")

Drawing on Audre Lorde, Naomi Zack, Elaine Scarry, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, among others, Barrett identifies bodily knowledge and desire—and, specifically, the libidinal—as the signal challenge to the individual, writing that "sexual pleasure and orgasm recurringly present themselves as incompatible with the very proposition of the individual. . . . Sexuality in its pleasurable and unruly recklessness, distresses and may *necessarily* abrogate, even if only momentarily, all formalities to which it would be bound."[9] As the point of articulation

of the racial subject, African American autobiography is an ideal site "at which a critical reader can witness, in diverse realms, the dynamics animating fictions of the self" ("Self-Knowledge, Law"). For example, in his analysis of a figure taken to be the epitome of individuality, Dennis Rodman, Barrett argues that "what is in evidence [in Rodman's autobiography] are the warring trajectories of a variety of appeals to social meaning, which vie with each other through the figure of the individual, and which do not necessarily find coherent resolution in any singular configuration or body" ("Black Men in the Mix"). To fully recognize the libidinal (and the prohibitions placed on it) is to admit race as central to notions of selfhood—even and especially those privileged locations and iterations of identity that would seem unmarked—and to acknowledge sexuality as fundamentally disruptive to the foundational unit of liberal humanism: the individual subject. Quoting Elaine Scarry, Barrett describes the psychic, social, physical, and affective possibilities represented by the libidinal in terms of nonsubjective, collective knowledge, declaring, "These knowledges arrive recklessly, . . . by drawing 'a single, overwhelming discrepancy between an increasingly palpable body and an increasingly substanceless [social/civic] world'" ("Family Values / Critical Values").[10]

The sharpest examples of the ways in which "public circulation of private desires seems the constitutive project of subjectivity itself" are in Barrett's analysis of scholarship, rather than his analysis of primary texts (though they are there, too; see, e.g., "Identities and Identity Studies" and "Black Men in the Mix"). It is, finally, our investment in the individual that leads us to ask the wrong questions when championing those who are marginalized, foreclosing the possibility of understanding the process of marginalization itself. This is most evident in "The Gaze of Langston Hughes: Subjectivity, Homoeroticism, and the Feminine in *The Big Sea*," and his previously unpublished "Family Values / Critical Values: 'The Chaos of Our Strongest Feelings' and African American Women's Writing of the 1890s." In his analysis of Hughes's memoir, *The Big Sea*, Barrett notes that much of the criticism has focused on Hughes's silence around his sexuality. Barrett takes up the question of Hughes's silence, jettisoning what he considers the overly narrow and even misleading interest in Hughes's sexual identity: "A too-strict concern for a sexual resumé, like a too-strict concern for a racial or gender resumé, neglects the coimplications of [the homoerotic, the feminine, and race] that allow masculinist subjectivity to accrue on symbolic, psychological, and material violations of agents who—by either biological markings or erotic preferences—stand as targets."[11] Rather than the question of whether or not Hughes makes himself legible as a gay man, Barrett is interested in "what specific silences allow Hughes to avoid

breaching important orthodoxies so as to appear a recognizable rather than an untoward speaking subject." In his assertion of the subject as a product of collective fantasy—"no individual posture is ever entirely about fantasy and, equally, no fantasy is ever simply about an individual posture"—Barrett shifts the critical question from "*whether or not* African Americans (and young black men in particular) are a site of cultural and social crisis" to "precisely what kind of social subject is allowed to take public form in collective recognition and negotiation of the crisis" ("Dead Men Printed"). In so doing, he makes clear that without looking at the conditions and dynamics that make social recognition possible, critics and artists—marginalized or otherwise—risk reproducing the violence and outcomes of those very dynamics.

Similarly, in "Family Values / Critical Values," Barrett indicts a scholarly conversation that has been hamstrung by its critical presumptions. Taking stock of the limitations of the debate about African American women's writing of the 1890s, Barrett elucidates the ways a consideration of gender is always (though often unacknowledged) a consideration of race. Untangling the interrelated but decidedly not interchangeable logics of race and family, he argues that "what has come to stand as the foremost debate in the field, contesting whether or not this body of work measures up as radical racial discourse, . . . mistakes important features of the cultural situation under examination." While one side argues that the sentimental novel, the formal template for women writers of the period including Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, "is bad art, white art, bourgeois art—or all three" and therefore " 'incompatible with political protest fiction,' " the other side "credit[s] the writers with innovative use of constricting narrative forms," reading their "use of sentimental forms as a means of cultural intervention." Emblematic of his work elsewhere, Barrett explodes the either/or premise of the debate, "subtended foremost by gender," by attending to the ways "unexamined reiterations of normative domestic agendas are never fully in dispute, so that cultural capital steadfastly accrues, even in never fully accounted ways, to the disciplinary construct of the family, which in significant measure secures the abjected cultural position of racial blackness, even as the most routine terms of African American advocacy in the 1890s attempt to resignify the construct." The essay goes on to provide a nuanced account of the intercalated but distinct logics of family and race, taking into account the different historical circumstances under which Harper and Hopkins "champion[ed] racial blackness by idealizing a set of conditions that do not define the circumstances of the majority of African Americans." He concludes that "the family and its structures do not strictly exhaust the possibilities of affective arrangements, racial, gendered, sexual, economic or any set of arrangements one

might imagine or pursue; as clearly, race and its structures do not consume the possibilities of affective arrangements, familial arrangements, gendered, sexual, or economic arrangements." Whether beginning in the classroom or dwelling in critical space, Barrett always returns us to the world—or, rather, the ways criticism takes its cues from social and material organizations in the world. Thus, for Barrett, criticism is a place to imagine possibilities, but it has to question its own deployment of categorical thinking, even when those categories are used in the service of radicalizing the canon.

Imagining Collectively

The most powerful implications of Barrett's focus on the libidinal are, perhaps, expressed in Barrett's "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls, and Hip-Hop Eulogy," an essay I find particularly piercing to read in the wake of Barrett's own violent death. In his examination of the murders of Shakur and Smalls, and the ways they have been represented in the press, Barrett brings to bear the full range of critical and social theory to demonstrate the fundamentally irrational force of the libidinal as central to what we might call the perverse pleasures of state violence. As Marlon Ross states in his contribution, Barrett "refuses to normalize or naturalize the death of young black men as a self-violating death-wish, the expected cost of being young, black, and too talented to survive the darkening streets of America's promised land."[12] Locating black men as a primal site within the libidinal economy of racial capitalism, Barrett writes that "capitalism looks to young black bodies as sites of open, unregulated flows of desire but, paradoxically, only in order productively and profitably to inscribe and channel these unregulated flows" ("Dead Men Printed"). He describes the paradoxical situation of young black men—who are uniquely vulnerable and uniquely threatening in what Barrett calls the "visual regime of abolished racial enslavement"—in terms of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. The master's sense of self "arrives at itself through a violent will or force" that must be displaced and disavowed to be maintained. Thus, "in these highly publicized incidents, violence 'returns' to African American male bodies, even though violence does not necessarily emanate from those persons in the first place, and it is this mystified circuit of what [Judith] Butler terms white paranoia that, one might say, positions the several discrete incidents as equivalent for U.S. culture logic (the beating of [Rodney] King, the shootings in Brooklyn, the murders of Shakur and Smalls)." But more than merely offering an explanation of racial violence, as the foregoing suggests, Barrett demonstrates how

our collective response to the murders of these young black men recirculates as ways of knowing ourselves that perpetuate this violence: "To imagine such a profound situation of non-sociality *as sociality* requires an enormous feat: the feat seems to be the denial of one's own relative—relating?—difference in an inscription of galvanizing—absolute?—difference elsewhere, the inscription of a horizon making one's own relative position of difference disappear, just as the absolute, visible difference of the physical horizon reaffirms the impossibility of seeing the relative position at which one is at that moment standing. One thing certainly happens: one imagines collectively." For Barrett, these modes of grief expressed in hip-hop eulogy instrumentalize brutality against black people in part by obscuring the relational dialectic within racial capitalism that places young black men in a position of extreme precarity.

One of the benefits of this collection is that these essays bear surprising and dynamic relationships to one another that continue to unfold in the shifting historical coordinates of the present, which rely on the precarity Barrett elucidates. To give just one example, the juxtaposition of Barrett's essays on slave narratives, which argue that "facts prove instruments of will," takes on new meaning in relation to the journalistic treatment of police brutality addressed in "Dead Men Printed" in our own moment of institutional and state-sponsored antiblack violence.[13] One contemporary strain of the national conversation about police violence, specifically, has called for evidence, clarification of the facts of the case, unbiased arguments, and clear camera angles. However, drawing on Ahmed Aijaz's articulation of colonial discourse, Barrett reminds us that "in terms of the cultural logic of the United States, to speak of Reason is already to a very significant degree to make a racially exclusive move" ("Presence of Mind"):

> To "describe" is to specify a locus of meaning, to construct an object of knowledge, and to produce a knowledge that shall be bound by that act of descriptive construction. "Description" has been central, for example, in the colonial discourse. It was by assembling a monstrous machinery of descriptions—of our bodies, our speech acts, our habits, our conflicts and desires, our politics, our socialities and sexualities—in fields as various as ethnology, fiction, photography, linguistics, political science—that the colonial discourse was able to classify and ideologically master the colonial subject, enabling itself to transform the descriptively verifiable multiplicity and difference into the ideologically felt hierarchy of value. To say, in short, what one is presenting is "essentially descriptive" is to assert a level of facticity which conceals its own ideology and to prepare a

> ground from which judgments of classification, generalisation, and value can be made. (Aijaz, qtd. in "Institutions, Classrooms, Failures")

Reminiscent of Ida B. Wells's 1893 indictment of lynch law, that "those who commit the murders write the reports," Barrett reminds us that "the knowledge that courts are charged to research, discover, and possess emanates from and returns to the civic and political communities from which the law is constructed" ("Self-Knowledge, Law").[14] There are no facts that are not implicated in the system of power-producing violence, which is to say that we cannot expect that state-sponsored antiblack violence will be ameliorated by the very matrices of "description," logic, and reason that violently constitute blackness as "the impossible point of human conception."[15]

Multiplicity, Plurality, and Difference: UC Irvine as a Theoretical Epicenter

Barrett's seventeen years at UC Irvine, an epicenter of critical theory, inform the aims and methods of these essays.[16] Barrett's theoretical substrate is decidedly post-structuralist, and his literary criticism might be described as philosophically inflected historical materialism. In his rigorous deconstructions of difference and his pursuit of how we come to know what we know, one can see his engagement with Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, and Ferdinand de Saussure, among others. Continuing the project of *Blackness and Value*, in his essays on slave narratives, for example, Barrett reads the representation of bodies—and the prohibitions on slave literacy—in light of structural linguistics as it gets taken up within post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity: "As we have been instructed by Saussurian linguistics and poststructuralist thought, multiplicity, plurality, and difference are the conditions that make possible significance, signification, language, meaning. Saussure, in his pioneering investigations of the synchronic dimensions of linguistics, argues that the 'content [of a linguistic unit] is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it. Being part of a system, it is endowed not only with a signification but also and especially with a value, and this is something quite different' " ("Hand-Writing"). Rather than ontology, Barrett understands race within a cultural system that determines meaning and value through the production of difference. As in the first essay of the collection discussed above, Barrett does not apply critical theory to particular texts but rather demonstrates the parallel and intertwined operations of critical theory and the production of racial meaning that are often masked or obscured; in this case, Barrett argues that race and the

racial body are fundamentally linguistic propositions. His methodology is of post-structuralism while also demonstrating the limits of post-structuralism: a tendency toward abstraction. If race is fundamentally linguistic, the reverse is also true: language reflects power and value, influenced by and entailing specific material, political realities.

Barrett's post-structuralist methodology, philosophical inquiry, and uniquely interrogatory interdisciplinarity are nowhere more evident than in his never-before-published review of John Carlos Rowe's scholarship. Explicating Rowe's influence on American studies, Barrett lingers in their shared intellectual domain, the domain of critical theory as seen from a historical materialist perspective:

> John Rowe's imperative, as clear from the beginning of his career, is an engagement with the sign as articulated by deconstructive theorizing, an engagement seeking to return the phenomenological force of the sign to the material historicity of the modern, that is, to outline modernity as the exorbitance of the sign, in which the United States is locatable as a sign (in political as well as aesthetic modes) indicative of the zenith of the linear progression that is the modern. . . . [His] insistent interest in re-tracing the ground of canonical U.S. literature mobilizes the deconstructive critique of this structuralist critical posture beyond the aporia of textuality, cognition, and experience into specific semantic determinations that enact material, historical, and aesthetic traditions that demonstrate how the endless chain of signification coalesces an extraliterary "reality" always holding political force.[17]

The essay, first delivered at a conference celebrating Rowe's work at UC Irvine, offers a preview of the line of thinking Barrett develops in the last essay of the collection, "Mercantilism, U.S. Federalism, and the Market within Reason." In it, Barrett describes the emergence of the United States within the context of mercantilist capitalism—both of which depended on the exclusion of African-derived people from the concept of "the people" (in the case of the nation) and of human being (in the case of the subject). At issue for both Rowe and Barrett is our understanding of the republican synthesis and the constitution of modern forms of subjectivity and personhood. For both, a post-structuralist account of the processes of signification is central to understanding the operations of power and national consolidation.

Lindon arrived at UC Irvine in the midst of the deconstructive turn. At the end of Barrett's time there, coinciding with Jared Sexton's and Frank Wilderson III's arrival in the African American Studies program, another theoretical paradigm was emerging for which Irvine would become the/an epicenter:

Afro-pessimism.[18] It is in debates over Afro-pessimism that I most acutely feel the loss of Barrett's inimitable voice and nuanced critique. Although Barrett was taken from us before he could fully articulate his response, I had the opportunity to be in reading groups with Barrett and Sexton, among others, where the tenets of Afro-pessimism were being discussed and debated. Drawing on these conversations, and pursuing the most speculative line of inquiry offered here, I want to suggest that these essays are keyed in an alternative modality to Afro-pessimism and that they might be limned for what I believe is Barrett's nascent response to an Afro-pessimist paradigm.

Like Afro-pessimist thinkers, Barrett identifies slavery as the fundamental ground of racial capitalism that structures the organization of the modern state and governs contemporary race relations; however, he resolutely rejected an assessment of black life and death as reducible to a reaction formation to this instantiation of organized, institutionalized racial violence. In this way, Barrett's thinking forecasts Christina Sharpe's work in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, in which she writes that "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding"; but rather than an ontological position, it is a linguistic proposition, a material reality, a dialectal positioning, such that "*to be* 'in' the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way of theorizing, in/for/from what Frank Wilderson refers to as 'stay[ing] in the hold of the ship.' . . . At stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate."[19] Similarly, Fred Moten's 2013 response to Afro-pessimism, laid out in his essay "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," resonates with Barrett's articulations of racial blackness as nonontological.[20] Moten asserts "blackness [as] ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence," declaring, "blackness is prior to ontology."[21] Barrett rejected the notion of race "conceived as an ontological condition," arguing that it "always has been and continues to be foremost an intellectual matter" ("The Experiences of Slave Narratives"; "Institutions, Classrooms, Failures"). Consequently, his analysis of the various textual crises in slave narratives, in "The Experiences of Slave Narratives," for example, demonstrates how the supposedly fixed poles of a black-white racial dialectic are, in actuality, continually strained.

Barrett's sharpest divergence from Afro-pessimism, however, is his insistence on the vitality of forms of black sociality and his insistence on race as a future-oriented temporal structure. Barrett's critique of the individual subject as both the fundamental unit of liberal humanism within modernity and a racist formation is crucial. In his essay on mercantilism and federalism, Barrett

argues that "the disposition of racial blackness constitutes the impossible point of human conception in the enterprise—foreclosed as the unnamed violence of human visibility. . . . At stake originally, as the 'modern' is the phantasmatic animation of the conceptual form (the commodity) in the face of the already fully animate individual and collective material forms (in human proportions) of racial blackness" ("Mercantilism, U.S. Federalism"). While this shares an understanding of the libidinal economy of modernity with Afro-pessimism, Barrett refuses the ability of modernity—"the enterprise"—to proscribe the limits of social engagement and arrangement. For Barrett, to accept the premise of social death, whether it be Frantz Fanon's iteration in *Black Skin, White Masks* or Orlando Patterson's in *Slavery and Social Death*, would be to adopt the terms of modernity's dialectic—to reproduce its fundamental conceit—rather than to think about how that dialectic is constructed and maintained and what it forces from view. Furthermore, Barrett's account of the future-oriented temporality of modernity's libidinal economy is at odds with Afro-pessimist temporality which posits, in Wilderson's words, that "the capacity to redeem time and space is foreclosed to the Black because redemption requires a 'heritage' of temporality and spatiality, rather than a past of boundless time and indeterminate space."[22] By contrast, Barrett understands race as a set of historically specific social and libidinal regulations designed to foreclose what Bruce Barnhart has called "the kinds of inventiveness that threaten to redistribute the future."[23] Consequently, blackness is not locked in a historically determined position of ontological death; to reclaim the unruly knowledge of the libidinal is to recognize that "race and its structures do not consume the possibilities of affective arrangements, familial arrangements, gendered, sexual, or economic arrangements" ("Family Values / Critical Values"). Whereas Afro-pessimism stipulates that "*Blackness* refers to an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality," blackness and subjectivity, for Barrett, are constituted by relationality.[24] Consequently, blackness exceeds the prescriptive force of modernity's limits on human experience, encompassing potential futures that modernity cannot predict.[25]

The Beginning and the End

Originally published over a span of thirteen years (between 1993 and 2006), the essays in *Conditions of the Present* chart the evolution of African American literary studies. The language designating this body of literature has shifted over time from "black literature" to "Afro-American written art" to "African-American literature" to "African American literature," the term I use here, each

idiom reflecting different perspectival, political, social, ideological, and cultural demands. I have chosen to preserve Barrett's original terminology for his objects of study, rather than making the language consistent across the collection. The scholarly potential in retaining the linguistic variance between, for example, "African-American" and "African American" is exemplified in Barrett's essay "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority" (originally published in 1995), in which Barrett mobilizes the shifting language and disciplinary codes used to address these texts to parse slave narrative scholarship into three distinct phases—historical, literary, and cultural analysis. In the first phase, slave narratives entered the academy under the rubric of history; scholarship in this period (the 1960s and 1970s) treated these texts primarily as historical documents and eyewitness accounts, valued for the window they offered onto historical conditions. In the second phase (the late 1970s and early 1980s), slave narratives began to be read in English departments and treated as literature; during this phase critics prioritized "what is literary (as opposed to sociological, ideological, etc.) in Afro-American written art" (in the words of Robert Stepto).[26] In this phase critics emphasized "interpretations of the language, rhetorical strategies, and predominant tropes of the texts, especially in relation to structuralist and poststructuralist theories" ("African-American Slave Narratives"). Barrett's own essay, "African-American Slave Narratives," inaugurates the third phase—what he calls cultural analysis—in which "rather than separating history and literature, one might see them as equally 'textual' and place them in conversation with one another, reconstituting and revitalizing the confusion of the realms of art and propaganda." To echo a point above, the benefit of this critical turn is that the literary text comes into view as an artifact enmeshed in and reflecting a set of extratextual power relations that are located and negotiated there, rather than simply a record of experience or a "closed linguistic event." This mode of analysis constitutes a self-reflexive turn in that it illustrates the ways African American literary study mandates a consideration of our critical vocabularies and ideological investments: "With acute sensitivity to its own politics, as well as the political dimensions of its objects of study, cultural analysis yields insights into the manner in which a particular worldview authorizes, implements, and structures the commonplace rituals, spaces, and interpretive activities of those interpellated by a particular cultural regime" ("African-American Slave Narratives"). The methodology we inherit from Barrett insists on integrating precise rhetorical analysis with acute attention to a text's historical conditions of production and our own ideological horizons of interpretation. Thus, in keeping with Barrett's dedication to understanding language as an index of power, the collection keeps these lin-

guistic and methodological shifts in view across the essays. The only exception to this is that I translated each of the essays into the same citation style and removed inconsistencies produced by different journals' variant house styles to unify the collection.

It is my hope that the editorial decisions and scaffolding offered here encourage multiple critical paths through the essays. Although the collection is organized thematically rather than chronologically, each essay's original date of publication is included next to its title so one might pursue a set of historical arguments yet to be made. Similarly, the section introductions offer an essential critical history of Barrett's scholarship, naming his scholarly ancestors as well as his legacy, a partial list of which includes work by Alexander Weheliye, Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Farah Griffin, Stephen Best, Jacqueline Goldsby, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Tavia Nyong'o, Jayna Brown, Soyica Colbert, José Esteban Muñoz, Sharon Holland, Christina Sharpe, and Simone Browne, as well as the contributors collected here.

A brief note on the book's arresting cover image: Hank Willis Thomas's 2008 *Hang Time Circa 1923*. Like Barrett, Thomas has long worked at the intersections of race, gender, and commodity culture in series such as *B(r)ANDED* (2006) and *Pitch Blackness* (2008). In *Hang Time*, Thomas reproduces the iconic Air Jordan logo—a graphic representation of Michael Jordan performing a layup—with a noose around Jordan's neck, forcing us to confront the pleasure of black masculine prowess in the context of the violence of racial capitalism. The image intersects with Barrett's essays at multiple points: his analysis of the commodification of young African American men within what he calls "capitalism as culture and culture as capitalism" in his essays on black masculinity in the NBA and in hip-hop eulogy, and in his analysis of a key moment in Toni Cade Bambara's story "The Hammer Man." Barrett discusses one of the main characters' performance of a layup as "a form of black masculine genius and gracefulness at its most thrilling" and, in the mind of the character's adversaries, "at its most repulsive or threatening."[27] Both Barrett and Thomas force us to confront, specifically, the position of black men within racial capitalism as "the most feared and the most revered bodies in the world."[28] The title of Thomas's work also resonates with the historical scope of Barrett's essays. Thomas recalls a specific historical moment in order to simultaneously enact a compression of time that brings together a vision of blackness and black masculinity emerging in slavery and with us now.

Finally, a word about the framing of these scholarly essays with two powerful voices articulating the personal—as well as scholarly and professional—force Lindon Barrett was in the world. The collection begins and ends with a return

to the particularly rich foundational moment of Barrett's life in the English doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. In their preface and afterword, respectively, Jennifer DeVere Brody and Elizabeth Alexander each give us a snapshot of a young Lindon coming into his own at the moment the vice grip of the canon was giving way to new possibilities in literary study represented by black literature. As this collection shows, this sea change in literary criticism and history was not simply an expansion of our objects of study, but rather a revelation/revolution of the very dynamics and ideological motivations determining social, political, and aesthetic notions of value, a literary referendum on how we come to know what we know. Offering us an intimate portrait of Lindon—animated by his excitement, his focus, his devotion to friends and colleagues and the then new project of black literary study—Brody and Alexander illuminate what was at stake for Barrett in this work: black love.[29] Both emphasize the importance of embodied experience and community to Barrett's thought. It is a portrait that decidedly contradicts what have seemed to me willful misreadings of Barrett's writing and his department building as cynical, isolating, or disaffected. Nothing could be further from the truth. The energy and rigor Barrett brought to his scholarship—and which sometimes fueled his falling out with friends and colleagues—was based on his deeply held belief that knowledge is produced collectively, that the energy between people conditions even what we understand to be the most intimate or private aspects of ourselves.

Although he was embattled at UC Irvine, decamping to UC Riverside in 2007, Barrett never stopped fighting intellectually damaging neoliberal forces, and he never stopped drawing students together in fierce collectives that were both intellectually rigorous and personally sustaining. As antithetical as pleasure and university administration seem, Barrett embodied this paradox in his academic life: he insisted on reclaiming pleasure where it was eyed most suspiciously; he was deeply committed to service and took up the administrative roles necessary to make expansive, revelatory, and challenging institutional and intellectual spaces. Barrett believed, as Moten writes in the epigraph above, that "celebration is the essence of black thought." Though it is perhaps counterintuitive, by centering institutional failures and a racial position designated by violence, negation, and otherness, Barrett reclaims critical space as the space of connection and relationality.

Nearly ten years after his death, the full scope of Barrett's impact in the academy is still being calculated. What is clear is that the need for Barrett's incisive analysis has never been more urgent. The essays are eerily prescient of later crises both inside and outside of the academy, including the 2008 financial col-

lapse, unprecedented levels of black unemployment, the dissolution of many interdisciplinary programs across the country, unrelenting police violence, and the ceaseless assaults on people of color intensified by our new national political administration. However, what is most valuable about these essays is not what they diagnose, but what they propose: taken together they indicate a way forward in the bleakest circumstances. Even while identifying the failure of present epistemes to acknowledge the circuits of social and market desire that coalesce in the "compositely articulated" subject, Barrett offers hope: "If the cause is inertia or blindnesses inherited from institutional (and culturally pervasive) paradigms, then, one can imagine, as already suggested by the work of feminists of color, that the obstacles for self-defined critical and radical thought are far from insurmountable" ("Identities and Identity Studies").

So we end at the beginning, before the sharp impact of his loss and its infinite aftermath, in a moment of "unprecedented possibility" to be harnessed for our present.[30] These essays provide a sophisticated articulation of the way intimate circuits operate, charging us to finish the work they so powerfully inaugurate. As another of Barrett's former students—Leila Neti—has written, "[Barrett]'s theorization of pleasure maps out the ways in which forces of racialization and capital, often in the service of regulatory modes of sexuality, constantly threaten to erode the possibilities of human sociality. Yet, on some level, his work is, most profoundly, about recognizing and rescuing a space for precisely those most vulnerable of pleasures amidst the most powerful social and cultural threats to them."[31] Perhaps the greatest gift of this collection will be the perpetual immediacy of Barrett's call to protect spaces of "open-ended desire" from the regulatory measures and violent appropriations that operate under the name of progress.

NOTES

1. Lindon Barrett, "Institutions, Classrooms, Failures: African American Literature and Critical Theory in the Same Small Spaces," chapter 1, this volume. References to Barrett's essays are given in the text in parentheses after first mention.

2. Lindon Barrett, "The Experiences of Slave Narratives: Reading against Authenticity," chapter 2, this volume.

3. Lindon Barrett, "Identities and Identity Studies: Reading Toni Cade Bambara's 'The Hammer Man,'" chapter 7, this volume; Barrett, "The Experiences of Slave Narratives."

4. Bruce Barnhart, private correspondence.

5. Lindon Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," chapter 4, this volume.

6. Barrett, "African-American Slave Narratives"; Lindon Barrett, "Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," chapter 5, this volume.

7. Lindon Barrett, "The Gaze of Langston Hughes: Subjectivity, Homoeroticism, and the Feminine in *The Big Sea*," chapter 8, this volume.

8. Lindon Barrett, "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls, and Hip-Hop Eulogy," chapter 10, this volume; Lindon Barrett, "Self-Knowledge, Law, and African American Autobiography: Lucy A. Delaney's *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*," chapter 6, this volume; and Lindon Barrett, "Black Men in the Mix: Badboys, Heroes, Sequins, and Dennis Rodman," chapter 9, this volume.

9. Lindon Barrett, "Family Values / Critical Values: 'The Chaos of Our Strongest Feelings' and African American Women's Writing of the 1890s," chapter 12, this volume.

10. Barrett's formulation reminds me of a line from the Last Poets' "When the Revolution Comes," which reasserts the solidity of revolutionary potential in an increasingly substanceless world, prophesying that when the revolution comes, "blood will run through the streets of Harlem drowning anything without substance."

11. Barrett goes on to state that "the attention to sexuality . . . is misconstrued . . . if simply translated into an attempt to settle the question of Hughes's individual sexuality, since the powerful forces assigning valences to race, gender, and sexuality impinge upon Hughes even as he remains shrouded in ambiguities. . . . By ignoring the magnitude of these shared oppressive mechanisms, one fails both to account adequately for longstanding social arrangements, and to recognize that the bedrock of individual identity (or rubrics of identity) is never as determinate as it appears." It ultimately amounts to "the impulse to blind oneself to one's absence from oneself." Barrett makes a similar critical move in his essay "Presence of Mind: Detection and Racialization in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,'" chapter 11, this volume, in which he argues that asking if Poe is racist is too limiting a question: "It is not open declarations of racial sentiments on the part of Poe that are so telling but, rather, the continuity between his work and widespread racial and racist constructions."

12. Marlon Ross, introduction to "Imagining Collectively: Identity, Individuality, and Other Social Phantasms," part III, this volume.

13. The full quote, from "Institutions, Classrooms, Failures," is useful here: "Students in African American literature classes discover opposing sets of facts and attendant narratives that no amount of appeals to neutrality might reconcile. . . . Neutrality itself takes up a place within one of the opposing sets of facts, with the result that there no longer clearly exists the certainty (or illusion) of 'getting the facts right'; the *facts* prove instruments of will implicated in, rather than effecting release from, *experience*, interestedness, and the dynamics of cultural, civil, and other forms of power. The facts appear as the discursive gestures of dominant groups 'whose exclusionary behavior may be firmly buttressed by institutionalized structures of domination that do not critique or check [that exclusionary behavior].'"

14. Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," *Our Day*, May 1893.

15. Lindon Barrett, "Mercantilism, U.S. Federalism, and the Market within Reason: The 'People' and the Conceptual Impossibility of Racial Blackness," chapter 13, this volume.

16. Barrett was at UC Irvine between 1990 and 2007, when he took a position at UC Riverside.

17. Lindon Barrett, "Redoubling American Studies: John Carlos Rowe and Cultural Criticism," chapter 3, this volume.

18. As Jared Sexton notes, "Afro-Pessimism is a contemporary phenomenon, some may even scoff that it is trendy, but its political and intellectual evolution is considerably longer and its ethical bearings much broader than one might expect, and there is work yet to be done regarding a genealogy of its orientation and sensibility," "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes* 29 (2016), doi:10.20415/rhiz/029.e02.

19. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13–14, 21.

20. Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (fall 2013): 737–80. Originally delivered as the UC Irvine miniseminar "Just Friends."

21. Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 739.

22. Frank Wilderson, *Red*, *White*, *and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 17–18.

23. Bruce Barnhart, American Studies Association session proposal.

24. Wilderson, *Red*, *White*, *and Black*, 18.

25. Barrett's understanding of blackness as in relation to but not reducible to white regulatory forces resonates with the temporality of the black radical tradition set forth in Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*, which posits black radicalism as a phenomenon and force that "cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis." Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 73. Stephen Best's essay on representations of slavery in contemporary art gets at the heart of these questions, positing what he calls "derealized social relation" as a way of "making those relations apprehensible." Stephen Best, "Come and Gone," *small axe* 48 (November 2015): 186–204, 199.

26. Robert Stepto, introduction to *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979), 1.

27. Barrett, "Identities and Identity Studies."

28. Hank Willis Thomas in *Juxtapoz*, qtd. on Jack Shainman Gallery website, http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/hankwillis-thomas/.

29. Here there is another connection to Moten's essay, "Blackness and Nothingness." Moten writes "that black life—which is as surely to say life as black thought is to say thought—is irreducibly social; that, moreover, black life is lived in political death or that it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject by those who, insofar as they are not subjects, are also not, in the interminable (as opposed to the last) analysis, 'death-bound,' as Abdul JanMohaed (2005) would say" (739).

30. Elizabeth Alexander, "Afterword: Remembering Lindon Barrett," this volume.

31. Leila Neti, private correspondence.