



ANTHONY B. PINN



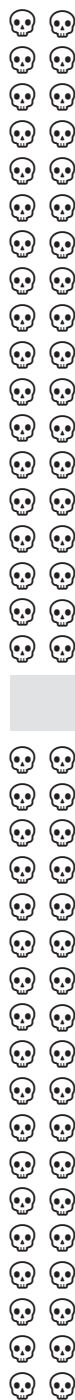
**HIP HOP AND
THANATOLOGICAL
NARRATIONS OF
BLACKNESS**



Deathlife

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NARRATIONS OF BLACKNESS**

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INTRODUCTION

PARADIGMS OF DEATH (OR LIFE) AND *DEATHLIFE*

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.

—JAMES BALDWIN, *The Fire Next Time*

In light of ongoing existential circumstances, Black expressive culture naturally has interrogated and wrestled with the constitution of existence—its beginning, its present, and its end. Why would it be otherwise when, as the above epigraph makes clear, denial of the realness of death is futile and unproductive in that it deforms both the nature and the meaning of death and life?

Death and life: while some, as is the American way, seek to sever the connection between the two, social circumstances contain language and practices (e.g., cultural depictions of Black bodies as dangerous, “law and order,” geographic confinement as something like a grave) that serve to reinforce their

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relationship despite objections. To avoid this discussion is to misunderstand history and deform aesthetic framing of the social world. They—death and life—are thought together to the extent that being for Black bodies involves the simultaneous potentiality of both, and this generates a geography of speculation both reasonable (drawn from interrogation of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural conditions) and affective. One way to describe this relationship of death and life is through the image of dying. And, so, what Victor Brombert says concerning Franz Kafka's take on death—one whose poor health kept death always a consideration—is applicable here. "Death for Kafka means not an end," Brombert writes, "nor a passing (or passage) located in a time soon to come, but an everlasting reality of pain in the present; not in fact death, but a permanent dying."¹

Pushing forward, Blackness attached to certain bodies has long functioned as a trope, a graphic sign, of this dying—housing at once the terror of death and the longing for life. In a sense, Blackness within the context of the United States has served as a frame for decay, a relationship to social chaos constituted by and monitored in terms of the counterdynamics of whiteness. And in this narration, in this performance against (Black) death and for the sake of (white) life, Black bodies are always and already representative of a perceived dangerous intersection. To think and perform Blackness is, within the context of our social world, to negotiate death and life. In fact, Blackness is constituted by the coherence, the coterminous relationship, of death and life as this is projected onto certain weight-carrying communities. As a consequence, in terms of physical exposure and metaphysical restriction, the history of the United States in relationship to Blackness is a history of demise—an often-denied performance of what I call *deathlife*. One of the more graphic narrations of this configuration comes from hip hop culture. In certain ways, hip hop culture—and I am particularly concerned with the lyrical content of rap music—offers a language, an alternate grammar and vocabulary, for articulating the nature and meaning of *deathlife*.

In what follows here, I position *deathlife* against another paradigm—life distinctive from death—in order to set the stage for its application vis-à-vis rap music.² The examination of these two paradigms isn't intended to suggest a distinction between death and *deathlife*. Rather, my aim is to isolate for discussion the intent behind *deathlife* as a structuring of the Other. Whites, by means of whiteness, don't "see" *deathlife*—privilege involves not having to. Instead, they feel its meaning and name its impact using the language of death or life.³ The distinction (death or life versus *deathlife*) is a matter of orientation (whiteness or Blackness), not substance. In making this claim, in the

following section, I mean to highlight, from the vantage point of whiteness's logic, a cartographical presentation of *deathlife* cast as death *or* life. The goal is to provide a sense of how embodied Blacks are positioned within US social arrangements related to *deathlife* (or what whiteness projects as death *or* life) and the discourse of anxiety marking this positioning of Blackness.⁴ The aim of whiteness in so doing is to position Blacks in relationship to death and life—and in this way ratify the social world. In making this argument, I begin to contextualize and offer pretext for narrations of *deathlife* that are presented in the remaining chapters.

Paradigm I: Life or/and Death

How does it feel to be a problem?

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folk*

By considering the manner in which Blackness has been constructed as the meaning of death for whites, and publicly performed as the “technology” of *deathlife*, I want to extend the notion of Blacks as a problem presented by W. E. B. Du Bois early in *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁵ And I do this by recognizing that the “Veil”—his term for what is not only a material source of division and exclusion but also a type of hermeneutical device, or tool of perception—hampers the manner in which Black people are viewed and understood by whites, but affords a clear presentation of whites.⁶ Hence, Blacks as a problem is tied to the production of whiteness (by white people) and its aims. Mindful of this, I want to note the flip side of that formulation (i.e., Blacks as a problem) by briefly considering Du Bois's later formulation of whiteness as presented in the essay “The Souls of White Folks.” For Du Bois, something about the second sight of Blacks allows them to “see” and to know whites—to view them from a place of familiarity in that he, like all Black people, is “bone of their thought and flesh of their language.” This is a deep familiarity informing Black people, but one that troubles and angers whites, resulting in white denial of Black people's substance and place within the social world; instead, as Du Bois writes, “They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism.”⁷

Undergirding this is a modern development: the creation of white people as unique and special, the measure of humanity, the standard, ontology's conclusion, with Blacks as a failed ontology in that they are defined by a radical status as “not like whites.” This is a modern logic, which serves to shape

the expanse of the social world and all its resources—and which is summed up by the category of whiteness. Or, as Du Bois expresses the predicament, “There must come the necessary despisings and hatreds of these savage half-men, this unclean canaille of the world—these dogs of men. All through the world this gospel is preaching. It has its literature, it has its priests, it has its secret propaganda and above all—it pays!”⁸

Whiteness is a justification for total consumption, for unbridled expression of desire; it frames a system of thought combined with diabolical practice that is sanctioned through violence and disregard of any (and all) who pose a threat to this logic of superiority and its grand claims. Or, in Du Bois’s words, “Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!”⁹ According to the grand narrative, without the presence of whiteness and white people to maintain it, the world would lack substance and meaning—and instead would devolve into chaos. Du Bois sees the trick here, knows the falseness of such claims, and names what whiteness puts in place to manage such exposure. This barbarity isn’t a misrepresentation of white people, not a misnaming of whiteness; rather, it is the very nature of white culture. Maintenance of this falsehood is intense and bloody. It is rabid in its moralizing and championing of a white world through condemnation of Blackness vis-à-vis Black people: “Say to a people: ‘The one virtue is to be white,’ and the people rush to the inevitable conclusion, ‘Kill the “nigger”!’”¹⁰

Here, one begins to see the manner (and means) by which whiteness captures the idea of Blacks through a discourse of anxiety, with Blackness constructed as a corrective narration of *deathlife* distinct from the experience of whiteness as a relationship of life *over against* death. In other words, the construction of Blackness carried through Black bodies is meant to isolate death for the white population in something other than themselves. By so doing, Blackness through Black bodies takes on death so that others (i.e., white members of the social world) are able to operate through a controlled encounter with death. Put another way, I am suggesting that whites (through the development and operation of whiteness) work to construct existential arrangements and ontological structures that make death visible and “manageable” by projecting it onto Black bodies.

White bodies do experience death, but whites are able to “attach”—a type of projection—their worst fears about death (as the taking of life), the most grotesque dimensions of their anxiety of death, to Black bodies. This happens with respect to two geographies: (1) physical demise and (2) irrelevance—as an ontological and epistemological rupture in its most graphic form.

The nature and meaning of death have changed; the locations for death and the framing of death have altered due to various socioeconomic, political, and cultural shifts in collective life over the centuries. Yet something related to the awareness of death remains in place and undergirds reflective awareness of life's vulnerability. Whites live with an understanding of and fear regarding the end of physical existence. This is such a strong component of individual and collective life that physical death loses its distinctiveness and becomes less easily distinguished from what is called life. In this regard, one might think in terms of material, physical life/death as opposed to a much clearer distinction such as life . . . death.¹¹ There have been efforts, of course, to control, monitor, and ritualize material death (the end of vital biological functions), or to privatize it so as to make it manageable, to make it fit within a particular sociocultural understanding.

Death experienced in this form gives whites time, resource, and opportunity to work out arrangements in a way consistent with individual need/want and in light of communal assumptions and priorities. It might involve arrangement of resources, nurturing relationships, and so on. This is an economy of death that is manageable and to some extent "owned" by whites. The opposite of this, the type of death avoided, involves a hard death, entailing death that is untimely (outside the socially assumed chronological frame for human life), death that is violent or in some other way outside the pattern of life or death desired by the person, or death that for any other reason is outside the dominant narrative of life or death. Such death disrupts sociocultural arrangements that mark out life or physical being within a given community. In this way, physical death produces *dis-ease* within a community and fosters a certain type of anxiety within individuals.

While there may be cultural nuance and difference in the practices of marking off and discussing death, whites and Blacks use similar structuring(s) of physical death; laws, for instance, determine how any body can be disposed of or stored.¹² The physical body, the biochemical reality whose biological functions end, can be ritually addressed after death.¹³ It can be mourned, represented in a variety of ways, and then set apart from living in a clear and "final" manner. It can be presented and available to the living in cemeteries and urns but still at a safe distance from the living, confined, managed, epistemologically docile. Not so with irrelevance premised on a certain epistemology. It, the body, must be apparent, in place, and exposed to life so as to differentiate it from that which isn't meaningfulness. In this regard, the practices

related to the material body are fairly set across cultures and social dynamics. For example, whites and Blacks both use professionals who prepare bodies for presentation and ritualized goodbyes, and so on. Yet there are limits to this connection, in that death as presented here grabs at Blacks in certain ways and casts Blacks in a particular relationship to demise. The challenge is this: contacts, or communities, nurture structures of connection that ease the reality of death, but they also involve the production of circumstances (e.g., diseases and violence) that undercut the offerings of relationship. There is the movement through the world aware that life is framed by death, and death by life.¹⁴ This, of course, is true for those who are considered human in ways that have fundamental mattering—who are socioeconomically, politically, religiously, and culturally human—that is, whites.¹⁵

The arts have recognized and faced this dilemma over and over again. Particular social developments and challenges have prompted this recognition and the need to aesthetically present it. Karla FC Holloway's insight is worth noting: there is an intimate link between "color and death." And this connection guides much of what she, and others who hold to this opinion, says about the nature and meaning of the rituals and processes of addressing physical demise within Black communities. In addition, Holloway argues, this connection between color and death shaped cultural production, as the arts became a way to express the nature and meaning of this tragic relationship.¹⁶ But regardless of the motivation, the arts have marked out deep awareness of this limitation. On this point I share a question with Sharon Patricia Holland: "What if some subjects never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the 'living'?" Our answers are different. Holland frames the question in light of Toni Morrison's brilliant *Beloved* and raises the specter of existing with the dead, being "at one with the dead."¹⁷ For Holland, Blacks are perceived as ghosts.¹⁸ Not so for me—and this is where we begin to move away from the physicality of death. I suggest Blacks do not achieve the status of the "living" not because they are categorized with the dead—the ancestors, for instance—but because they are neither fully objects nor fully subjects. Put another way, they have a particular materiality—an embodiedness that produces discomfort and anxiety in the general non-Black population—but they have limited metaphysical importance, in that their presence is without deep epistemological and ontological significance because they have no will that matters. They, through socioeconomic and political arrangements, for example, are put in place and monitored by the dominant population; in this way, they occupy an in-between space of sorts.

The dead must also be “alive”—present, ever-present—if the meaning of whiteness is to have meaning. But the dead can’t be so present as to cause epistemological and ontological discomfort on a fundamental level for those (advocates of white supremacy, among others) depending on this particular arrangement of the dead. Put differently, Blacks must be recognizable—“human” enough to be visible, or regarded—but not able to demand so much attention, or significance in time and space, as to threaten those who advocate modalities of white advantage. One might think of the deaths of Michael Brown, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Trayvon Martin as representing this visceral desire to maintain the placement of Black bodies.¹⁹ To talk about death—to understand it on some level within and beyond its most superficial dimensions as confrontation of the senses in the form of physical demise—is to talk about life. This, nonetheless, is a reality fought on a variety of fronts. The logic of life, in fact, is death.

ONTOLOGICAL DEATH

There are ways in which the very presence of Blacks in North America entails a certain type of death. Slavery, as the sociologist Orlando Patterson has aptly noted, involves social death: the surrender of will or authority for the sake of physical life.²⁰ This arrangement has certainly shaped the context and content of Blacks’ existence in the Americas, but I have in mind a different dimension of this situation, related, but to be wrestled with in its own right. What Patterson describes so vividly entails the existential arrangements of “life,” the experience of living within a context of race-based discrimination. The embodied Black body is confined in time and space in ways felt through the flesh and in relationship to other bodies. Yet there are also ontological considerations of note, meaning ways in which the very being of Blacks is defined by the presence of demise. Indeed, the Black body as social construct is the language of demise, in that it was meant to signify and speak of and tame the end of being as a subject. This ontological death is not the end of vital functions such as heart activity or brain activity. Nor do I mean the end of spiritual vitality in a traditional religious-theological sense. This is not death as a physical or “spiritual” condition, but rather death more fully as an ontological positioning and an epistemological rupture regarding knowledge of being, of life integrity, of dignity, and so on. It is the loss of meaning more generally as opposed to the particular ending of a particular person’s mattering.²¹

This ontological and epistemological situation means the “identity” of Blacks isn’t simply marked by stigma. That is to say, Erving Goffman’s keen

work on the nature and meaning of the stigma as marking a person who is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” doesn’t fully capture the construction—epistemologically and ontologically—of Blacks.²² For Blacks aren’t simply human with both “virtual” *and* “actual” social identity as less than—as somehow and in some way impure. It isn’t a matter of a Black person, a complex human being understood or stereotyped in a way that renders them problematic or deficient in some way.²³ No, the Black person means something more fundamentally different, and perceived as a necessary danger. Stigma has too limited a range of influence and form, in that any given attribute can render an individual “usual” or “unusual.”²⁴ Such is not the case for Blacks, for whom the challenge is always and already deeply ontological-epistemological and expressed existentially. Even the idea that some “attributes” are always a problem doesn’t fully capture the situation. Furthermore, the “not quite human” sense, as Goffman outlines it, the sense of race as a stigma, doesn’t recognize sufficiently the nature of the ontological *dis*-ease (not simply social understandings and arrangements, that is, social identity) assumed to be constituted by Blackness. In some respects, what Goffman points out as stigma involves a type of social and/or physical symmetry lacking in some persons. For the Black person, however, it is more than this lack of symmetry.²⁵

What Neil Small says concerning the discussion of death within scholarship and as differentiated over time in the West is relevant here: “Death is the apotheosis of this grand dream of control and of the belief in the power of the ordered.”²⁶ As Blacks have been constructed as death, this means for those needing and wanting this arrangement that death is both sought and feared—having something of a religious quality. It is an odd arrangement: Blacks are projected as death within a context fighting to keep death at bay, and participation in American life in any substantive way requires Blacks to buy into the death they are projected as constituting. With this in mind, it is clear that Russ Castronovo’s intriguing notion of “necro citizenship” fails to fully capture what I mean to represent here. He argues that US democracy enjoys nonresponsive citizens—Blacks—who do not react to political developments, who are passive and still, who are . . . corpses.²⁷ His sense of a citizenry rendered docile, disengaged, corpse-like entails some of the actual consequences associated with the irrelevance or death of African Americans, but I have more in mind, more than the sociopolitical spheres of life. For Castronovo there is something about recognition of morality as political capital that says a word about “democratic existence within the state.”²⁸ The corpse—the body—can be dead, or it can be reanimated through particular

shifts in political ideals, practices, and sensibilities. This sense of death, of the final disembodiment, understood within the context of “necro citizenship,” has something to do with the sense of privatization that so many have understood as the modern turn regarding the dead, while the political is public. This separation isn’t certain and it isn’t fixed, when, for instance, one considers the political importance of the social death of enslaved Africans.²⁹ I mean something more fundamental by “irrelevance” over against the “dis/embodied experience, social position, and political metaphor” intended by Castronovo. The death I describe is the structuring of knowledge about Blacks in spheres of collective interaction (such as their educational ability and criminality) and the very meaning of Black bodies that undergirds these other historical patterns of individual and collective life. Death so conceived is one reason we can talk about bodies mattering.³⁰

It is not the case, nor need it be, that all agree Blacks are so constructed. The manner of structuring Blacks as such isn’t dependent on consensus. It only needs to become the dominant logic, with white people benefiting directly and indirectly from its normativity, and this doesn’t preclude slippage regarding when and how Blacks are so understood. The presentation of this logic must be compelling or at least presented in light of a shared need, and over time it will become the unspoken reality, the assumed condition. It, this logic, to borrow and apply in a different context a phrase from Albert Camus, entails “solidarity against death.”³¹ Undergirding this configuration of Blacks is an epistemologically grounded and ontological move: Blacks are needed in order for meaning to be and to be lodged in the “life” of whites. Within this narrative of meaning, Blacks are a cautionary tale suggesting the importance of accepting the dominant structuring of individual and collective existence—of safeguarding against contamination. Letting one’s guard down in the presence of Blacks can result only in destruction of social existence as vital, vibrant, and humane. This second form of death, according to whiteness, is a meaninglessness that restricts life force to memory: it subjects one to the caprice of others, to the will of others who determine to what degree one has presence. It is to be without the human will that “matters.” Ontology, through death, is warped, and social relationship involves confinement and destruction.

This discussion is not one simply regarding alterity—the Other as a “presence” to be recognized and addressed. Such cannot be the case when Blacks are ontologically and epistemologically dead—that is, irrelevant. This difference in being won’t be addressed by simply recognizing the Other or having the Other recognize the dominant mode of humanity. Even the aesthetic representation of Blacks, from the minstrel shows’ “Zip Coon” moving forward,

offers yet another way in which the Black person serves as the marker of death, represented in and by the cultural frameworks and imagination of the general public.³² It is in thinking of Blacks in this way, and presenting them in this fashion, that whites over the course of centuries have been able to envision themselves as alive, or invested with meaning, as subjects moving and arranging their world. Over against Blacks, they have relevance within a social world marked by no central and consistent meaning.³³ Everything about Blacks as being irrelevant has an underlying function of affirming as right this grand narrative of white life *over against* death. There is a warped assumption that, through Blackness, whites can harness reality and control it through a mode of prescience.³⁴

Blacks are constructed as the embodiment and discourse of danger, destruction, and disorder, whose very efforts to produce meaning result in contamination and chaos that must be controlled by naming them irrelevant.³⁵ Yet, oddly enough, this process is not without its weak points. For instance, to the extent Blacks cannot be forgotten within the US narrative of white domination, the Black person is immortal: dead to the extent that they are projected as without meaning, but perpetually alive to the extent that their memory is essential for the safeguarding of the American narrative. Some have recognized such weaknesses and have worked to exploit them, if by no other means than signifying them. From my perspective, that is the case with hip hop culture in general and rap music in particular. Those who carry the bodies of symbolic death (and who pose the threat of physical death) speak in haunting tones of their demise and what it means for the larger structures of existential concern within the US context.³⁶ More precisely, hip hop culture is an intervention of sorts, marking a cultural shift—a change in the grammar and vocabulary of living that acknowledges the presence of death. But, through this acknowledgment of death tied to Blackness, rap artists seek to shift its significance and benefit. That is, rather than this association with the workings of death acting as a marker of a less-than status, it is used to project substance. In this situation, meaning is *me(an)ing*, or a tension between the individual and frameworks of communality played out through/in the fragility of life.

Exposing and Claiming Death

My aim in this section is not to offer a full rehearsal of how rap is related to death in general or murder in particular. Instead, I want to share a few examples to establish a sense of how death functions in much rap music. As artists guided by this paradigm reflect, one has no choice but to consider death and

life, to be aware of both. A sense that they are distinguishable entails a point of graphic and explosive conversation.

With respect to physical demise, hip hop has something of an elegiac quality—an irreverent poetic reflection on those who are dead, which includes by its very nature rehearsal of death's production. Such is the concern with relationship to death, which is to say, how one interacts with it. In certain ways murder is a dominant motif and, in this manner, it is tied to the Western preoccupation with the ending of life through crafted narratives exploring demise. As Michael Collins reflects, "The beautiful murder, the murder lifted into the mind by 'winged words,' is in many ways the heartbeat of American culture—indeed, of all western culture."³⁷ The situation, however, is more focused than that—situated within a particular social geography—and, so, what James Baldwin reflects regarding the nature of socioeconomic and cultural life for Blacks in mid-twentieth-century Harlem holds true for hip hop's attention to death. The circumstances related to the awareness of loss, or epistemological clarity, make plain that "your losses are coming."³⁸

I want to avoid the quick move to the "why" of killing and instead describe and analyze the "how" and "what" of killing within hip hop culture *qua* rap. In other words, murder in rap is often viewed from the vantage point of life—what it takes away—yet there are important ways in which murder in hip hop also speaks about the substance of death. Much has already been made of the taking of life, or the presence of active demise, within hip hop culture, particularly as chronicled in gangsta rap.³⁹ And this focus is not without good reason, when one considers the sociocultural impact of the gangsta personae that emerged during the culture wars of the 1980s and in relationship to the age of crack. So, something about the effort to claim time and space, to constitute presence and significance, is connoted through the ability to consume time and space (i.e., murder).

Resembling a thematic arc found in the fiction of Richard Wright, relevance (or what Calvin Warren might call "ontological murder") for a despised Black figure seeking to be a subject within an anti-Black social environment involves the ability to take life.⁴⁰ If one cannot determine fully the shape of one's own social existence, one can produce it through negation—through the ability to end the (social) life of another. There is a "feel" for living produced by the taking of life—a carving out of psychological space and meaning through the void resulting from the manufacturing of demise.⁴¹ For Blacks, as Wright and later rap artists would attest, the possibility of physical or ontological demise is always present, always threatening. Does one take life, or does one have one's life taken?

Taking life becomes the ontological equivalent of having life. Think, for example, of active demise as a marker of being represented in Dr. Dre and Ice Cube's 1994 song "Natural Born Killaz." Life is amplified through the consumptive power of death. While Ice Cube described the song as satire, there's no concern or remorse regarding the consequences of life taken. Rather there is only an excitement at times erotic in nature: "It feels like I'm bustin' a nut when I open you up."⁴² Presented from the perspective of the one who controls life by taking it, vitality is determined in light of a signifying of codes meant to safeguard life. Murder is without a larger logic and without grand claims. It takes place because it can, and within this possibility of demise the murderer constructs an arrangement in which one controls life through death. The "right" to life is superseded by the ability to end life. In this sense, production of death serves as a signifier of subjectivity, as a mode of being in contradistinction to social dictates. Or, in the words of DMX,

Look me in my eyes (WHAT!)

Tell me to my fuckin' face that you ready to die (C'mon).⁴³

Murder, then, is the performance of a twisted personhood. It is not only the taking of life by murder that constitutes a marker of significance; ontological vitality is also constituted through being the target of murderous intent.

Biggie Smalls (The Notorious B.I.G.), murdered in 1997, famously outlines this philosophy of existence in "You're Nobody ('Til Somebody Kills You)"—the counter to Dean Martin's "You're Nobody till Somebody Loves You."⁴⁴ The visual imagery associated with the track presents Biggie Smalls dressed in a long black coat and hat, leaning against a hearse, looking out at the person holding the record album. The license plate with the letters "B.I.G." suggests the artist is the one orchestrating or ritualizing the transition between realms, serving as something along the lines of a funeral director. From this cover imagery to the lyrics, death is present. Through the track, Biggie Smalls comes to grips with death by seeking to manage it, to determine its arrival and its target. This isn't quite the gangsta encountered through "Natural Born Killaz," but death is still managed. Although the posture is a bit different, there is still a direct relationship between projected personal meaning and destruction of the Other. A direct relationship, a metaphysical mutuality, between taking and sustaining life is apparent and graphically portrayed through the defiant Black body occupying time and space. Agency is aggregated and signified through a body count.⁴⁵

Something about this arrangement of ignoble reciprocity speaks to the metaphysical significance of the dead Black (male) body. Or, as Lindon

Barrett reflects, “The dead black body may be an ultimate figure of regulation, unruly desire and its risks fully mastered. Yet, as the unfolding history of the United States attests in particular, what is most interesting is that this form of death has a highly useful social valence,” marked by a type “of social productivity.”⁴⁶ What Biggie Smalls outlines in “You’re Nobody” isn’t hip hop’s presentation of the martyr. That is to say, the track doesn’t advocate seeking (or welcoming) demise, but rather indicates one’s value is determined by the desire to murder that it generates in others. Importance or worth involves negation, a mode of absence—ultimately the value of one’s life is measured in the void generated by its ending. In relationship to the materiality of being, the measure is the desirability of one’s economic holdings: one is valued to the extent one has things others will kill to secure. But on a more ontological level, significance for the Black body is measured against the merit of loss. Value is determined by how aggressively another tries to bring about one’s nonbeing. This is a radical give-and-take by means of which substance is assessed by a significant absence, and importance is defined by the appeal of a void. There is a tragicomic quality to these circumstances: tragic in that they define the existential environment described (and lived?) by the artist, and comic to the extent the artist is aware of these arrangements and seeks to maneuver with swag and thereby live despite the price for living.⁴⁷

Still, death is accepted as part of the game but also denied, or, as the chorus of Biggie Small’s track laments, “I don’t wanna die, God tell me why.”⁴⁸ Even so, to be (of worth) is to be in reach of death. Both the deceased and the one who murders claim substance, announce their presence through demise. Nonetheless, there is a paradox in play. The one who is killed, because of the rationale for taking that life, has inflated significance (they are “worth” killing) but is also diminished by the act. In other words, death is two-faced, jaded. It exposes, renders transparent, the cartography of status, signifying both the inauthentic and the celebrated real social substance:

You can be the shit, flash the fattest five (that’s right)
 Have the biggest dick, but when your shell get hit
 You ain’t worth spit, just a memory.⁴⁹

Biggie Smalls’s album depicts the distinction between life and death, while recognizing circumstances can result in a quick transition from the former to the latter. Pride, prowess, money, and status can easily fuel a demand for blood. Puff Daddy’s rehearsing of Psalm 23:4–6 (“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . .”), with which the song starts, is quickly overcome by Biggie Smalls’s recounting of life marked by

“strictly gun-testin’, coke-measurin.’”⁵⁰ Is he the chosen one framed by the scripture rehearsed? Or do the lyrics signify scripture by offering an orientation premised not on the blessing of life, but rather on the promise of death—expressing the fragility of life in which divine assistance doesn’t trump the intent of a murderer?

The bestowing of subjectivity isn’t a matter of divine creation and orientation but instead is found in the bringing of death—“somebody” does the killing and in that process of taking bestows personhood. Obtaining material goods doesn’t constitute this personhood but merely becomes the occasion of a certain visibility that, through death, brings meaning. Death consumes life and leaves behind residue in the form of memories and reputation. The curiosity about a theologized depiction of life qua scripture over against existential concerns is short-circuited through a materialist turn because, Biggie Smalls recounts, “Niggas in my faction don’t like askin’ questions.”⁵¹

Social status and its markings (e.g., wealth and notoriety) can bring death, as Snoop Dogg chronicles in “Murder Was the Case That They Gave Me”—released a year after Snoop Dogg was charged with (but not convicted of) first-degree murder, after his bodyguard shot and killed someone.⁵² The story weaves together the threat of death with the promise of life enabled by a cosmic turn; but even this doesn’t entail a break from the materiality of both. Death is felt, and life is defined, over against the looming possibility of demise. Like blues artists before him, Snoop Dogg works a deal with the “Devil” meant to render life robust and deep with material markers of importance, but it simply delays the consumption of life by death.⁵³ That is, either way—through murder or the surrender of one’s soul—loss is the paradigmatic transposal. It simply solidifies the metaphysical dimensions of and material geography for death over life. But, unlike Biggie Smalls, who tells the story from the perspective of the murderer who brings death, Snoop narrates from the perspective of the one challenged with death. In this case, he’s brought back from the brink and reconstitutes an alternate modality of life, but not without the ongoing threat of demise:

Just remember who changed your mind
'Cause when you start set-tripping, that ass is mine.⁵⁴

The bedtime prayer that begins “Now I lay me down to sleep . . .,” recited mid-track, offers no clear protection from the threat of death. An appeal to a moment of innocence succumbs to significant demands that impinge on the body. Perhaps there is a type of desire for inactivity, for rest, but it gives way.

It, this prayer, is a theologization of circumstances without salvific potential. Time isn't disrupted or reconfigured along new lines of meaning and being. Praying doesn't trump preying. Again, life is distinct but lived in the shadow of confinement and demise, and this arrangement isn't softened or altered through theological proclamations and platitudes.

Between Snoop Dogg and Biggie Smalls, there are distinctly different perceptions regarding the embodied response to death. For the latter, it can instill status; for the former, it is to be avoided, in that it marks the tragic. For both artists, death is already and always a consideration—one that is distinct from life. In other words, death marks an end to connection and to the workings of community, and importance tied only to ephemeral realms of memory. Put yet another way, death has a direct and negative relationship to life—marked by the taking of agency and the residue of vulnerability exposed in a most graphic and permanent form. It is to lose grip on the markers of substance impinging on one's psychosocial geography.

Distinction between death and life constitutes a mode of self-sacrifice acknowledged in lyrics as an assertion of self over against the Other for justified reasons related to the established code of conduct. This is one way of thinking about "getting got" as a mode of status exchange revolving around the dynamics of reputation that is real but in/tangible, and shadowed by a materiality of consequences (e.g., money). All of this—murder and being murdered—has meaning to the extent the social parameters and rules for life are agreed upon, or, in other words, because all involved know the "game."

In playing this game to the death, there is both longing and disregard. Both require an object kept through destruction. The Black body is understood as significant, as bearing "weight," to the extent it is open to the loss of life in either an active (murder) or inactive (murdered) form. To recognize similarity—both partners being in the "game"—does little to dissuade aggression. To kill and to be killed are forms of manageability, as well as the graphic ritual enactment of annihilation. The language used to narrate stories of murder (*lunatic, psycho-driven murder, maniac*) suggests recognition of the act as antisocial and outside the normative morality of collective life—a type of social dysfunction. Or, as Dr. Dre and Ice Cube put it,

Journey with me into the mind of a maniac

Doomed to be a killer since I came out the nut sack.⁵⁵

These artists, despite what might be the listener's initial reaction, don't seek to normalize murder; rather, they rationalize it by describing circumstances

and social contexts in which death is necessary if one is to value life or at least maintain the viability of existence. In a word, they expose and manipulate the logic of whiteness.

While narratives of death over against life have tended toward the totalizing impact of murder and Black male occupation of time and space, this does not mean that the perception accurately reflects circumstances. I would not attempt to authenticate any assumption that death has a special hold on Black male bodies or that the distinction between life and death is any more graphic or intense when gendered in that way. Social coding and cultural assumptions concerning gender may help shape those to whom one listens; but it doesn't mean women within rap aren't experiencing the impact/fullness of death and narrating it. Rather, the mechanics of expression may bend to gender, but the nature and meaning of death remain as intense and determinative. Think of the demise of Philadelphia's Chynna Rogers, a model and rap artist. Her death, in 2020, probably as a result of addiction, is not a common case of traditional gunplay like the stories recounted above—of bravado escalating into identity and personhood affirmed through death. Still, the narrative of death here isn't unfamiliar. Yet drugs, in this case, aren't marked by the lure of the hustler or the trap house presented from the perspective of the hustler. Instead it is death in relationship to a young woman, whose end is still a bit mysterious.⁵⁶

Working within the orbit of the A\$AP Mob, her early releases (especially "Selfie") gained Chynna an audience beyond the fashion world she'd entered after signing with Ford Models.⁵⁷ Her music blurs the line between death and life: embodied struggle (perhaps) chemically fueled is a circumstance shadowed by mechanisms of demise. The titles of her EPs—such as *music 2 die 2* (2017) and *in case I die first* (2019)—speak to this presence of death and focus on the dynamics of death in public. However, it isn't simply the titles that explore these conditions. Instead, the lyrical content provides a grammar and vocabulary of death as slow spectacle. In fact, "her output thrives on bringing light to the things often relegated to hushed conversations in the corners of the mind: drugs, death, despair."⁵⁸ Chynna, the embodied artist, is shaped and figured through the highlighting of effects: the biochemical play that both intensifies and destroys as the body is *re-shaped* by substances that "blunt" the dynamics of life, leaving death in their wake. The somewhat slow, intentional, sleepy, and haunting delivery of her lyrics, laced with reference to a bluesy haze of activity, guides the script as it announces her pattern of "question[ing] my life all the time."⁵⁹ Demise is amplified; life ends and death takes over.

From a profession (fashion) centered on the hypervisible body to the lyrical content of her music, there is a shift from the body as ideal and static to the body as altered and victimized by external materials brought into it. With the former, death is bracketed, or “quarantined,” behind a frame of beauty; but with the latter, the body is subdued. The body is vulnerable—not only dimensional and tagged by the potentiality of life but also susceptible to death. There is the lyrical, the skeletal, the to-the-bone manner in which habit encourages a mood in which death is a matter of honestly portrayed living . . . ended. The performance of life with its trauma surrenders to a type of stillness at the end. Or, as Chynna asks, “Shit ain’t bad forever, is it though?”⁶⁰ One doesn’t necessarily see the full performance of demise—Chynna didn’t speak about her addiction until after rehab—but rather the “mood” of demise is rehearsed and layered on a visible body, and it is done in a way that fades life into death.⁶¹

In addition to Chynna’s raps addressing demise from a young woman’s perspective, remember Rapsody’s “Aaliyah,” a track in which she recounts the dynamic relationship between existential circumstances and notions of death. As she reflects, there are various dimensions to demise measured by quality and quantity—a circumstantial weight borne by those on both sides of the divide:

Only plan for some niggas, was the plan to stay alive
Is a loss a blessing? Only a few of my friends died
I know another side of graves, some always at a graveside.⁶²

Life is taken and this constitutes death: a distinct experience framed in terms of negation. In a certain sense, the threat of ending life is totalizing, shaping not only how living is understood but also the preoccupations directing movement through time and space. The tools of demise are ever-present, working in a variety of contexts but all targeting vulnerable bodies on display. To be part of a hip hop–inflected community is to be seen by means of a negative visibility and prone to demise. To live is to be exposed and targeted. As Lil’ Kim reflects in “Pray for Me,”

I’m more worried about the streets takin’ you from me
I’m more worried about police takin’ you from me.

Yet this worry doesn’t paralyze. There is agency present to the extent Black embodied bodies not only are exposed to death but also can perform death and in this way be death dealing. This is an awareness that doesn’t stifle activity, but rather motivates and directs engagement:

I'll whack a nigga, then buy a flight to Madrid
I did the bid, now I do the most . . .⁶³

Social meaning plays out within a metaphysical and historical arena of death against life. And there is enough separation between life and death to allow forethought of action and reflection, at least in the form of memory rehearsed and exercised. While differentiated to some degree, life and death in this schema both impinge on time and space in similar ways and are consistent with the logic of the social environment described by hip hop culture.

Paradigm 2: *Deathlife*

In 1974, while speaking with a French journalist, James Baldwin reflected on his life and said that he “never had a childhood, he was born dead.”⁶⁴ *Born dead*: an existential and ontological intertwining of life and death played out within the framework of embodied Blackness. Mindful of Baldwin’s statement—how it links life and death existentially and ontologically—and moving beyond a discussion of killing and dying as the existential scope of rap music, this book explores not the “how” of death, but rather the “what” of death. That is to say, my concern is the manner in which Black bodies are coded by social understandings of and reaction to *deathlife*.⁶⁵

Over against the paradigm of death versus life highlighted above (i.e., paradigm 1), the paradigm of *deathlife* pushes against the assumed safeguard of both real and symbolic boundaries. To relate this description of two material-metaphysical patterns using common tropes, one might think of it this way: the latter (*deathlife*) is met through the sensibilities of the trickster (i.e., the technique of movement that blends worlds) whereas the former (death versus life) involves a distinction exhibited by the preacher, who speaks of movement from one to another opposing plane. What the preacher offers is the *elegiac response* to a perceived exhaustion of vitality in one plane of existence. If one is of faith, the preacher claims, one is reconstituted on another plane beyond loss and sorrow. The preacher’s approach is consistent with the argument found in spiritual and gospel music: freedom entails the detangling of life from death through a transhistorical “beyond.” Despite the preacher’s claim, even if death and life could be distinguished and held apart—one against the other—language doesn’t have the capacity to illustrate the process. Vocabulary and grammar remain on the border of each and are marginal to the content of both.

This framing of *deathlife* isn't mere recognition of "both/and." Put another way, one might think of it as an expressed superposition housed within embodied Blacks. This isn't a mode of epistemological agnosia whereby there is an inability to distinguish objects that are distinguishable. This is to say, distinction between life and death so as to safeguard one over the other just isn't, and effort to produce distinction is without effective possibility. To speak of one is to name the other. Furthermore, *deathlife* involves more than a highlighting of a symbiotic relationship between life and death, in which these two realities are in close proximity or relationship without having that connection alter the meaning of either. More than that, there is a fundamental connection—involving a blending together beyond simple patterns of contact between slippery social conceptions. Black existence as embodied and geographically arranged speaks and reflects this relationship: embodied death as life, life as death. They are coterminous in that they entail the same situation.

The Blackness of certain bodies entails the mapping out of this relationship, as it constitutes a blurring—mingled meaning that speaks life as it speaks death. By and large, the primary locations of hip hop's—more precisely rap music's—development are geographies of this denial of distinction. At least, they are locations serving as a vantage point from which to recognize and narrate this economy of denial. In one sense, artists highlighted in the following chapters provide an alternate perspective, in that they narrate life as death (and death as life)—that is to say, a merger of life and death along the lines of ontological consumption. The artists reflect a mood of existential movement that assumes the epistemological "sameness" between life and death. It is harsh, and one might seek to signify it, but death remains inseparable from what is meant by life. Both mark the body, in this case the material Black body; and the discursive Black body is constructed in relationship to both. What these artists, in part, provide is a poetic engagement with/through this situation of sameness.

What is offered in rap presentations of *deathlife*, then, is a hip hop–inflected thanatological (or what might be more properly called a bio-thanatological) lucidity.⁶⁶ To say this is to speak to the manner in which Blackness is to be a structured condition—despite all (e.g., economic gain through music production), recognized only in relationship to this condition of *deathlife*. This, however, isn't the equating of Blackness with death, but rather the destruction of any distinction between life and death vis-à-vis the totalizing category of Blackness. One, then, shouldn't think of this as a fixable circumstance that

can be altered through persistent effort to the extent that Black lives can be made to matter; rather, it is a fixed circumstance defined in terms of its resolute resistance to alteration . . . for the sake of the social system and the world it manufactures. It is to name a culturally coded and politically, economically, and socially enacted sameness of death and life that isn't constitutive of a transition "between," a movement from one to the other, as narrated in light of social stories of "natural death" and "long" life.⁶⁷ The structure of *deathlife* entails a push against the assumed utility of sociocultural confinement as a plausible safeguard for life as well as a denial of the accompanying assumption that death involves the ultimate loss of agency.

Deathlife is somewhat viral in nature: it has no meaning and doesn't function outside a host, which is to say it has no meaning outside its enactment in Black embodiment. On some level, Blackness is constructed and constituted in such a way as to deny death to those who carry (as definition) its weight. To grant death would be to acknowledge a distinction that humanizes and to represent Blacks as similarly constituted to white bodies—as the vulnerable storehouse of humanity. However, Blacks are not indistinguishable from creatures existing outside the context of "cultured" sociality. While particular Blacks are forgettable, Blackness grabs attention and is subject to fevered engagement. Whiteness is a performance that demands a disproportionate counterperformance. Whiteness needs to be able to identify Blackness through Blacks so as to have it serve a function unfulfilled through others. To confine or kill a lion, for instance, offers nothing for whites seeking affirmation of distinction. For this affirmation to take place, there is a requirement of both (1) the threat of demise, and (2) comparable signs of life recognizable, yet distinct. Blacks serve as an entry point, a safety value that allows controlled access to Blackness. So, my concern here isn't the applicability of the category of the human as a way to congeal Blackness in time and space.

Related to the ontological question, there is much I find compelling in the writing of Calvin Warren, and I engage him, along with Afropessimist Frank B. Wilderson III, directly and indirectly at various points, thereby marking out regions of commonality in our thinking as well as points of disagreement. Yet the ontological status of the target doesn't capture what I want to say concerning *deathlife* as articulated in rap music.⁶⁸ This entails a need to replace an ontological grammar with thanatological considerations in order to capture the nature and meaning of Blackness. Therefore, this book wrestles with dynamics of thanatology (again, perhaps more precisely, bio-thanatology), but only indirectly with the issues of concern framed by Warren's questioning of ontology connected to "antiblack violence sustaining

the world.”⁶⁹ My concern here is with the intentionality of that violence and the social shaping power of that violence as well as rap music’s response to that outcome—*deathlife*. Hence, as readers will see, this book isn’t directly concerned with issues of being as a philosophical question, although death undoubtedly lends itself to such considerations; instead, the concern is with *deathlife* as a thanatological (highlighting its social dimensions) circuit.⁷⁰ Despite how Blackness is situated, those who carry it are a target of abuse resulting in death *but* are also alive to the extent they animate a white fear and anxiety of dying—the collected presence of effect and affect. Blackness entails both: it is available as counterpresence, allowing whiteness to have social significance (i.e., alive), but also open to violence to prevent the demise of whiteness (i.e., dead).

This violence often involves the killing of individual Black people, and I want to pause briefly to consider what the death/murder of individual Black people entails for the larger system of disregard and demise. Simply put, it doesn’t reduce Blackness; rather, it amplifies Blackness. Stated differently, this violence speaks a relationship between Blackness and whiteness: an increase in one entails a related increase in the other. They are dependent, so killing a Black person doesn’t challenge said relationship. No, it reinforces and highlights the relationship, because Blackness, so to speak, is not the sum of its parts. One can’t “kill” Blackness by killing Black people. John L. Jackson Jr. might be brought into this discussion, since an affective embrace of this relationship as the “American” way can be said to relate (in a deadly manner) to what he calls “racial Americana”—which is a way of naming, in his words, “the inextricable linkages between race and nationhood.”⁷¹ Animosity between what, for the social world, are necessary categories gets expressed through modalities of violence and symbolized in forms of this “racial Americana.” Considering this, to kill a Black person is performance of this relationship. It is an active reminder of whiteness’s need for but hatred of the Blackness that is meant to undergird it and save it from “untimely,” or what one might call an “irregular,” death.

The dead Black person becomes a type of talisman, a device representing (both physically and psychologically) circumstances under control, which is to say life with death bracketed away and managed, at least for a moment. And this representation imagines the Black person both dead (killed in assurance of whiteness as life) and alive (an ever-present reminder of the danger of death). In chapter 4, I’ll think about this status in terms of the zombie, but here suffice it to say that Blackness doesn’t end with the death of Black people. The graphic “look” of Blackness with pretense stripped away through the

act of killing continues to impinge, to impose. And the fear this produces for white people is in part the point of Blackness. One might think of the killing of Black people as a selective “pruning” of Blackness’s representation, which doesn’t hamper it but rather promotes its stability and growth. Its importance for the maintenance of whiteness and a certain set of practices for white people can’t allow for such a finality. Blackness does too much heavy lifting for whiteness, and therefore white people, for it to come to an end.

Blackness is not an in-between place as such but rather is a type of simultaneous occupation—or what one might call a type of metaphysical comorbidity conditioned and orchestrated through external structures of social anxiety that confirm the demands posed by the social world encountered. Blackness affords the social world the maintenance of an illusion—that of beginning and end, or a narrative of progression and development that manages the anxiety of death through a projection of reasonable life as a process of fulfillment over time. And the lack of time encountered by some within the social world is rationalized (or theologized) as an unfortunate anomaly presented through a grammar of lament: a *re*-membering.

The performance of Blackness (over against the performance, for example, of whiteness) can’t be captured and described using the same vocabulary and grammar of engagement. Those who carry Blackness are denied the affective arrangement of response and consideration expressed in such a way as to communicate death as “unnatural”—coming too quickly and taking away something precious. Blackness is constructed so as to hold together life and death and render them indistinguishable in function. Blackness, holding together what is called death and what is called life, can’t be controlled in full by the social world because it exceeds social limits. This, one could argue, accounts for how Blackness is both despised and desired (i.e., death is both repudiated and mesmerizing). On some level, there is an erotic quality to engagement with Blackness through violence to the extent, that is, such engagement allows a flirtation, or an affective entanglement, with what is both desired and feared.

The second decade of the twentieth century has provided urgent and excessive cartographies of this Blacks/Blackness arrangement. One gains a sense of this relationship of Blackness to the white social world in the testimony of former police officer Darren Wilson, who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. (A white man, he was not indicted on state charges nor did he face federal charges.) During his testimony—an inner dialogic made public—Wilson described Michael Brown in terms that rendered him a caricature (“Hulk Hogan”) and ontologically foreign (a demon),

one who seemed to walk through bullets gaining strength with each stride.⁷² (Absorption of destructive intent marks the Black body defined by *deathlife*.) While attempting to explain the shooting, Wilson said,

I start backpedaling and again, I tell him get on the ground, get on the ground, he doesn't. I shoot another round of shots. Again, I don't recall how many it was or if I hit him every time. I know at least once because he flinched again. At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him. And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way.⁷³

Nothing is mentioned of Brown that would center his pain. This, again, is because Blacks through Blackness are presented as “demons.” What Blacks experience by means of their Blackness wouldn't qualify as a category or type of suffering (not even in theological terms). Instead, it is simply a marker of qualified existence cast in other terms (ominous danger, disorder, aesthetic repulsion-appeal, animated hazard, virus). What Blacks experience through the white social world's engagement with Blackness simply constitutes sanctioned and embodied aversion. For Wilson, Michael Brown oozed wildness and the threat of demise, which had to be contained, rendered tame, and confined within established boundaries. Blackness is a threat, but it is also a desired necessity: fundamentally, Wilson's sociality is premised on the existence of this dilemma. Blackness constitutes a situation of both death and life performed and authenticated—despised and desired to the extent it is constitutive of the distinction that whiteness is intended to mean.⁷⁴ Hence, death isn't something that happens to Blacks, as if they can be named outside this framing. Rather, violence is a naming of *deathlife* made visible and active. Violence, in a manner of speaking, puts *deathlife* to work. Furthermore, it is only from the vantage point of Blacks that violence is shrouded with negative connotations. For whites, violence against Blackness by means of Black bodies is rendered justified—a necessary dimension of the social world's infrastructure.

This all points again to a basic logic: the social world isn't dependent on Black bodies only (or, directly, as if to say Black bodies “matter”), but rather the structure of society is grounded in the presence of Blackness. By extension, the social world (sociability performed) is framed and defined over against *deathlife*. Whether there is more to Black bodies than this is moot at best, and attention to the question does nothing to sideline *deathlife* as a basic consideration. To be clear, I am not saying Blackness involves life and

death—the holding together of two meanings. Thinking this way misses the fact that Blackness doesn't involve a choice, a selection of one over the other, an ability to decipher and name an alternative: life and death. Rather, Blackness is Blackness precisely because it entails—it is—the two as the same. Who is “Black” is a question responded to with a bit of fluidity based on proximity and need, inasmuch as the Black is one whose value is symbolic (indirect), a breathing and moving allegory. Other groups who aren't participants in whiteness—who don't perform the sociality of whites—can also be marked by *deathlife*. In effect, there are two categories: whiteness and all else. One sees this, for example, in the expansive manner in which violence serves as a means by which to affirm a particular arrangement—force assures whites of their whiteness. Think of the violent effort to present and arrange Latinx populations in a grammar of democratic life vis-à-vis firm borders, or the way during COVID-19 Asian Americans were rendered connected as they were often (and violently) targeted as the embodiment of viral threat and so on.

Furthermore, beyond “color,” the dimensions of the Black body are of limited concern because what the body—small or large, weak or strong—serves to represent is beyond scale. Even when the embodied body is subdued through killing, the body remains alive—a looming threat because Blackness is the same, despite the particularities of a given Black body. As with a virus, disabling one occurrence of Blackness's presence doesn't wipe it out but instead simply highlights Blackness's expansive configuration. To kill *a* Black person is to point out at the same time the irrepressible nature of all Blacks as marked by the same Blackness. Removal of one points out the existence of so many others. For example, think of the communal continuity to Michael Brown, discussed later, who becomes all Blacks: the hashtag “#iammichaelbrown” and the like speak a word concerning the relationship of all Blacks to *deathlife*.

Blackness is without age restrictions, which is to say Blacks are in this coterminous relationship of *deathlife* from birth. So, violence as an acknowledgment of this relationship's value to whiteness observes no limits when it comes to reinforcing the arrangement. One example of Blackness—or one Black—is the functional, interchangeable equivalent of another. Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones (seven years old) was shot and killed in Detroit, when members of the Special Response Team charged into her grandmother's home. She was sleeping on the couch, next to her grandmother. The police had entered the wrong apartment . . . and the list of Blackness managed goes on, each individual different (e.g., gendered) but the same with respect to how they represent Blackness. The need for Blackness as a functioning

arrangement of *deathlife* creates its own justification and provides a grammar of threat against proper conduct. This is one way to read the trauma experienced by a six-year-old Black girl in Florida, who was arrested after “throwing a tantrum in class and kick[ing] a staff member.”⁷⁵ She was taken to a detention facility, where she was fingerprinted and a “mug shot” taken. Blackness is perceived as a threat to be contained for the well-being of society’s white residents—and it is never too early to reinforce this framework. Or one might think of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed in 2014 while playing with a toy airsoft replica gun without the orange-tipped barrel, indicating it posed no threat.

As with the lynched body hanging from the tree, decomposing in the sun—as well as the small bits of that body later carried as souvenirs—the static body on a city street communicates a positioning that affirms both the demand for difference on the part of whiteness and a surrender to that demand as signified through Blackness. Though killed, the body is still animated in a particular sense and for a set of purposes, which is to say it has impact to the degree it impinges on (shadows) the sociality of whiteness and animates public/private conversation and exchange. It is not just the one whose body litters the ground who creates these conditions; no, any embodied Black is representative of these conditions and therefore poses a threat to the stability of whiteness’s framing of life as distinction. Hence, in this sense, the dead body is a trope maintaining certain “vital” functions. While confrontation with Blackness does not always produce this exact response, it is a ready option. There is a distinction between the death of a Black and the end of Blackness. The latter isn’t desired despite white nationalist rhetoric serving as sociopolitical subterfuge and a type of affective convulsion, while the former is performance of social sensibilities regarding life and death scaled down to that which affords repetition—one individual after another: Martin, Brown, Bland . . . all meant to justify the coding of Blackness.

To merely say Blacks are dead or are death is to miss an element of the terror they represent qua Blackness. If Blacks could be understood totally through death, the violence against them would be to safeguard life without the nature of life being challenged or disrupted. No doubt, Blackness constitutes such a challenge to life, but it also involves a potential signification of what life entails: its fragility, for instance. Life and death aren’t destroyed through this activity, but rather a reinforced sense of their mutuality is preserved. To be white is to live until otherwise—but even then, with physical demise, to be known through the memorial of a life remembered. To be Black is to exist, which is to say Blacks are “produced” as visible and anthropomorphic

housing for Blackness. What is rendered visible (thereby meaningful) about Blacks as presented to (and active within) the world involves this sameness between death and life. Blackness is both cause and rationale. That is to say, Blackness isn't a structure of convenience but rather a calculated and carefully arranged category that makes possible for whites an existential and psychological conjunction: *or*—as in life *or* death.

For Blacks there is no conjunctive possibility, no *or* as in life *or* death. Better yet, there is no vantage point outside the scope of both (*deathlife*) that would allow such a choice to be made. They are only representative, an embodied trope, of *deathlife*. Black bodies, as Blackness, cannot be described or positioned adequately as “dead” or “alive”—this grammatical move is unavailable because *or* stipulates possibilities made available only by whiteness. Rather, again, a coterminous relationship between the two renders Black bodies both at the same time. Blackness, by its constructed nature, opposes substitution or alternative; rather, it is totalizing in intent and overdetermining in effect. Blackness becomes the social world's attempt to confine and tame death while advancing its take on life.

A visual representation of the distinction between life and death that whiteness struggles to maintain is offered in Gustav Klimt's 1915 painting *Tod und Leben* (Death and life).⁷⁶ On the left, one sees Death represented—visualized as a skeleton draped in a garment marked with religious symbols (crosses and other images). It holds something in its hand, and the held device is positioned as if Death is simply waiting for the right moment to unleash it on the group of living figures gathered to the right. Aside from the faint, white skull, the rest of Death is shrouded in dark tones; the darkness indicates a presence beyond full description and outside our ability to gather in. The more brightly colored, more vibrant, more identifiable mass of people at right is layered, perhaps depicting different moments of life—from the joy of relationship (as a mother holds a child) to the wonders of youth represented by the child. Those depicted cling to each other, at points blending together with only heads and small portions of bodies distinguishable. As one's eye moves down the image (the important symbolic value of verticality), there is a man—the only man in the painting—holding and being held by a woman, his face buried against her shoulder, hers buried in their touching arms. One does not know if those in this huddled group have accepted death. Something about their grasping of each other—the desire for some sort of bond or connection—would suggest resistance and an effort to preserve life. Moving down the grouping, the joyous expressions give way to more somber looks until the last two figures, the largest figures, with faces hidden

(reflecting melancholy, the awareness of death), suggest a feeling of time lost. Life and death are connected through a web of psychological and affective confrontations worn on the faces of those in the painting. Death is at a distance—hence, oppositional to life—but the potential of it inching toward life (it seems poised for movement) is already and always present. It is this situation of death as threat against life that the creation of Blackness is meant to address.

Whites are permitted a full range of affective responses and existential possibilities meant to safeguard a fragile psyche, while an effort is made to restrict Blacks to a range of responses deemed suitable by whites. Yet Blacks do respond, do develop strategies of engagement. Two recently popular theorizations of response involve (1) Afropessimism, which recognizes the social world's dependence on Blacks as sentient beings (but not human, not understood through ontology) and a push against assumptions of political solutions to this situation; and (2) Afro-optimism, which projects a future in which Blacks exist, and in which imaginative framings mark the vitality of Black life.⁷⁷ The former, for a variety of reasons, I find more compelling—more consistent with the shape of historical conditions, more in line with my moralist sensibilities, and more informative as a way to interrogate certain underexplored dimensions of hip hop culture. However, before giving attention to both an explicit and implicit read of hip hop through Afropessimism (by means of which I connect Blackness *and/as* Black people within the context of the social world), I want to consider a counter sense of Blackness *and* Black people by highlighting Fred Moten's work. My goal in doing so isn't to offer a full explication of Moten's theorization of Blackness; rather, I want to offer a counterpoint (i.e., Moten's "optimism") to this project's pessimism so as to provide context for my argument.⁷⁸

A useful starting point is Moten's essay "The Case of Blackness" (2008). He begins by remarking on the sense of pathology that has informed notions of Black people and Blackness, whereby activism on the part of Black people assumes, when it doesn't more explicitly pronounce, the question "What's wrong with black folk?" This question, read in relationship to its ontological considerations and to the thinking of Fanon, raises yet another question: "And if, as Frantz Fanon suggests, the black cannot be an other for another black, if the black can only be an other for a white, then is there ever anything called black social life?"⁷⁹ Of concern here, for Moten, is what he references as "fugitive movement," which is a type of unauthorized life that might fuel "black optimism." Thinking through the issue of ontology and Blackness, Moten proposes that Blackness works at the intersection of the social and

the ontological—of “fugitivity and impossibility”—and the “lived experience of blackness” by its nature calls for measurement through a para-ontology, a mode of disorder, a structuring of differences.⁸⁰ Instead of concerning himself with the question of pathology—is the behavior of Blacks “pathological or natural”?—he wants to lift up another concern named in relationship to the benefit of fugitivity, of disorder, or disruption: “What is the efficacy of that range of natural-born disorders that have been relegated to what is theorized as the void of blackness or black social life that might be more properly understood as the fugitive being of ‘infinite humanity’?”⁸¹

What Moten offers is a way to challenge the pathology (and the organizing of that pathology), which has been seen as a flaw that prevents a sense of Black social life because social life is what takes place when Blacks are not included and Blackness isn’t present. Black social life is, for Moten, a fugitive act, a mode of expression and practice, naming a type of impossibility, but impossibility is not the same as absence.⁸² Fugitivity also seems to undergird what he would later say concerning Blackness as “enthusiastic social vision, given in non-performed performance, as the surrealization of space and time.” It helps to note that there is a danger embedded in Blackness as Moten conceives it—a danger stemming from its refusal to seek what the social world displays as desirable. Blackness in this case involves a refusal to be one thing—it is “consent not to be one: not just to be more + less than one but the mobilization of that indiscretion and incompleteness or ‘otherwise than being.’”⁸³ When viewed in light of the nature and workings of anti-Blackness, this refusal, according to Moten, enforces recognition that there is a distinction between Blackness and the people referenced as Black. There is, then, also a distinction between life and death, even if that distinction amounts only to a difference between “life and lives.”⁸⁴

For Afropessimism, Blackness seems a condition that cannot be resolved, or addressed in ways that transform, short of destroying the social world. However, as I read Moten, there is a sense of Blackness as a troubled and troubling category, a type of “brokenness of being,” but a brokenness that doesn’t prevent living: Black people can “live with brokenness.”⁸⁵ To do so is an act of fugitivity (a “space” of “dis-order”) and amounts to living with what Moten and Stefano Harney have called “debt.”⁸⁶ As Kara Keeling elucidates, this turn to Karl Marx’s notion of wealth allows Moten to distinguish between Blackness and Black people, in that the former involves a type of “historical becoming” that isn’t restricted but speaks to the “racial dimension of ‘the human.’” Hence, Blackness “both exceeds and supplements those who

are called 'Black people,' but cannot be divorced from Black people without epistemological and ontological violence to both the concept and the material realities it currently participates in organizing."⁸⁷

For Moten and Harney, Blackness isn't the same ontological emptiness described by Frank Wilderson and other Afropessimists—an emptiness that consumes Black people; rather, it is to live in a "wild" space in which the modalities of order and domination don't make sense any longer. This, one might say, is a type of abolition-inflected "refusal" that constitutes an action that counters the forces of disregard. Such is more than Afropessimism's political apostasy.⁸⁸ While recognizing the importance of Afropessimism as a revitalization of intellectual rigor in "Black study," Moten counters what he perceives as Afropessimism's refusal to "love" Blackness through a challenge to its notion of social death by means of which he seeks "to stay a black motherfucker." Here something about staying Black involves a slight shift in grammar—"death and pessimism" toward "life and optimism."⁸⁹ Philosophically, one might say this involves a shift with respect to the relationship between Blackness and ontology. For Afropessimists, Blackness is outside the realm of ontological consideration (Blacks are sentient beings only), but for Moten's effort to exist outside the desire to justify that existence (*vis-à-vis* a "standpoint"), not only is "blackness . . . ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology."⁹⁰ To be a "black motherfucker"—to continue to hold Blackness regardless, to seek ways to free Blackness from the assumptions of ontology—is to oppose Afropessimism's read of social death (i.e., Black life lacks sociality). Instead, it is to view Black life as social but tied to political death in the burial ground called the world. For Moten, what Patterson actually describes is political death, not social death as commonly argued. To clarify the argument, Moten writes,

I am in total agreement with the Afro-pessimistic understanding of blackness as exterior to civil society and, moreover, as unmappable within the cosmological grid of the transcendental subject. However, I understand civil society and the coordinates of the transcendental aesthetic—cognate as they are not with the failed but rather with the successful state and its abstract, equivalent citizens—to be the fundamentally and essentially antisocial nursery for a necessarily necropolitical imitation of life. . . . Social death is not imposed upon blackness by or from the standpoint or positionality of the political; rather, it is

the field of the political, from which blackness is relegated to the supposedly undifferentiated mass or blob of the social, which is, in any case, where and what blackness chooses to stay.⁹¹

According to Moten, the work involves this push for Black subjectivity over against “ontology’s sanction against the very idea.” As I read Moten, this isn’t merely a hope and it isn’t the goal; rather, it is the ongoing labor that fosters (a para-ontological) distinction between Blackness and Black people—a distinction between Blackness and strategies of being. This is the difference (what amounts to a very small distinction) between pessimism and optimism, based on the degree to which we “consent not to be a single being” but embrace instead a type of unsettledness without a standpoint.⁹²

Black people are in relationship to the world, and according to Moten, this involves deprivation of a kind, in that “Black people are poor in the world. We are deprived in, and somehow both more and less than deprived of, the world.” This recognition, according to Moten, is shared between his optimism and Afropessimism; but advocates of the latter think of this along the lines of “ontological reach,” while Moten understands Blackness as the expression of an alternative modality of desire. In his words, “What if blackness is the name that has been given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire?” Such involves, on some level, an effort to forge another world made “in and out of this world.”⁹³ One might also think about such Blackness as a practice of resistance, which is to say, “Our resistant, relentlessly impossible object is subjectless predication, subjectless escape, escape from subjection, in and through the paralegal flaw that animates and exhausts the language of ontology.”⁹⁴ Indeed, Moten is not alone in this desire for Black-life-affirming difference. Keeling, for example, also holds allegiance to the plausibility of “another world,” framed in terms of robust “queer futures,” by means of which a “wealth that cannot be measured by a predetermined yardstick” holds open possibilities that can’t be fully described.⁹⁵ Yet Moten’s “optimism” and Keeling’s “another world” miss the mark for me and blur from clear view what I believe are important representations in and of hip hop that don’t fall in line with their approaches.

Moten notes the distinction between his approach (i.e., optimism) and that of the Afropessimists (i.e., pessimism) as being slim. Thinking across optimism and pessimism, Moten sees a relationship—the possibility of a “friendship” premised on some shared commitments (e.g., the slim nature of their disagreement) processed in light of their differences (e.g., a contrary sense of distance between Blackness and Black people). I think one may simply need

to choose a stance and measure the distance between Blackness and Black people as they see it. Mindful of this, some might view hip hop as adopting an optimistic posture, and that would entail a particular framing that highlights certain artists. But there are other artists, some discussed in the following pages, who offer no clear distinction between Blackness and Black people, between death and life. It is this group of artists, who see nothing encouraging in the call for distinction, that I highlight for consideration. And it is in relationship to their art that I labor to name a theoretical framework—drawing on a sense of pessimism—capable of maintaining their sense of Blackness, Black people, and *deathlife*.

Turning again to Afropessimism, Blackness and Blacks are connected, but they are not the same: one occasions the other. To illustrate the point by borrowing from Hortense Spillers, one might think of it this way: Blacks are “flesh”—the first narrative, the marker of significance ripped away through violence—and Blackness is that which is left (i.e., the body) as a functionary for the logic of whiteness after the flesh has been taken away.⁹⁶ Or, borrowing from Wilderson, one might say that Blacks involve the “performance” of *deathlife* and Blackness is the “paradigm” representing *deathlife*.⁹⁷

Performance: There is with Afropessimism an important recognition of dire circumstances that projects a particular engagement worth noting (although these circumstances are understood and articulated somewhat unlike my take on Blackness):

Afropessimism is Black people at their best. “Mad at the world” is Black folks at their best. Afropessimism gives us the freedom to say out loud what we would otherwise whisper or deny: that no Blacks are in the world, but, by the same token, there is no world without Blacks. The violence perpetrated against us is not a form of discrimination; it is a necessary violence; a health tonic for everyone who is not Black.⁹⁸

I agree with dimensions of Wilderson’s depiction of violence as necessary and as a process with relational dynamics, or what he calls a “positioning matrix.”⁹⁹ Yet, rather than understanding violence as a *negative* act against Black bodies, I see it as whiteness’s *affirmation* of Blackness, as perhaps an anti-anti-Blackness. Violence so understood isn’t meant to foster political structures, economic mechanisms of wealth and poverty, or dynamics of a dys/functional democratic “experiment.” This violence is a naming and management of death and life through the establishment of Blackness as a trope of nondistinction (i.e., *deathlife*), freeing whiteness to function as a technique of difference: life

or death. That is to say, whites are authorized through the logic and mechanics of collective life to punish Blacks (to the point of physical death), thereby preserving whiteness. And violence is a systemic process of affirming this social need. Through modalities of aggression, whites are freed from a certain type of visceral anxiety while still subject to the consequences of the trauma associated with maintaining this difference between life and death. In this sense, through Blackness, whites feel both nausea and euphoria.

The sense of life (and death managed) is ritualized and expressed as sociality. Something of this meaning is found in Wilderson's remark concerning violence within the context of master-slave interaction. He asks, "What if anti-Black violence could be counted among the things that make life *life*?"¹⁰⁰ Whiteness allows a sense of the present as the present (i.e., measurable and responsive localized episodes of white need/desire fulfilled), a presence-connoting activity that soaks in the moment. Blackness, on the other hand, extends beyond itself and is tied to a particular will to recall a pleasant past and speculate or confirm a future (for whiteness) that isn't dissimilar to the structure of the present guarded vehemently through force. The future sanctions an ethics of containment and claims Blacks as its target. Such an orientation involves a missing present—a sense of meaning that short-circuits conditions in the moment and, in particular, a failure to interrogate violence and its rationale.

Violence as a core element of the social world depends on Blackness. Or, as Wilderson situates it, violence "underwrites the modern world's capacity to think, act, and exist spatially and temporally."¹⁰¹ Violence is a wild and aggressive refusal to deny whiteness. In this way, through the targeting of Blackness, whiteness preserves "time"—allowing measurability of events and determinable progress as personal and collective value and worth. And preservation of time is the maintenance of a calculable and structural arrangement of distinction that accounts for relationality and, in this way, gives a type of "substance" to whites. In turn, Blackness serves as a switch initiating a protective structuring of what "is" over against what can be "taken." This keeps whites from dying to irrelevance, although it can't safeguard fully from physical demise. Still, the democratic experiment as a weaponizable shaping of engagement with the world provides some effort to safeguard whites from the latter. In so doing, sociality is marked for whites by a potentiality exercised or wasted. Even if wasted, whites do not become corpses inasmuch as viability remains through the fact they once lived.

For whites, in most cases, pain or misery is a measurement of choice. It helps to think about this theologically by saying that, for whites, one might

read pain and misery as having a theodical quality (a connection to defending god's goodness despite human suffering), expressed in relationship to potentiality, pedagogical benefit, and projection of future. Blacks, theologically, can be read as the "anti" figure—those through whom life and death are read. In the parlance of the "first white president," Donald Trump, "Make America Great Again."¹⁰²

Whether Blacks are ontologically substantive is an important issue, one alluded to earlier, but what grounds it is the manner in which Blackness covers Blacks and determines the meaning of presence and purpose. Blackness is fixed and firm—it is already and always *deathlife*. This is not dependent on Black death (i.e., the death of Black sentient beings), as Afropessimists surmise, but rather on Blackness to ground both death and life in one loved/despised framework. As such, I would argue in this context the social world is anti-Black and pro-Blackness: it needs the latter to sustain the viability of white life as distinct from death. *Everything*—structures of thought, mechanisms of meaning, ethical frameworks, affective registers, political practices, cultural codes, grammars of being, modes of pleasure, and regulatory boundaries—is caught in this double bind.¹⁰³ Blackness becomes for whites and whiteness a means of avoidance and denial because the structuring of *deathlife* offers the social world (i.e., whiteness) and its inhabitants the illusion of selective performance: death *or* life. Blackness qua Black bodies serves as both the narration of this arrangement and the reason for the arrangement. Blackness and those defined by it make visible (and therefore manageable) what the white social world and its recognized inhabitants fear: life slipping away into an end through which social meaning is lost as access to (and control over) technologies of collective life—economics, politics, cultural production—expires.

Wilderson argues that a Black person is "a being that is *dead*, despite the fact that this being is sentient and so *appears to be very much alive*."¹⁰⁴ Is *dead* but *appears to be very much alive*: I would offer a change in perspective here and say Blackness involves Blacks as *alivedead*—no transition, no space, between the two orientations. To call Black bodies "death personified" doesn't capture fully the dynamics of Blackness as *deathlife*, and to label whites as the "personification of diversity, of life itself" doesn't announce the relationship of whiteness to Blackness as I seek to frame it.¹⁰⁵ Instead, if Blackness is *deathlife*, whiteness is the opportunity (or "right") to distinguish. This does not keep whites (through whiteness) free from threat, but they aren't defined by this threat. Instead, whites are marked by a capacity for avoidance that opens them to challenge, despite social coding (e.g., gender, class, sexual

orientation). *Deathlife* is a noting of no distinction between life and death. By extension, whiteness—through violence—exists to the degree life and death are synonymous in function and orientation *and* “external” to whites. Whiteness, then, has only to rub up against this sameness through force in order to be affirmed. Whiteness is defined by a practice of choice—the ability to live or die, each as a distinctive ordering of time and space.

Wilderson notes a tension akin to that I have alluded to throughout this discussion, although the larger argument might differ. Reflecting on a conversation in which it became clear that “the borders of redemption are policed by Whites and non-Whites alike,” he writes, “I, as a Black person (if person, subject, being are appropriate, since Human is not), am both barred from the denouement of social and historical redemption and needed if redemption is to attain any form of coherence.”¹⁰⁶ Social death, according to Afropessimists, “can be destroyed,” although what is required in order to pull this off ends the social world and therefore requires of Black bodies a posture of commitment to the destruction of the social world that is, really, “impossible.”¹⁰⁷ I’m unable to say the same concerning *deathlife*, in that there is no outside, no alternate mechanism for viewing or engaging. Objection to this arrangement by Blacks (or whites) doesn’t alter the framework because its logic easily shifts to render Black bodies accountable and responsible for what is done to them. Whites hide their hands, so to speak, making Black bodies accountable for Blackness and accountable to whiteness. For Black bodies, violence is a sign of demented desire, consuming them in order to stabilize the fictions of the social world. For whites, it offers an odd comfort—peace within the storm—suggesting their right to well-being, or life.

Exposure of violence, for example, through phone videos, tends to elicit sympathy for whites (as symbols of whiteness), drawing on the very intent of the United States as a white haven for distinction (life *or* death): “*life*, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁰⁸ Such is the case, as Christina Sharpe reflects, with respect to the dynamics of the US social world to the extent that “the ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on.”¹⁰⁹ Yet this mode of death vis-à-vis the taking of life is one technique, while the other attacks and destroys more than existential arrangements because is an ontological killing—a sense of Blackness as “nothing” by means of which life and death are joined.¹¹⁰ Even when this sympathy isn’t in place, punishment for white performers of anti-Blackness is easily narrated as their having selected life over death, and the integrity of the *deathlife* framework is maintained. So conceived, the demise of a Black person might be

better characterized in light of *deathlife* as being “disappeared” or a “forced disappearance.” In this way, something is captured of the manner in which the circumstances of this one Black person are always shadowed by an inability to distinguish life and death—by a fogged performance—and connected to larger social arrangements.

How some Blacks have engaged *deathlife* takes shape in the four central chapters of the present book. For now, I’ll argue that some whites lament this mode of demise—speak against it, act contrary to it—but their language of life and grammar of systemic change offer little to differentiate *deathlife* as life over death, and little to dimension its ubiquity. There is a symbiotic—as in close and mutually informing—relationship between Blackness and whiteness played out in its most graphic presentation on/through Black bodies. The Black body can’t but represent *deathlife*. Even the most liberal whites still envision Blacks over against *deathlife*; hence, they remain tied to these circumstances as constitutive. Whites, even liberals and progressives, need Blackness so configured; the question is whether, in word or deed, they will admit the benefit (the life-affirming quality) of this arrangement. For others, the action is more straightforward, in that they understand Blacks and Blackness as inherently linked, and all they see in and of the world affirms this relationship, including in their personal dealings, as each one knows someone who’s had a life-threatening encounter with a representative Black. For the liberal/progressive or the “Make America Great Again” public advocate, Blacks/Blackness remain the same in function.

This situation is both philosophically and theologically the case when one considers, for example, the biblical story of Abraham and his son, forced into a performance of obedience as substitutional demise.¹¹¹ Relationship to a “Grand Unity”—to ultimate being—required the ritualization of death as a request for life (in the sense of distinction from surroundings). The story indicates Abraham was only required to surrender to the idea of sacrifice—that is, to think life gone as the opening to vertical meaning; yet, for his son, the one to be killed, the lesson involves something more overtly sinister. The potentiality of death (for life) isn’t measurable logically as tied to physical breakdown or existential circumstances, but rather is an endorsement of a larger, nonhistorical “order” that structures un/spoken commitments and obligations. The demand comes from (and thereby constitutes) the very structure of the world in that it is tied to the logic constituting the markers of disassociated meaning played out in sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and affective registers. And buttressing this is a simple assertion: something/someone must embody this demand for “blood.” The demand, of course,

outweighs the need for cooperation. Abraham's son, like the substituted ram, need not voice agreement or disagreement with the act of sacrifice (of staged death); in fact, they can't, in that each in its own way lacks a vocabulary/grammar of restitution that can contradict the expressed conditions for participation in the Grand Unity.¹¹² Abraham sees no necessary distinction between the two: one can replace the other; both serve the same purpose.

Either/or.

Still, there is something about Isaac that poses both possibility and threat: possibility to the extent he might be a suitable sacrifice, but threat to the extent he, in his demise, takes something of Abraham with him. Perhaps Abraham senses in him something that might speak "not I" and thereby disturb performance of the ritual. Or perhaps Abraham wonders who might be next: could the taker of life be taken in turn? Isaac's death would be both sacrifice (renewing life) and murder (ending life). The willingness to murder is as good as the act. Still, the history of connection and interaction (son versus wild animal) makes no difference in how this plays out. Abraham, as does the thicket neutralizing the ram, holds steady what the world demands. Only the horizontally arranged logic undergirding the social world can decipher which sacrifice is more suitable. Desire as expressed here in the form of horizontal connection pushes beyond language of faith, beyond a grammar of psychic surrender. It is a ritual of assurance, a safeguard against being forced to acknowledge one's awareness of the absurdity of that which is named "life." However, what one might gather from this narrative is already known: life and death are bound together through the necessity of violence (as a type of white life logic). Black bodies, as *deathlife* embodied and active, represent for whites something along the lines of what Wilderson points out when discussing how white South Africans he taught creative writing viewed him: "I was both the trauma and the cure."¹¹³

This is not to call Blackness "salvific," as is the case with a sacrificial scapegoat. Such a suggestion would entail the ability to distinguish life and death: the latter guaranteeing the former through shifting of embodiment and representation by means of ritualization. The scapegoat, at least at the time of the ritual surrender, subdues the threat of demise in some form. The scapegoat or sacrifice, at least for a time, tames the perceived threat. But the white world needs the *deathlife* threat, and to banish it would be counterproductive. Because Blackness must remain, Blacks aren't properly understood as the scapegoat, nor is Blackness properly positioned as the form of "sin" to be ended in that it is a necessary technology within the social world. Sin would

suggest an alternate possibility of thinking and doing that isn't available if the white world is to be maintained. No, here, theological formulations give way to a more mundane "contract" drafted, arranged, and enacted by whites for the benefit of whites. Referring to Charles Mills's "racial contract," Adam Serwer frames the racial contract in a manner that suggests the dynamical relationship underlying *deathlife* as Blackness managing the psychological and existential anxiety of whiteness. He remarks, in light of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery as he jogged through his Georgia neighborhood,

If the social contract is the implicit agreement among members of a society to follow the rules—for example, acting lawfully, adhering to the results of elections, and contesting the agreed-upon rules by non-violent means—then the racial contract is a codicil rendered in invisible ink, one stating that the rules as written do not apply to nonwhite people in the same way. . . . The law says murder is illegal; the racial contract says it's fine for white people to chase and murder black people if they have decided that those black people scare them.¹¹⁴

Despite the graphic and seeming finality of this violence, the societal goal isn't to end Blackness because whiteness needs it to "be." The demise of individual Blacks, then, doesn't speak to an end of Blackness but rather the brutal effort to manage it, to display it, to express need for it. Physical death doesn't negate this coterminous arrangement, in that the "presence" of Blackness as threat isn't dependent on overwhelming materiality, but it is always real and impactful on the psychological and affective level. The physical killing of Blacks doesn't kill Blackness but reinforces it; the desire (no, need) for whiteness/whites to confront it is an effort to confine and tame it—and in so doing preserve whiteness as life.

If there is fungibility related to Blackness as Wilderson describes it, here it would entail this process of one individual after another—the same violence enacted on Black bodies without difference.¹¹⁵ These individualized markers serve to verify or authenticate the claims regarding Blackness made against (and for) Blackness. In a word, Blacks can die (or be put to death), but Blackness cannot be ended, and so the technical nature of this arrangement isn't captured through a strict grammar of "murder" (explored earlier in this introduction). That grammar separates life and death; it moves between the two and positions Black bodies in relationship to one over the other. Blacks produce anxiety in that their presence overflows the intent of whiteness, because *deathlife* by its nature exceeds the boundaries established through violence (and other means).

Narrations of *Deathlife*

Although Christina Sharpe and I think about the relationship of death to life in different ways and use our perceptions of death to explore and explain different moments of anti-Black thought and activity, one of her statements is applicable here. “Again,” Sharpe writes, “Black being appears in the space of the asterisked human as the insurance for, as that which underwrites, white circulation as the human.”¹¹⁶ Sharpe explores this depiction of Black being and death (the ability to breathe) in relationship to the wake (i.e., weather, as anti-Black climate), and here, through rap music, I explore naming and signification of Blackness and the constitutive nature of death and life as concurrent. If the social world and the well-being of its considered occupants (whites) are sustained through a reflexive relationship to the *deathlife* scenario, what of this is spoken back as echo or, at times, signified through rap music’s narratives? Is some of the animosity toward particular genres of rap music—from both Blacks and whites—tied to (while not limited to) its graphic amplification and signification of this construction of Blackness as *deathlife*?

The coterminous nature of life and death qua Blackness frames the United States, and recognition in various forms of this arrangement entails a poetic impulse exercised. That is to say, it has required the destruction of language and its grammar in order to reconstitute a mode of expressing the gross (as in without diminishment) nature of such circumstances. Hip hop culture’s manipulation of language in the form of rap music provides this service. Hence, this book is framed in light of this question: How does rap music articulate and respond to this arrangement of death and life, the positioning of Blackness by means of which it becomes a blending of the two into *deathlife*? Embedded in some rap lyrics, then, is a meaningful and lucid interrogation of the social mechanics of de/contamination. Awareness is the underpinning of dying, and as such it might be akin to what Peter Boxall calls “blind seeing”: a process of depleting distinctions such as that between light and dark, or in this case death and life.¹¹⁷ This is met with an affective response, which signifies dread—a type of subversive (or, better yet, perverse) joy embodied and ritualized over against social perceptions of life *or* death.

The artists discussed in the following chapters chronicle activities that engage (at times embrace) this *deathlife* model and signify its disturbing and disruptive social coding. As they make clear, to see Blackness is to see *deathlife*. If this work on the part of rap artists involves ethics to any degree, it is because of rap music’s linguistic function as offering perspective on the “what” in the “What ought we do?” question.

Deathlife isn't the first text to explore death in relationship to Black existence; it would be difficult to think and write about Black existence without entertaining death on some level.¹¹⁸ However, less frequent is analysis of rap music meant to push beyond melancholic-centered description and analysis of victims or victimizers.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, in tackling the issue of *deathlife* my focus isn't on unpacking and explicating the metaphysical dimensions of this positioning or naming of Blackness and Black bodies (although there are moments when I am so engaged). The concern isn't primarily an ontological issue, but rather the aim is to provide thanatological narration of how certain artists—by no means all artists—at times name, describe, conceptualize, act out, or signify *deathlife*.¹²⁰

My goal isn't to assess the effectiveness or morality of these depictions. I offer a description of rap music's relationship to *deathlife* without measuring it against some type of moral-ethical norm. What we believe ourselves to know about life and death (and the connection between the two) is often sensitive to a selective body of materials, drawing on the perspective and concerns of those other than the "victims" of the social world. Even when sources from those who carry Blackness (as their definition) are tapped, there is typically a concern with the pedigree of documentation. How often does the material output of hip hop culture claim philosophical ground beyond a grouping of scholars who embrace it, primarily as an extension of personal appreciation? I question a particular arrangement of respectability: how is it that Du Bois not DMX, Martin Luther King Jr. not Goodie Mob, tells us about the nature and meaning of life and demise? *Deathlife* shifts this archive by attending to and theorizing death and life in light of artists who claim the grime and grit of traumatic geographies.¹²¹

This introduction has worked to theorize *deathlife* and also to set out some contextual considerations regarding its function as a framing, as well as what its performative expression is meant to accomplish for whiteness/whites. Once the function of death on behalf of whiteness (framed through Blackness as *deathlife*) is established, the remainder of this book involves a thanatologically oriented exploration of rap music's recognition of and response to these circumstances. And while some appeal is made here to various artists, the next four chapters focus on examples of rap music's take on *deathlife*.

The first chapter explores *deathlife* through attention to Jay-Z, positioning him as something along the lines of the "Orphic" hustler: a figure who understands death as already and always bound to life, and for whom ethics entails effort to maintain this tension between the two. This figure lives in light of death, but without either life or death serving as a totalizing experience.

Chapter 2 explores the delicate balance between life as death and death as life through Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.*, which is bookended by the potentiality of death and how death penetrates life. All the action (i.e., life) taking place within the various lyrical narratives offered on the album is consumed by the specter of death. I position Lamar as the antihero, whose challenge to the illusion of distinction (i.e., life versus death) is posed against the heroic effort to pretend a safeguard for life (expressed in Eminem's "Stan" and "Bad Guy"), rendering it distinctive. In both chapters, life and death are presented, discussed, and interrogated. Together they address the signifying of *death-life*, while the following two chapters map out the poetic consumption of *deathlife*.

In chapters 3 and 4, through performances of the erotic and the symbolic zombie, *deathlife* is seen to entail a merger of embodied possibilities that disrupt distinction between life and death by "playing with" or consuming the terminology associated with them: love, passion, hunger, and so on. The artists considered here serve to distinguish linguistically the dynamics of each appetite, thereby rendering *deathlife* connected through an intertwining of vocabulary used in relationship to them. In a certain sense, in the examples discussed in these chapters, death and life are consumed together as *death-life* through acts of irreverence: behaviors that counter the ritualization possible when life and death are distinct. One might say the artists reject the socially assumed value in seeking to separate life from death and confine/manage the latter for the longevity of the former. They position *deathlife* as a mode of defilement, of destruction, that challenges the integrity and logic of the social world and the grammar/vocabulary used to narrate that social world. To rethink the nature of embodied Blackness in this case, one might argue, involves by its very nature a destruction of the social world as currently conceived—that is, the safeguards for meaning, the dynamics and processes of life as distinguishable from death, are negated. The very presence of embodied Blackness (e.g., the zombie) threatens the distinction: Blackness, in this regard, consumes both life and death.¹²² The zombie (chapter 4) and the demise devotee (chapter 3) involve the one who brings *deathlife*. Something about this blends time, conditions response "time," and merges unto itself in such a way as to make an impactful separation of circumstances that promote life over those that promote death disingenuous. The moral and ethical framing of distinction is signified. What one encounters here isn't a corruption of life, a stagnation of its more vibrant dimensions in the form of possibility; rather, it is a lack of distinction by means of which to initiate one is to satisfy the other. The volume ends with an epilogue in which two forms

of melancholia are described and discussed: one related to death or life, and the other related to *deathlife*.

If either the signifying or consumptions of death projected onto Blacks qua Blackness involves a “victory,” to the extent this term has any use, it isn’t in what is gained but rather in what is prevented. It is embedded and expressed through each moment of disruption: each break in the smooth operation of whiteness, when whites are forced to see their whiteness and confront the cost of maintaining it. With respect to rap music as a poetic thanatological narrative, I argue that to separate life from death, and death from life, is to alter the meaning of each, to lose their significance. Such a claim is not to suggest they aren’t discussed within the language of the social world as distinguishable—each with a set of affective markers, biological conditions, political arrangements, and so on. Rather, it is to suggest that Blackness is constructed as a safeguard for, but also comes to connote, a defiance of distinction (i.e., death *or* life). To be clear, the language of distinction doesn’t apply here, despite the intent of whiteness otherwise. Death doesn’t always end physical sensation and biological movement. It can negate significance or ontological recognition. Yet it conditions, informs, and satisfies life in such a way as to make distinction meaningless. One might think of this not as “Black life as it is lived near death . . . deathliness,” but instead life as merged with death.¹²³

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. PARADIGMS OF DEATH (OR LIFE) AND *DEATHLIFE*

Material in the section “Paradigm #1: Life and/or Death” is drawn from material first published as Pinn, “Zombies in the ‘Hood’”; Pinn, “When It’s Over”; and Pinn, “The End.” This introduction involves a redirection of some of the material in these publications so as to highlight the description of death and its relationship to hip hop as opposed to viewing hip hop as a counter to death. The aim here is different. In the articles, my intent was to present the manner in which hip hop seeks to counter social arrangements and narratives. In this introduction, I am simply interested in an analytical description of the manner in which hip hop describes and performs death.

- 1 Brombert, “Kafka,” 642.
- 2 While this approach, like all the narrative strands of thought in hip hop culture in general and rap music in particular, is not gendered in a manner that totalizes a reified “masculine” sensibility, for a variety of socio-ideological reasons—the outlining of which is beyond the scope of this project—the narration of death and life within hip hop culture is most closely (but by no means exclusively) associated with the refusal by or placement of the embodied body labeled Black and male.
- 3 For interested, and related, discussions of whiteness with respect to notions of transcendence over against the grounding of Blackness, see Driscoll, *White Lies*; and Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity*.
- 4 I discuss this at times in relationship to Afropessimism and its understanding of Blacks as sentient beings without status as human.
- 5 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 7. The concept of *technology* is borrowed from Michel Foucault. See Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*; and Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

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- 6 Du Bois discusses the theme of the “Veil” in *The Souls of Black Folk*; see pages 7–15.
- 7 Du Bois, “Souls of White Folks,” 923.
- 8 Du Bois, “Souls of White Folks,” 933.
- 9 Du Bois, “Souls of White Folks,” 924.
- 10 Du Bois, “Souls of White Folks,” 926, 927.
- 11 Kellehear, *Social History of Dying*, 47.
- 12 McIlwain, *Death in Black and White*, chap. 1.
- 13 See Laderman, *Rest in Peace*.
- 14 Kellehear, *Social History of Dying*, 90–95, 136–38.
- 15 West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*
- 16 Holloway, *Passed On*, 60–61.
- 17 Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 15.
- 18 Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 23.
- 19 I give more attention to Trayvon Martin in Pinn, “Do Atheists Understand and Appreciate Black Bodies?”
- 20 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
- 21 See Cornel West, “Nihilism in Black America,” in Dent, *Black Popular Culture*, 37–47.
- 22 Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.
- 23 Goffman, *Stigma*, 2–3.
- 24 Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.
- 25 Goffman, *Stigma*, 5.
- 26 Neil Small, “Death and Difference,” in Field, Hockey, and Small, *Death, Gender, and Ethnicity*, 208–9.
- 27 Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship*, 4–5.
- 28 Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship*, 1.
- 29 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
- 30 Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship*, 10, 40–44.
- 31 Camus uses the phrase in reference to the logic behind capital punishment—the death penalty. Speaking against the usefulness of it, he argues that “capital judgment,” rather than aiding, actually harms our most fundamental human solidarity, that against death. Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 222.
- 32 Think about these aesthetic representations in relationship to Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. Trayvon was a “zombie” attempting to be human and to extend itself beyond the confines of death, and so it had to be resettled within its proper epistemological and ontological geography. Zimmerman’s action (the killing of Martin) was an effort to restore a bizarre and damning sense of meaning—to embody death—in ways that safeguarded white Americans, through Zimmerman, with protection from death. Killing sought to confine death by protecting a particular unity of ideas around nature and meaning. On the surface this was the protection of white privilege, but on a more fundamental level it was the restoration of death’s confinement by disciplining a zombie. Martin is not the first, nor will he be the last, graphic

example of how fissures in zombification are addressed. So important is the work done by the classification of zombies that the United States, among other societies, will kill (bodies, ideas, meaning) to maintain it. The strategies of “law and order” provide the justification as well as outline the most productive techniques.

- 33 Albert Camus, “Fourth Letter,” in Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 28.
- 34 See Alvarez and Buckley, “Zimmerman Is Acquitted.”
- 35 Genesis 10–11. See Pinn and Callahan, *African American Religious Life*.
- 36 This statement could be read through the work of various rap artists, such as Ice Cube’s “My Skin Is My Sin.”
- 37 Collins, “Biggie Envy and the Gangsta Sublime,” 911.
- 38 From Studs Terkel, “An Interview with James Baldwin,” quoted in Singleton, *Cultural Melancholy*, 65.
- 39 See, e.g., Riley, “Rebirth of Tragedy”; Armstrong, “Rhetoric of Violence”; Smuts, “Ethics of Singing Along”; Collins, “Biggie Envy and the Gangsta Sublime”; and Hunnicutt and Andrews, “Tragic Narratives in Popular Culture.” According to Gwen Hunnicutt and Kristy Humble Andrews, “about one-third of the most popular rap songs from 1989 to 2000 contained at least one reference to homicide” (618). Furthermore, they noted “that references to homicide became increasingly graphic and lurid over time” (619).
- 40 Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 113. For examples in Wright’s work, see Wright, *Native Son*; and Wright, *The Outsider*.
- 41 See, e.g., Wright’s *Native Son*.
- 42 Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, “Natural Born Killaz.” See Philips, “Is America Ready for ‘Natural Born Killaz’?”
- 43 DMX, “Bring Your Whole Crew.”
- 44 “You’re Nobody till Somebody Loves You” was first recorded by Russ Morgan in 1946.
- 45 This depiction of the gangsta persona and ethics is often described in relationship to literary figures. See, e.g., Malone, “Long-Lost Brothers.”
- 46 Barrett, “Dead Men Printed,” 306.
- 47 See, e.g., Stop the Violence Movement, “Self-Destruction”; and Goodie Mob, “Still Standing.”
- 48 Notorious B.I.G., “You’re Nobody (’Til Somebody Kills You).” Also see Goodie Mob, “God I Wanna Live.”
- 49 Notorious B.I.G., “You’re Nobody (’Til Somebody Kills You).”
- 50 Notorious B.I.G., “You’re Nobody (’Til Somebody Kills You).”
- 51 Notorious B.I.G., “You’re Nobody (’Til Somebody Kills You).”
- 52 Snoop Dogg, “Murder Was the Case.”
- 53 Compare this to DMX’s deal with the devil in “The Omen.” With DMX, the situation is more horrific in nature. Rather than the devil safeguarding from death, DMX’s deal involves a new outlet for murder—use of the demonic to bring about murder as revenge. What is gained isn’t material goods and status, but rather a comfort with destruction beyond the human capacity to embrace.

- 54 Snoop Dogg, "Murder Was the Case."
- 55 Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, "Natural Born Killaz." This is also the case with Cypress Hill, "How I Could Just Kill a Man."
- 56 Gonsalves, "Chynna Rogers Was a Drug Addict Plagued by Demons."
- 57 Chynna, "Selfie." See "Chynna—Selfie (Official Video)," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DPHaWiHr7g>.
- 58 Younger, "Introducing Chynna, the Ex-model and Ex-addict Who Can Rap Her Ass Off."
- 59 Chynna, "seasonal depression." See "seasonal depression," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUKrUduXYxM>.
- 60 Chynna, "asmr." See "Chynna—asmr [official video]," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZtf6ibHgOW>. ASMR stands for autonomous sensory meridian response. See Emma L. Barratt and Nick J. Davis, "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): A Flow-Like Mental State," *PeerJ*, March 26, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851>.
- 61 For example, Chynna, "iddd." See "Chynna—iddd (official music video)," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBaVrILsFzA>.
- 62 Rapsody, "Aaliyah."
- 63 Lil' Kim, "Pray for Me."
- 64 I have not found direct source information for the 1974 article. One of the commonly referenced secondary sources is Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 3. I am grateful to Mayra Rivera for bringing this statement to my attention.
- 65 Calvin Warren, in passing, notes, "Life and death lose distinction and coherency for black being as nothing." *Ontological Terror*, 111. This is an insight we share; however, how we come to this statement and what we do with it as a conceptual framework differ. My thinking on this relationship between life and death as presented in this volume extends my earlier work in "Zombies in the 'Hood"; "When It's Over"; and "The End"
- 66 Warren highlights the manner in which Ronald Judy uses the language of thanatology to describe the relationship between death and Blackness: "The death that is emancipating is the negation of the materiality of Africa. Writing the slave narrative is thus a thanatology, a writing of annihilation that applies the taxonomies of death." Quoted in Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 40.
- 67 See Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 34–36.
- 68 Something of this might be accounted for in the distinction between Warren's Black nihilism and my Black moralism.
- 69 Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 7.
- 70 There is much I find compelling about Warren's critique of Black humanism, but responding to that critique isn't the purpose of this introduction, nor is it the aim of the larger book. See Warren, *Ontological Terror*.
- 71 J. Jackson, "A Little Black Magic," 397. I don't want to push the use of "racial Americana," in that Jackson's concern in his essay is race explicitly and not Blackness, which is my concern. Although the two are related, there's no reason to assume them identical formulations.

- 72 Calamur, "Ferguson Documents."
- 73 Quoted in Calamur, "Ferguson Documents."
- 74 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 16.
- 75 Luke Darby, "Florida Police Officer Arrested and Handcuffed a 6-Year-Old Black Girl for a Tantrum in Class," *GQ*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/six-year-old-black-girl-arrested-for-a-tantrum>.
- 76 It is held at the Leopold Museum in Vienna, Austria.
- 77 For texts related to *Afropessimism*, see Frank Wilderson's *Afropessimism* and *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Also of interest with respect to issues of Blackness, hope, and future is work in Afrofuturism. Materials in this area include Dery, "Black to the Future"; Nelson, "Afrofuturism"; Barber et al., "25 Years of Afrofuturism"; Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*; Womack, *Afrofuturism*; Anderson and Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0*; Youngquist, *Pure Solar World*; and S. Jackson and Moody-Freeman, *Black Imagination*.
- 78 I want to thank the external reviewers for calling attention to the need for this contextual counterpoint.
- 79 Moten, "Case of Blackness," 177–78.
- 80 Moten, "Case of Blackness," 187.
- 81 Moten, "Case of Blackness," 214. One might also read this notion of pathology in relationship to Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*.
- 82 Moten, "Case of Blackness," 204.
- 83 Moten, "Erotics of Fugitivity," 241, 242.
- 84 Moten, "Erotics of Fugitivity," 253.
- 85 Halberstam, "Foreword," in Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 5.
- 86 Halberstam, "Foreword," 6, 7.
- 87 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 38.
- 88 Halberstam, "Foreword," 8–9. Calvin Warren provides a compelling discussion of this ontological emptiness, or what he references as non-ontology. See Warren, *Onticide*.
- 89 Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 738.
- 90 Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 739.
- 91 Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 740.
- 92 Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 749–50. On the para-ontological distinction between Blackness and Black people, see, e.g., Moten, "Erotics of Fugitivity."
- 93 Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 776, 778.
- 94 Moten, *Black and Blur*, vii.
- 95 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, xiii.
- 96 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
- 97 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 168.
- 98 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 40.
- 99 Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 247.
- 100 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 92. Italics in the original.

- 101 Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 2.
- 102 Ta-Nehisi Coates claims Donald Trump as the first white president because he is the first to secure the office based solely on the social status of whiteness—and as a corrective (or renewing of whiteness) against the Barack Obama presidency. See Coates, “First White President.”
- 103 I am reminded of a statement by Frank Wilderson: “Afropessimism is a looter’s creed: critique without redemption or a vision of redress except ‘the end of the world.’” *Afropessimism*, 174.
- 104 Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 41. Emphasis added.
- 105 Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 43.
- 106 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 12.
- 107 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 103. There is what I would describe as a “dark” hopefulness in Afropessimism to the extent that “activist” remains a viable element of its vocabulary and resistance a part of its grammar.
- 108 Achille Mbembe’s “necropolitics” as a statement concerning the fullness of sovereignty as the ability to “kill or let live” (*Necropolitics*, 66) provides a compelling way to think about the manner in which the system of slavery and colonialism operates through the categories of life and death played out through the body. However, I sense sovereignty here involving a distinction between death *and* life played out through the bodies of those exposed to the potentiality of death (over against life) and those who determine this relationship. Mbembe references slave life as “a form of death-in-life”: “Because the slave’s life is like a ‘thing,’ possessed by another person, slave existence appears as the perfect figure of a shadow” (75). Even here, there appears to be a distinction between death and life—still life against death—that I seek to close off. See Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, chap. 3.
- 109 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 7.
- 110 Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 111, 112–13.
- 111 Genesis 22:1–13.
- 112 I borrow this notion of Grand Unity from Albert Camus. See *Myth of Sisyphus*.
- 113 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 262.
- 114 Serwer, “Coronavirus Was an Emergency until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying.” See also Mills, *Racial Contract*. On Arbery, see, e.g., Elliott C. McLaughlin, “What We Know about Ahmaud Arbery’s Killing,” CNN, May 12, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/11/us/ahmaud-arbery-mcmichael-what-we-know/index.html>; and “Ahmaud Arbery: Prosecutors under Investigation over Handling of Killing,” *Guardian*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/12/ahmaud-arbery-georgia-prosecutors-under-investigation>.
- 115 See, e.g., Wilderson, *Afropessimism*.
- 116 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 110.
- 117 Boxall, “Blind Seeing.”
- 118 See, e.g., the manner in which death is discussed by Calvin Warren in relationship to Black being as nothingness. Warren, referencing Ronald Judy, also

- speaks of thanatology as a way to describe “black being” as “the evidence of an onticidal enterprise.” *Ontological Terror*, 40. Some texts regarding death are discussed in this volume. See, e.g., Holloway, *Passed On*; McIvor, *Mourning in America*; Holland, *Raising the Dead*; and Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
- 119 Examples of melancholic-centered analysis include De Genova, “Gangster Rap”; Malone, “Long-Lost Brothers”; Ellis, *If We Must Die*; and Winters, “Contemporary Sorrow Songs.”
 - 120 I am not concerned with issues of authenticity—that is to say, with the degree to which artists “are” the stories they tell. Rather, I’m interested in the manner in which these narrations offer a language and grammar for depicting *deathlife*.
 - 121 For an intriguing discussion of the nature and meaning of the archive, see Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”; and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
 - 122 Along these lines, chapters 3 and 4 project some of the logic captured in Afro-pessimism. This is particularly the case not simply in terms of the predominance of death as a way to mark out Black bodies, but also in the manner in which modes of orientation and articulation are defiled by any effort to rethink the relationship of Blackness to death.
 - 123 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 7–8.

1. THE ORPHIC HUSTLER

Some of the material in this chapter first appeared as “God Wears Tom Ford: Hip Hop’s Re-envisioning of Divine Authority,” *Media Development* 61, no. 4 (October 2014): 20–23.

- 1 Simone, “Sinnerman.”
- 2 I outline much of this development in Pinn, *Writing God’s Obituary*.
- 3 See, e.g., “Reverend Run: From Rapper to Preacher,” National Public Radio, September 19, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/12/19/167623728/reverend-run-from-rapper-to-preacher>; and “Rapper Turned Minister Kurtis Blow Is 50,” National Public Radio, August 9, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111696980>.
- 4 UGK, “Game Belong to Me.”
- 5 Tupac Shakur, “Blasphemy.”
- 6 Tupac Shakur, “Blasphemy.”
- 7 Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 24–25.
- 8 Jay-Z and Kanye West, “No Church in the Wild.”
- 9 Jay-Z and Kanye West, “No Church in the Wild.”
- 10 Jay-Z and Kanye West, “No Church in the Wild.”
- 11 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.
- 12 Jay-Z, “Crown.”
- 13 See Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 277: “Most of all, I don’t think what I believe should matter to anyone else; I’m not trying to stop anyone from believing whatever they want. I believe in God, and that’s really enough for me.”