BLACK GATHERING *Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life*

SARAH JANE CERVENAK

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Art,

BLACK OUTDOORS: Innovations in the Poetics of Study
A series edited by J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak

Ecology, Ungiven Life

SARAH JANE CERVENAK

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COVER ART: *Denver*, 2008. © Xaviera Simmons.
Courtesy the artist and David Castillo, Miami.

For Gayl Jones

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Thank you for being here. I want to say that first.

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My husband, Marc, and my son, Edison, are my whole heart. I'm at peace and smile so big when I'm with them.

Thank you for reading.

INTRODUCTION

Another Beginning

In 2010, African American visual artist Xaviera Simmons completed and installed her work of art called *Harvest*. Standing approximately eight by nineteen feet tall, the installation comprises 231 wood panels on which are painted a variety of words and phrases (see figure I.1). Such words as *gold*, *flowing silk*, *blue*, and *arabic* adorn some panels, while phrases like "an evening of cards," "open sky," and "of the possibilities for joy" appear on others. As a composite, it is a beautiful ensemble of earthly life and experiences, a kind of patchwork that suggests a loose coming together, some kind of deregulated togetherness. A gathering.

Interestingly and ironically, considering the artwork's title, if there is a harvest in this ensemble, it's unclear where it is. Unlike a harvest, which is often coextensive with a homogenous yield, Simmons's artwork offers instead a world of different, seemingly unrelated, variously flourishing forms of life. Nothing and no one appears in a locatable space-time, just life blooming in the marked planks that come together as an uncategorized ecology of their own. A gathering of some kind where the word's (*gathering*) own shape-shifting capacity to be either (or simultaneously) noun or verb, a collectivity or state,

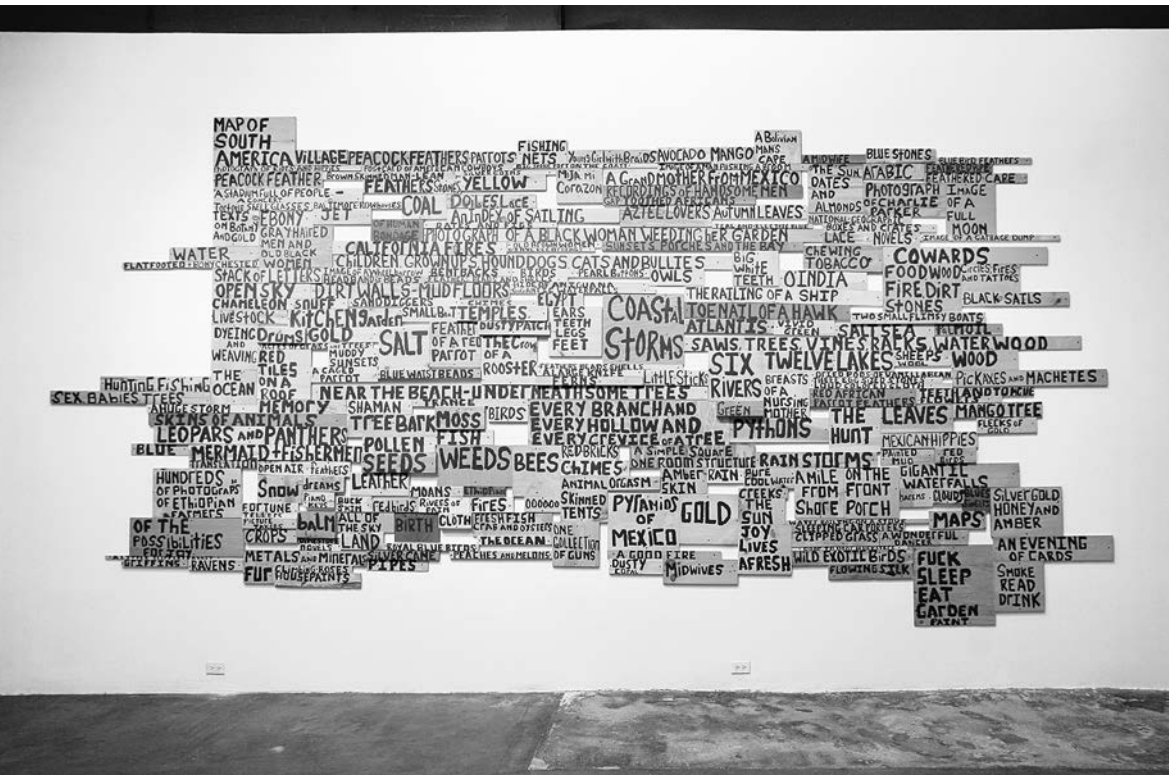

FIGURE 1.1. Xaviera Simmons, *Harvest*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo.

a relation or act of coming together animates the ungovernable, uncategorizable energy infusing this art.

Most directly, while phrases like "greyhaired men and old black women" and "Mexican Hippies" affix planks without an accompanying predicate, events such as "fuck sleep eat garden paint" or "of the possibilities for joy" are not wedded to an easily locatable subject. The separation here arguably engenders a certain fugitive movement where togetherness is unmoored from the enclosures of category and purpose. Moreover, like an aerial view of earth swirling as undifferentiated swashes of green and blue, *Harvest* is a flourish of building materials remaining unbuilt, unconsolidated, and uncategorized. Social life in *Harvest* orbits into and out of view as verbs disappear and reappear from and without their proper subjects and half-indicated socialities bloom as an earth without enclosure.

I begin with Simmons's installation because in some ways it seems like a beginning, another imagination of earthly relation that pushes against capture. Unfinished sentences, unlocalized movement and activity, people living within and outside the limits of name and category, a vision of earth that isn't. In *Harvest*, earthly living moves by way of a seemingly uncoordinated ensemble of gatherings, and the aesthetic ruse of Simmons's installation is that, despite the title's extractive/consumptive implications, the art and the living within remain ungivable and, in turn, neither knowable nor takable.

In *Black Gathering*, I engage with Black artists and writers who've aestheticized and poeticized a relation between togetherness and ungivable living. Toni Morrison, for example, concludes *Beloved* (1987), a novel about un/surveilled Black gatherings, as "not a story to pass on" (Morrison 2004, 323). Fellow writer Gayl Jones joins Morrison by not *giving* words to her characters; instead, she listens to how they arrange their lives. Both writers join up with sculptor Leonardo Drew in moving out of the way of the various togethernesses flourishing on the page and the canvas. As Drew shares about his abstract installations of weathered everyday objects, "The work will pull you by the nose. You know that you don't have all the answers, and the unknown is the best place where you would want to be as an artist, not knowing. That actually leads you to ask questions, and it continuously feeds itself" (quoted in Weiss 2016).

It is precisely this nonteleological openness, unenclosed words and stories, insistently unfinished canvases and sentences where Black life and Blackened living seemingly come together through a kind of release.[1] I assert that the writers and artists surveyed in this book, in some ways all together, speak to as well as formally experimentalize another relation to fleshly and earthly

togetherness, what Gayl Jones might describe as saying the beginning "better than [it was said] in the beginning" (Jones 1975, 54). Within the context of Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), where the quote appears, a Black woman blues singer named Ursa lives with slavery's long h/arm, finding that its violence, its perverse logic of Black women's sexuality as given over haunts her songs. She grapples with, and often discovers in her dreams, how *their* ownership of her family changes her music and how singing itself changes what release might mean; "Let me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. . . . I'll stain their hands. Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning" (54).

Ursa's witnessing moves by way of a different comportment toward flesh and earth, an understanding of both (here, womb and coffee bean) as extractively imbricated, and how their imaginative gathering in her eyes, their gathering which becomes a haunted song she releases, makes for a vision they can't take. All of this prefaces the main character's instruction that *everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning*. In *Corregidora*, Black art makes for another imagining of relation, one that indicts anti-Black and anti-earth extraction and alchemically transforms their presumptively shared give-overness into untakable music. What the main character attunes us to is how Black art has long provided another dream of beginnings, deregulated, unownable arrangements different from those imposed by the world slavery made.

Ursa's song, like Xaviera Simmons's *Harvest,* aestheticizes other beginnings where Black life moves as if flesh and earth were neither givable nor ownable. Such aesthetics of ungiven life are, as Gayl Jones instructs, how new beginnings are formed. Beginnings that might respond to the enduring violences of a fictionalized, white Enlightenment narrative of the earth's beginning. For example, according to seventeenth-century patron saint of liberal humanism, John Locke (2015, 120), "in the beginning, all the world" was America, and such beginnings were ordained by god's *giving* of the earth to men: "God, who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life and convenience. The earth and all that is therein is given to men for the support and comfort of their being" (110).

Moreover, for Locke, such use of the earth was inextricable from gathering, which was inextricable from ownership. Indeed, according to the philosopher, "all the world" began with the "first gathering"; in the chapter "On Property" from his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), this "first gathering" describes man's presocial relation to the earth (2015, 119). Locke ponders: "He that is nourished by the acorns he picked up under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood. . . . I ask then, when did they

begin to be his? When he digested? Or when he eat? Or when he boiled? Or when he brought them home? Or when he picked them up? And it is plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could" (111). Significantly, Locke's rationalization of self and earthly ownership is bound up with the question of labor: "He [who] hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it, something that is his own" (111). Such a claim, on its face, both brutally hopes to justify settlement and expropriation while also suggesting that the enslaved Black and Indigenous workers of the land had divine right to it and, by implication, their own flesh. But, as is common in Enlightenment rhetorics about freedom's universality, anti-Blackness makes explicit the Age of Reason's brute and terrible particularity. That is, the father of liberalism himself was also a chief architect of the Carolina colony within which both Black and Native "slaves made up a significant portion of the population from the beginning," such that "by 1672 'between one fourth and one third of the colony's newcomers were Negroes.'" By 1710, "promotional literature for the colony . . . included '2 Negro slaves as a requirement . . . in order to live comfortably' in Carolina" (Hinshelwood 2013, 577, 579). By making the ownership of Black people a requirement for settler comfort and by naturalizing the colony's existence precisely through recourse to a fear of war, of being surrounded, Locke sanctioned the unhoming of Blackness and indigeneity as settler home's prerequisite.[2]

Moreover, after Locke declared "all the world was America," a move that at once rationalized Black people and earth as ownable and givable and brutalized the expression of gathering as extraction, the logic of the gift buttressed life and freedom's expression. That is, Locke's theory of beginnings, as Black and Native studies scholars Cheryl Harris, Joanne Barker, and others have argued, provided a political theory for the purported founders of the United States, who "embraced Lockean labor theory as the basis for a right of acquisition because it affirmed the right of the New World settlers to settle on and acquire the frontier. It confirmed and ratified their experience" (Harris 1993, 280).[3] Moreover, as feminist scholar Mimi Nguyen demonstrates, the notion of the gift forges a "genealogy of liberalism" extending from Locke to the present: "Under modern humanism, th[e] individual is understood to be 'free' on the condition that he or she act autonomously[;] . . . the consciousness of the modern subject thus proceeds through self-referential enclosure as a precondition for rational action and contract with like others, including wage labor, marriage and family deemed the most natural of such forms, through which *possessive ownership* is perceived as a historical necessity for human freedom" (Nguyen 2012, 11–12).

Saidiya Hartman joins Nguyen here in arguing that this history of (white) self-possession, or holding property in one's self, "presumes particular forms of embodiment and excludes or marginalizes others" (Hartman 1997, 122). Put differently, even after emancipation and the alleged gift of Black freedom, the history of American self-possession centrally moves as the capacity of whiteness to keep Blackness held, that is, in holding. Such figuration of Black freedom as propertied self-possession, moreover, depended on a continued anti-Black and anti-earth figuration of gathering. As Hartman demonstrates, compelled Black self-regulation manifested through the equating of quasi-bound (often, agricultural) labor with civic responsibility: the coercive gathering of earth moved in relation to the coercive gathering of self. In her seminal *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman continues by arguing: "Indebtedness was central to the creation of a memory of the past in which white benefactors, courageous soldiers, and virtuous mothers sacrificed themselves for the enslaved. This memory was to be seared into the minds of the freed. Debt was at the center of a moral economy of submission and servitude and was instrumental in the production of peonage. Above all, it operated to bind the subject by compounding the service owed, augmenting the deficit through interest accrued, and advancing credit that extended interminably the obligation of service" (Hartman 1997, 131). It is through her engagement with the rhetoric and writing of "missionaries, teachers, and Freedmen's Bureau officials, and Northern entrepreneurs," particularly their advice on what so-called responsible freed Black living should *look* like, where Hartman finds indebtedness a common theme (127). To be free was not only to have received a gift, something givable, but the expression of such freedom was legitimate only if one could paradoxically demonstrate a measure of coercive self-regulation in its exercise. Keeping oneself together, via the "moral economy of submission," moreover, was bound up with the quasi-forced capitalist extraction of the earth (130).

What is more, as Hartman argues, Black gathering's movement outside of anti-Black and anti-earth spatio-temporalities of capitalist regulation figured as a civic threat. Reflecting on narrative accounts by recently freed Black people, she (Hartman) argues that: "Freedom did not abolish the lash . . . the habitual exercise of violence, in particular, Klan attacks on black homes—against freedpeople forced them to 'mostly hide out in the woods.' If blacks assembled, they were accused of sedition" (140). Instructively, this figuration of deregulated Black gathering as Black sedition, from slavery to the present, has long been integral to the generalization of a white ecology. A *white ecol-*

ogy is a fictionalized imposition of anti-earth and anti-Black narratives of the earth and Black people as given over to propertied regulation and inscription, theoretically sanctioned, according to Bernd Herzogenrath, in the text of "Western (white) Metaphysics," notably that of John Locke (Herzogenrath 2013, 4). Through anti-Black forms of gathering (as extraction) and regulation, such a generalization of white ecologies has attempted to privatize and regulate a free relation with the self and the earth.

Notably, before Herzogenrath's recent theorization of white ecology's enduring pretense to metaphysical generality (from Locke to the present), Nathan Hare's landmark 1970 essay, "Black Ecology," centered racism's enduring impact on Black people's access to healthy places for gathering ensured by clean air, water, and housing. Hare indicts mainstream environmentalism's unmarked investment in what he calls "white ecologies." Citing a 1965 federal water pollution report, Hare (1970, 2) argues, "In the realm of white ecology pollution closes your beaches and prevents your youngsters from wading, swimming, boating, water-skiing, fishing, and other recreation close to home."

Tellingly, according to Hare, in a report on the impact of contaminated oceans on (white) leisure and extraction, a 1960s governmental call for environmental awareness and remedy ignored pollution's impact on the Black working class. Given that public beaches were not desegregated until 1968, the report doesn't say how an investment in the generality of white ecology always already violently policed Black gathering. According to environmental sociologist Dorceta Taylor (2002, 27): "Blacks were barred from using other city parks and living in other neighborhoods. [Chicago's] Marquette Park, which had a public beach, was guarded to ensure that Whites had exclusive use of the facilities. When Whites used fear, intimidation, and vigilante tactics to deny Blacks use of recreational facilities, the police did not protect the rights of Blacks."

Taylor's and Hare's attention to the distinction between white and Black ecologies, then, powerfully attunes us to the tenacious whiteness at the heart of mainstream environmentalism and how discourses of pollution, for example, sustained an enduring ethos against Black gathering even as the purportedly race-neutral discourse of contaminants was being advanced. Moreover, Hare's "Black Ecology" is regarded as a key text that identifies and extends the need for environmental justice activism. As Taylor (2002, 28) writes, "During the 1960s and 1970s, Blacks throughout the country also organized campaigns to reduce pollution, improve sanitation, clean up neighborhoods, and reduce the incidence of lead poisoning in African American communities." While

Black Gathering is not a history of Black art focused on environmental justice, it engages with Black literary and visual arts of the environmental justice era (1970s–present). Arguably extending the terms of environmental justice, the art surveyed in this book powerfully elaborates some possible but, per Morrison, not-to-be-passed on shapes of gathering as Black ecological desire.[4]

Equally important, Black writers and artists have illuminated how a certain figuration of the aesthetic, a certain relationship with the aesthetic, integrally buttresses such presumption of the earth and Black flesh's given-overness to inscription. On the notion of a "white ecology" in the text of Western metaphysics, Herzogenrath writes:

> In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. But where did the word fall, where did it leave its trace? Where did it echo, resonate? So, before the word, there must have been some background, some canvas, some blank page? As Deleuze and Guattari have it, "Significance is never without a *white wall* upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies." So, in the beginning was the White. Uniform, indistinctive whiteness. And God wrote. The omniscient author had no writer's block. Facing the absolute whiteness, always following the Golden Ratio, he separated light from darkness, the waters from the land, night from day, and so on. (2013, 3)

Recall that Locke, too, mobilized a Genesis narrative, asserting that God gave over the earth (and people) to men "in common" (2015, 113). Then, not only did the earth and the universe become figured as given-overable, but as Herzogenrath argues, this given-over-ness is inextricable from a violent figuration of the aesthetic. In Locke, the word's meta-inscriptional force moved coterminously with an extractivist, fundamentally anti-Black and anti-indigenous ethos. And the earth figured as canvas and pen for gathering's reductivist definition.

Even still, against such violent aesthetic instrumentalization of Black people and nonhuman life toward liberal personhood's vile anti-Black origins, Ursa's elusive song bespeaks other arrangements. In *Black Gathering*, I engage writers and artists who theorize and aestheticize gathering's essentially deregulated kinesis at the meeting ground of ungiven people and ungiven earth. Here, I join scholars Camille Dungy and Kimberly Ruffin. Dungy's anthology, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), and Ruffin's monograph, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010), center Black writers and poets who were "investigating the alignment between man and nature long before the popularity of con-

temporary ecopoetics" (Dungy 2009, xxii) and who reflect "a deep knowledge about the human and nonhuman consequences of social systems" (Ruffin 2010, 20). At the same time, though, the writers surveyed in this book push the question of Black ecology past what might figure as physical nature all the way into the domain of astrophysical and quantum vitalities. I consider how deregulated togethernesses undulate in sentences, images, and artistic arrangements that pulsate against enclosure, extending the ecological beyond even its own regulative pretense. That is, a Black ecology, where *ecology* derives from the Greek word *oikos*, "a fundamental unit, a household, a collectivizing space, a gathering of people and things," moves by way of an aesthetic that's visible and invisible, earthly and cosmic, phantasmatic and imaginative (Cohen 2013, xvii). There's a kinetics of returning—spatially, temporally, astrophysically—to other possible horizons of togetherness, a vision conjured by artistically *saying the beginning better than it was said in the beginning*.

For scholar Christina Sharpe, these other horizons might accrue at the interface between atmospheric and poetic distillation, ecoaesthetic openings for gathering with self and earth in the unshareable space-time of "hold and release" (Sharpe 2020). In a recent column in the online magazine *Jewish Currents*, Sharpe is one of "three poetry readers [who] reflect on a poem they've been holding close during this difficult time" (Sharpe 2020). Sharpe characterizes her engagement with Canisia Lubrin's recent poetry collection, *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* (2020), as a "sitting with" (Sharpe 2020), a form of aesthetic dwelling and cohabitation taking place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine and global protests against anti-Black state violence. As Sharpe relates:

> A word might hold you close when the world does not, gerund; it might measure the distance between what is and what might be. Open to this old/new word/world that was always there and that was "big enough for all of us."
>
> In the midst of all of the sacrifices (and the sacrificed)—and all that is being made and unmade by masses of young, queer, trans, disabled Black people organizing and gathering in order to insist a habitable wor(l)d into being—I come back to "Dream #5." And by the time I land in its final line, "How rude of me to force you on the thing that springs blood," some suspension breaks, some clarity returns. I have been gathered.
>
> My breath has been taken away and then given back. (Sharpe 2020)

For Sharpe, Black gathering moves across what is taking place in the streets—"masses of young, queer, trans, disabled Black people organizing and gathering"—and amid the wordly arrangements within Lubrin's poetry (Sharpe 2020). Concerning the latter, "a sitting with," a being with Lubrin's poetry, describes other aesthetic possibilities for Black gathering during a pandemic that disproportionately impacts (and is instrumentalized to perversely criminalize) Black people's already regulated rights to be together and to survive such togetherness. Sharpe's "sitting with," then, weighed down by the enclosure of spectacularized Black suffering and the hyperpolicing of its refusal, elaborates gathering's possibility to make other ways of being with the world. Precisely, for Sharpe, a being with Lubrin's long poem, which "works with and at what survives TransAtlantic slavery" (Sharpe 2020), joins her time with clouds (which, as she acknowledges, remind her daily "to breathe, and to look up and out") to bespeak another iteration of Black gathering as integral to survival as that which unfolds in the streets. Sharpe's brilliant elaboration of Black gathering's aesthetic travel evokes the healing potential of some deregulated togetherness ethereally linking sky, street, and page.

In that way, Sharpe's writing and its earthly canvas move as part of a larger Black aesthetic tradition traveling alongside what figures as Black gathering's political expression. As Black people gather in the streets to protest state violence and as Black people have always gathered in spite of the state's incessant prohibitions against such gathering, white supremacist violence moves (and has moved) with deadly force to interrupt Black togetherness. Even still, Black gatherings happen; some livingness, with neither sanction nor extraction, manages to get through. The artists and writers in this book aesthetically honor and acknowledge this, and their artworks might be seen as offerings of respite and for (cosmically expansive levels of deregulated) reassembly, which Sharpe also acknowledges, even as white supremacy's murderously interruptive force sees fleshly/earthly separation as its raison d'être.

Put another way, through non-pass-on-able scenes of cloud and poem dwelling, quilting, and sharing, the immeasurable quantum communique between earth and cosmos and the unfinished arrangements of words and objects, Black artists and writers experiment with togetherness without ownership. Moreover, as indexed by Sharpe's communion with poetry, activism, and atmosphere, aesthetic engagements with Black social life's multiplicity put pressure on form itself such that pages and canvases become occasions for a different kind of relational praxis. In this regard, other kinds of engagement with such art are required.

As a student of Black studies, performance studies, and Black feminist theory, and as someone committed to the abolition of whiteness (as racialized, gendered, and sexualized property and as propertizing apparatus), which imbricates and animates the "extractive view," I argue that Black gathering's aesthetic enactments provides instruction on a nonpropertizing, nonauthoritative relation to the craft of writing about art itself (Gómez-Barris 2017).[5] As Jared Sexton (2014, 593) writes, "Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even, or a politics whose demand is 'too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds.'" Arguably gathering bears a similar kinesis to what Sexton calls "the perverse affirmation" of indeterminacy itself. This undecidabilty, at once indicating a noun or verb, a being or making, potentiates fugitive capacity; in that way, such undecidability when it manifests in and as Black literary and aesthetic practice must, as Édouard Glissant might say, be respected.[6] That is to say, part of what it means for me as someone who benefits from whiteness is to not just engage Black social and aesthetic thought in its delimitation of abolition's political and ethical shape but to think about how the commitment to abolition through a sustained engagement with Black studies refuses reading strategies enacting the very propertizing and extraction otherwise critiqued.

In other words, as each chapter queries how the arts of writing, sculpture, and painting engender the possibility of form as a place for relationality's reimagination and safeguarding, I'm committed to not attempting some false analytic resolution of Black gatherings' indeterminate meanings and ambulation. Most directly, the artists and writers surveyed in the book advance another ecological and architectural imagination into some undisclosed coordinates where the release of earth from its fraudulent ownership is coterminous with the release of flesh. Such forms of release, the inherent fugitivity of *gathering* as a term, flourish in the recesses of property's afterlife, theorized by innovative assemblages of language, found objects, paint; Black gathering potentiates exits out of the extractive view and into realms that are nobody's business. In that way, I hope that this book contributes to ongoing conversations about contemporary Black feminist and abolitionist ecopoiesis and the role of aesthetics (and aesthetic analysis) in sustaining and concealing a nonextractive view. Moreover, I'm interested in how an engagement with Black gathering's deregulated kinesis as a way to imagine fleshly/earthly together-

ness at abolition and anti-extraction's meeting ground calls on my belief in another geological ethos, what Audre Lorde and Kathryn Yusoff might respectively describe as "language [as correlated to rock] crazure" and the "epoch making" capacity of "black poetics" beyond the space-time of this writing (Lorde 1980, 8; Yusoff 2019, 19).[7]

Returning to Simmons, to suggest that *Harvest* might flourish as gathering is to believe in (but not look for) its unseen/unfracked depths of undisclosed place and activity, unindicated space-times of interspecies relation—"wild exotic birds," "pythons," and "rainstorms." When the human is indicated in the mosaic of wood planks, they are often Black and Brown, the people historically extracted from, perversely harvested, so that the earth could be. That is, capitalist agriculture's very world-historical conditions are settler colonialism and chattel slavery, flesh and earth gathered up so that the world could be turned over and broken up for a profit. As Black feminist scholar Tiffany Lethabo King (2016, 7–8) argues: "Under slavery and conquest, the Black body becomes the ultimate symbol of accumulation, malleability, and flux existing outside of human coordinates of space and time. Rather, Blackness is the raw dimensionality (symbol, matter, kinetic energy) used to make space."

But in *Harvest*, Black and Brown people show up as human insofar as that humanity ambles in the unelaborated recesses of the artwork's own unlocalizable socialities. In the middle of *Harvest*, for example, there's a panel that tells of "a photograph of a black woman weeding her garden" while, elsewhere, an "old black women" and a "grandmother from Mexico" are named as quickly as they are dispersed. Once more, the omission of certain elaborations bespeaks a fugitive gathering at the heart of *Harvest*. Just as communions run out of and away from category, togethernesses otherwise vitiated by agents of extraction manage to flourish as a half-told story. In *Harvest*, fugitive life moves as beginnings that ripple past the enclosures indicated by the artwork's very name, gathering in and with the ungiven earth otherwise.[8]

These gatherings with earth otherwise and more particularly the aesthetic depictions of Black women in a variety of outdoor locales are arguably a central theme of Simmons's photographic oeuvre. For Simmons, while the Black woman subject of her photographs is often herself, *she* becomes a different character depending on where a photo is taken, be it cane fields, forests, a canyon's valley. She shares, "I see the landscape at this point as both the most fertile and the most basic ground to overlay the characters that come to me when I engage with these environments" (quoted in Despain 2012). Simmons's reflection here suggests that art, and with it the land, enacts the possibility of another imagining, one where known artist and (perhaps) loca-

tion might be re-created differently together. An artful interaction with the environment potentiates a dream of another relation. In Simmons's artwork, otherwise pursued and surveilled flesh and earth are somehow cast outside the harvester's reach, as the photos intimate the possibility of unendangered togetherness.

In the photo titled *Denver* (2008), for example, a Black woman stands alone in a creek, her skirts underwater. She holds a fishing pole, cast outward with the end of the line invisible. Behind her is an uncultivated field, some towering pines, and a mountain. The river flows around her ankles (see figure I.2). There is no evidence of impending arrest or extraction, no diggers of a pipeline visible or policers accusing her of trespass. No one to interrupt her activity or presume, divinely, juridically, otherwise, that she and the earth belong to them. In the space/time/ecology of this photo, relationalities flourish without definition or interception.

I argue that the space/time/ecology of this photo suggests a possibility of gathering with and on earth without the threat of someone else's overdetermination, an intrusive presumption of harvestability. As with Simmons's installation *Harvest*, in *Denver* there's relationality without explanation and assertions of earthly life that come through without category. In *Denver*, something and someone flourishes within the frame's safekeeping—a Black gathering made possible by a kind of ecological protection engendered by art.[9]

Here I believe in the ecology of the photograph, installation, and watercolor painting the same way Sonya Posmentier believes in poems. In *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, Posmentier (2017, 4) advances, "Poems sometimes mimic or approximate organic forms and processes often associated with enclosure, preservation, self-sustainability, and internal relation, forms that can exceed their own boundaries, and that may in turn yield new models for social and ecological relation." I also believe in poems and particularly how they can, like photographs, sculpture, and paintings, "yield new models for social and ecological relation" (4).

Indeed, scholars in Black studies and Native studies, along with twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black women writers and poets, have long engaged the intersection of anti-Black and anti-earth violence toward "new models for social and ecological relation." To backtrack, when I first started thinking about gathering in relation to anti-Black histories of property and propertied personhood, I was in a series of study sessions with my friend J. Kameron Carter, sessions which eventually formalized into a speaker series at Duke University called Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures after Property and Possession (2016–17). During this time I began to more fully con-

FIGURE 1.2. Xaviera Simmons, *Denver*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo.

template Black studies in relation to critical ecology literatures. The writings of Anna Tsing, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and others figured centrally as we grappled with the ways that these scholars' engagements with the world's end, the violence of the Anthropocene, attune us to the practices of intra-racial and inter-species forms of togetherness long flourishing otherwise. Key concepts advanced by these scholars include the anti-cultivationist view of more-than-human togetherness from a mushroom on the forest's floor (Tsing 2015), propertied personhood's integral anti-Blackness (Hartman 1997), Black studies' earth-saving mandate (Moten 2017c),[10] and Black feminist artists and writers' unorganization or deorganization of the world toward "difference without separability" (Ferreira da Silva 2016). Moreover, as I was working on this book while reading and thinking alongside these scholars, I was also reading and writing in relation to Black women artists like Xaviera Simmons, Dionne Brand, and Wangechi Mutu, who gesture toward while creating ecologies in their photography, poetry, and collages alike, where Black women characters interact with the natural world without regulation, highlighting while also subverting a relation between the mutual precarity shared by uncaptured Blackness and earthliness. The book emerges out of this sustained thinking and study, done together and alone, even though alone is never what it seems to be.

Black Gathering is divided into two parts: part I, Gathering's Art, and part II, the Art of Gathering. This distinction, while in keeping with *gathering*'s meanings as a noun or a verb, is kind of impossible. That is, *gathering* as noun (a collective, a party, and so on) and *gathering* as verb (bringing together) shape-shift into each other. For example, the brief sentence "People are gathering" could suggest either an event or an activity; *gathering* indicates some kind of elusive arrangement, an artful ecology of ungiven life.

In chapter 1, I engage Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Nikki Wallschlaeger's *Houses* (2015) to argue for Black women's centrality to conversations on ecoaesthetics. Although they are often underacknowledged if not unacknowledged, Black women writers have long illuminated how the world slavery made, in its juridico-philosophical sanctioning of "whiteness as property," brutalized experiences of ecology, of home (Harris 1993). Even so, writers like Wallschlaeger and Morrison crucially imagine the possibilities of home beyond property. In their art, Black gatherings ecoaesthetically intercede in and against property's terrors and depravations. So, thinking with *ecology* as derived from *oikos*, I interpret *Beloved* and *Houses* as enacting all the term's definitions while elucidating how *oikos* doesn't require the conditions of extractive gathering and the propertizing of self (Cohen 2013, xvii). Across these

texts, there is an imagining of gathering's artfulness, of its artistic capacity to change an environment, to etherealize home as rearrangements of color, light, texture, and image that, in turn, illuminate and suspend property's disruptive violences. Arguably, both books imagine another kind of living, another kind of house and oikos, unmoored from an assertion of ownership or presumptive givenness. Both authors poeticize oikos and home less from the vantage of property than from an ecoaesthetic vantage, the complex interface between what gathers in a room and what might artfully release as some ungivable time together.

In chapter 2, I explore how writers Samiya Bashir and Gabrielle Ralambo-Rajerison engage classic physics and astrophysics, respectively. They join Morrison and Wallschlaeger in precisely these ecoaesthetic and ecopoetic contemplations of Black social life in the wake of anti-Blackness's enduring assault on fleshly, interspecies, extraplanetary, and more-than-human relationality.[11] Drawing on branches of science that, as Ashon Crawley (2017, 48) writes of quantum physics, offer "mode[s] of study that verif[y] the fact [that] there are things that happen in the world, in the universe, that are not easily perceptible to human flesh," Bashir and Ralambo-Rajerison offer meditations on Black gathering that posit the deep connections between earth and cosmos. In many ways, I argue that, the authors surveyed in this chapter poetically dwell with the universe's beginnings and, following Jones, try to say them better. That is, both Bashir and Ralambo-Rajerison poeticize around the fluctuations of dark matter, which even astrophysicists conclude is what proceeded the fictionalized beginning forged by god as creator; Blackness, in their writings, moves as both earthly, "enfleshed" (and degraded in that enfleshment) experience and as a kind of energetic and cosmological surround for otherwise regulated relationality (Weheliye 2014, 14). Moreover, in keeping with the question of how gathering makes an environment, I advance that the authors' artful engagements with Black gathering enact a cosmoaesthetics and a cosmopoetics. That is, through unconventional arrangements of words, particularly the spacing between them (Bashir) and between passages (Ralambo-Rajerison), I believe that the writers cosmoaestheticize poems as parallel galaxies. As poet Amy Catanzano (2011) argues, "Quantum poetics investigates how physical reality is assumed, imagined and tested through language at discernible and indiscernible scales of spacetime." While neither Bashir nor Ralambo-Rajerison identifies their art as "quantum poetics," per se, their conceptual deployment of terms common in quantum and astrophysics, along with the errant spacing between and around words and passages, arguably alludes to what Catanzano calls the "something else" qual-

ity of the poem. In other words, if, following Catanzano, the poem, is not just writing but a play of "indiscernible scales," showing how language always points to an extraempirical elsewhere, then might the spacing around words also allude to a something beyond the page? An immeasurable space-time that shows up as an emptiness, a pulling of words apart? This chapter considers how the poetry of Bashir and Ralambo-Rajerison makes of emptiness, the emptiness between words, another occasion for cosmoaesthetic and cosmopoetic cohabitation.

Again, the first part of this book considers how gatherings make or art something, be it a poetic experience of galactic relation or a sense of home against property's artificial enclosures. The second part considers Black gathering's relation to ungiven life through artistic practices of bringing together. I begin by discussing how writer Gayl Jones engages language and then how sculptor Leonardo Drew arrays artificially weathered objects in order to elucidate how unforeseen arrangements might unsettle life's assumed givenness to word and category. I see both Jones and Drew as gathering, although not necessarily toward something recognizable; in fact, their gatherings put pressure on the impulse to name and know. What their gatherings potentially do is activate the possibilities of a togetherness that exceeds understanding and, in some ways, the logic of social and economic value. In their art they raise the question of forms of togetherness ungivable to axioms of reason and category and of forms of togetherness that thrive precisely because they evade regulation.

Moreover, the artists surveyed in the first part elucidate how togetherness creates an environment, more livable surroundings—gathering as a group or family—and the artists in the second part express the definition of gathering as a bringing together. The first definition indicates a place of arrival; the second suggests an activity without clear or predictable end or form. Put differently, *gathering* in part I emerges as a noun, as an effect of an arrangement of an author's writing and wordly (along with spatial) arrangements. What Morrison does in *Beloved*, for example, in her deeply beautiful engagement with flora and fauna, is conceivably transform the book into an earthly environment for the (formerly) enslaved characters of her novel. The novel, I hope more than think, is a gathering, a literary materialization of an earth where characters can live rather than merely survive. Moreover, the novel bears spaces for characterological and imagistic togetherness in its prose and across its pages, and harbors experiences of gathering to remain, as per its author's instruction, elusive to transfer at book's end.

In part II, I attend to the act of *gathering*, where its status as verb is highlighted by the abstractional practices of both Jones and Drew. In their work,

there's arguably an interest in the materiality of words and objects—wood and cotton, for example, in the case of Drew—as locus of relationality rather than in the possible worlds those arrangements yield. In particular, in chapter 3, I consider Jones's early writing as forms of aesthetic experimentations that attempt to listen, without interfering, to where social life might build and move in Black erotic and "cripped" turns of speech (McRuer 2004, 59). That is, her (Jones's) unanticipatable arrangements of language, alphabetic letters, and tense arguably suspend a giving over of social life to presumptively normative linguistic arrangements. In that way, her characters thrive beyond others' understanding even as they contend with the violence of others' sentencing.

In chapter 4 I contemplate how Drew's gathering of artificially weathered, everyday objects questions the relation between gathering and economic systems of valuation. Particularly in Drew's installations, everyday objects—kids' toys, a high-heeled shoe, the feathers of a dead bird, for example—are artificially weathered, often painted in monochromes of black and white, and arranged into nonfigurative installations. Such arrangements move by way of gathering's kinetic openness. That is, there is an unfixedness to Drew's installations, as materials thickly bob on the surface of the canvas while the illusion of decay indicates an impending collapse, where everything might fall together.

Finally, *Black Gathering* concludes with a brief meditation on the mid- to late twentieth-century artistic career of former sharecropper Clementine Hunter. In 1955, Hunter completed murals commissioned for a structure on Melrose, a working twentieth-century plantation in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. On the walls of what was alternately remembered as a storehouse and a prison for enslaved people, Hunter painted scenes of Black people gathering: different tableaux feature Black women sharecroppers gathering cotton and pecans, people assembling for church services and baptisms, some nighttime dancing. On the walls of a building arbitrarily named African House, the walls of a plantation are repainted by someone managed, someone whose own ancestors were violently gathered so that those walls could hold life apart. Mothers from children, lovers from lovers, the feel of grass on unfettered flesh.

In ornamentalizing the building with an ungivable painterly vision, of Black gathering, these powerful murals not only work in the interest of togetherness's deregulation, but somehow they also change the atmosphere in which they appear.[12] This is complicated. The murals are on the interior of a plantation. To view them requires the purchase of a ticket for a plantation tour, the monies of which ostensibly support the very anti-Black, anti-earth structure's maintenance and touristic vitality. Still, what would it mean to

think of that muraled wall as an ecology that harbors Black memories, feelings, desires, and dreams? The feel of a painter's brush, the unscaled images and memories that ambled in her mind, the molecular breakdown of wood that somehow makes its way into the night sky. Indeed, along with the work of other writers and artists surveyed in this book, Hunter's murals suggest that Black gatherings, through artistic innovation, might transform the very terroristic ecologies within which they move or, at the very least, might engender private harbors where besieged flesh and earth could live together differently. Indeed, in reflecting on why I arrived at *all* these writers and why all of them *together*, I kept coming back to the common denominator of home. Each writer and artist gestures to home: its elusiveness in Simmons; its dual comforting and terroristic character in Morrison, Wallschlaeger, and Jones; along with its quantum and molecular immeasurability in Bashir, Ralambo-Rajerison, and Drew; and in Hunter, its infinite re-canvassing.

While the first chapter engages home in relation to property's terroristic anti-Black shapes, there are ways that home appears again and again through the art and literature surveyed here. As if through opening something on the page and canvas and into flight, home joins other words, like a bird in murmuration, indexing not just the possibility of Black gathering as deregulated social life but also a deregulated social life that's somehow protected. In that way, perhaps what art does, in safeguarding the presences and histories it names and evokes, is honor their ungivability, even if ownership and enclosure come knocking and try to have their say.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Throughout the book, I characterize aspects of gathering in art (i.e., unfinishedness) as "insistent." In some ways, my use of the word *insistent* is informed by Nathaniel Mackey's usage in *Bedouin Hornbook* (2010). For Mackey, *insistent* characterizes the sound of a "previousness," heard in the "clucking beat" of reggae (35). While *Black Gathering* does not engage substantively with Mackey's art and thought, I continued to pause at my use of *insistent* and in my thinking around its familiarity, I arrived at Mackey. What the usages—mine and Mackey's—share are a belief that art insists and such insistence is of a certain un/knowable relationality. See Mackey 2010.

2 See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons* (2013, 17) for their critique of settler colonialism manifest in the dual violent affectivities of feeling at home and surrounded.

3 Along with Cheryl Harris, Joanne Barker's (2006, 6-7) writing on the use of John Locke's settler colonialist theories among eighteenth-century US jurists was enormously helpful here.

4 I want to acknowledge books that were enormously helpful in my thinking about the enduring whiteness of mainstream environmentalism along with a recent expression of black ecology as that which is engendered by literature's disciplinary troubling of "the limits imposed by a disciplinary or otherwise aversion to thinking with nonhuman forms of life" (Bennett 2020, 8). These books are Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces* (2014) and Joshua Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself* (2020). Bennett conceives of black ecology as a place where "black literary study might take place . . . [in] largely unthought forms of interspecies collaboration, convergence and convivalit[y]" (Bennett 2020, 13). *Black Gathering* attends to interspecies sociality as it manifests in Morrison's literary engagement with flora and fauna. Although Bennett's focus is on human and nonhuman animal socialities, his advancement of the term

black ecology to describe environments experimentalized by literature is enormously important.

5 My use of "the extractive view" is informed by Macarena Gómez-Barris's brilliant elaboration of extraction's force as the violent reduction of earthly life into takeable resource. In *The Extractive Zone* (2017), Gómez-Barris elaborates on the extractive view accordingly: "Before the colonial project could prosper, it had to render territories and peoples extractible, and it did so through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence. Therefore, the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity. This viewpoint, similar to the colonial gaze, facilitates the reorganization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation" (5).

6 My first encounter with Glissant's phrase "right to obscurity" was in reading Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman's conceptual and methodological deployment of the phrase moves as part of her critique of the "coerced theatricality" of enslaved people (Hartman 1997, 37). This "coerced theatricality" not only manifested in the compulsion of dancing on the auction block but also presumed that performances by enslaved people were always already for the captor. For Hartman, the complexity of Black performance in subjection lies in refusing to "consider black song as an index or mirror of the slave condition" but rather as a place where "something in excess of the orchestrated amusements" moved (36).

And this something else, the white supremacist fear of it, suffered endless policing. As Hartman argues, an enduring feature of anti-Blackness was the "dominative imposition of transparency" exemplified in such postbellum violences as the Black Codes, which, among other things, policed any Black movement seen as without purpose or otherwise not sutured to capitalist accumulation (36).

As Hartman argues elsewhere (2018), the presumption of Black assembly as seditious, because unreadable and uncategorizable, further manifests in such anti-Black gathering ordinances as the 1901 Tenement House Law and the "five-second rule," imposed during the Ferguson protests of 2014.

With respect to the former ordinance, Hartman observes that in the early twentieth century, "Harlem was swarming with vice-investigators and undercover detectives and do-gooders who were all intent on keeping young black women off the streets, even if it meant arresting every last one of them. Street strollers, exhausted domestics, nocturnal creatures, wannabe chorus girls, and too loud colored women were arrested on a whim or suspicion or likelihood. In custody, the reasons for arrest were offered: Loitering. Riotous and Disorderly. Solicitation. Violation of the Tenement House Law. Who knew that being too loud, or loitering in the hallway of your building or on the front stoop was a violation of the law; or making a date with someone you met at the club,

or arranging a casual hookup, or running the streets was prostitution? Or sharing a flat with ten friends was criminal anarchy? Or the place where you stayed was a disorderly house, and could be raided at any moment? The real offense was blackness" (Hartman 2018, 473). Given this history, an engagement with Black gatherings must not reproduce whiteness through an anti-Black "imposition of transparency" historically integral to whiteness as property's codification and violent endurance. My commitment to modes of relation on and with earth that are not governed by whiteness and property, as such moves, as both political and aesthetic forms of ethical comportment, that aver to think of reading not as a "dominative" critical imposition but as a thinking with.

7 Concerning Audre Lorde, the reference to language's geological capacities, its potential earth-building power, appears in her book *The Cancer Journals* (1980). In a dream, Audre Lorde finds herself in a small gathering, a class that includes herself, a teacher, and another woman. It is here where she ponders the relationship between words and rocks. There's something really beautiful about these geological ruminations in Lorde's dream, written in the context of her meditations on illness, environmental racism, and state-sanctioned suffering. Lorde gathers with her selves in the dream, and what flourishes is a planet with her survival in mind: "I dreamt I had begun to change my life, with a teacher who is very shadowy. I was not attending classes, but I was going to learn how to change my whole life, live differently, do everything in a new and different way. I didn't really understand, but I trusted this shadowy teacher. Another young woman who was there told me she was taking a course in 'language crazure' the opposite of discrazure (the cracking and wearing away of rock). I thought it would be very exciting to study the formation and crack and composure of words, so I told my teacher I wanted to take that course" (1980, 8).

8 My use of the word *otherwise*, as in "gathering otherwise" or "otherwise ecologies," is indebted to scholars Ashon Crawley and Denise Ferreira da Silva. In "Otherwise Ferguson," Crawley (2016) writes: "To begin with the otherwise as word, as concept, is to presume that whatever we have is not all that is possible. Otherwise. It is a concept of internal difference, internal multiplicity. The otherwise is the disbelief in what is current and a movement towards, and an affirmation of, imagining other modes of social organization, other ways for us to be with each other. Otherwise as plentitude. Otherwise is the enunciation and concept of irreducible possibility, irreducible capacity, to create change, to be something else, to explore, to imagine, to live fully, freely, vibrantly. Otherwise Ferguson. Otherwise Gaza. Otherwise Detroit. Otherwise Worlds. Otherwise expresses an unrest and discontent, a seeking to conceive dreams that allow us to wake laughing, tears of joy in our eyes, dreams that have us saying, *I hope this comes true*."

9 Denver is the name of a character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, who finds and gathers with other earthly life outdoors. What if this photograph named Den-

ver is at once and perhaps never a character, at once and never a geographic, ecological relation? Denver as person, as place, as categorically evasive? Denver as partially disclosed togetherness? Maybe Denver is an arrangement of letters, a bringing together whose "epoch-making" sociality remains earthly, fleshly, geologically un-notionable and yet to come.

10 In addition to recalling "Black Topographic Existence" (Moten 2017c), I'm reminded of a line from a conversation among Moten, Robin D. G. Kelley, Afua Cooper, and Rinaldo Walcott. Moten shares, "I think that Black studies has on a fundamental level a specific, though not necessarily exclusive, mission to try to save the Earth, and on a secondary level, to try to save the possibility of human existence on Earth. That's a big statement, but I think maybe it is important to just leave that big statement out there for a minute and just make sure you know that I knew that I said it when I said it" (quoted in Cooper, Walcott, and Hughes 2018, 156).

11 My use of "more than" here indicates both nonhuman vitalities and what Erin Manning refers to as the "more-than" of experience. In *The Minor Gesture* (2016, 30), Manning writes: "To reorient toward the radically empirical is to profoundly challenge the knower-known relation as it is customarily defined. Neither the knower nor the known can be situated in advance of the occasion's coming to be. . . . Like Deleuze's insistence that the virtual, while not actual, is real, radical empiricism emphasizes that experience is made up of more than what actually takes form. Experience is alive with the more-than, the more-than as real as anything else directly experienced."

12 My thinking here on Black art's capacity to transform an environment, to "aerate" a space as suffocating as a plantation prison, as in Hunter's murals, is inspired by Moten's (2013, 778–79) beautiful writing: "There is an ethics of the cut, of contestation, that I have tried to honor and illuminate because it instantiates and articulates another way of living in the world, a black way of living together in the other world we are constantly making in and out of this world, in the alternative planetarity that the intramural, internally differentiated presence—the (sur)real presence—of blackness serially brings online as persistent aeration, the incessant turning over of the ground beneath our feet that is the indispensable preparation for the radical overturning of the ground that we are under."

ONE. "FOR A WHILE AT LEAST"

1 In the preface to *Beloved*, Morrison (2004, xvi–xvii) shares: "I think now it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what 'free' could possibly mean to women. In the eighties, the debate was still roiling: equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions, schools and choice without stigma. To marry or not. To have children or not. Inevitably these thoughts led me to the different history of Black women in this country—a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required,