BLACK LIFE MATTER BLACKNESS RELIGION AND THE SUBJECT

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BIKO MANDELA GRAY

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BLACKNESS, RELIGION, AND THE SUBJECT **BIKO MANDELA**

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For Andrea

And for Aiyana, Tamir,
Alton, Sandra, Jordan,

and all the black lives lost
to state-sanctioned violence,

and their families

Contents

Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION
FOUR BLACK LIVES

I had to take care.—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

She was seven years old. And she was adorable. In one of her pictures, she is smiling. Behind her are three Disney princesses: Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and the Little Mermaid. She must have really liked those princesses, too; she liked to sleep under a blanket adorned by one of them. (Her grandmother, Mertilla, once told me and a beloved of mine which one, but I can't remember now. And it's this lack of memory that haunts me.[1]) Maybe, sometimes, she dreamed of being a princess. Perhaps her dreams were filled with music. Maybe they were Disney musicals. I only hope that they weren't nightmares.

Mertilla told us that Aiyana was sleeping under the princess blanket when the cops came. Mertilla had fallen asleep on the couch with her.

But then the flash-bang came in. Startled, Mertilla fell off the couch. A man walked in, turned to the right, and shot her, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, a little black girl, in her sleep. While she dreamed.

I really hope she wasn't having a nightmare.

* * *

He was twelve. And by all accounts, he was a clown; he loved to make people laugh. He was playful, too; like most kids, he had an active imagination. One day, at the community center near where he lived, he traded his mom's cell phone for his friend's toy gun. But you know how kids do; playtime is rough. The toy had lost some of its parts. The orange cap had fallen off, and now this toy gun looked more realistic.

Tamir didn't mind, though. Imagination has neither time nor patience for perfection. You make do with what you have: a tree can become a fortress; a gazebo, a vantage point for finding the bad guys. I like to think that he was after bad guys that day; he'd point the toy here and there, keeping them at bay. He was a kid, playing with a toy.

When they drove up, however, they didn't see a kid playing with a toy. They saw something else. And they asked no questions; they weren't going to wait for answers. They were out for blood; in their minds, *Tamir* was a bad guy. One of them shot. Twice.

Tamir would not survive.

* * *

He was thirty-seven. Life hadn't always been good to him, either. He'd been in trouble with the law from time to time. But things were changing. He loved music, and he realized he could make part of his living from sharing it with others. He'd made friends with an owner of a convenience store, and they'd agreed that he could sell CDs on a table out front.

I don't know how much money he made, but perhaps it wasn't only about profits. After all, he didn't simply sell the CDs; he also played music while he sold them—so much so that "if you didn't hear music, he wasn't there."[2] After a while, people started calling him the CD Man. It had a nice ring to it: Alton Sterling, the CD Man. He let it stick.

But one night, somebody kept harassing him. He flashed a revolver in his pocket and told the person to leave him alone. The heckler made a call, and they came.

When they arrived, they were aggressive and unrelenting. But it wasn't clear why they were there—let alone why they were being aggressive toward *him*.

"What I do?" he said. No answer: they'd found their suspect, and they weren't going to dignify him with a response. They pinned him down. And then they saw the pistol in his pocket.

There are no CDs—or a CD man—in front of the Triple S Mart in Baton Rouge anymore.

* * *

She was twenty-eight. And she loved the babies. In fact, she wanted one. She'd gotten pregnant before, but the baby didn't come to term. This took a toll on her. But if she couldn't have one of her own, she would do her best to make sure that all the children she knew were loved. She started making videos. She did fundraisers for children's sports. Things had been hard, but love was what got her through.

And things were looking up. She'd gotten a new job—at her alma mater, of all places. Maybe that's what she was thinking about when she was driving that day—all the possibilities. And that day was a good day for a drive; the sun was out, and it was warm. But then a car started tailing her. It was a state trooper, and it clearly had somewhere to be. She tried to move out of its way; she switched lanes. But she didn't signal.

The lights came on. When she stopped, he got out and told her she didn't signal when she switched lanes. She was incredulous. And she let him know it.

While he wrote the ticket, Sandy lit a cigarette. The trooper returned and told her to put it out. She told him no. And that was it.

Three days later, Sandra Bland would be found dead in her jail cell.

* * *

Aiyana Stanley-Jones. Tamir Rice. Alton Sterling. Sandra Bland. This book is about these four lives. It's about how these four lives matter.

Black Lives Matter. For many, the phrase is as aspirational as it is declarative. We claim—we scream, we shout, we declare—*black lives matter* because it appears they don't; too many of us have come to know Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra through their deaths. They have become ancestors in the worst way; they appear to us in the very moments in which they disappear. Lost to us in the very moment we know who they are, we are confronted with the question: Do black lives actually matter?

Appearances can be deceiving, though. It is precisely this structure of dis/appearance that discloses how Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra are still with us. They still speak. In speaking, they still matter—to those who love and cared for them, and yes, to those who have no patience for them. In sitting with these four lives, we come to recognize that black lives matter to this world—even to those who would claim otherwise, even to those who killed them.

In this book, I call those people normative subjects. *Black Life Matter* argues that the normative subjects of this world are sustained by the symbolic, physical, philosophical, and religious violence they enact against black life, against black lives. This requires sitting with the lives stolen by these very normative subjects; it requires attending to those lives that, for many, no longer register in our collective consciousness. In sitting with them, we find resources to criticize the violence at the heart of normative subject formation—a violence that is, as I hope to show, helplessly and relentlessly antiblack.

Norms hide themselves. (That's what makes them norms.) Because of this, I leave the subject undefined. I don't racialize it. I don't tether it to a specific gender. I also leave questions of class, sexuality, and nationality open. In fact, after this, I will rarely use the word *normative* to describe them—I'll just call them subjects. In doing this, I am adopting and criticizing the philosophy of the subject—particularly Martin Heidegger's conception. Heidegger told his readers that "subjectivity" could be best captured in what he called the "they" or the "one" (*Das Man*).[3] *Das Man* is the everyday way in which *Dasein* engages with the world and others in it. *Dasein* moves as one does; it speaks as one would speak. It acts in accordance with what one would understand as normative, acceptable, and sanctioned modes of conduct.[4] Subjects, then, are those who live from and reinforce the norms of this world.

Black Life Matter criticizes this structure of subjecthood and its violence, arguing that black death founds and justifies normative subjecthood. It does so by exposing the cops who excessively, reactively, and violently brutalized and killed their victims. In this text, cops are the primary examples of normative subjects; police have demonstrated that they are incapable of anything other than violence—particularly violence against black lives.

Cops, however, aren't the only normative subjects. If subjects live from and reinforce the norms of this world, then subjects are also those who *rely upon* cops to keep order. Subjects shudder at the idea of abolishing the police; they claim that all cops aren't bad; they might even offer explicit support for police, claiming that *blue lives matter*—even as they claim they aren't racist. This is the case because, as I will say later, subjects privilege their own perspectives more than anything or anyone else; they think their perspectives take primacy over others, and anything or anyone that challenges this primacy will suffer the consequences.

Black Life Matter therefore argues that cops are proxies for a structure of subjecthood that is compelled to enact cognitive, symbolic, religious,

and philosophical violence when it is confronted with the indeterminate movement and presence of blackness. And it is precisely this subjective compulsion that discloses how important black life—or, more precisely, the killing, maiming, violating, exploiting, and brutalizing of black life—is to normative subjects. Without enacting violence against us, normative subjects would cease to exist.

After sitting with these lives, I am fully convinced that the police need to be abolished. The institution that is the police conditions the subjects that engage in (and justify) lethal and brutal antiblack violence, and because of this, it has lost any ethical purchase, especially when it comes to black life. In this regard, this text could be understood as clearing philosophical ground to make a case for abolition as an ethical stance from the perspective of philosophy of religion. While this text doesn't outline specific calls for police abolition, the chapters nevertheless describe the conditions of antiblack violence that, I hope, will encourage readers to adopt, or at least consider, police abolition as an ethical stance.

Black Life Matter isn't only about the violence, however. It gestures toward the capacity for life in the midst of what Christina Sharpe might call the "requirement for our death." In this way, this book is a work of care—for the dead. And this kind of care, Sharpe intimates, "means work." It is "hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living."[5] Sharpe calls this kind of work "wake work." She describes wake work as "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery."[6]

This book is my way of enacting wake work. Sitting with Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra does not simply expose the violence of normative subject formation; it also seeks to rupture this violence by "imagining otherwise," by demonstrating how black lives still speak from beyond the grave. We who live in the wake of these deaths are still here, and our being here produces a radical ethical demand to care—for the living and for the dead, for those who are struggling under the violence of antiblackness now as well as those who were killed by it. *Black Life Matter* is therefore my attempt to "attend to, care for, comfort, and defend those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death, life lived in the presence of death."[7]

While this world has moved on, I believe it is necessary to defend the dead. Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, Sandra, and so many others were not mere tragedies.

They lived. They led lives. The fact that their lives were stolen (or the fact that this world continues to justify this theft through its advocacy of police) should only call us to stay with them, to not move on, to wrestle and reckon with the power and promise of their lives and legacies. And, like Sharpe said, that requires work—the hard, painful, yet necessary work of care.

Philosophical Eulogy as Care

Care isn't a cheap sentimental term. *I don't care* and *you don't care* are far harsher than they seem at first glance. After all, affects like anger or even hatred signal investment.[8] But apathy? Apathy doesn't give a damn. It is a disposition of utter disregard.

When it comes to these lives, it's easy to become apathetic. It's easy to move on. Aiyana was murdered in 2010; Tamir in 2014. Sandra Bland died in 2015, and Sterling was gunned down in 2016. By the time this book appears, many years will have passed since their names were in the headlines. Now, if they do appear, it's on the anniversaries of their deaths, or when yet another black person is murdered by the state. The cops kill so much that it's hard to keep track. So, you shed a tear, post something via social media, and move on. Or conversely—and on a wider scale—you draft a vapid piece of legislation, make a speech, "celebrate" or "bring awareness to" something, and move on. Once you've done your piece, the life no longer matters. You've become apathetic. That is, until the next black life is killed. And then you rinse and repeat. But in the end, you don't care.

Black Life Matter refuses to move on. In fact, central to this book's method is a commitment to stay (I'll say more about this in just a bit), to not move on—because moving on is precisely what subjects do. Subjects don't stay. They don't remember or defend the dead. In fact, they might even justify why the dead had to die. They gather what they need from a life and then move on. They don't care.

Sharpe wants to "think care as a problem for thought," and perhaps this is the case because care discloses the problems *of* thought.[9] *Black Life Matter*, then, takes up the problematic of care by enacting philosophical eulogy; this text is a collection of stories about the dead that have philosophical and ethical importance.[10] These stories include phenomenology, affect studies, black critical theory, and philosophical ethics, and they do so in service of speaking (back) to philosophy of religion. *Black Life Matter* is therefore a sustained criticism of the religious logics and structures of thinking—theodicy (chapter 1), ontotheology and interpellation (chapter 2), and affect and religious

experience (chapter 3)—that inform, enable, and sustain subjects in their enactments of black death and antiblack violence.

These stories are as painful as they are critical. But they are, and remain, eulogies. They are, and they remain, good words about the lives we've lost. I give these eulogies because there is also something else, something otherwise, something beyond what those logics can contain or even fathom. Even in their absence, Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra—among so many others—live on. They live as afterlives.[11] There is something about Aiyana's, Tamir's, Alton's, and Sandra's lives that "survive[s] this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation" that occasioned their deaths.[12]

Those who have died—those who were murdered—are no longer with us. They are now our ancestors. That cannot be overcome. And it certainly cannot be overlooked. But—*but*—we can honor the dead by turning to them, sitting with them, caring for them, and therefore allowing them to form, disform, and inform us. This process of in/dis/forming renders the finality of death a farce. Death isn't the final word. It never has been. It never will be.

This book therefore highlights a modality of life—by which I mean a mode of feeling, moving, connecting, and relating—that runs counter to the death-dealing structures of this world. And it does so by listening to what stolen black lives still have to say. In listening, this book declares that black lives matter—to us, to the world, to the world's subjects. In making this declaration, *Black Life Matter* calls us to care for black lives. And care is so much more than sentiment. It is a requirement. It requires that we stay with the lives.

It requires that we *sit with* them.

Sitting-With

> I've been trying to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are.—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

I use the phrase *sit with* intentionally and technically. *Sitting-with* is my method. It is the way I handle the lives and deaths at the heart of this book.

Sitting with someone is an act of care.[13] If you've ever sat with someone, you know that they are your focus.[14] You aren't distracted easily—if at all. You might cry with them as they mourn; you might call the medical staff to

come ease their pain, or you might administer medicine yourself. A beloved might call you: "Do you have a minute? I need to talk." It doesn't matter if you do or don't—you respond. You tell them you're on the way, or you sit with them on the phone as they share what they've been dealing with.

Sometimes, the situation calls you to speak, to share your thoughts. Other times, your presence itself is enough; words would only do more damage.[15] No matter the specifics, you're called to respond, to be there, to show up. When you sit with someone, you respond to them. You tend to them. You attend to them.

Sitting with someone isn't always easy. Especially when they are struggling—and even more so when this struggle is one of life and death. In these moments, it is hard to stay there; as your beloved cries or sits in shock, as they bleed or are afraid, as they face their death, you might find yourself wanting to leave. You want to look away. But you don't. You stay. For as long as you can. For them. As a method, sitting-with begins with a commitment to not move on.

This book makes that methodological commitment. It doesn't move on. Each chapter will have moments that are hard to read. They were excruciatingly hard to write. In writing this book, I have listened to police interviews; I have read newspaper articles and after-action reports; I have read testimonies. And yes, I have watched videos when they were available—multiple times.

In doing all this, I am struck by how I am never desensitized, how the brutality continues to make me shudder and bring me to tears. I am struck by how the abject disregard for black life—which is to say, human life (even if that term *human* means little when it comes to black life)—wears on my psyche, takes a toll on my soul.[16] I wrote this text because I haven't moved on, because sitting-with requires the sometimes painful commitment to remain and remember.

This commitment is also risky. There are ethical difficulties with reproducing narratives of antiblack violence. Narrating the violence as I do here risks becoming trauma porn. Saidiya Hartman once said as much:

> Rather than inciting indignation, too often [stories of antiblack violence] immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity . . . and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities

> of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? . . . At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator.[17]

Telling these stories runs the risk of crossing "the uncertain line between witness and spectator." This is what institutions, corporations, politicians, and celebrities do, after all: they know that "the exposure of the mutilated body yield[s]" massive profits.[18]

There are other related risks, too. It is possible for some viewers to receive pleasure from watching, even if this pleasure comes in the form of repulsion. They might watch these videos or hear these stories and feel good about feeling bad. For these people, watching is a form of catharsis: their feelings about these scenes—whether it be anger, sadness, or so-called outrage—cleanses their consciences; it confirms for them that they are good people. In the end, they enjoy what they see. And the very possibility of enjoyment is precisely what prompts Hartman to raise questions.[19]

I hear Hartman; I am moved by her work. But I wonder, along with Fred Moten, if not telling these stories actually hinders this world from finding enjoyment in spectacles of antiblack violence.[20] This world finds enjoyment in black suffering, and it would seem that this structure of enjoyment cannot be fully overcome—that's one of the insights of Hartman's analysis. Is there a way, then, to expose, disrupt, and undo this perverse violence of enjoyment? Are there ways to become witnesses and not spectators? Or, as Moten puts it, "is there a way to subject this unavoidable model of subjection to a radical breakdown?"[21]

I offer sitting-with as a possible way. In remaining witnesses, we stay with the stories. We stay with the lives. When you sit with someone, you worry about them; you are concerned for *them*. As your beloved cries or sleeps, you are angered, upset, by the fact of their pain. You might worry about the doctors and their medical standards; you might be angry that the doctors missed a diagnosis or failed to provide adequate treatment. And that anger points you to the structures or the conditions that continue to produce the pain they experience.

In all of this, you don't try to explain or justify—to them, to yourself—why or how they suffer. You don't abstract away from their experience; you don't fashion a theory out of their pain. You stay with them, holding them if you can, and wondering what you can do to try and change the situation.

Sitting with these lives, then, requires that we commit to staying, to not moving on, and that we do not abstract away from them. These lives aren't materials for making theory. They instead point us toward the violence of making theory, toward the violence of making abstractions, which is to say, sitting with these lives and deaths means we behold them *in their opacity*.[22] Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra aren't fully available to us. They are not examples—they are synecdoches. They hold so much more than we can fathom. And because of this, we do not try to discern their motivations or produce general principles from their lives. Sitting with them in this way might make it possible to radically break down and maybe even break through the violence of spectatorship.

This is why I have reproduced these stories. I didn't write this book to exploit these lives.[23] I wrote it because these lives called to me, because they prompted me to turn my analytic and philosophical lenses to criticize the nature of subjects and the attendant philosophical structures that enable and justify them in their pursuit and enactments of antiblack violence. I am able to do this only because I sit with the *lives*; the subject and its thinking are my targets of criticism, but only because the lives point me there. Sitting-with requires that we don't move on. It requires that we stay. That's this method's first step. It is also its primary commitment.

Sitting-With as Paraphenomenology

What if the thing sustains itself in that absence or eclipse of meaning that withholds from the thing the horrific honorific of object? At the same time, what if the value of that absence or excess is given to us only in and by way of a kind of failure or inadequacy—or perhaps more precisely, by way of a history of exclusion, serial expulsion, presence's ongoing taking of leave—so that the non-attainment of meaning or ontology, of source or origin, is the only way to approach the thing in its informal . . . material totality?—Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness"

[Husserl's] abstraction permits a "philosophical" forgetfulness of just how fundamental the deracination of personhood is to the constitution of human society in modernity.—R. A. Judy, *Sentient Flesh*

This part will be technical.[24]

Black Life Matter sits with these lives in a particular way. It describes the encounters between the lives and the police officers who occasioned their demise. And it does so in service of disclosing the philosophical and theo-

retical structures and logics that condition the violence normative subjects enact in service of securing the meaning of their existence. Sitting-with, then, is a mode of critical philosophical description.

If *critical philosophical description* feels phenomenological in its phrasing, that's because it is—kind of. Sitting-with draws its inspiration from phenomenology, but it doesn't adhere to the strictures of classical phenomenological methodology, particularly its preoccupation with first-person description. Phenomenology may turn to "the things themselves," but, eventually, it turns away from those things; it turns back toward itself. Bracketing (*epoché*) the existence of the world and its objects, classical phenomenology turns to the things themselves only to turn back to the subject of experience. Once the brackets are put in place, phenomenology invests in the experiencer, not the experienced.[25]

> The *epoché* can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me. Anything belonging to the world, any spatiotemporal being, exists for me—that is to say, is accepted by me—in that I experience it, perceive it, remember it, think of it somehow, judge about it, value it, desire it, or the like. . . . By my living, by my experiencing, thinking, valuing, and acting, I can enter no world other than the one that gets its sense and acceptance or status in and from me, myself.[26]

Brackets center the experiencing subject. They focus the subject's attention on its own modes of thinking and understanding; brackets are (erected as) philosophical blinders. It isn't simply that phenomenology starts and ends with experiencing subjects—the very mode of description is situated within the subject's perspective. With the brackets firmly in place, the subject is free to interrogate their own ways of engaging and understanding the world. In so doing, brackets deceive the subject into thinking it is at the center of the world it experiences. In the end, classical phenomenological methodology is, well, *self*-serving.

But good phenomenologists know that the brackets are an artifice. Erecting them may bring clarity. It might even bring a certain kind of critical self-reflexivity.[27] But at the end of the day, the brackets are about the subject; they withhold access to the very material world with which subjects must reckon and wrestle. And that material world, that world of matter—of what I'll later call flesh—cannot be dismissed.

To account for this, certain phenomenologists draw a distinction between what we might call *encounters* with matter that do not yet have meaning (I'll have more to say about this later in this introduction and throughout the book) and the meaningful *experiences* that draw from matter to make sense; you know, or at least have an idea of, what you're experiencing.[28] Experiences are, phenomenologically speaking, more than encounters. They require a relationship between you, what you're encountering, and the structures of signification that give this perception meaning. Turning to what is experienced only to turn away from it, phenomenological methodology doesn't take care. It moves on.

But what if we didn't turn away? What if, instead of staying with experiencing subjects, we stayed with *what is experienced*? What if we described *encounters*, following them where they lead us? We wouldn't yet be dealing with objects, but instead recognizing how the production of the object is a violent affair. What was once an object would show itself as something else, something beyond the constraints of the "horrific honorific of object," something that would exceed the constraints of signifying subjects whose signifying cognitions reduce plentiful matter into intelligible entities.

From that perspective, we would begin to catch, but only catch, glimpses of something that the subject can't apprehend and arrest in its first-person perspective, something that "is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether."[29] Catching that glimpse would be enough to expose the subject, showing that its own claim to primacy is nothing other than a violent artifice of its own making. It would show that intentionality isn't directed but circular, coming from and returning to the experiencing subject. And it would show that this circularity is a necessary and enabling condition for all kinds of symbolic and physical violence.

Turning to encounters instead of experiences changes and exposes things; it remembers that the phenomenological brackets are an artifice; it recognizes that the very constitution of the subject depends upon the hermeneutic and physical violence subjects enact. Turning to encounters allows us to sidestep the "'philosophical' forgetfulness of just how fundamental the deracination of personhood is to the constitution of human society in modernity."

I call this approach *paraphenomenology*, and I offer it in service of attending to and caring for those who were taken from us. Paraphenomenology takes us elsewhere; it attends to—it *sits with*—the lives that were stolen not as objects of analysis, but instead as living matter that exceeds the significations of the subjects who encountered and then enacted violence against

them. In so doing, it disrupts the desire for coherence at the heart of phenomenological analysis (as well as much of philosophical analysis more generally), calling into question the assumptive privileging of the first-person perspective as a surefire way of understanding life and its possibilities. Paraphenomenology sits with black lives that were taken from us as an act of care; it is a mode of wake work; it is my way of defending the dead in the name of life. Black life.

PARAPHENOMENOLOGY AS PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

Paraphenomenology stays with the lives that were stolen so that we might catch that glimpse of their irreducible indeterminacy. In catching that glimpse, we wouldn't be able to explain what we encountered; we would simply behold this indeterminacy in its irreducibility, allowing it to guide us and take us to the structures that have set upon it. When you sit with someone, *they* guide your perspective. They take primacy—not you.

Sitting with these black lives, then, does not allow us to affirm the phenomenological method; they expose its problems and its violence. They expose how the first-person perspective is the way the subject privileges itself; they show that this very privileging is not simply limited to the subjects who enact it—which is to say, these lives show how the privileging of the first-person perspective is embedded in, and the enabling condition for, the very institutions that sanction, tolerate, encourage, and justify even more violence.

The officers I discuss in this book live into and express a structure of subjectivity that privileges the first-person perspective, and they do so because they are called, sanctioned, encouraged, and justified by this very privilege. Officers constitute their victims—as bodies (chapter 1), as threats (chapter 2), as resistant and affectively resonant objects (chapter 3)—by reducing their encounters with irreducibly living, moving, feeling, and loving black flesh into intentional experiences of meanings they could understand, apprehend, constrain, and, in many cases, kill. And they do so in the name of larger institutional structures that embrace the phenomenological privileging of the first-person perspective.[30] If cops are extreme examples of the violence of the subject, it is only because they are sanctioned by other subjects to do so.

The Supreme Court case *Graham v. Connor* is an example of this: in adjudicating a case of police brutality, the court ruled that "the 'reasonableness' of a particular use of force must be judged from *the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene*."[31] The law itself therefore privileges the reductions, constitutions, and intentional (which, again, means directed) experiences of the officers who kill; the officers—the subjects—in these

encounters are the only ones deemed reasonable, and, as I say later in this introduction, it is precisely this capacity for reason, for thinking, that sediments the primacy of the officers' perspective.

Let me be clear: I do not arrive at these conclusions because I hate cops. Hate requires investment, and I am not invested enough in cops to hate them. The implicit call for abolition that motivates this book comes from a love for black life, not from a hatred for police. I do not propose reforms or call for individual cops' executions. I do not seek to change policing in this country; I seek to *expose* it and those who support it. In so doing, I hope this book will push others to recognize the violence inherent in policing, and push for something else. Sitting with these stolen lives discloses the violence inherent in the structure of subjecthood that cops embody, protect, and are sanctioned to kill for. Sitting with these lives has required my attention. It has required my attentiveness.

ON NOT LOOKING AWAY: ATTENTIVENESS AS THE SECOND STEP OF PARAPHENOMENOLOGY

Sitting-with requires that we don't move on, that we stay. In staying, we adopt a paraphenomenological stance; we sit with these lives as an enactment of philosophical criticism. But there is a bit more to sitting-with. If the first step is to not move on, then the second step is to not look away. Sitting-with requires that we focus on the lives, that we tend to them, that we attend to them. In other words, sitting-with requires that we become attentive. That's the second step.

I've shown a bit of this already, but I want to go further. Earlier, I mentioned that this text is an enactment of wake work. I therefore want to return to Christina Sharpe to show what I mean by sitting-with being a form of caring wake work that requires attentiveness.

From what I can tell, Sharpe isn't a phenomenologist, but she is certainly attentive. She's especially attentive to a photo of a young girl who was rescued from the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Across the girl's face is a piece of tape that simply says "SHIP." Sharpe sits with the photo. She stays with the girl. And the girl moves Sharpe; she is moved to ask questions, disruptive questions, about the meaning of that term: *ship*.[32]

> Is *Ship* a proper name? A destination? An imperative? A signifier of the im/possibility of Black life under the conditions of what, Stephanie Smallwood tells us, "would become an enduring project in the modern Western world [of] probing the limits up to which

> it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within"? Is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage, of the difference between life and death? Of those other Haitians in crisis sometimes called boat people? Or is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the ongoing migrant and refugee crises unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans?[33]

As the little girl looks back at the camera with that piece of tape on her forehead, she disrupts and discloses the manifold violence that comes with the meaning of *ship* and its disastrous legacies.

Notice that Sharpe doesn't make declarations; she asks questions. Notice how these questions come from her engagement with the young girl—which is to say, notice how Sharpe's attention is wholly invested in the young girl. Notice how this investment prompts a different line of engagement, one that doesn't overdetermine the meaning of the young girl in the photo, but instead draws Sharpe to take the young girl seriously. This young girl is real; Sharpe doesn't bracket her existence.[34] Sharpe doesn't reduce back from the girl. She stays with her; she allows her to guide her questions. The fact—not the assumption—of her existence prompts Sharpe to ask questions.

In fact, Sharpe's attention is so focused on this young girl that she returns to it. And in returning to it, Sharpe goes further than asking disruptive questions. She starts noticing things. She notices that "a life, however precarious, was always there. . . . I looked again at that photo and I marked her youth, the diagonal scar that cuts across the bridge of her nose and into her eyebrow, those extravagant eyelashes that curl back to the lid, the uncovered wounds, that bit of paper on her lip, and a leaf on the gown and in her hair. . . . *I had to take care*."[35] She notices the hints of life in that photo—eyelashes and a scar; a bit of paper and "a leaf on the gown and in her hair." And speaking of hair, she notices the little girl's braids. "And I think," she writes, "*Somebody braided her hair before that earthquake hit*."[36] Sitting with this photo, Sharpe notices life, black life, in the midst of the overwhelming and widespread "requirement for our death." Sharpe pays attention. No, that's not quite right: Sharpe has become attentive.

Becoming attentive means that we abandon the primacy of the first-person perspective. Notice that I say *the primacy* of the first-person perspective; we do not cease to exist when we sit with someone (if we did, we wouldn't be there to care for them). Sitting with this photo includes Sharpe, but it is not about her. She isn't the center of attention. Instead, Sharpe intensifies her attention. She focuses on the violence this young girl has

suffered, as well as the care she's received. In sitting with the girl, Sharpe abandons her capacity, and perhaps her desire, to understand, because something else, something more important, is at stake: *I had to take care*.

This is what happens in this book. This book is a work in and of attentiveness. It describes encounters in sometimes painstaking detail. In describing these encounters, it notices hints of life within them—braids and hands (chapter 1), movement and speech (chapter 2), love and feeling (chapter 3). Noticing these things discloses how real these lives were and are, and it exposes what's at stake in the violence of these encounters.

TO THE LIVES THEMSELVES: PARAPHENOMENOLOGY AS A CRITIQUE OF THE VIOLENCE OF ABSTRACTION

Sitting with these lives can undo us. It undoes our thinking—even if for a moment. In beholding these lives and deaths, we realize that they do not fully enflesh (the limitations of) the first-person perspective.

Something else occurs, too. Beholding these lives shows the violence of abstractions that come from the privileging of the first-person perspective. Abstractions are, after all, the result of looking away, of moving on, of not staying; they are what appear after reductions have been enacted. Consider it: notions like *black male* or *the suspect* are abstractions; they are categorical designations superimposed onto rich and complex black lives. And as I show throughout this book, such abstractions can and will kill; turning away can sanction and engender violence. The third step of sitting-with is to refrain from reducing lives to mere material for theory, for abstraction.[37]

Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra remain opaque to us. Charles Long tells us that black lives "deny the authority of the white world to define their reality, and deny the *methodological* and *philosophical* meaning of transparency as a metaphor for a theory of knowledge," which means that black lives are not fully or easily captured by theoretical frames.[38] These lives exceed our frames of reference, our theories. They cannot be fully known. That is their beauty. That is their power.

According to Barbara Christian, theory fixes "a constellation of ideas for a time at least, a fixing which no doubt will be replaced in another month or so by somebody else's competing theory."[39] Making a theory out of these lives would produce a chain reaction in which we'd try to outdo each other in explaining these lives and deaths. It would then be about us. But perhaps more to the ethical point, making a theory out of these lives would situate them within a closed system, a set of definitions and logics that would foreclose their capacity to still speak—to keep speaking. Theory can't hold these lives.

But these lives do (prompt us to) theorize. "People of color have always theorized," Christian writes, "but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic," and she "intentionally uses the verb form rather than the noun" because theorizing is dynamic; black lives still speak.[40] Even in and after their deaths, these lives remain opaque to us. They elude us. They escape our frames of reference. They are fugitive; and sitting with their fugitivity "sets in motion, or calls for, a form of supra-inhabitation of thought or demands that a certain meta-perspective take shape right in the midst of experience, self-consciousness, or the particularities of existence."[41]

Such a perspective would and does point us toward theoretical structures, but it does so in service of exposing, situating, and perhaps disrupting them in service of something more capacious, more ethical, more . . . engaged. As this book unfolds, you'll see what I mean. You'll see how Aiyana and Tamir were subjected to the violence of causal logics and theodicean structures (chapter 1); you'll hear how Sterling's movement and speech criticize certain philosophies of normative subject formation (chapter 2); and you'll witness how an affect like irritation can be deployed and manipulated to justify misogynoirist violence (chapter 3). Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra are inscrutable lives that call us to see differently. And perhaps in seeing differently, we might be called to act differently.

Maybe that's the difference between phenomenology and paraphenomenology: it's the difference between turning to, and then turning away from, (knowable) objects on one hand, and turning to, and staying with, (inscrutable) lives on the other. Sitting-with, then, is a paraphenomenological—and therefore critical and constructive—method and disposition. Paraphenomenology is a criticism of phenomenology, but it is also a constructive act of care, of tending to black lives we've lost. If the phenomenological maxim is "to the things themselves," then perhaps the paraphenomenological maxim is "to the lives themselves."[42]

I guess, then, a definition is necessary: sitting-with is a radically critical disposition of care for, and attentiveness to, black lives; it is a paraphenomenological method of philosophical and religious criticism that exposes, criticizes, and disrupts dominant philosophical and religious modes of thinking and acting that sustain and reinforce antiblack violence. In sitting with these lives, you will see things differently. And, hopefully, seeing things differently might prompt you—us—to (continue to) act differently.

I therefore offer sitting-with as an encouragement and invitation: to (continue to) enact radical care.

Do you have a minute?
I do.
So does the movement for black lives.

Black *Lives* Matter: The Movement and Its Opening

In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometti had a minute. In the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal, Garza penned a Facebook post that told black people that we matter. Khan-Cullors and Tometti drew from Garza's passion, and a hashtag was born: #blacklivesmatter.

Their efforts were (unfortunately) quite timely: just a year after Garza wrote her post, Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. In doing so, he set a (recent) precedent for shooting and killing black women, men, and children on camera and getting away with it. The people of Ferguson, Missouri, had had enough. And though they were not associated with the hashtag or the Black Lives Matter Network, they didn't need to be; the movement for black lives exceeded (and still exceeds) the network and the hashtag. The organizers in Ferguson had a minute, too, and they showed up in full force. The country was put on notice: black people were not going to take their deaths sitting down. The movement of black resistance in the United States was reincarnated. And, for better or worse, Khan-Cullors's name stuck: Black Lives Matter.[43]

The movement went national. Then it went international. People from England to Palestine were declaring Black Lives Matter. The movement spread, but it wasn't and isn't centralized. Each community organizes in ways that respond to the specific conditions in their specific locations. Perhaps, then, it is better to speak of the movement beyond the three words; what erupted in Ferguson is best understood as part of a larger movement (from and) for black lives.

The movement moves toward something that this world cannot understand; it expresses and organizes toward a vision of black life we cannot yet fully realize but we know is already here. Minkah Makalani writes that the movement "refuses [the] normative range of possibility and begins precisely with that which is impossible or nonsensical as thought and culls from the experiences of peoples and movements those worldviews, practices, and knowledges that enable us to move beyond the already available."[44] We see what cannot be seen. We yearn for what cannot be fully grasped. And we do so because we know it is possible, because we have felt it. Having sat with black lives in their own ways, thousands—perhaps millions—of people have been disruptive in service of something different, maybe even something better,

something beyond what we are currently given. That disruptive movement is still going on. It hasn't stopped. And I doubt it will stop anytime soon.

Black *Life* Matter: Blackness as Living Matter

Obviously, with a title like *Black Life Matter*, I offer this book as a contribution to the movement for black lives; having organized, marched, and protested with people who were invested in black life, this book is a testament to those who have participated in a movement that began long before I existed and, sadly, will probably have to continue long after I'm gone.

This book, however, is not a chronicling of the movement. There are other powerful books and articles that handle the movement's unfolding far better than I could. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and Barbara Ransby chronicled the movement's historical, political, and feminist contours and underpinnings; Christopher Lebron wrote an intellectual genealogy of the movement, distilling the philosophical underpinnings that motivate and sustain it; and Minkah Makalani and Debra Thompson have underscored the radical and affective power of the movement in articles.[45] I am indebted to these writers and others. They inform a lot of what I do here.

But this book has a different focus. Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra call me to think about what it means when we say *Black Lives Matter*.[46] In thinking about this phrase, I couldn't help but hear the manifold notions of *matter* present in the phrase. On one hand, matter is that metaphysical substance that has been rendered mute in its presentation and mutable in its function. Placed in opposition to mind or spirit, matter has been configured as brute solidity, the res extensa of Cartesian thought that invites constraint and manipulation through its very extension—and therefore resistance—in the world. On the other hand, *matter* announces the possibility of mattering; to matter is to stand out, to exist, to emerge as that which is significant, even if such significance is rendered negative, violent, or even discardable. Matter matters.

Quiet as it's kept though, matter has always mattered. And, at least for some time, matter has been (figured as) black. In discussing the object—the form matter often takes in Western thought—Fred Moten makes this clear: "Blackness . . . is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses."[47]

Sitting with these lives makes explicit the very pressure of which Moten speaks, and this is precisely where I get my title from. Yes, *Black Life Matter* is a play on the phrase, but it is also meant to underscore how black lives move through the world as living matter or, put differently, how black lives move as flesh.[48] As I will show in a bit, flesh is not (yet) an object—or subject, for that matter.[49] It's an irreducible mode of life that grounds the subjectivity of the subject as well as the objectivity of the object. Black-life-matter is a mode of fleshy movement and engagement that sets the subject's violent thirst for clarity and transparent meanings in sharp relief.

Flesh is material; it leaves impressions, which means it can become objects. But it's sentient, too, which means that it lives.[50] Flesh is reversible; it feels and can be felt; it wounds and can be wounded; it gives and receives pleasure.[51] Flesh's reversibility calls the subject into question; it displaces the subject's primacy, (dis)possessing the subject in the process—and therefore compelling the subject to solidify the meaning of its existence. Flesh therefore grounds subjects through the violence they enact against it.

This is the case because flesh is irreducible to the significations superimposed upon it. Flesh "has no name"; it cannot be fully captured.[52] Turning flesh into objects therefore requires that it is reduced, flattened out, and made into something that can be grasped, apprehended, and understood; flesh becomes objects and subjects through "the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet."[53]

The black lives with whom this book sits show themselves as flesh. They exceed the ontological designations and constraints imposed upon them. They were made into objects—bodies (chapter 1), "a threat" (chapter 2), and a site of irritability (chapter 3)—through violence. But they also *lived*. Aiyana was sleeping; Tamir was playing when the cops came; Alton was speaking and moving throughout his encounter with the officers; Sandra showed irritation at the state trooper's ruse. And it was precisely this life that the officers could not stand.[54] In response, they enacted violence to clarify the primacy of their subjecthood.

BLACKNESS, FLESH, AND PLASTICIZATION

The subjects who encountered Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra stretched their flesh out, pinned it down, warped and distorted it to make it do and mean what they wanted and needed. Zakiyyah Jackson calls this kind of violence "plasticization." "Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness

is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology."[55] As "everything and nothing," flesh founds the normative world; the normative world, in turn, pays flesh back by plasticizing it, brutally stretching it out, and therefore rendering it available for manifold forms of manipulation and violence.[56] Plasticization makes living matter, black flesh, whatever it needs it to be.

I use the phrase *black flesh* intentionally. Plasticization exposes the inextricable connection between blackness and flesh: "The black(ened) are," Jackson writes, "defined as plastic; impressionable, stretchable, and misshapen."[57] Jackson also tells us that plasticization isn't arbitrary. She tells us that plasticization is "a form of *engineering*" that comes from the slave trade, and she highlights how "*slavery's technologies were not the denial of humanity but the plasticization of humanity*."[58] Enslaved Africans were framed—they were enframed—to be whatever the ruling class needed them to be; their flesh was framed to mean, do, and be what others wanted and needed. Blackness became "sub/super/human all at once."[59]

Slavery may no longer be legal (even as it still goes on), but blackness is still plasticized. Consider Michael Brown: Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson said that, when he encountered Brown, he encountered an "angry demon"—which is to say, he encountered the supernatural, the superhuman. But this label—*angry* demon—indicates that Wilson also saw Brown as irrational, as subhuman. And as it relates to the human part, consider that, in a deposition, Darren Wilson affirmed Brown's humanity.

> QUESTION: You described Michael Brown as a demon or demon-like.
>
> WILSON: Admitted.
>
> QUESTION: A demon is not a human being.
>
> WILSON: Admitted.
>
> QUESTION: You did not view Michael Brown as a human being during this incident.
>
> WILSON: Denied.[60]

Brown is, "all at once," sub/super/human. Which is to say, Brown is plasticized black flesh. And this serves to justify Wilson. Wilson absolves himself of any guilt by (en)framing Brown as superhumanly strong and

subhumanly angry, yet just human in general. This is the technology of plasticization at work: plasticization (en)frames flesh—and therefore blackness—as absolutely available for the thoughts and desires of others, of subjects. Plasticity is the way black flesh, living matter, is (en)framed by subjects. The (en)framing is part of the game. The (en)framing *is* the game.

The Violence of the Subject

Subjects (en)frame. They plasticize black flesh. And they do this because, philosophically anyway, they are defined in and as their capacity to think, to reason, to make sense of themselves and the world.[61]

Black Life Matter has a very specific definition of thinking that will unfold throughout the chapters. For now, though, suffice it to say that thinking frames matter—it enframes matter—to know and understand it; thinking is an epistemological enterprise of instrumental reason. Thinking makes categories. It manufactures distinctions. It creates representations. It provides reason. It is bound by logic. Thinking is digital; it points. It points out—as in identifying, singling out, and apprehending. In short, thinking makes and reinforces rules; it maintains order, and it does so as an attempt to fully grasp the meaning of what it encounters.

But flesh is unruly; it arrives unannounced. Flesh is also disorderly; it doesn't submit to normal modes of thinking and understanding.[62] Because subjects are defined by their capacity to think, flesh—living matter, black-life-matter—poses a challenge to subjects. It exposes their fragility and dispossesses them of their primacy. For subjects, encountering flesh is akin to trying to read hieroglyphics.[63] They don't get it, but they want to. They need to; if subjects can't understand something, then their existence is threatened. They think in response, and therefore enact violence—the violence of abstraction made possible by the violent circularity of their first-person privilege. Subjects are defined by their capacity to think, but it is precisely this capacity that privileges *them*, makes *them* primary.

Thinking doesn't simply make subjects primary, though; it maintains their primacy—even after they've enacted violence. In the wake of their actions, subjects must ask themselves an ethical question: What have I done?[64] And this ethical question leads to an ontological one: Who or what am I to have done this?[65] These questions prompt subjects to reflect on the violence they've enacted. They think again. They think after. In reflecting on their violence, subjects report on their actions; they provide reason(s) for why they did what

they did. And in so doing, they solidify themselves; subjects ontologically and ethically arrive as afterthoughts; they justify themselves through after-action reports.

Thinking, then, is not merely an epistemological enterprise. It has ethical and ontological implications. In sitting with Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra, the violent ethical and ontological implications of subject formation are exposed. Throughout this text, we'll see that the officers who killed were compelled to do so; they were dispossessed by the black people, the black flesh, the living matter, they encountered. They were dispossessed of their primacy; they needed to regain control. So, they thought. They identified. They categorized and signified, constituting—carving—objects of their violence out of irreducibly indeterminate black flesh. These officers took lives as an act of reason. They did it to retain the norms of this world. They also thought in the aftermath of their violence; they provided justifications for what they did.

Ending these lives gave meaning to these officers' existence. Without fail, each of these officers (like so many others) framed their actions as part of their policing duties—which means they are (or were) cops *because* they killed, *because* they enacted homicide in the name of public safety.[66] Cops find meaning in the violence they enact; violence is what makes them who they are. It is the way they protect, serve, and enforce law and order. Thinking makes and restores order, and it does so by setting its sights on living matter.

There is no bright side here; sitting with these lives doesn't bring them back. But it does show a cruel irony: it exposes how thinking needs matter to secure its existence. I mentioned this earlier in my discussion of phenomenological intentionality; thinking needs something to think about.[67] This isn't limited to phenomenology; it pervades much of Western philosophy in general. Philosophers from Descartes to Kant to Hegel—and yes, even to Husserl—have claimed that thinking is impossible without matter. Thinking is not a self-starter. It might attempt—often successfully—to gain and maintain control, but it's parasitic; without matter, thinking has no place. It is rendered inert. It ceases to exist. In the end, matter *matters* to thinking.

If this is the case for thinking, then it's certainly the case for subjects. Subjects need flesh to secure their existence. They come into being through a "threshold of susceptibility and impressionability" that stretches far beyond their own capacities.[68] (According to Merleau-Ponty, they're made

of it, but it doesn't appear that they see it this way.) If thinking is parasitic, then so are subjects; without flesh, they have no place. They are rendered inert. They cease to exist. In the end, living matter matters to subjects.

When I say that these four black lives matter, then, I'm not simply claiming that black lives already matter to black people and should matter to others; I am also, always, and already claiming that these black lives were and are the living matter that is central to how subjects understand themselves; I will show that these lives cannot help but matter to and for the thinking of this world. Black flesh, living matter, matters—epistemologically, ontologically, and ethically.

Religiously, too.

Religion: How (Living) Matter Comes to Matter

Throughout this introduction, I have mentioned that this book is an engagement with philosophy of religion, which is usually understood as a series of questions and logical puzzles that include (among other questions) proving God's existence, understanding the nature of religious experience, accurately describing the relationship between faith and reason, and solving (or at least responding to) the problem of evil. *Black Life Matter*, however, comes at philosophy of religion from another vantage point. It challenges philosophy of religion to sit with black lives in their unruly and disruptively fleshy presence. Sitting with these lives allows for a reckoning with philosophy of religion's problematic preoccupation with the same old questions and concerns—two of which are discussed at length throughout this book: religious experience and theodicy.

VIOLENCE AGAINST THE SACRED: SUBJECTS AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

As living matter, flesh exceeds language: to engage with it, we need the imagination—which means, as Charles Long once observed, that we must engage religion and religious experience.[69] Or, as Rudolf Otto, a neo-Kantian philosopher of religion (and heavy influence on Charles Long) once put it, we must engage in the sacred.

Sacred is a tricky term.[70] I suspect the reason this is the case is because Otto used the term to describe a specific—and for many, empirically unverifiable—set of experiences. For Otto, experiencing the sacred is an affective, not necessarily rational, experience. It entails feeling fear and attraction at the same time. Think burning bushes here: Moses saw a burning

bush and he was terrified and compelled—he couldn't leave, but he didn't want to stay, either. The sacred announces how faith exceeds—or is at least different from—reason. The contradictory nature of religious experience discloses the excessiveness of faith.

But we don't always believe in (allegedly) good things. The demonic, the monstrous—the threatening—are also part of faith traditions. As was stated earlier, Darren Wilson labeled Michael Brown as an angry demon; in chapter 2, we'll see a similar dynamic with Alton Sterling, and in chapter 3, we'll encounter a man who claims that he was concerned because Sandra Bland moved in a suspicious fashion.

Such descriptions feel threatening; they feel terrifying. Subjects encounter black flesh as fear inducing and therefore repulsive. But the attraction is there, too: chapters 2 and 3 also show that officers will shoot excessively; they'll linger, stay around, and not leave the scene—which is to say, they are compelled to stay and (over)react. Despite legal claims of cops being reasonable beings, officers will show that reason itself can show up as a compulsion—and therefore attraction—in the face of allegedly terrifying black flesh. In the wake of the violence they enact, cops claim that they had to do what they did, that the situation required nothing less than shooting, pinning, snatching, and brutalizing black life.

Sacredness does that to subjects, though. The sacred exceeds cognition: what appears doesn't conform to understanding. It doesn't make sense. And that's what subjects fear. Subjects need sense; they are defined by their capacity to make sense. In the face of unruly, excessive, and irreducibly indeterminate black flesh, subjects will become existentially afraid. They will fear for their lives, and they will compulsively fight back with all they have. They'll shoot indiscriminately and excessively. They'll make monsters out of lives. They'll claim that their actions were accidental. Subjects therefore use reason to make sense of the sacred. Reason is the way subjects retain their priority, their primacy, their privilege. Subjects do not abide the sacredness of blackness well, and, as I stated earlier, they are called to justify themselves in the wake of the violence they've enacted.

THEODICY: JUSTIFYING VIOLENCE AGAINST THE SACRED

Black Life Matter uses an old term in philosophy of religion to name this structure of justification: *theodicy*. Theodicy used to be about justifying God in the face of evil. But now, theodicy no longer needs God. It can simply be the process of identifying, categorizing, and ultimately eradicating what has been called evil. In this text—and especially in chapter 1—I show

how theodicy has become a modality of reason. It is a justifying logic that maintains the brutal normativity of the subject.

While I give theodicy explicit attention in the first chapter, a critique of its logic runs throughout this text. In chapter 2, an officer thanks his God for killing Sterling; in chapter 3, a state trooper justifies his actions by claiming that Sandra Bland's affective state put him in a state of heightened awareness and duress. These statements are theodicean in nature; they justify the goodness of the officers in the face of the allegedly terrifying or threatening (read: evil) presence of black flesh.

The officers enact theodicy in their recollections of events, but they are able to do so only because they act as enforcers of the norms of this world. In other words, the officers are called upon to eradicate what the world deems evil. The world, in turn, justifies their actions, their existence: juries hang themselves; indictments are few and far between; the twofold legal shield of *Graham v. Connor* and qualified immunity juridically protects officers; and legislatively, an allegedly divisive US Congress can agree across party lines that abolishing the police is a horrible idea. In short, the world sanctifies these outrageous and nightmarish enactments of violence by freshly minting them with the official governmental seal of approval. What all this means, then, is that this world mandates officers to kill black life in service of public safety—which is to say, as an act of eradicating evil.

This is how blackness, as living matter, comes to matter to the world of normative subjects: they encounter blackness, living matter, as terrifyingly sacred, and then they reduce—which is to say, kill or maim—it into objects that can be comprehended. This violence is then retrospectively justified through theodicean logics, and voila: another state-sanctioned theft of black life. All because officers of the state are ontologically, legally, politically, and culturally called upon to restore order to irreducibly indeterminate and sacred presence of black flesh.

But this isn't the whole story.

THE SACREDNESS OF BLACKNESS, OR THE MYSTICAL POSSIBILITIES OF BLACK FLESH

Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra—among so many others—are, indeed, sacred to subjects. But, as flesh, Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra also show the possibilities of black flesh, the possibilities that they incarnate beyond their deaths. Ashon Crawley calls this vibration: "Everything living and dead, everything animate and immobile, vibrates. Because everything vibrates, nothing escapes participating in choreographic encounters with the rest of

the living world."[71] Flesh vibrates beyond the opposition of life and death. And because it does, these lives still speak. They can still be heard.

Perhaps it is this possibility of being heard that speaks to flesh's religious capacities, too. After all, "Blackness—through the flesh—would bear the trace of what in Western thought is called 'the religious,'" and it would do so "without being reducible to any one tradition."[72] Religious experience can and will entail violence, but it can also afford the opportunity for life. It can and will offer critical space for sitting with lives who exceed our logics, and who therefore terrify and awe subjects through their eruption and sustained existence. Religion can, and does, offer life and death—and often offers both simultaneously.

That *both* is what these lives show us.[73] They were subjected to violence against the sacredness of their existence—a violence that binds subjects to thought. And yet their sacredness speaks to a mode of life that exceeds the categorical, calculative, and signifying schemes that would seek to reduce them into merely corporeal bodies. Black experience is a living one, filled with dynamic relationality and sociality forged in the very crucible of death itself. Blackness lives beyond death; if, as Alexander Weheliye claims, "it's the end of the world," then blackness is that which has not only survived but also thrives in the collapse of the world itself.[74]

As living, sacred matter, black flesh announces the possibility of a modality of life beyond the subject. It will #SayHerName, announcing specificity, but it does so "in service of a collective function." Its agency is derived not from individual volition or desire but through its existence as flesh that demands to be loved. It "enacts Clearings" wherever it goes, speaking against and back to the world that would turn us into slop for hogs.[75] It conditions the subject—which means it matters to subjects. But it also announces its own inestimable significance, which means it matters to those who are excluded from the world of subjects. As living matter, blackness matters. It is black-life-matter.

This is what I mean by black-life-matter: it is the mode of existence that exposes, sustains, and calls this world and its subjects into question through its excessive, resistant, and care-filled presence in this world as flesh. Religious in structure, subjective in its unfolding, and black through its perpetual refusal of and resistance to the truth of the world through its existence as living matter, black-life-matter names the existential, ontological, ethical, and religious weight black lives carry. Black-life-matter names that black lives have significance, that—no matter what anyone says—they deserve radical and unyielding care.

Conclusion: On (Not) Moving On

Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra are no longer physically with us. It is incredibly brutal and deeply painful that most of us have come to know of them only through their deaths. But while some have moved on, I haven't. I still mourn. I always mourn. I am in mourning. I am—which is to say, I exist as—mourning.

I also celebrate. I always celebrate. I am in celebration. I am—which is to say, I exist as—celebration. "That we have to celebrate is what hurts so much," Fred Moten writes: "Exhaustive celebration of and in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is black study."[76]

This text is black study; it is as much an elegy as it is a praise song. It struggles with the doubleness of black life and black death, to the point where I cannot help but conclude that in black life, we are in death, and in black death, we are in life. "I want . . . to declare that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of *Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death:* to think and be and act from there."[77] If all I did was sit with the violence, I would miss the fact that Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra loved and were loved by others. I wouldn't notice that these lives moved and still move others, that they were and are still loved. The chapters are as generative as they are critical; they come from a contradictory space. They announce that our mourning is also celebration.

As I conclude, I want us to think about Eric Garner's and George Floyd's last refrain: "I can't breathe." Ashon Crawley tells us that *I can't breathe* "is not merely raw material for theorizing, for producing a theological and philosophical analysis." He continues:

> "I can't breathe" charges us to do something, to perform, to produce otherwise than what we have. We are charged to end, to produce abolition against, the episteme that produced for us current iterations of categorical designations of racial hierarchies, class stratifications, gender binaries, mind-body splits. "I can't breathe," Garner's disbelief, his black disbelief, in the configuration of the world that could so violently attack and assault him for, at the very worst, selling loosies on the street. "I can't breathe," also, the enactment of the force of black disbelief, a desire for otherwise air than what is and has been given, the enunciation, the breathing out the strange utterance of otherwise possibility.[78]

Crawley points us to how "I can't breathe" carries the violence of this world as well as the yearning and enactment of something else, something otherwise than—or, as I put it, something beyond—the violence of this world. This text therefore sits between mourning and celebration, between (Afro-)pessimism and (black) optimism. I stay in the tension because the lives and deaths call me to stay there.

I did not know Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, or Sandra personally. But I was a part of the movement. I marched for Sandra (her family calls her Sandy); I organized in her wake and therefore in her honor. And I wasn't alone. In chapter 3, I'll give a small bit of the story. But here, I want to say that these lives—as well as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Korryn Gaines, John Crawford III, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others—have left an indelible mark on me.

In this text, I sit with four of them. But please know that, in researching this book, I have sat with others. It pains me that I couldn't sit with them in more detail here; their absence from this text is not any indication that they were less important. They have all left a mark on me; they have shifted the way I think, and they have prompted me to try to act differently. Which is to say, all those black lives *still* matter. They will *always* matter—to their families, to the movement, to me, and even to those who try to say otherwise.

I know this world has moved on. Subjects have attempted to drain these lives of their significance; we see names and faces appear on advertisements, on the front covers of magazines; we see their names headlining limp and vapid legislation. Having tried to use these lives up, this world and its normative subjects have moved on to the next problem.

But these lives aren't problems to be solved. These lives show us the violence of solving problems; they show us how thinking cannot sit with the plenitude of a life, how black-life-matter is an affront to the normative categories of an antiblack world. And yet, these lives also show us black-life-matter is a site of profound love and care. Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandy expose it all. Their lives matter—to me, to their communities, to their families and loved ones, and yes, to this world and its subjects. Their black lives matter.

I do not know why I'm repeating myself. Perhaps it is because I am constantly aware of what thinking does. Maybe it is because I worry that, for some readers, the lives will come secondary to them; I worry that some

readers will try to find the theory, searching this book's pages for the theoretical parts that can be extrapolated from the lives themselves. In short, I worry that some readers will move on while reading. I cannot control for that, I know. But I do worry about it.

I guess I repeat myself, then, because I do not want to forget why I wrote this book. Crawley tells us that "I can't breathe" charges us to do something, "to perform, to produce otherwise than what we have." This book is my attempt to do that something. I do not know if this book will perform or produce otherwise, but I hope it does. After all, I wrote this book for those we've lost—and those lives are otherwise. Always. They still speak. They call to us. They call us to be attentive. They call us to stay. Which is to say, they call us to care.

This book takes care.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Although this story haunts me, I am forever indebted to Janet Baker, the mother of Jordan Baker, for her grace and invitation to participate in a radio show where we spoke with family members who had lost loved ones to police officers. To Janet: thank you. I will never forget your unshouted courage, your quiet grace. I am in awe of your compassion, your strength, and who you are in general.

2. Lane, "Alton Sterling and His CD-Selling Gig."

3. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, section on "The They" (particularly 149–57).

4. Heidegger critiqued inauthentic engagement. But he didn't deny it and—contrary to standard readings—neither did he find it to be problematic. It was just limited in allowing *Dasein* to clarify its own being-in-the-world.

5. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 10.

6. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.

7. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 38–42.

8. For more on hatred, see Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, particularly the chapter "Organisation of Hate."

9. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5.

10. Lewis Gordon gifted me with the phrase "philosophical eulogy." For that, and for his work and support of me and my project, I am grateful.

11. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

12. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 14.

13. For those phenomenologically inclined, this line is a direct criticism of Heidegger's notion of *Zorge*—care—as that notion of care is steeped in *Dasein*'s own existential possibilities and limitations. Heideggerian care has everything to do with the normative subject's self-investments; it is a navel-gazing approach wherein *Dasein* concerns itself with itself—with its own life and death. For more on this, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

14. Recently, one of my beloveds had a life-and-death health crisis. In the midst of COVID-19, I was unable to visit them. But I was able to use Facetime to see them in the hospital. This method is as personal as it is conceptual.

15. I really hope my words don't do more damage. But I cannot determine how this book will be read.

16. Zakiyyah Jackson makes a beautiful and powerful case for why "inclusion into the human" offers little to no solace for black life. See Jackson, *Becoming Human*, particularly the introduction.

17. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3–4.

18. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

19. Moten, *In the Break*, 4.

20. Hartman enacts perhaps one of the most famous omissions—or, more precisely and as Fred Moten calls it, "repressions"—in black studies: namely, she represses the story of Aunt Hester's beating at the beginning of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative.* And she does so for reasons I've outlined in the text. But Fred Moten raises a point that also cannot be dismissed: "Like Douglass, [Hartman] transposes all that is unspeakable in the scene to later, ritualized, 'soulfully' mundane and quotidian performances. All that's missing is the originary recitation of the beating, which she reproduces in her reference to it. This is to say that there is an intense dialogue with Douglass that structures *Scenes of Subjection.* The dialogue is opened by a refusal of recitation that reproduces what it refuses." In other words, repressing the narrative does not necessarily stave off the possibility of enjoyment, nor does it stem the tide of the violence. The possibility—for enjoyment, for more violence—remains. And so the question is, as I say in the introduction, how we might handle these stories. Sitting-with is my "how." And I say more about it in this section. For more on this, see Moten, *In the Break*, 5.

21. Moten, *In the Break*, 5.

22. Many black studies scholars have developed theories of black opacity, but perhaps Edouard Glissant is the most well known. For more on this, see Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. But here, I'm thinking of Charles Long's notion of opacity as it relates to blackness. In his work, he attunes us to the idea that, at least since modernity, Western knowledge production has understood "transparency as a metaphor for knowledge," and in so doing, it has enacted violence against the "opaque"—or, as Long put it, "dusky"—beings who do not fully show themselves. I'll have more to say on this later. For more on Long's discussion of opacity, see *Significations*.

23. I want to say, here and now, that a significant amount of the royalties (if there are any) from this text will go to the families of the victims I chronicle here. I plan on donating a portion of the proceeds to the Tamir Rice Foundation, as well as to the Sandra Bland Center for Racial Justice.

24. For those who are not scholars or interested in philosophical methodology, I encourage you to read one of the chapters and then return to this section.

25. In "The Case of Blackness," Fred Moten critically reads Frantz Fanon's chapter "The Lived Experience of the Black" as "not only a lament over Fanon's

own relegation to the status of object; [this chapter] also contains a lament that it suppresses over the general annihilation of the thing to which transcendental phenomenology contributes insofar as it is concerned with *Sachen* [things *qua* things], not *Dinge* [things *qua* objects], in what remains untranslatable as its direction toward the things themselves." Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 184.

In other words, Moten claims that phenomenology is preoccupied with the object—which is something subjects represent to themselves—not the thing, which eludes or exceeds the subject's representational capacities. Moten quotes Heidegger as saying, "Man can represent, no matter *how*, only what has previously come to light of its own accord and has shown itself to him in the light it brought with it," and then he elaborates by saying, "For Heidegger, the thingliness of the thing . . . is precisely that which *prompts* its making. For Plato—and the tradition of representational thinking he codifies, which includes Fanon—everything present is experienced as an object of making where 'object' is understood, in what Heidegger calls its most precise expression, as 'what stands forth' (rather than what stands before or opposite or against)" ("Case of Blackness," 183).

I'm laying all of this out because when I say that phenomenology doesn't stay with the experienced, I'm affirming Moten's criticism of phenomenology; while I'm sure that some phenomenologists will claim that Heidegger's discussion of the thing isn't phenomenological—after all, for late Heidegger, there might be nothing more real than *Sachen*, which means that he doesn't bracket or suspend his judgment about the reality of the thing—Moten's criticism is of the phenomenological method. I read him as saying what I say above: phenomenology moves on—to the subject's consciousness, to its capacity to represent. And in so doing, phenomenology doesn't stay with "the things themselves"; it only turns to them as objects available for subjective and transcendental consciousness. Phenomenology moves on. And it is precisely in its moving on that it fails to grasp or behold the irreducible complexity of the things—not the noematic objects—subjects encounter.

26. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 21, emphasis added.

27. Husserl often conceived of phenomenology as an ethical enterprise of critical self-reflection. To the extent that turning within and bracketing one's assumptions might bring clarity about one's own perspective on the world, classical phenomenology has promise. But to the extent that this clarity comes at the cost of one not attending to the manifold alterity that constitutes the subject's very perspective, the ethical promise of such a method remains in question. For more on this, see the epilogue to Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*.

28. "The hyletic, which deals with matter," Michel Henry writes, "is not only situated 'far below noetic and functional phenomenology.' It is not simply 'subordinated' to it. To the extent that [the hyletic] only has a signification 'by the fact that it provides possible gussets in the intentional eave, possible matter for intentive formations,' a content for appearing and for the givenness that is the business of intentional phenomenology, hyletic phenomenology is

a phenomenology in the trivial and pre-critical sense of the term." Moreover, "'Sensible givens, sensuous data' must be understood in the sense whereby 'being given as a matter for intentional complexes' is being given *in a certain way*, as something traversed by an intentional regard that casts it before itself and gives it to be seen. The 'sensible appearances' through which the world is given to us *do not give themselves. They are only appearances or phenomena inasmuch as they are animated by a noetic intention and come to appear through it*" (*Material Phenomenology*, 11, emphasis added).

29. Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 182.

30. I am aware of second-person phenomenology. Perhaps the foremost proponent of this is Emmanuel Levinas, who reverses the direction of intentionality to make the other, the second person, primary. For more on this, see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

31. Emphasis added. *Graham v. Connor* was a case in which Dethorne Graham was beaten by M. S. Connor, an officer who deemed Graham's actions suspicious. See "Justia Opinion Summary and Annotations," Justia, US Supreme Court, accessed December 29, 2021, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/490/386/ for a synopsis of the case.

32. Perhaps I'm more Derridean than I appear, but my point here is to say that we cannot *not* use language. Even if language is a problem, it is all we have. The issue, then, is how we use this language: Do we take language for granted, presupposing a correlationist theory of truth? Or do we recognize, along with Derrida, that meanings are always in flux—in play, as he would say—and therefore we use language always with an eye toward its limitations and its insufficiencies?

33. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 46.

34. The phenomenological *epoché* is now famous; Husserl used it to suspend judgment about the reality of a thing in order to understand how one experiences the thing; the early Heidegger used a variant of it to suspend our ontological assumptions about the meaning of being; and the earlier Merleau-Ponty deployed a variant of it to disclose the centrality and importance of the body to the development of subjectivity. While I don't read Levinas as using the *epoché*, I could be mistaken. The *epoché* might be useful in certain contexts, but when it comes to living beings—and here specifically, black lives—such a move is problematic and, quite frankly, unethical. I'll say why later in the section.

35. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 120.

36. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 120.

37. "The Other," Levinas writes, "can also not appear without renouncing his radical alterity, without entering into an order. The breaks in the order reenter the order whose weave lasts unendingly, a weave these breaks manifest, and which is a totality. The unwonted is understood. The apparent interference of the Other in the Same has been settled beforehand. The disturbance, the clash of two orders, then does not deserve our attention. *That is, unless one is attached to abstraction*." Levinas's point here is that there is an irruption that the Other brings, but abstraction denies this irruption its disruptive capacities.

While I do not fully ascribe to Levinas's phenomenology—I think there is a difference between opacity and alterity, as opacity is not the total or absolute unknowability of something, but instead the fugitivity, the perpetual escape, of meaning's grasp—I do think that this irruptive capacity of the Other that Levinas gestures toward produces a methodological maxim to not search for abstraction, to not turn to the development of theory. For more on this, see Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," 68.

38. Long, *Significations*, 207, emphasis added.

39. See Christian, "The Race for Theory," 51.

40. Christian, "The Race for Theory," 51.

41. Nahum Chandler, referenced in Carter, "Paratheological Blackness," 590–91. For those who are familiar with Fred Moten, I am of course referencing his essay "The Case of Blackness," in which he tells us that fugitivity is the movement of blackness. He elaborates, "the problem of the inadequacy of any ontology to blackness, to that mode of being for which *escape or apposition* and not the objectifying encounter with otherness is the prime modality, must be understood in its relation to the inadequacy of calculation to being in general." In other words, the fugitivity of blackness exposes the limitations, the "inadequacies," of dominant modes of thinking that seek to contain and constrain existence—especially black existence. For more on this, see Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 187.

42. Notice that I leave the term *lives* unqualified. I am not interested in espousing an anthropocentric understanding of life. I do handle human lives in this book; those lives are the ones that touched me, that have changed me. My attention is focused on Aiyana, Tamir, Alton, and Sandra. But know that I have a more expansive understanding of *life* than an anthropocentric one might allow.

43. I say "for better or worse" because many different organizations have been incorrectly lumped under its name, and also because the phrase has been instrumentalized, exploited, and commodified nearly beyond recognition by those who refuse its radicality.

44. Makalani, "Black Lives Matter and the Limits of Formal Black Politics," 547.

45. See Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*; Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter*; Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*. And for the articles, see the special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 2017); I've already cited Makalani's article above; the title of Debra Thompson's article is "An Exoneration of Black Rage."

46. Jared Sexton's "Unbearable Blackness" has a beautiful line of questioning: "Black Lives Matter: how so and to whom, in what ways and by what means, when and under what conditions, precisely? What, moreover, does it mean to matter at all, much less for a life to matter, for lives to matter, let alone for *black* lives to matter? Do black lives matter only when taken together, or taken apart, or taken apart together? Black lives are (a) strange matter." And it is precisely this parenthetical "a" that announces the polyvalent power of the phrase. See Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," 159.

47. Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

48. I say "we" because there are so many thinkers who correlate blackness with flesh. I will be specifically referencing Zakiyyah Jackson's brilliant work in this section. But many of those thinkers are drawing from Hortense Spillers's brilliant distinction between body and flesh in "Mama's Baby"; although there are multiple ways to read that distinction, most black studies scholars agree on the complex existence of flesh as engendering the violence of subjection and subjugation even as it is the condition for the dissolution of such violence. As Weheliye claims, flesh is that "ether, that 'shit that make your soul burn slow' as well as a modality of relation" (*Habeas Viscus*, 48).

49. "What we are calling flesh," Merleau-Ponty writes, "has no name in any philosophy. As the formative *medium* of the object and the subject, it is not the atom of being, the hard in itself that resides in a unique place and moment: one can indeed say of my body that it is not elsewhere, but one cannot say that it is *here* or *now* in the sense that objects are; and yet my vision does not soar over them, it is not the being that is *wholly* knowing [emphasis added], for it has its own inertia, its ties" (*Visible and Invisible*, 148).

50. R. A. Judy has just written a magisterial work called *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiesis in Black* that discusses the complexities of black flesh and its practices and praxes. I wish I could give it full treatment here, but doing so would be beyond the scope of this book. I do, however, gesture toward it in the conclusion as a way to think about ethics.

51. Maurice Merleau-Ponty tells us that flesh is reversible, which means that it is neither the experiencer nor the experienced, but the condition both occasions and undoes the distinction between the two. He writes,

If we can show that the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself, if there is a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer, this circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible, can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own. And if I was to be able to understand how this wave arises within me, how the visible which is yonder is simultaneously *my* landscape, I can understand . . . that elsewhere it also closes over upon itself and that there are other landscapes besides my own.

His point in all of this is that flesh doesn't allow for simple distinctions, that the "coiling over" of flesh is precisely what makes one both part of and distinct from other inhabitants of the world. See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 141.

52. Merleau-Ponty tells us that flesh "has no name in philosophy" (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 148).

53. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67. But as the endnotes show, I am also thinking about Merleau-Ponty here. "Yes or no," he asks, "do we have a body—that is, not a permanent object of thought, but a *flesh that suffers when it is wounded, hands that touch?*" According to Merleau-Ponty, flesh occasions relational possibilities through splitting apart; I draw from Spillers to show that this splitting isn't always pleasant or harmonious. See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137, 146.

54. I understand Moten's frustration with this line, but to think of blackness as a testament to the fact that "objects can and do resist" is to invoke—as he does later on in that introductory chapter—the inextricable connection between life, materiality, and blackness. Here, I'm interested in criticizing the philosophical structures that engender violence against black life as a condition of possibility for the subject. In making this claim, I'm indebted to a host of black studies scholars—not simply Moten, and too many to name here, but for a brief reference, one might look at Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; and Moten, *In the Break*; and for a more religious treatment of this, consider Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*.

55. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 3.

56. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 72.

57. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 71.

58. Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 71, emphasis added; 71, emphasis in original.

59. For those who know, "enframing" (*Gestell*) is Heidegger's name for the instrumental reason that technology enacts. Water is enframed as hydroelectric power; trees are enframed as sources of fuel for fire and paper. Enframing, technology, "challenges" matter to become useful, to become something wholly available for use. See Martin Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," in *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

60. Michael Brown, Sr., and Lesley McSpadden vs. City of Ferguson, Missouri, Former Police Chief Thomas Jackson, and Former Police Officer Darren Wilson, "Defendant Darren Wilson's Responses to Plaintiffs' First Set of Requests for Admissions," December 28, 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/national/us-district-court-document-including-officer-darren-wilsons-list-of-admissions/2371/.

61. You'll notice that I don't racialize the subject. I don't ascribe it a gender. I also leave questions of class, sexuality, and nationality open. This is intentional: subjects are expressions, embodiments, and beneficiaries of the dominant political, epistemological, philosophical, and religious norms of this world. Subjects are expressions of what Heidegger calls the "they": "This being-with-one-another," Heidegger writes, "dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others,' in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The 'they,' which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness." Even though straight, white, cisgendered people are the primary embodiments of normative subjectivity, they aren't the only ones; subjects are those beings for whom "the Being of everydayness" takes precedent; they also benefit from this structure as well. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164.

62. Again, Judy's work *Sentient Flesh* comes to mind. He tells us that black flesh occasions a kind of thinking-in-disorder, a mode of thought and praxis that, as

I read him, disrupts the philosophical, theological, scientific, and mathematical foundations of the world.

63. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.

64. Emmanuel Levinas tells us in *Totality and Infinity* that reason emerges as a reflection on one's actions for or against the Other. And in *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Levinas tells us, "The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory,' an 'ulterior to every accomplishment,' from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence." His point here is that, at the end of the day, the subject's responsibility stems from a "null-site of subjectivity," wherein the notion of freedom is already put into question. Subjective freedom comes after. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 10.

65. I'm sure that, if he were alive, Emmanuel Levinas would have serious consternations about my claims. After all, for Levinas, ethics is first philosophy; it is his primary word. Ethics exceeds being; it goes beyond it. I don't disagree—in fact, the majority of my attention in this book is devoted to what might be called the ethical implications of that which is beyond the ontological and epistemological capacities of the thinking subject. But where Levinas wants to stay in beyond being, I'd like to claim that the beyond of being nevertheless requires attention to being. And this is the case because my primary phenomenological content is neither the face nor the hostage, but the slave and its afterlives. In sticking with black life, I am beholden to a tradition where personhood was transformed into the brute materiality of the merely corporeal body—which is to say, the objective body. I sit not with faces, but with (the tradition of) objects.

66. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger claims that *Dasein* works out the meaning of its being in and through the projected possibilities it has before it. In this regard, *Dasein* clarifies who and what it is through doing things; one of the first moves of "fundamental ontology" is to realize how practical identity forms the foundation for ontological deliberation.

67. If you're thinking this is a criticism of Cartesian and Husserlian phenomenological philosophy, you'd be right. Descartes wants to claim *cogito ergo sum*, but it turns out that if there is nothing to think about, the cogito doesn't exist. And while Husserl concedes the directionality of thinking as well as the fact that thinking is conditioned by horizons, he nevertheless focuses primarily on the movement of consciousness. In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl makes it clear that this world is "for me," by which he means that, even if this world is what I think about, it is nevertheless available to and for my thinking, my determinations, my constitutions.

68. Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 1.

69. For more on the relationship between religion, blackness, and the imagination of matter, see Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*. See also Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*; as well as Long, "Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter." Though Noel is critical of Pinn's project, Pinn nevertheless articulates black religion as tethered to the history of objects, situating black religion and black religious experience as connected to materiality.

70. In *Authors of the Impossible*, Jeffrey Kripal makes a compelling case for retaining the term *sacred* even as it has been denigrated in religious studies. While I do not share his tendency to emphasize our shared capacities, I am nevertheless deeply informed by and grateful for his insistence that we experience things that exceed reason—and in religious studies, we call those suprarational experiences sacred ones. See the introduction and conclusion to Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*.

71. Crawley, "Stayed Freedom Hallelujah," 29.

72. Crawley, "Stayed Freedom Hallelujah," 31.

73. In *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, Nahum Chandler lays claim to the fact that blackness, black life, is irreducible to a simple binary, even as it nevertheless must work with and within them.

74. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 54.

75. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 79.

76. Moten, *Black and Blur*, xiii.

77. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 22, emphasis added.

78. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 3–4.

1. HANDS AND BRAIDS

1. Burns, "Detroit Police Officer Who Shot 7-Year-Old."

2. LeDuff, "What Killed Aiyana Stanley-Jones?"

3. Transcription of Joseph Weekley's testimony, accessed on YouTube (WXYZ-TV Detroit, "Officer on Trial").

4. Joseph Weekley's testimony (WXYZ-TV Detroit, "Officer on Trial").

5. Burns, "Aiyana Jones Trial: Questions and Inconsistencies."

6. Loehmann, "Timothy Loehmann Statement."

7. Loehmann, "Timothy Loehmann Statement," 1.

8. Loehmann, "Timothy Loehmann Statement," 2.

9. Loehmann, "Timothy Loehmann Statement," 1.

10. Loehmann, "Timothy Loehmann Statement," 1–2.

11. For some reason, Loehmann's "we are taught" and "we are trained" reads to me like the "ditto ditto" of the archives in Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*, 52–58. I can't shake this, and I don't know what to make of the resonance, so I note it here. Perhaps readers will see what I mean.

12. Dewan and Oppel, "In Tamir Rice Case."

13. Flynn, "How to Make a Police Shooting Disappear."

14. Fantz, Almasy, and Shoichet, "Tamir Rice Shooting."

15. Crenshaw and Ritchie, "#SAYHERNAME."

16. Burns, "What the Police Officer Who Killed Philando Castile Said."

17. Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 24–25.

18. Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, 25.

19. Hartman and Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," 184–85. We might also hear hints of a Derridean supplement flowing in and through Wilderson and Hartman's conversation.