

A Poetics of
BLACK SPACE

FLIGHT LINES

ELLEZA
KELLEY



FLIGHT LINES



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To my parents, who raised me in the place
where maps don't go.

And to Greg Tate.

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What does it mean to consider that the relation between the reader, the poem, and history is spatial, a special relation, a north Atlantic entreaty, a plea, an exhortation in the form of a world embrace in resistance to enclosure?—FRED MOTEN, *Stolen Life*

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INTRODUCTION

Another Axis

The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock.—TONI MORRISON, *Song of Solomon*

Was the author gripped by madness, or was he rooted in an intellectual tradition that inherently enabled destitute African Americans to traverse multiple scales of consciousness and space?—CLYDE A. WOODS, “‘Sittin’ on Top of the World”

It has long been said that the people could fly.¹ From the legend of Igbo Land-
ing through the black funeral mainstay “I’ll Fly Away,” tales of flight “[perme-
ate] the mythology of Black America.”² Flying Africans and African Ameri-
cans frequent works of contemporary literature, like Toni Morrison’s novel
Song of Solomon (1977). Cassie Lightfoot, the protagonist of Faith Ringgold’s
picture book *Tar Beach* (1991), flies too, over New York City, where she re-
claims the urban landscape, converting the George Washington Bridge into
“a giant diamond necklace.” Often, such flight is imagined as a magical abil-
ity bequeathed by West African ancestors or by ancestors who were unruly,
rebellious, fugitive slaves—where *flight* means both flying and fleeing. But
what if this capacity for flight was not located in the aberrant, exceptional, or
supernatural black body but in a world whose metaphysical rules were some-
how different? What if the earth itself, as black people behold and experience
it, moves along another axis? What if our intellectual traditions enable us “to
traverse multiple scales of consciousness and space”? Such an intellectual
tradition would surely entail an entirely different understanding of space and
time.

If black worlds do indeed spin on another axis, how might we begin to con-
ceptualize what Katherine McKittrick has called “a black sense of place”—“the
process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary
struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of

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racial encounter”?³ How might we trace, not merely locations where black people live, but a tradition of black spatial thought, theory, and practice? If it is not included in the annals of “proper” geographic, spatial, and architectural knowledge, where might we look for it instead? *Flight Lines* feels for a poetics of black space across and beneath the surfaces of African American literature and visual art to show that black formal innovation is not just stylistic and political but contains critical insight into black spatial thought and black worlds.

I begin from the premise that black Americans are not passive subjects of the built environment but have a long tradition of spatial thought, spatial production, and spatial representation, which I refer to as *black spatial praxis*. Within black spatial praxis, we find interpretations of space as inextricable from sensory, racial, social, political, and historical forces. *Flight Lines* explores how black writers and artists in the United States, from the nineteenth century to the present, have articulated black spatial praxis as a critique of racial enclosure and the broader architectures of racial capitalism that it subtends. I map several sites of spatial praxis that reappear throughout African American literature and art, gathering, cutting, and reassembling these works to reveal how black artists have understood, contested, and reimagined space. What results is a palimpsestic, multidimensional, anagrammatical, quilted, and collaged assemblage of that place—a black mode of spatial representation. *Flight Lines* therefore employs the forms and methodologies of black spatial praxis to theorize black space(s), bringing to the surface a submerged history of efforts to resist and rewrite geographies of racial capitalism. While these efforts vary significantly, when thought together, they help us “see” black geographies as not simply places where black people live but epistemologies and methods of space and place across forms, scales, durations, and political orientations. Black geographies, then, are material spaces black people inhabit, coproduce, and transform, which are perpetually animated and enfolded by the set of practices through which black people represent, narrate, critique, and theorize those spaces.⁴

I focus specifically on the continental United States, though black people throughout the world articulate and are guided by spatial praxes that break with racial capitalist logics of domination and enclosure.⁵ The idea of black space may seem fraught or unthinkable in a nation built on practices of subjugation and dispossession, from its founding in expropriation, genocide, and slavery, to the partitioned landscapes of Jim Crow, to the catastrophe of urban renewal and the ubiquitous fortified enclosures of the prison industrial complex. Black Americans may seem an unlikely force of spatial production:

They own less than 1 percent of land in the United States and make up less than 2 percent of the nation's licensed architects.⁶ But such statistics cannot be used to measure black spatial production, which stands in excess of (and often in opposition to) capitalist forms of development. These statistics cannot account for the ephemeral, clandestine, insurgent spatial praxis of everyday life that black cultural production brings to the fore. In fact, a focus on colonial and capitalist spatial relations, which overdetermine our ideas about space and place in the West, obscures the very epistemological break that black space constitutes.

Black space in the United States is more than the materialization of racial capitalism and antiblackness. Black farms, gardens, churches, beauty salons and barbershops, basketball courts, HBCUs, hair shows, dance halls, jook joints, bashments, organizing spaces, parades, homecomings and homecomings, family reunions, second lines, sideshows, clearings, quilting circles, hush harbors, repasts, theaters, bookstores, funeral homes, restaurants, and schoolhouses form in opposition to, in spite of, or irrespective of racialized enclosure. "A black sense of place," McKittrick reminds us, "draws attention to the longstanding links between blackness and geography. It brings into focus the ways in which racial violences . . . shape, but do not wholly define, black worlds."⁷ Black spaces are not wholly defined by the conditions of their emergence.

FLIGHT LINES EXAMINES FIVE spatial forms—the fence, the train, the block, the apartment, and the rooftop. Each provides a window into the ways black writers and artists represent black spatial praxis and, in particular, into black engagement with multiscalar geographies of racial enclosure. In each chapter, spatial forms and aesthetic forms offer sites at which to contemplate black engagements with enclosure, letting us glimpse the mutual relay between black aesthetics and black space. African American art, I argue, thus emerges not only from experimentations with style and form, or from an attention to the political and historical dimensions of black life, but also from the unique modes of black spatial praxis that circulate through and shape black life in the United States. Black aesthetics express "black senses of place" because they are shaped by such senses. Through methods of close analysis and superimpositional reading, I illuminate the ways that African Americans have narrated, critiqued, improvised on, and transformed the built environment, paying particular attention to how black spatial praxis "worries the line" of borders, boundaries, color lines, and subdividing walls.⁸

Black spatial praxis does not appear only at the level of content, location, setting, or background but also at the level of form, genre, media, and structure. Thus, *Flight Lines* proposes that black senses of space have been an important but overlooked source of formal innovation.⁹ I am interested in uncovering the interface between black space and black form. I suggest that to understand black geographies, we must understand black aesthetics, and to understand black aesthetics, we need to read across media. *Flight Lines* tracks spatial knowledge across media, contending that where mediums meet, we find black form, and thereby uncover significant insights about black space.

Black art and black studies have always transgressed disciplinary, generic, and medial boundaries. While Robert Farris Thompson has theorized black aesthetics as the interface of multiple media, Fred Moten has offered the figure of the “blur.”¹⁰ Tracing the “many pathways and passages between two putatively discrete media (sound and writing),” Brent Hayes Edwards identifies “pseudomorphosis—working one medium in the shape of or in the shadow of another”—as “the paradigm of innovation in black art.”¹¹ I’m particularly interested in points of overlap between visual and textual mediums where we might study how cultural production offers schematics, cartographies, and blueprints of spatial critique and reimagining. Rather than examining deployments of multiple media by single artists, as Edwards does, I read instances of formal resonance among visual and textual media to highlight how black spatial logics are articulated, transmitted, and preserved through black aesthetics.

Not only is pseudomorphosis a paradigm of innovation in black art; I contend that black form is detectable *only* at the point of contact—the blur—between media: not only where music enacts criticism but where poetry reaches toward song; where marks hover between letter, glyph, and image; where collage bends and reassembles print; where dance is archive; and where fiction, like Toni Morrison’s, emerges from photographs and quilt scraps.¹² As such, *Flight Lines* employs a practice of superimpositional reading, which uses the formal aspects of black visual art to reread works of African American literature and bring to the surface black senses of space. Where visual and literary form resonate, I suggest that logics of black spatial praxis are perceptible.

Indeed, to see black space clearly, we must think black *form* across (and between) media, and geographies across and between disciplines, beyond the social scientific approaches that characterize the broader field of geography. Any serious consideration of black space will always throw a wrench into the disciplinary, generic, and medial boundaries that continue to constrict

academic fields. Fortunately, black spatial praxis itself models ways we might break, bend, and stretch the confines of our given surroundings.¹³

While mark-making mediums give us insights into the relationship among spatiality, representation, and composition, they are far from the only mediums of black spatial representation. Sound, dance, music, and performance are beyond the scope of this project, yet they still appear and shape the media on which I focus. In African diasporic culture, specifically, these media are not easily disentangled but always working through one another.¹⁴ Beyond this impurity, a sort of inherent intermediality characterizes black cultural production. In an essay on the artist Romare Bearden, the novelist Toni Morrison asserts, “The borders established for the convenience of study are, I believe, not just porous, they are liquid. Locating instances of this liquidity is vital if African-American art is to be understood for the complex work that it is and for the deep meaning it contains.”¹⁵ This liquidity drives my reading practice in *Flight Lines*.

When it comes to thinking about abstract and theoretical concepts of space and place, it becomes necessary to look at black media not in isolation but as a poetics entangled with longer and more capacious traditions of transmedial black form that are not limited or defined by discrete, taxonomic categories of medium and genre.¹⁶ My attention to mark making allows me to highlight how one aesthetic mode—a compositional surface—gives us a glimpse into the ways that multiple mediums not only collapse, interweave, and inform one another but, when triangulated, help make black geographic thought and practice visible. I read visual art and literature not only together but *through* one another in order to illuminate a coherent tradition of black form, unbound by generic or medial enclosures. I examine transmedial formal practices like appropriation, repurposing, eruption, fragmentation, reassemblage, suspension, dilation, and more, which reoccur, echo, and defy the boundaries between visual and textual media, bringing forward the rich theories of space and place embedded within African American culture.

READING BLACK WRITING AND art as an index of black spatial praxis, *Flight Lines* pays particular attention to the ways that black space—and black form—emerges from engagements with geographies and processes of racial enclosure, ongoing operations of racialized containment that capture and convert the earth and its inhabitants into private property. While *racial enclosure* has experienced an increase in circulation among black

studies scholars, *Flight Lines* seeks to work across racial enclosure's scales, bringing together its abstract, theoretical deployments with its material and geographic history, with its literary critical valences.¹⁷ Highlighting spatial expressions of racialized enclosure in the United States—the plantation, the railroad, the grid plan, carceral urban architecture and planning, and urban renewal—*Flight Lines* charts a counterhistory of how racial enclosure and its logics have been enforced, sustained, and renewed in the United States through the built environment. Though each chapter centers one of these aspects, the book also demonstrates how they overlap, reappear, and work together across the postslavery United States to sustain racial capitalism. Racial enclosure, as I argue, operates on many scales and takes many forms—aesthetic, political, material, economic, social, affective, and beyond. As Caroline Levine notes, “We can understand forms as abstract and portable organizing principles . . . but we also need to attend to the specificity of particular historical situations to understand the range of ways in which forms overlap and collide.”¹⁸ These expressions of enclosure appear in African American literature and visual art as “architectonic” structures that give shape to social, material, intellectual, and political life—and to literary and visual form.¹⁹ In these ways, racial enclosure emerges at geographic, thematic, formal, and compositional scales.

Moving from Levine's proposition that literary studies “include patterns of sociopolitical experience” in its definition of form, I examine racial enclosure as not only a (contested and unstable) pattern of sociopolitical experience, but also as a pattern that animates and is entangled with aesthetic form.²⁰ My counterhistory of US racial enclosure tracks not only its specific forms but its rearrangement by black artists and writers. Each chapter takes up a different literary framework that both encodes enclosure and becomes a site for critique, deviation, and disavowal: emplotment and narrative structure, setting and background, lyric form, and genre. In so doing, I theorize black form and black space together. If black spatial praxis is a response to the material and discursive architectures of racialized containment that structure the United States, then black form is a response to racial enclosure's formal logics. Black form, then, engages in a mode of close reading and critique as it produces its own antagonistic, agitational forms that writhe against, burst out of, disregard, and erupt from the hold of anglophone Euro-American literary traditions. While these agitational forms may resemble, and even intersect with, modernism and postmodernism, I argue that they emerge from a different source—the black geographic practices, philosophies, and traditions that have sustained black life in the New

World through seemingly infinite variations of capture, violence, dislocation, and abandonment.²¹

The relationship between literary and social forms is well-trodden ground. While Lucien Goldmann famously posited “a rigorous homology between the literary form of the novel . . . and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general, and by extension between men and other men, in a market society,” Levine describes an enduring presumption among literary critics “that literary forms can be easily mapped onto political communities—that there is an effective homology between the bounded wholeness of the lyric poem, for example, and the bounded wholeness of a nation.”²² This homology, as Levine points out, proves to be an oversimplification: Forms collide, overlap, move and intersect. It becomes even more reductive when we begin to consider black life—a force that destabilizes homology, analogy, and ontology in general. What of the relation, for example, between man-made-into-commodity and commodities? Or *among* commodities, as Moten inspires with his “resistance of the object”?²³ How do black people, black epistemologies, and black forms simultaneously produce and disrupt homological relationships between aesthetic and sociopolitical forms? In her assessment of the novel as provision ground, Sylvia Wynter bends Goldmann’s homological approach to literary forms to theorize New World black geographies.²⁴ Following Wynter but also scholars like GerShun Avilez, Katherine McKittrick, Thadious Davis, and Judith Madera, I read black artists and writers as theorists of space whose depictions of place and innovations of form reflect—and enact—black spatial praxis.

While I argue that enclosure generates its own aesthetic forms, I am interested specifically in writers and artists who have used literature and art as a site in which to critique enclosure by positioning certain formal and thematic conventions as figures for that regime of property and containment. But enclosure’s forms are neither static nor homologous. Their relation to one another is perhaps better captured by a method of black spatial praxis that artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah has called “affective proximity.”²⁵ As fellow artist Arthur Jafa describes it, “Affective proximity is a thing that happens when two things come together. Certain things seek to be next to other things.”²⁶ *Flight Lines* explores this demand for relation, where forms share material, spiritual, and historical connections—where an echo or a rhyme or a fake elicits study, demands creative means of suture. What happens when we consider together the material relations between enclosure’s scales—between landscapes, people, and cultural production all shaped by enclosure? When we go beyond homology or analogy, what might we find in

proximity, in resonance? I use the term *resonance*, not only for its conjuration of the echo, of the sonic, but also for its suggestion of enmeshment—not the duality of homology or the parallelism of analogy but the stretching topology of a sound in the past that reverberates into the future. Literary forms do not replicate or analogize sociopolitical patterns; rather, they resonate, contain residues and traces of the material conditions from which they emerge.

Valerie Smith identified this resonance among literary, social, and spatial forms in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).²⁷ Reflecting on Jacobs's narrative of self-confinement, Smith argues that "each moment of apparent enclosure actually empowers Jacobs to redirect her own and her children's destiny."²⁸ Importantly, Smith connects this architectural and spatial intervention with literary form—in particular, the genre of the sentimental novel. For Smith, the parameters of this genre resonated with the parameters of life, and so Jacobs "seized authority over her literary restraints in much the same way that she seized power in life. From within her ellipses and ironies—linguistic narrow spaces—she expresses the complexity of her experience as a black woman."²⁹ As Smith considers the relationship between Jacobs's engagement with "architectural close places" and with "linguistic narrow spaces," *Flight Lines* endeavors to map an engagement with forms of enclosure that resonate, rather than replicate, across social, spatial, and literary scales. Rather than presume mimesis, or else the empowering capacities of subversion alone, I am interested in how resonance can point to moments of critique, where aesthetic forms like genre and medium, setting and background, plot and structure, and lyric form and composition offer black writers and artists opportunities to stage antagonisms, reversals, revisions, and transformations of the structures of racial enclosure that constrain, commodify, exploit, and brutalize black life. Expanding on Smith's provocation, I contend that if the conventions of realism, landscape painting, lyric form, history painting, or the bildungsroman express and sustain the logics of enclosure, black formal innovation is not merely stylistic or expressive but contains a rich trove of geographic knowledge, spatial theory, and social critique.

While enclosure is far from the only spatial technology that gives shape to black life and black aesthetic form, *Flight Lines* examines the ways black form—like black spatial praxis—responds to enclosure's material, logical, and aesthetic scales. Thus, I am also interested in what African American literary studies misses when it does not attend to space beyond metaphor or setting; when it does not attend fully to a genealogy of transmedial black form. I argue that twentieth-century African American aesthetics are overwhelmingly defined by a grappling with enclosure's forms on the page. This grappling not

only yields what I've been calling "black form"; it also indexes black spatial praxis, becomes a site for its preservation, and offers insights and challenges for the fields of Black Geographies, literary studies, visual studies, and beyond.

"BLACK GEOGRAPHIES," WRITES Camilla Hawthorne, "asserts the inherent spatiality of Black life—the spatial imaginaries, space-making practices, and senses of place rooted in Black communities."³⁰ I find this assessment of blackness's spatiality as "inherent" key to understanding how black form is always embedded with the trace of black spatial praxis. Blackness, after all, if conceived as being made through diaspora, emerges from the act of scattering—geographically. Even more than as an essentialist notion of cultural or racial coherence, blackness is defined in and as a spatial phenomenon. Richard Iton suggests we approach diaspora as "anaformative impulse . . . that which resists hierarchy, hegemony, and administration." Conceiving of diaspora as "anaform," he writes, "would mean being suspicious of homeland narratives and indeed any authenticating geographies that demand fixity, hierarchy, and hegemony."³¹ Iton's point underscores not only that spatiality is inherent to blackness but that it is a spatiality that fundamentally breaches the geographic taxonomies and definitions that seemingly hold together the modern world, suggesting instead "different and dissident maps and geographies."³² These are the maps and geographies I trace between and beneath the lines and marks of African American cultural production.

Art and literature help us see the unmappable dimensions of black space. It comes as no surprise that so many of our sharpest spatial thinkers—June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, Ralph Ellison, Melvin Dixon, Toni Morrison—are writers of poetry and fiction. These days, when talking about the possibility of black space and place, artists and creative writers are often called on and cited. Understanding why black space conjures the subjective, the creative, and the experimental is one of the motivations of this book. In general, the relationship between narrative and human experiences of space remains a rich subject with implications for literary studies and for life itself. Narratives have always taught us how to think about space and place—whether as property or kin, as static container or bendable, shifting fabric. Art reflects reality and imagines what is possible, expanding the horizon of what we might perceive or envision about the spaces we inhabit. *Flight Lines* ultimately argues that the way we approach narrative can materially alter the way we understand, care for, inhabit, and transform space. African American literature and art place different ethical demands on our relationship to our

environment and to those with whom we share the earth. At the heart of *Flight Lines* is a methodological proposition. What is surfaced, I ask, when we read literature not just *for* geography but *as* geography? As LaToya Eaves observes, “Black geographies are not always cartographically inscribed. In other words, using Black Geographies as a theoretical and empirical framework requires expanding our understanding of ‘validity’ in geographic research.”³³ In this spirit I offer that black cultural production constitutes an undervalued, yet valid, source for the study of black geographies.³⁴

Compared to Black Geographies, the parallel yet intersecting subfield of black ecologies has seen much more robust exploration of literature and engagement with literary studies, in part because of its development as a critique of and intervention within white ecocriticism.³⁵ Although ecology and literature have seemed more easily conversant than geography and literature, I find Black Geographies methodologically appealing for its concerted efforts to connect concrete spatial practices and geographic transformation with radical politics. Black Geographies goes well beyond the descriptive or analogic; as McKittrick warns, “description is not liberation.”³⁶ This is where methodology matters for McKittrick: “Methodology that is relational, intertextual, interdisciplinary, interhuman, and multidisciplinary honors black studies.”³⁷ In other words, literature must be more than representational or descriptive for it to properly engage with Black Geographies.

My intervention joins a larger chorus of thinkers who continue to insist that space is provisional and subjective and, as such, requires creative, imaginative, sensory, and thick modes of representation and analysis.³⁸ Tiffany Lethabo King, for example, has insisted that “counter-cartographies that en-flesh flat spaces and embed Indigenous stories and place-making into the map are geographies that need to be used in tandem with archival spatial records to craft more critical cartographies.”³⁹ *Flight Lines* seeks black stories, both written and visual, that might serve as critical cartographies of and countercartographies to the spatial records of the United States. I emphasize with this book how deeply space and place are constituted by acts of writing, inscription, and mark making, thus reiterating the centrality of narrative and subjectivity to spatiality.

African American literature—especially in its rich, yet undertheorized, tradition of formal innovation—possesses such dynamic insights for thinking black space at more theoretical and structural levels, in particular, for thinking the built environment, or human geographies, and their dialectical relation to social, political, racial, and economic processes. Black literary geographies have been revisited infrequently over the years since Melvin

Dixon's classic 1987 study *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, the first major attempt at a comprehensive study of African American literary geographies.⁴⁰ The insights of Black Geographies and the efforts of literary scholars have yet to come together in earnest. *Flight Lines* offers one point of entry—a meeting place, where poetics and aesthetics are not treated solely as representational objects but as critical methods and repositories of geographic theory. *Poiesis*, a significant concept for defining thinkers in black studies, refers both to the “process of making,” in general, and to “poetic work or composition.”⁴¹ This conception of poiesis links black form and black space together and helps us see how deeply black senses of space and place are embedded within our creative traditions and vice versa. They are inseparable. I hope to illuminate the juncture where these definitions meet: where multiscale modes of composition bring about new forms—forms that are aesthetic but also social, political, spatial, material.

In part, *Flight Lines* responds to a challenge posed by McKittrick and Woods, who keenly observe that “in the humanities, spatial metaphors abound through analyses of black creative texts, yet they are often theorized as detached from concrete three-dimensional geographies.”⁴² *Flight Lines* responds to this call, striving to attend to the relationship between the theoretical dimensions of black space *and* the concrete, material geographies in which black spatial praxis exists and to which it responds. In this way I build on the work of black literary geographies, pushing it to engage more seriously with concrete three-dimensional geographies and to treat space materially, not just metaphorically. At the same time, I hope to bring to Black Geographies a sense of the theoretical richness that poetics, aesthetics, and abstraction make available.

MCKITTRICK AND WOODS ALSO remind us that reclamation, preservation, and remembrance are not “merely a question of re-enacting hegemony” but that “the act of making corners, neighbourhoods, communities, cities, rural lands, rivers, and mountains sacred is central to their defence and the defence of the communities that love and cherish them.”⁴³ Remembrance here is not mere nostalgia or affection but has aesthetic, social, political, spiritual, and epistemic power. It is evidence of the preservation of another way of conceptualizing space. The spaces I examine are not invented but drawn from memory, even if they are fictionalized. Even the most formally experimental of the texts and artworks considered here depict real places where the

author or artist lived or spent time: Dougherty County, Sparta, Eatonville, Cleveland, Baltimore, Charlotte, Chicago, Harlem, and more. Not only is the landscape itself memorialized in print or paint, but so too are the spatial practices, beliefs, and critiques that shaped black life. As David Alworth suggests, literary fiction can theorize social experience “by transposing real sites into narrative settings and thereby rendering them operative, as figures in and of collective life.”⁴⁴ I suggest that it is precisely by way of the creative affordances offered by literary form, medium, and genre that these artists and writers are able to capture that which is in excess of the historical record and the map—sounds, smells, sensations, the ineffable and uncapturable sense of a place.

In other words, the relationship between memory and place drives the theoretical and methodological principles of this book. It is also the source of its inception. *Flight Lines* began in the Clearing, where many things do, with Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*, explaining to her daughter, “Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again.”⁴⁵ For Sethe (and Morrison too), place is palimpsestic. It does not forget but rather stores and preserves what was there before. What Sethe knows about the earth, about the persistence of the picture, about configurations that haunt and dwell in a single place, is a key feature of black space and, I argue, of what black literary study can learn from black spatial praxis.

Black constructions of space are therefore not objective but, as Thadious Davis argues about the Southern writers in *Southscapes*, “move beyond the merely physical aspects and render a felt experiential reality along with metaphorical or symbolic undergirding. Their constructions of place are political, connected to social ideology and social movements or to inscriptions of more abstract space.”⁴⁶ Black space and black form do not exist in a vacuum but always contain the historical, sensory, affective, political. Therefore, purely historicist *and* purely formalist readings of black literature are incomplete. Margo Crawford has convincingly argued that historicism cannot adequately account for African American literature’s affective landscape or “mood-scape,” which renders it distinct from the American literary tradition.⁴⁷ To this, I add a spatial perspective—a reservoir of geographic knowledge, practice, and modes of representation—that distinguishes African American aesthetic form. What Cedric Robinson called “the ontological totality” generated another spatial sensibility, another axis, another “poetics of space.”⁴⁸ So too did it embed this distinctive sense of space within our poetics.

That the earth has memory is not simply magical realism for Morrison but the bedrock of her spatial and geographic theory. As she remarks memorably in “The Site of Memory”:

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”⁴⁹

For Morrison, place slips easily between metaphor and materiality. The machinations and technologies of racial capitalism attempt to discipline and order the old and wild river, foolishly presuming that its containment is an accomplished fact; that to enclose—or to have the *capacity* to appropriate land, commoditize it, and determine its use—is to vanquish. “They” do not know what Sethe knows. Of course, in those very places the river remembers, its path remains invisibly cut. Again, Morrison reads place as palimpsestic, as a sedimentation of histories and temporalities. But she also understands fiction writers to perform a similar remembering—a kind of irrigation, perhaps—within and against the straightening, disciplining function of time. What the writer can communicate, Morrison suggests, is the emotional memory of a place, “what the nerves and the skin remember *as well as* how it appeared.”⁵⁰ Memory, for the writers and artists considered here, does not just capture how places appeared but also what escapes the official record, what is unmappable, “what the nerves and the skin remember.” They capture not just the metaphysical workings of the black world but the way the black world *feels*. Memory, *Flight Lines* demonstrates, adds to, revises, and reconfigures the record of black spatial practice, revealing not its fact but its truth.⁵¹

Not only does the river remember its freedom; it re-members its totality, its multiplicity, its connection to other waterways and tributaries, against the enclosure of its straightening. Memory is also a spatial practice. Just as the river remembers itself despite being straightened, art holds vigil over the memory of another kind of freedom—one more expansive than the one given by racial capitalism. Art and literature allow us to remember the earth before

it became world, “to desediment, exfoliate, to renew the earthly and inseparable assembly.”⁵² In their embrace of formal experimentation to depict real black places, the authors and artists in this book offer maps, blueprints, and modes of navigation that critique the given world, all while conjuring spaces that are not reducible to world making.

Flight

Black movement is not reducible to flight. Flight is but one act in a repertoire of spatial practices that *Flight Lines* explores. Across this book you will find refusal and resistance, but you will also encounter staying, subterfuge, striving, surrender, failure, foreclosure, reproduction. I center *flight* in the title because of the manifold meanings the word signals: *Flight* expresses kinship with the other-than-human; *flight* evokes transcendence; it hails diasporic traditions from the continent to the New World, from folklore to the adjective *fly*; it is as natural as it is *supernatural* to the black church; and of course, *flight* means to flee, to escape. Across this book you will find people escaping plantations and police; escaping cramped apartments and the stifling strictures of patriarchal domination; escaping, over and over, the “lines” of enclosure and its afterlife. As Morrison reminds, in the prologue to *Song of Solomon*, to *fly* can also mean confrontation—to fly in the face of someone or something. Not all critiques of, and challenges to, enclosure required or enabled escape. Some of the flights in this book are about staying, fighting.

In the context of black studies and black cultural production, *flight lines* may initially connote a hopeful take on the myriad possibilities of fugitivity and freedom, but I insist on a more complex deployment. For while my use of *flight lines* does mean to mark gestures of freedom-seeking that drive black spatial praxis and its representation, it also contains traces of the very infrastructures of enclosure it moves against—traces that shape but do not wholly determine notions and practices of survival, sustainment, resistance, or liberation.⁵³

Besides describing the path of an aircraft, flight lines or “lines of flight” is how Brian Massumi translates Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *linges de fuite*, a major concept in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Massumi asserts that the term “has no relation to flying”; rather, “*fuite* covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a *point de fuite*).”⁵⁴ Fugitivity is not a pure analog to “lines of flight,” whose set of actions and movements is more capacious. If I take anything from this interpretation, it is that: a set of practices

irreducible to fugitivity that animate and give shape to black form. Take this image, for example: “Lines of flight, for their part, never consist in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs, as when you drill a hole in a pipe; there is no social system that does not leak from all directions, even if it makes its segments increasingly rigid in order to seal the lines of flight.”⁵⁵ Deleuze and Guattari imply that “fuite” is not simply running away but effecting a disruption or transformation of space—here, fittingly, infrastructure. Per Deleuze and Guattari, lines of flight always exist, running through structures of containment, which enable escape, transformation, divergence, and deterritorialization.

Tiffany Lethabo King observes that in their depiction of “the American, rhizomatic West as an ideal landscape of unfettered experimentation full of connections, ruptures, and unpredictable lines of flight,” Deleuze and Guattari avoid contending with the genocide, settler colonialism, and enslavement upon which such a rhizomatic “terra nullius” would come into being.⁵⁶ Likewise, they erase and disavow “Indigenous ancestral claims, history, presence, and ongoing relationship with the land in North America” and histories of resistance to genocide, slavery, and myriad forms of racial enclosure.⁵⁷ With this critique in mind, can “lines of flight” have any bearing on, or usefulness for, black spatial practices?

Of course, not all flight lines are the same. The flight lines that emerge across black literature, for example, do not necessitate a previous transgression in the physical sense, but perhaps they indicate the construal of blackness as already a transgression of the boundaries that give shape to the modern world—racial boundaries, borders, property lines, gender, social and economic hierarchy, and more.⁵⁸ Flight lines are porous and flexible, their definition elusive. But it is this very flexibility and fungibility that renders them radically open. Within this openness, varying bids for freedom are made; bids that compete, contradict, reproduce, and ignore one another. This diversity, rather than uniformity, of freedom-seeking practice gives way to black space, a dynamic explored at length in chapter 5.

Of *flight line*, however, I wish to ask an even more elemental set of questions that presses on the very shapes and forms on which a flight line would depend for its coherence: Can lines ever enable or facilitate flight for black people? And what else might lines—in the hands of the dispossessed, those meant to be ever enclosed by lines—bring about, make possible, or make visible? Can the same lines that draw boundaries be used to subvert, drain, deform, negate those boundaries? In other words, shifting the emphasis away from *flight* (perhaps overwrought in recent years), what to make of the *lines*

in *flight lines*? As I will show, lines gesture at once to the containing, dividing, and property-defining borders of racial enclosure and to the lines of composition that critique and redraw enclosure's logics.

Lines

Alongside renewed interest in matters of land, space, and geography, *enclosure* has surfaced as a key word in black studies, extending beyond its typical definitions and usages by historians of land, ecology, and political economy to describe more abstract spatial and theoretical phenomena.⁵⁹ Despite its increased circulation, the concept of enclosure has yet to receive extensive, historically grounded treatment with regard to black life and black space.⁶⁰ So, what do I mean by racial, or racialized, enclosure? How do we work with a historically grounded concept of enclosure that does not reduce it to, nor dismiss entirely, its abstract and symbolic applications? It is precisely the intersection of its abstract, historical, and material qualities, I suggest, that makes it an urgent formulation for study and that compels us to see African diasporic peoples within the mass of those subjugated, dispossessed, and contained by processes of enclosure all over the world and throughout time.

As Carolyn Lesjack notes in *The Afterlife of Enclosure*, it is difficult to define *enclosure*, even when thought of as a specific "historical event," that is, the enclosure of the English countryside between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶¹ She writes:

The historical processes of enclosure involve at once a series of parliamentary acts, local actions, and far more amorphous events that have occurred over many centuries. As a result, even the seemingly simple act of dating enclosure proves difficult; without a signal moment when enclosure can be said to have begun, and with no clear endpoint—enclosure continues apace today—enclosure's time frame threatens conventional modes of telling history and storytelling. Moreover, the effects of this process are multiple, varied, and often deferred and diffuse, marked only tenuously by their connection to the initial event that induced them. Therefore, as an *event* enclosure defies our common sense understandings of a historical event as discrete, locatable, and temporally bounded.⁶²

Enclosure, ironically, defies boundedness. It is a term that signals, at once, the historical event of the capitalist transformation of the English countryside,

which destroyed and privatized the commons, and the more general operation of privatization—"the action of surrounding or marking off (land) with a fence or boundary; the action of thus converting pieces of common land into private property."⁶³ It is also used to describe the spatial forms that make enclosure possible ("an encompassing fence or barrier") *and* the figure created by enclosure ("a space included within or marked off by boundaries").⁶⁴ Thus, enclosure itself proliferates—it is both subject and object, historically specific and conceptually abstract. And as Lesjack and others note, it is ongoing.⁶⁵ If enclosure "continues apace today," we might say we live in the space *and time* of enclosure.

But we also live in the episteme of enclosure. Enclosure instantiates the notion of private property, enforces and naturalizes the perception of land *as* property, criminalizes commoning, fortifies hierarchies, and uses partition to commoditize, individuate, contain, and extract. Through partition, the violent taxonomies of the Enlightenment are reified, giving way to ecocidal practices like monocultural farming and the plantation, which function through the differentiation, racialization, categorization, and commoditization of land and human and nonhuman life. Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls this "the disintegrating grind of partition and repartition," the process by which racial capitalism is reproduced and "perpetuates the means of its own valorization."⁶⁶ Enclosure, then, is a significant technology and spatial expression of racial capitalism. And it is no surprise that it develops concurrently with what Michel Foucault called the disciplinary society.⁶⁷ Peter Linebaugh describes the coproduction of incarceration with these processes of privatization in early modern Europe: "Imprisonment grew with enclosures replacing the old chastisements, like the stocks. A massive prison construction program accompanied the enclosure of agricultural production."⁶⁸ Enclosure's material, historical, *and* abstract definitions have always worked through one another as a foundation for modern capitalism and its epistemic structures. This is one reason to turn to cultural production, which can help us map such a complex and multiscalar figure.

Enclosure's intimate connection to incarceration is one obvious reason it should be thought from inside black studies. But what exactly is the "racial" in racial enclosure? I would suggest, the same racial as in racial capitalism, insofar as *all* enclosure relies on and is sustained by practices of racialization. In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson explains that racism "was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the 'internal' relations of European peoples. As part of the inventory of Western

civilization it would reverberate within and without, transferring its toll from the past to the present.”⁶⁹ What he called *racialism* is inseparable from the foundations of European civilization and capitalism and, I would add, from the processes, forms, and logics of enclosure. If we accept this thesis, then the enclosure of the English countryside could not have occurred in isolation from the “architectonic” racial logics of feudal social order.⁷⁰ And as Achille Mbembe reminds us, race is the product of enclosure: “Historically, race has always been a more or less coded way of dividing and organizing a multiplicity, of fixing and distributing it according to a hierarchy, of allocating it to more or less impermeable spaces according to a logic of enclosure. Such was the case under the regimes of segregation.”⁷¹ In other words, enclosure and the development of racial logics were not parallel but radically intertwined.

The plantation, as I argue in chapter 1, is a key spatial form through which racial enclosure was established and refined in the United States and the Caribbean.⁷² Native dispossession was the precondition for the plantation, not only to expropriate land for capitalist agriculture and transform communal lands into property but to eliminate the primary obstacle to enclosure.⁷³ The colonial order was threatened by Indigenous sovereignty and the prospect of European indentured servants and enslaved Africans becoming “new made Indians” by fleeing bondage and either living off the land or joining Native nations. To combat these forms of marronage and absorption into Indigenous communities, European indentured servants received land grants and muskets, making them property owners and enforcers of racial enclosure. The consolidation of racial slavery, whiteness, and settler power enabled the enclosure of Native lands and peoples, through war, forced relocation, reservations, and legislation—notably the Dawes Act of 1887, which further divided up Native lands into individual allotments in an effort to destroy tribal sovereignty, break up communal lands and living arrangements, and make more land available for white settlers.⁷⁴ As Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita observe, “Since lands were often held in common, there was no documented native title, no legal evidence that the land was the property of a community. The absence of title was seen as justification for declaring native lands *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one, unoccupied land) and, therefore, ‘naturally’ available to European settlers.”⁷⁵

Built on top of these stolen lands, plantations offered a new mode of enclosure that would proliferate far beyond the abolition of slavery. Plantations did not simply attempt to contain enslaved people, but the privatization of the land also enabled extraction, produced profit, and brought property into

being—just as enclosure had done in England. At the same time, labor was tied to the land in more explicit ways that relied on containment, torture, legalized bondage, sexual and reproductive violence, and disposal—thus, enclosure’s *material* definitions are perhaps even more relevant to the plantation economy, where people were also property, and privatized land was also a prison. The plantation, a site of containment, extraction, and capital accumulation, was also made *through* processes of enclosure: Planters turned Indigenous land into monocultural commercial farms through expropriation, privatization, and clear-cutting. The enclosure of people through bondage converted them into private property and, through the partitioning logics of race and ontology, criminalized their quest for freedom.⁷⁶ Moreover, the plantation exerted its own violent logics; its imposition effected what McKittrick calls “rational spatial colonization and domination: the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands.”⁷⁷ In these ways the plantation not only was produced *through* the enclosure of land but also became its own specific mechanism of racial enclosure that reverberated throughout global plantation geographies and into the present.

Just as racial enclosure took different forms across the colonized world, Jim Crow did not merely reproduce plantation enclosure but asserted new forms of racial enclosure that sought to manage the South’s new urban spaces and forms of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Plantation enclosure laid the groundwork for our present-day political economy. Clyde Woods writes, “The plantation was an asset stripping enclosure institution without peer. . . . In many ways, the plantation social-economic model is the neoliberal ideal.”⁷⁸ In the wake of what Sarah Haley calls “Jim Crow modernity,” new forms of racial enclosure, like mass incarceration and urban renewal, continually emerge to reassert racial order, containment, extraction, and the regime of private property. The plantation was not replicated but reorganized and reconsolidated through racial enclosure.⁷⁹ We see this succession unfold across *Flight Lines* as it moves from plantations to projects.

At the same time, we must remember that the commons and collective life persisted, constantly in tension with land privatization efforts, even after the formal abolition of slavery and the protracted dismantling of plantations themselves. Today, against even more complex forms of spatial privatization like subdivision, eminent domain, and “air rights,” flashes of the commons still illuminate the city. While I argue that black spatial praxis “worries the line” of racial enclosure, enclosure is never complete, never totalizing. McKittrick and Woods remind us that black geographic narratives and lived

experiences “reconfigure classificatory spatial practices” like enclosure.⁸⁰ Focusing on enclosure, as the obverse of black spatial praxis, is a reminder that we cannot eradicate antiblackness without eradicating capitalism. And this must be a conjoined effort alongside Land Back and the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty, the restoration of the commons, and prison abolition.⁸¹ By asserting our structural position within analyses of enclosure, we suture the radical politics of black life to those of other peoples victimized and dispossessed by capitalism and its technologies. We suture the struggles of African Americans to broader struggles against property, extraction, imprisonment, colonialism, dispossession, apartheid, ecocide, and beyond.

Beyond signaling an engagement with the history of racialized enclosure, *lines* in this book’s title also gestures to the lines of mark making, composition, and poiesis: lines of text, lines of lettering and drawing, lines that cross, double back, angle, and curve. *Flight Lines* pays particular attention to how creative practices of writing, drawing, cutting, collaging, and rearranging underwrite geographic production. In the West, spatial knowledge is constituted through marks—letters, symbols, numbers, and especially by the drawing of lines: latitude and longitude; coastlines and state lines; abstractions of river, road, and railway; property lines and borders that scar and score both map and earth. From the Treaty of Tordesillas, which drew a line that divided the New World between Spain and Portugal, or early maps that transmitted racist fantasies to Europeans, to the property lines and parliamentary decrees that made the enclosure of the English countryside possible, the spatial knowledge that developed during the Enlightenment was forged through the mighty instruments of stake, pale, and pen. And these lines were supplemented by a dense network of textual description and narrative: the prose map, the travelogue, the map key, the signing of deeds and the naming of towns.

However, just as marks produce borders, enclosures, and property and enforce racial capitalism, so too they can be rearranged and disarranged to subvert and reroute their shaping power. What are marks, strokes, lines, and letters in the hands of the dispossessed? How might they refurbish the weapons of capitalist and colonial space into new arrangements? How might they reframe completely what we have been taught about space and place? Because marks and lines are the dominant medium of spatial knowledge production in the West, I assert that African American artists and writers, manipulators and repurposers of marks and lines, have significant things to say about spatiality; they record its past and present and rehearse its possible futures.

A Poetics

With his landmark 1957 *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard is considered one of the earliest recognized theorists of the phenomenological dimensions of space. Focusing especially on domestic space, *Poetics* moves through “the house,” room by room, mapping “the topography of our intimate being.”⁸² Though dated, *Poetics* remains useful in its explicit merging of poiesis, imagination, and the subconscious with architectural analysis. Just as built space exerts force and produces psychosocial and behavioral effects, so too is it experienced beyond its material and physical elements.⁸³ Where he writes of the space of the attic as a site of dreaming, for example, I wonder what states—oneiric or otherwise—belong to those without attics, or those who grow up on rooftops, instead? If the pitched roof “tells its *raison d’être* right away,” the flat roof tells a different story entirely.⁸⁴ If the house is a map of affect and psyche, what is the kitchenette, or the project building? What of those who rent, who constantly move, who share subdivided rooms with extended family? What is the topoanalysis of the apartment dweller, for whom stoop, stairwell, rooftop, air shaft, fire escape, and shared bathroom are the sites of memory’s refuge?⁸⁵ The spatial landscape of black life in the twentieth-century United States is far more complex and dynamic than Bachelard imagined for the white subject at the center of *Poetics*. And while I reject these universalizing and archetyping impulses in my own partial “map” of black space, I also acknowledge the persistence of certain spaces throughout African American literature. I consider where these spaces reoccur and why, how they have been seen and valued, what meanings they have taken on, what purposes they have served, and how they have been mythologized and critiqued by black Americans.

In his psychology of the house, Bachelard identified two principal themes: First, “a house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality.” Second, “a house is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality.”⁸⁶ As chapter 4 demonstrates, with one glance across the mid-century literature of black Chicago, one finds residential environments of mass, multiplicity, and porosity where concepts like self and family are distributed across floors, halls, buildings, and blocks. One finds subdivision where congregation and concentration are horizontally arranged, where walls are thin and life happens outside and with others. While *Poetics* dismisses apartments as “oneirically incomplete,” we might instead ask what *different* senses of space, self, and world emerge in dwellings that exceeded Bachelard’s scope of imagination?⁸⁷

Flight Lines offers a “poetics of space” that departs from Bachelard’s—one that accounts for the sites of habitation that overwhelmingly shape black life in the United States: carceral spaces; spaces of “geographic refuse” on the edges of railroads or highways, or in the recesses of the city; spaces “made sacred” by black literature and art.⁸⁸ These spaces are neither comprehensive nor monolithic; rather, they offer typologies for beginning to imagine a repertoire of black spatial praxis and theorize the ongoing geographic afterlife of enclosure.

By contrast, Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of landscape” asserts the mutually constitutive relationship among geography, history, and poetics and emphasizes the role of narrative and storytelling in the production and apprehension of geography.⁸⁹ I concur with McKittrick that such a view of space is a defining characteristic of black spatial praxis, as “Black diasporic communities engender poetic spaces that redraw and remap the landscape.”⁹⁰ Critical to my project is understanding what a poetics of landscape suggests for regimes of property. I am particularly interested in geographic tools of dispossession, the ways black spatial praxis can reveal a geography untethered from and, at times, antagonistic to (land)ownership and the logics of possession and property.⁹¹ By charting tools made in and from dispossession across African American literature, *Flight Lines* explores myriad ways “subaltern spatial practices” compose a poetics of black space.⁹² My invocation of poetics broadens spatial thought to include African American writers like Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup, and Frederick Douglass, who theorized space beyond its apparent metaphysical qualities, long before Bachelard, Georg Simmel, Martin Heidegger, or Henri Lefebvre. With *poetics*, too, I take license to imagine conversations across these texts, like the meeting at the street corner of Langston Hughes, Romare Bearden, and Tonya Foster. Choosing *a poetics* versus *the poetics* in this book’s subtitle, I try to stay perpetually open to multiplicity, contradiction, possibility, and all the many other spaces and places that this book does not cover. *Flight Lines* is not a manifesto but a provocation to wider and more capacious attunement, a call to see and read more carefully, imaginatively, and rebelliously.

Ultimately, my turn to poetics does not just gesture to my interest in artistic or literary composition, or in the phenomenology of space. With poetics I also invoke *poiesis*, as in the *process of making*. To adequately describe black spaces, we must attend to the creative not simply as beauty or idiosyncrasy but as an epistemic order. As Mishuana Goeman writes of Native women’s literary cartographies, “The literary . . . tenders an avenue for the ‘imaginative’ creation of new possibilities, which must happen through imaginative

modes precisely because the ‘real’ of settler colonial society is built on the violent erasures of alternative modes of mapping and geographic understandings.”⁹³ Just as Native women’s “imaginative modes unsettle settler space,” it is through poiesis that black spatial praxis articulates itself and advances a critique of racial enclosure, worrying its lines.⁹⁴ Poiesis is what it means to make the world. In this way, too, black spatial praxis responds to the poiesis of the “New World,” bending, refracting, breaking, and reassembling it throughout history. As such, I turn to *poetics* as a generatively open term that includes all forms of composition: on paper, in the fields, against the fence, along the railroad, in the mind, on a rooftop, on a dance floor, in the air.

Of Black Space

While the first half of *Flight Lines* focuses on Southern spaces, establishing a historical and material context for racial enclosure in the United States, the second half explores racial enclosure in the postmigration urban geographies of Harlem and Chicago. Despite this trajectory I caution the reader against a teleological reading of this book. As each chapter demonstrates, there is no clean linear movement from the nineteenth century to present, from slavery to freedom, from South to North, from rural to urban, nor even from ground to sky. These binaries are not only constantly coursing through and inflecting one other but are mutually constitutive. The black North, West, and Midwest are incomprehensible without the black South; they give shape to one another in innumerable ways. While nineteenth-century writers anticipated critical geographies scholarship, black space, as I have argued, is specifically attuned to the ways space is shaped by and entangled with the past. The chronology that organizes *Flight Lines* is a spatial history of racial enclosure and its resistance, which likewise changes over time. But even that is not such a straightforward history, for racial enclosures do not evolve in a straight line nor as separate phenomena; rather, they should be understood as accumulative and overlapping, early, belated, expected, and out of place.

Flight Lines enters “the longue durée of enclosure” in medias res, reading fences and gates that crisscross and circumscribe the landscapes of African American literature.⁹⁵ Chapter 1 begins with W. E. B. Du Bois, who theorizes “the place of the fence” in the Black Belt region as a figure for Emancipation’s entanglement with, and extension of, a racialized property regime. It examines creative “misuses” of the fence in slave narratives by William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Solomon Northup to show how black writers and artists misappropriate and reconfigure *aesthetic* structures of enclosure.

Focusing on emplotment, I trace how fences in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) schematize the ways Jim Crow enclosure structured black life and point to moments of narrative flight, where Janie squeezes out from between the slats of marriage plots and linear narrative closure. The chapter concludes with a brief meditation on contemporary artist Cameron Rowland, suggesting that they extend this tradition of misappropriating operations of enclosure to effect "antagonism" to the property regime, rejecting the conflation of black freedom with enclosure. In chapter 2, we find racial enclosure on the move. I focus on railroad enclosure, which destroys and remakes ecologies and social relations through racialized partition. I read *Cane* (1923), which Jean Toomer penned aboard a train, alongside the figure of the train in Romare Bearden's oeuvre of collage-paintings (1960s–1980s), arguing that they produce "echolocologies"—volumetric, eruptive, reverberational, and topographical atmospheres. I propose that these new theories of atmosphere and positionality let us reread the place of place in African American art and literature.

Chapter 3 moves to Harlem, New York, where new enclosures have emerged alongside the new and unprecedented contours of city life. This chapter focuses on how black communities improvise on the space of the city block to resist the managerial impositions of the grid plan. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Alexander, I return to Romare Bearden, this time using his collage *The Block* (1971) as a model for thinking about urban spatial production and representation. Through the kaleidoscopic lens of this model, I read Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) together with Tonya Foster's *A Swarm of Bees in High Court* (2015), attending to how their poetry renders the material block as broken, multiple, reassembled. Here the block is a figure of individuation and parcellation, made through multiscalar operations of enclosure. In these pairings we see the afterlife of the plantation and of urban renewal—extended by gentrification and neoliberal urbanization.

Chapter 4 examines representations of black apartment life in Chicago by poet Gwendolyn Brooks and painter Kerry James Marshall, whose "dilated realism" makes visible the creative and spatial capacities of black apartment dwellers. In Brooks's 1945 poem "kitchenette building" and her novel *Maud Martha* (1953), we find transgressive matter—small, light, and neglected enough to navigate through architectures of immobilization. "In the Mecca" (1968) shows how Brooks equally explored the perils of porosity, while Marshall's *Garden Project* (1994–95) paints the buoyant, floating matter that urban enclosure can neither crush nor keep submerged. Ultimately, Brooks and Marshall present apartments that are sustained dialectically by partition

and porosity, both of which have the capacity to produce radical possibility and oppressive harm. Their narratives refuse false binaries, showing instead how agency and subjection work through each other in complex ways.

Chapter 5 explores the improvisatory conversion of the flat rooftop into a space of community, fugitivity, and performance, through three coming-of-age narratives set in Harlem: Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), and Faith Ringgold's picture book *Tar Beach* (1991). In all three, semiautobiographical subjects rehearse their responses to the enclosure of black life. While Thomas and Brown see roofscapes as a countergeography to the carceral architectures of New York City, Ringgold presents a soft city, still malleable and provisional, still radically open to possibility. While the roofscape offers a site for their subjects to rehearse visions of freedom, however fugitive and fleeting, its writeable, mutable expanse simultaneously reveals just how different, and sometimes conflicting, those visions can be.

Ultimately, a book about black space is inevitably a book about making life under the duress of antiblackness and racial capitalism, and in the afterlife of slavery. The alternate metaphysics laid out in the works of these writers and artists, time and time again, resolves such a contradiction, showing that life is also always made beyond, underneath, and beside these conditions. But the work of this book was never to make a claim on life or death, pessimism or joy, but simply to study very closely some of the spatial thought advanced by black writers and artists over the past two centuries. In this record of spatial thought, we find life, death, pessimism, joy, containment, escape, accommodation, refusal, subversion, indifference, possibility *and* its foreclosure. We find that space is made and unmade in spite of (and through) these divergent and variegated affects, conditions, positions, and practices. The work of this book is to study, to preserve, and to gather. In this way, I strive to catalogue, to look closely, to draw together patterns and initiate strange, interesting, speculative conversations between writers and artists. My hope is that readers will come away newly attuned, able to see what may previously have been invisible; able to read, look, behold, and feel in more expansive ways. That is, after all, the lesson of black spatial praxis.

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 See Virginia Hamilton's celebrated collection of black folktales, *The People Could Fly*. On flying tales in African American literature, see McDaniel, "Flying Africans"; and Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight*.
- 2 McDaniel, "Flying Africans," 28.
- 3 McKittrick, "On Plantations," 949.
- 4 I use *black geographies* to refer to the material spaces black people inhabit, coproduce, and transform; and *Black Geographies* to refer to the interdisciplinary subfield.
- 5 For example, see Perry, *Black Women*; Lloréns, *Making Livable Worlds*; Santos, *Nature of Space*; Simone, *Surrounds*; and D. Thomas, *Political Life*. Plantation and postplantation geographies are not exclusive to the United States and, in fact, remap the territory of the black Americas in ways that defy and refuse the boundaries of the nation-state. Scholars throughout the globe, not only in the Atlantic world, theorize the persistence of plantation relations. See Takaki, *Pau Hana*; Barua, *Plantation Worlds*; and Dey, *Tea Environments*.
- 6 Leah Douglas, "U.S. Black Farmers Lost \$326 Bln Worth of Land in 20th Century—Study," Reuters, May 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-black-farmers-lost-326-bln-worth-land-20th-century-study-2022-05-02/>. See also Waterkeepers Chesapeake, "Brief History"; and National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, "Demographics." For more nuanced discussions of black landownership, see Jennifer James, "Dyspossession"; and Purifoy, "Black Towns."
- 7 McKittrick, "On Plantations," 947. Likewise, Jarvis McNinnis has explored how black people repurposed and reimagined the physical space of the plantation to plot alternative, agrarian futures. See McNinnis, *Afterlives of the Plantation*.
- 8 I borrow "worries the line" from Cheryl Wall, to gesture to the blues tradition of worrying the line—bending a phrase musically and/or lyrically for "emphasis, clarification, or subversion." Wall, *Worrying the Line*, 8. Here, Wall uses the folk expression to examine how black women worry the lines of literary tradition. I hope that *Flight Lines*, in her spirit, worries the lines of enclosure, borders, property, and capitalist spatial logics.

- 9 *Black sense of space* is a riff on McKittrick's term *black sense of place*. See McKittrick, "On Plantations," 947.
- 10 See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*; and Moten, *Black and Blur*.
- 11 Edwards, *Epistrophies*, 19.
- 12 Moten, *In the Break*, 202; and T. Morrison, "Abrupt Stops," 182.
- 13 I build on work being done in the growing field of Black Geographies, especially foundational work by McKittrick and Clyde Woods, including their coedited volume *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. For more on the development and contributions of this field, see Moulton and Salo, "Insurgent Ecocriticism"; Hawthorne and Lewis, *Black Geographic*; Hawthorne, "Black Matters"; Bledsoe and Wright, "Pluralities of Black Geographies"; Noxolo, "Black Geographies"; and Noxolo, "Black Feminist Geographies." See also the work being done by the Black Geographies Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers.
- 14 Moten describes "invagination" as a "principle of impurity that, for Derrida, marks the law of the law of genre where the set or ensemble or totality is constantly improvised by the rupturing and augmentative power of an always already multiply and disruptively present singularity. So that speech is broken and expanded by writing; so that hieroglyphics is affected by phonetic script; so that a photograph exerts itself on the alphabet; so that phonographic content infuses the photo . . . it's the itinerary of the force and movement of signification's outside." *In the Break*, 202. See also Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*.
- 15 T. Morrison, "Abrupt Stops," 182.
- 16 See C. Lewis, *Dynamic Form*; and Edwards, *Epistrophies*, on intermediality and the interface between media.
- 17 On literary enclosures, see M. Jones, "Reframing Exposure"; Fienberg, "Wife of His Youth"; and V. Smith, "Loopholes of Retreat."
- 18 Levine, *Forms*, 7.
- 19 Cedric Robinson describes racialism as part of "the architectonic possibilities previously embedded in the [European] culture." Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 3. My use of *architectonic* here follows his, suggesting that these expressions of enclosure were not just physical structures but were embedded within culture, speech, and social interaction—they are as epistemic as they are material.
- 20 Levine, *Forms*, 2.
- 21 On the relationship between black aesthetics, modernism, and postmodernism, see Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism*; Pavlič, *Crossroads Modernism*; Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*; Dubey, *Signs and Cities*; and Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*.
- 22 Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, 7; Levine, *Forms*, 25.
- 23 Moten, *In the Break*.
- 24 Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation."
- 25 Akomfrah and Eshun, "To Make Figures," 42.
- 26 Jafa, "Arthur Jafa in Conversation."

- 27 See V. Smith, "Loopholes of Retreat," 213, 215.
- 28 Smith, "Loopholes of Retreat," 213.
- 29 Smith, "Loopholes of Retreat," 213.
- 30 Hawthorne, "Black Matters," 5.
- 31 Iton, *Black Fantastic*, 200.
- 32 Iton, *Black Fantastic*, 200.
- 33 Eaves, "Black Geographic Possibilities," 84.
- 34 Moulton and Salo, "Insurgent Ecocriticism," 157; Hawthorne and Lewis, "Black Geographies," 3. See also McKittrick and Woods, *Black Geographies*; and McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*. In recent years the field of Black Geographies has blown open the discipline of geography and advanced the capacities, scope, and interventions of black studies. While this inter- and multidisciplinary field has built on the propositions of Katherine McKittrick and Clyde A. Woods's groundbreaking edited volume, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, it recognizes that "Black Geographic thought has existed (often under other names) for centuries—across formal academic environments, political struggles, and everyday practices of Black space-making." Hawthorne and Lewis, "Black Geographies," 4. To this I would add black aesthetics. Much of the literature and visual art that this book explores precedes the formation of Black Geographies as a scholarly field, yet, as I show, these works offer undeniable, vibrant, original, and radical theories of space, place, and the built environment.
- 35 Frazier, "Black Feminist Ecological Thought." Ecocriticism has likewise outpaced the smaller, less developed field of geocriticism.
- 36 McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 39.
- 37 McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 44.
- 38 In addition to Black Geographies, the past three decades have seen a substantial body of critical, creative, and politically radical work coming out of fields like critical geography, critical cartography, philosophy, and architectural history. With the spatial turn of the 1970s and 1980s, space overtook time as the central preoccupation of cultural production. Buoyed by the emergence of poststructuralism, this period saw field-defining works that interrogated the positivist, empirical approaches to space that had overdetermined its study. See Lefebvre, *Production of Space*; Harvey, *Social Justice*; Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*; and Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*. At the same time, Marxist, feminist, and other radical geographies were emerging, as we see with the founding of *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* in 1969 at Clark University. Our understanding of space and place has been transformed by thinkers who sustain and expand on this work, like Gillian Rose, Edward Soja, Doreen Massey, Neil Smith, Milton Santos, Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, Clyde Woods, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Bobby Wilson, Mike Davis, and many more.
- 39 King, *Black Shoals*, 100.

- 40 Here I refer to scholars who pay attention to explorations and representations of geography in African diasporic literature, not those who endeavor to trace the itineraries of black writers. Examples of pioneering work that explores themes of geography in African American literature include Baker, *Workings of the Spirit*; Baker, *Blues, Ideology*; Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*; Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?" More recent work includes Madera, *Black Atlas*; A. Brown, *Black Skyscraper*; A. Brown, *Residential Is Racial*; T. Davis, *Southscapes*; Avilez, *Black Queer Freedom*; Decker, *Geographies of Flight*; Rambsy, *Geographies of African-American Short Fiction*; and Beavers, *Geography and the Political Imaginary*. For more on the intersection between architecture, race, and literature, see Cheng, *Second Skin*; and Gleason, *Sites Unseen*.
- 41 See Wynter, "Ceremony Must Be Found" (on autopoiesis); Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics"; Ferreira da Silva, "Black Feminist Poethics"; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; and, on "poetics of landscape," Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*.
- 42 McKittrick and Woods, "'No One Knows,'" 7.
- 43 McKittrick and Woods, "'No One Knows,'" 5.
- 44 Alworth, *Site Reading*, 2.
- 45 T. Morrison, *Beloved*, 44.
- 46 T. Davis, *Southscapes*, 6.
- 47 Crawford, *What Is African-American Literature?*
- 48 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 171.
- 49 T. Morrison, "Site of Memory," 98–99.
- 50 T. Morrison, "Site of Memory," 99 (emphasis mine).
- 51 Morrison writes, "The crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot." T. Morrison, "Site of Memory," 93.
- 52 Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 30. I owe my thinking on the distinction between earth and world here to Jonathan Howard. See Howard, "To See the Earth."
- 53 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use *lines of flight* ("linges de fuite") to describe linkages between different assemblages. Lines of flight, they maintain, always exist, running through structures of containment, and enable escape, transformation, divergence, and deterritorialization but "always risk abandoning their creative potentialities and turning into a line of death, being turned into a line of destruction pure and simple." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 506.
- 54 Massumi, "Note on the Translation," xvi.
- 55 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 204.
- 56 King, *Black Shoals*, 98–99. See also King, "Humans Involved," and J. Byrd, *Transit of Empire*.
- 57 King, "Humans Involved," 171.

- 58 I do not read this construal as antiblackness alone but as opposition to any threat to the racial capitalist order and its spatialities of enclosure (which are neither uniform nor evenly distributed).
- 59 See Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*; Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*; Moten, *Stolen Life*; and Moten, *Universal Machine*. Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe have both popularized the term *racial(ized) enclosure* in recent years; see, for example, Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xv. But we see mentions of racialized enclosure as early as 2003, where David Kazanjian considers how a “racialized form of enclosure” drove black men off the sea, referring to “the racial enclosures of the Long Island expulsion act,” as well as the enclosure of the sea “within increasingly reiterated, discursive practices of racial and national codification articulated with formal egalitarianism.” See Kazanjian, “Mercantile Exchanges,” 167, 173. See also Woods’s vital work on enclosure, “Les Misérables of New Orleans”; and Woods, *Development Arrested*.
- 60 With few exceptions like Woods, “Les Misérables of New Orleans”; and Woods, *Development Arrested*.
- 61 The body of scholarship on enclosure and the commons is vast. For further reading, see Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*; Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*; E. P. Thompson, *English Working Class*; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*; Blomley, “Making Private Property”; Harvey, *New Imperialism*; Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*; and W. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.
- 62 Lesjack, *Afterlife of Enclosure*, 7.
- 63 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “enclosure, n1.a.,” accessed March 10, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/enclosure_n?tab=meaning_and_use#5576455.
- 64 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “enclosure, n3.a.” and “enclosure, n4.a.” accessed March 10, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/enclosure_n?tab=meaning_and_use#5576455.
- 65 See Midnight Notes Collective, “New Enclosures”; and Fields, *Enclosure*.
- 66 R. Gilmore, “Abolition Geography,” 491.
- 67 See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. As Moten writes, “Enclosure, engendering, and epidermalization of the irregular, of the alternative, mark the conceptual boundaries of regulatory technique.” Moten, *Stolen Life*, 6.
- 68 Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*, 1.
- 69 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.
- 70 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*, 8.
- 71 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 35.
- 72 For me, the plantation is an exemplary form from which racial enclosures emerge and proliferate, but it is not the only, nor the originary, mode of racial enclosure in the New World. The massive land expropriation and attempted “clearance” of Indigenous peoples, for example, created the conditions for the American plantation in the first place. Kazanjian points us beyond the plantation to the maritime geographies of the revolutionary period, describing the

expulsion of poor and enslaved black people from places like Suffolk County, through “racialized form[s] of enclosure” of both land and sea. See Kazanjian, “Mercantile Exchanges,” 152–57.

- 73 On the ways Native expropriation laid the groundwork for chattel slavery, see C. Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”
- 74 Chang, *Color of the Land*; and Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks*. On the rich and growing literature on Indigenous conceptions of land, see Goeman, “Land as Life”; Witgen, *Seeing Red*; and Nichols, *Theft Is Property!* On the entanglements of slavery and settler colonialism, see Leroy, “Black History.”
- 75 Sánchez and Pita, *Spatial and Discursive Violence*, 27.
- 76 Freshour and Williams, “Toward ‘Total Freedom,’” 1565. I discuss this relationship between the plantation and the common land that surrounded it at length in chapter 1. See also Hahn, “Hunting, Fishing, and Foraging”; and Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.
- 77 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, x.
- 78 Woods, “Les Misérables of New Orleans,” 776.
- 79 Haley, *No Mercy Here*. See also Woods, “‘Sittin’ on Top,” 57; Roane, “Black Ecologies”; Freshour and Williams, “Toward ‘Total Freedom’”; McKittrick, “Plantation Futures”; and Hartman, “Anarchy of Colored Girls,” 470–76. Hartman follows many from the social sciences, like Loïc Wacquant, who writes, “As migrants from Mississippi to the Carolinas flocked to the northern metropolis, what they discovered there was not the ‘promised land’ of equality and full citizenship but another system of racial enclosure, the ghetto, which, though it was less rigid and fearsome than the one they had fled, was no less encompassing and constricting.” Wacquant, “The New ‘Peculiar Institution,’” 381. Racial enclosure acts not only upon space but upon the body too. As Barbara Harris Combs writes, “Racial enclosures and racial enclosure policies—like the plantation, segregation, the ghetto, and prison—provide a place-based mechanism for regulation of the body.” Combs, *Bodies Out of Place*, 11.
- 80 McKittrick and Woods, “No One Knows,” 5.
- 81 Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*, 2.
- 82 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, ix.
- 83 Adrienne Brown has brilliantly developed Bachelard’s phenomenological approach to consider “how the built environment scripts, reinforces, and essentially shapes racial experience.” A. Brown, “Architecture of Racial Phenomena,” 30.
- 84 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 18.
- 85 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 8.
- 86 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 17.
- 87 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 26.
- 88 “Geographic refuse” is from Winston, *How to Lose the Hounds*, 32. “Made sacred” is from McKittrick and Woods, “‘No One Knows,’” 5.
- 89 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 5, 104–9.

- 90 McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 182.
- 91 Jennifer James has provocatively offered the analytic of “dyspossession.” See Jennifer James, “Dyspossession.”
- 92 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxiii.
- 93 Goeman, *Mark My Words*, 2.
- 94 Goeman, *Mark My Words*, 2.
- 95 Lesjack, *Afterlife of Enclosure*, 26.

CHAPTER 1. “THE FENCES HAVE FLOWN”

- 1 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 88.
- 2 On the literary geography of the color line, see Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*.
- 3 Quoted in Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 55.
- 4 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 56.
- 5 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 56.
- 6 Examples include Frederick Douglass’s figure of the “blood-stained gate,” Édouard Glissant’s concept of “arrival,” Dionne Brand’s exploration of the “door of no return,” Hortense Spillers’s concept of “vestibularity,” and Nathaniel Mackey’s figure of the “paracritical hinge.” See Douglass, *Narrative*; Glissant, “Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara”; Brand, *Map to the Door*; Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”; Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge*.
- 7 Roane, “Black Ecologies.”
- 8 Rowland often describes their work as “grounded in the black antagonism of property”; see artist’s statement, Carpenter Center, March 13, 2025, <https://carpenter.center/programs/artist-talk-ronald-rowland>. The concept also appears in captions to many of their works. See, e.g., *Obstruction* (2024), Maxwell Graham Gallery, <https://maxwellgraham.biz/artists/ronald-rowland/>; and *Depreciation* (2018), Dia Beacon, <https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit-our-locations-sites/ronald-rowland-depreciation>.
- 9 Madera, *Black Atlas*, 213.
- 10 Madera, *Black Atlas*, 213.
- 11 Jeffrey et al., “Rethinking Enclosure,” 1250; and Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.
- 12 Moten and Harney, “Conversación Los Abajocomunes”; Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*, 1–2; see also Netz, *Barbed Wire*; and Low, *Behind the Gates*.
- 13 J. Scott, *Seeing like a State*, 55.
- 14 Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 2.
- 15 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 8, 154. For an extensive treatment on how plantation geographies transformed natural environments, see Johnson’s chapter “Dominion.”
- 16 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 155; Roane and Hosbey, “Mapping Black Ecologies”; and Roane, “Black Ecologies.”