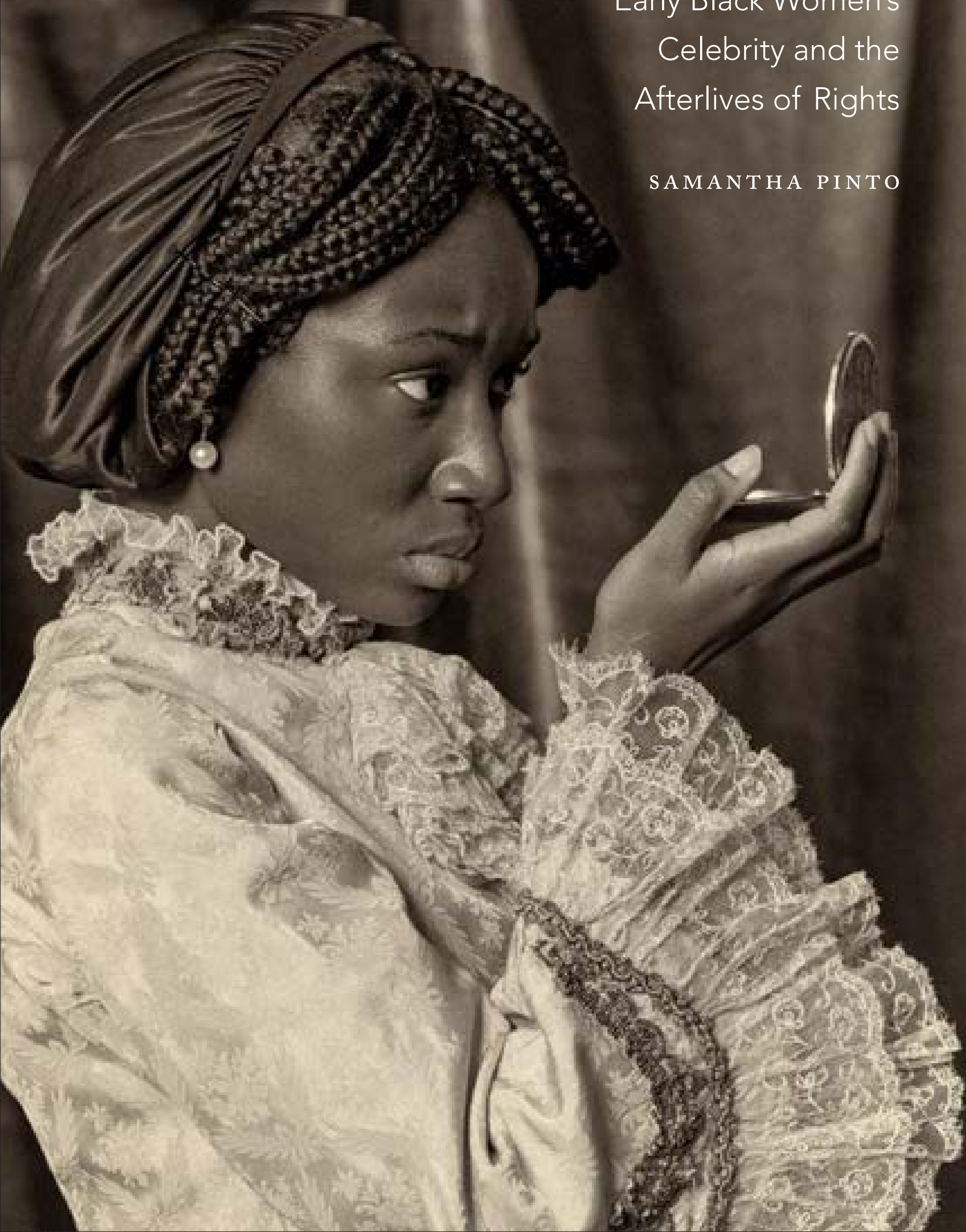
INFAMOUS BODIES

Early Black Women's Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights

SAMANTHA PINTO



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SAMANTHA PINTO

Early Black Women's Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights

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Contents

Acknowledgments · vii

INTRODUCTION
infamous bodies, corrective histories · 1

1. FANTASIES OF FREEDOM
phillis wheatley and the "deathless fame" of black feminist thought · 31

2. THE ROMANCE OF CONSENT
sally hemings, black women's sexuality, and the fundamental vulnerability of rights · 65

3. VENUS AT WORK
the contracted body and fictions of sarah baartman · 105

4. CIVIC DESIRE
mary seacole's adventures in black citizenship · 139

5. #DEVELOPMENTGOALS
sovereignty, sarah forbes bonetta, and the production of the black feminist political subject · 173

CONCLUSION
black feminist celebrity and the political life of vulnerability · 203

Notes · 207
References · 221
Index · 243

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UNIVERSITY
PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

INFAMOUS BODIES, CORRECTIVE HISTORIES

In law, rights are islands of empowerment. To be unenlightened is to be disempowered, and the line between rights and no-rights is most often the line between dominators and oppressed. Rights contain images of power, and manipulating those images, either visually or linguistically, is central in the making and maintenance of rights. In principle, therefore, the more dizzyingly diverse the images that are propagated, the more empowered we will be as a society.—PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 1991

We have many estimable women of our variety, but not many famous ones. The word famous is applied to a person who is "celebrated in fame or public report, renowned, much talked of . . . used in either a good or bad sense, chiefly the former." It is not well to claim too much for ourselves before the public. Such extravagance invites contempt rather than approval. I have thus far seen no book of importance written by a negro woman and I know of no one among us who can appropriately be called famous. This is in no way a disparagement. . . . We start too near a former condition [slavery] to have any famous work in science, art, or literature expected of us. It is not well to ship the paddle wheels before we have steam to move them. . . . I do not find it consistent to enlarge the list of famous negro women. Many of the names you have are those of admirable persons, cultivated, refined, and ladylike. But it does not follow that they are famous. Let us be true and use language truthfully.—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, in response to a request for names of "Noted Negro Women," 1892

For a brief moment in early 2016, months before her career-defining visual album *Lemonade* dropped, entertainer and icon Beyoncé Knowles Carter was tied to a rumored film project on Sarah Baartman, the early nineteenth-century African performer known in Europe as the Venus Hottentot. Baartman, performing in Europe from 1810 until her death in France in 1815, is perhaps the most infamous of bodies when thinking through the global tragedy and travesty that defines the relationship between Enlightenment modernity and

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black womanhood. The gossip of the rumored casting spread quickly and was just as quickly critiqued by both South African groups and popular think-piece websites such as *Feministing*, media blog *Blavity,* and hip hop magazine *Complex*. Ultimately, the link between Beyoncé and the biopic was disavowed by the popular icon's camp with a public statement in *Billboard* (Platon 2016) asserting that while "Beyoncé is in no way tied to this project . . . this is an important story that should be told."

This double-pronged statement of distance and recognition engages the minefield of black feminist thought and its relationship to cultural representation. Baartman's legacy has been one of infamy—one that locates the tragedy of antiblackness in her performing body and its fate. Debates about Baartman center on the politics of representing exploited black women's bodies and the attendant risk of repeating the injuries such exploitation caused and continues to manifest in the contemporary moment. Some also look to Baartman's past to find liberatory, resistant, and reparative possibilities in her performative resilience and its reiterations, and others advocate for Saidiya V. Hartman's (2008) caution about reproducing the violence of the archive of enslavement and colonialism by narrating black suffering for white audiences, which she outlines in "Venus in Two Acts."[1] Hartman nonetheless reinvests in the power of representation as she outlines the work of "critical fabulation," a process that attempts "both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" (11). The early 2016 public reception of the possibility of Beyoncé reproducing Baartman, and then her camp's simultaneous disavowal of the project and recognition of the significance of Baartman's story inhabit the difficult desires—inclusive of failure and impossibility—that constitute black women's history and its cultural afterlives.

Beyoncé herself has also been a lightning rod and litmus test for black feminist politics, tightly controlling her message, image, and brand even as her status as a "racial icon" has catapulted her to unheard of levels of public recognition as well as critical attention from black feminist public luminaries such as bell hooks, Melissa Harris-Perry, and Angela Y. Davis. Pre-*Lemonade* Beyoncé, who is often seen as apolitical in her hyperfeminine performance, gives way to a recognizably politicized Beyoncé in much of this attention. If, as Nicole R. Fleetwood (2015a) compellingly argues, the "racial icon" is unique in its simultaneous evocation of veneration and denigration, Baartman seems to inhabit too much of the latter for even the post-*Lemonade*, politically venerated Beyoncé—the one with a Black Panther Party–inspired, black nationalist aesthetic in her 2016 Super Bowl performance of "Formation"—to rehabilitate for her considerable fan base. Beyoncé's balancing act of recognizing

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the significance of Baartman's infamous story while simultaneously refusing the intimacy of representing her body on screen suggests that Baartman's iconography still exceeds the boundaries of a black political imaginary of historical recovery or clear critique. Instead, Baartman is rendered *almost* unrepresentable by Beyoncé's camp precisely because of the very "problem" of black women's representation that she embodies and provokes over two hundred years after her death.

Infamous Bodies takes seriously the genealogy of black women celebrities who undergird Beyoncé's and Baartman's formations along with the political worlds and work of black women's cultural representation. As Frederick Douglass's 1892 letter quoted in the epigraph attests, the well-known author and abolitionist refused the category of famous to black women, including Phillis Wheatley, Sally Hemings, Sarah Baartman, Mary Seacole, and Sarah Forbes Bonetta, all of whom he likely had encountered in print (let alone fellow black women writers, speakers, and activists with whom he shared print and stage). Douglass lays bare the anxiety around black fame and its tenuous yet significant place in Western political economies—that it might be feminized and sexualized in object and subject if its political and cultural meaning were to become more capacious to include the infamous, sexualized, feminized labor in which black women's representational economies traffic in the public sphere. Following Hartman, *Infamous Bodies* eschews both the "heroic" and the "tragic" as adequate frames to ask how figures such as Baartman are both erased in political histories and "come to stand for too much" (Crais and Scully 2009, 6), in Baartman's biographers' words, not just in their own historical times but also in contemporary cultural negotiations of race, rights, and social justice. *Infamous Bodies* examines the political and cultural trajectories of famous black women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries whose legacies stretch into the twenty-first century.

This book studies cultural representations of Baartman, African poet Phillis Wheatley, enslaved subject of scandal Sally Hemings, Victorian-era Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole, and royally adopted African "princess" Sarah Forbes Bonetta. Their complicated biographies push the term celebrity beyond noting exceptional black women who make it into the archive—beyond correcting Douglass's exclusions. Instead, celebrity becomes a particular genre of black political history, one that foregrounds culture, femininity, and media consumption as not merely reflective of, ancillary to, or compensation for black exclusion from formal politics, but as the grounds of the political itself. *Infamous Bodies* reimagines these celebrity genealogies both as they critically intersect with the formation of human rights discourse around individual civil rights

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and entitlements, and as they represent a variety of black women's experiences as embodied political subjects of modernity who engage with pleasure, risk, violence, desire, ambition, and vulnerability. *Infamous Bodies* considers how they have been disciplined into the poles of heroic ascent into the affirmative recognition of rights or descent into tragic lack of agency as well as how they have exceeded these boundaries. Reading early black women's celebrity promises not repair of historical injuries but a method of interpretation that assumes the vulnerabilities of black women's embodiment as the starting point and future of progressive political projects—with "bodies" signifying both the material body *and* its representational insistence and repetition. Critical itineraries around social justice, then, are here premised on vulnerable embodiment not as a tragic problem to be solved, but as the premise of living and as the object of institutional care rather than cure.

Black women celebrities are also at the cultural, critical, conceptual, and representational center of debates about rights, humanity, and freedom. Within this frame, I explore how key concepts in the formation of rights as they are commonly known, forged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—such as freedom, consent, contract, citizenship, and sovereignty—have been shaped by these cultural figures and contemporary transnational understandings of the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and rights. These "understandings" have frequently taken the form of heated debates about the value of rights—especially for Left critique that sees a tainted origin as an endpoint unto itself. *Infamous Bodies* takes these critiques of rights discourse as its starting point. In the spirit of Patricia J. Williams's own capacious desire for more and different rights as a black feminist political goal, this book looks elsewhere for a proliferation of genealogies of the political that center on black women's embodied experience and reception.[2] These histories include the shadow of rights discourse in varying and important ways, as well as point to and construct other modes of concatenating political meaning.

Baartman's reception and representation and the discussion of Beyonce's embattled "right" to play her then participate in but also disrupt some of the major economies of what this book fashions as the corrective histories of early black women celebrities that continue to undergird black political thought. *Corrective histories* are the multiple reanimations of these infamous lives and texts that are meant to figure more contemporary political and social investments in struggles for black freedom and that start from a premise of either skepticism at the white feminized sphere of celebrity or revel in its public and resistant possibilities as they read "beyond" the mere surface of celebrity culture. This book traces the routes of these infamous bodies, these black women

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celebrities who maintain uncomfortable relationships to existing political discourses of race, rights, and representation. It does so through its analysis of a wide-ranging archive that includes newspaper accounts, legal proceedings, paintings, political cartoons, photographs, letters, poetry, contemporary visual art, novels, films, television scripts, plays, documentaries, children's books, monuments, memorials, speeches, autobiographies, biographies, histories, literary criticism, political theory, and other rich scripts that make up the enormous category of what we might call the culture of celebrity. Some of these act as corrective histories, even as they can also act as critical fabulations that maintain a deep skepticism about rights discourse and liberal humanism as pathways to liberation. Some may still find themselves in the grip of the conceptual limits of Enlightenment modernity, frames that assume, however complexly, that diagnosing failure or resistance is the endpoint of black cultural representation and politics. Here, instead, I investigate the critical attachments and desires that append to these histories and figures—generously and hopefully generatively—to map alternative routes through the genealogy of black women's representation and, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999) terms, "re-presentation" and its relationship to political thought beyond the corrective model.

Like Jennifer C. Nash's (2019b) work on moving away from a "defensive" affect of black feminist intellectual practice as exclusive property, moving away from the corrective can be both exposing and exciting for the future of the field. Celebrity repetition conjures up the Morrisonian "re-memory" of not just the material trauma done to black women's bodies in the past but also the critical trauma enacted through their simultaneous elision and exploitation in academic discourse. This project then converges on the feminist scholarly sites of critical fabulation, representation, and re-memory—alongside Diana Taylor's (2003) concepts of the archive and the scenario as the delicate delineation of that which is recovered through history versus that which is reperformed within a familiar structure, genre, or scene with the open possibility of difference—to animate discussions about the reception and reproduction of early black women celebrities in multiple forms and forums across modern history.

These celebrity lives dovetailed with the era often identified as the age of Enlightenment, which, following Avery Gordon's (2008) designation "New World modernity," I refer to as Enlightenment modernity—the historical point that simultaneously solidified the discourses of the "Rights of Man" and the enslavement of African peoples. Baartman both crystallizes and disrupts the rights-based poles of freedom and unfreedom, resistance and submission, as well as agency and exploitation that are formed during this historical pe-

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riod. Baartman is an enduring racial icon, and her corrective histories also intersect with the contemporary currency of both mainstream rights-based political understandings of personhood and antiracist movements that challenge the rhetoric of human rights as able to engineer black freedom.[3] Both discourses engage with the complicated work of "the making and maintenance of rights" that Williams describes in the epigraph, in that they expose rights as a set of fictions, performances, and constructions that are far from organic or "self-evident," in Thomas Jefferson's own infamous words. This book enters into these heated debates with eyes toward stretching visions of black political futures into alternative interpretive economies that imagine politics beyond rights (including rights critique) in black feminist thought. "Re-membering" these figures for this book thus represents not just a rehearsal of past traumas, but the recognition of holding the injury at the same time that one builds from and upon it, as in *Beloved*'s (Morrison [1987] 2004) own construction of the infamous afterlives of enslavement; this means materially holding both temporalities at once, rather than seeking trauma's impossible resolution. In the insightful words of one of this manuscript's anonymous reviewers, then, this book takes up representation not as a black feminist search for truth but as a black feminist analytics of "truth effects."

In tracing the work that Baartman and her fellow early black women celebrities do to undergird the imagined possibilities for living and representing black feminist lives across two centuries, *Infamous Bodies* seeks to find alternate sequences of meaning and strategies of interpretation that include but do not center on the stories critics already tell and know about the aims and possible outcomes of black political and social life (and death). These configurations hinge on the figures of decidedly difficult subjects—black women who are "famous" enough to have currency in the repeating scene of black iconography within the modern era, but who are also "infamous," or defined by their lack in comparison to the kinds of rights-bearing, rights-demanding, resistant, or agentic subjects that one might more obviously seek in creating antiracist political theories. In Michel Foucault's (1967, 161) formulation of "infamous men," he argues for an infamy defined by a metric of lost-to-history but for their "encounter with power" that marks them in the archive. I repeat that frame with a difference here, arguing that the "record" of encounter includes not just bureaucratic biopolitical and legal archives but the afterimages—Joseph Roach's (2007) term for the ways and forms that celebrity presence lingers, materially and otherwise—of early black women's celebrity in the public sphere. Hence, this project focuses on famous black women—akin to Fleetwood's (2015a) "racial icons," Kimberly Juanita Brown's (2015) "repeating bod[ies]," Uri

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McMillan's (2015) "embodied avatars," and Daphne A. Brooks's (2006) "bodies in dissent"—whose public infamy renders them difficult subjects for racial heroism.

Douglass excludes these figures from "appropriate" black political vision, even as doing so "masks the import of the very centrality (of black women and their bodies) organizing transatlantic slavery and its resonant imprint" (K. J. Brown 2015, 8). Expanding Brown's "resonant echoes of slavery's memory" (8) to include other types of colonialist, labor, and performance histories, I focus here not on making these celebrity figures more appropriately known or seen—"famous," in Douglass's view of the term—but to question the available modes of hailing black women subjects into known-ness, into visibility, in the very moments that make them politically viable. McMillan's and Brooks's critical formulations, which always keep their eyes on this political impossibility rendered in their subjects' performances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ground my own move away from redressive terms of analysis for black performance and authorship.

Because each figure in this book also troubles the line between free and enslaved, they have become contested, thick subjects that black studies and black feminist studies have returned to again and again in an effort to "work the contradiction," as Angela Y. Davis (2016, 125) refers to the methodology of feminist practice. *Infamous Bodies* thinks through the stakes of the debates surrounding these figures in their own time and beyond, and the way those corrective histories—both in disciplinary terms of reading in a "corrective" mode that aims "to remedy misreadings" (Nash 2017, 119) and in a broader sense, of the "stories [that] matter," Clare Hemmings's (2011) description of the narratives feminist studies has of itself as a field—have animated critical attachments around the sign and scene of "black women" and "black feminism." In doing so, I locate routes of black feminism that challenge the very terrain recognized as the political, or of what and how to understand the desired trajectories and outcomes of calls for social justice around race, gender, and sexuality. In other words, I question the ground that reads pre-*Lemonade* Beyoncé as lacking the political gravitas to pull off the balancing act of representing the story of Baartman but post-*Lemonade* Beyoncé as somehow better able and equipped in her recognizable political formations to redress the unredressable, to remake the tragedy of black abjection into an afterlife of political triumph.

These counterintuitive choices, traced here as the central figures of black political subjectivity, also expose possibility in the legal definition of "infamous" as a description "[of a person] deprived of all or some citizens' rights as a consequence of conviction for a serious crime" (*OED* 2017). The ontological "crime" of being black, and of being a black woman, has arguably defined the extremes

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of deprivation experienced in Enlightenment modernity, as well as desires for a revolutionary politics based on positive rights and freedoms. *Infamous Bodies* traces the ways these celebrity figures have been disciplined into laboring for the corrective histories of particular political visions—and also imagines, with artists, thinkers, and the figures themselves, a politics premised on the body, and embodied experiences of women of color.[4] It takes into account infamy not only as a criminal category, but a sexual one that appends particularly to feminine and feminized bodies and acts in the public sphere, marking a constant duality of "access" as risk and reward.

In what follows in this introduction, I expand on why celebrity is a vibrant and necessary terrain where the political is made through rather than against feminine embodiment. I then trace how, in particular, black feminist scholars—historians, cultural critics, and theorists—have worked through and on agency as a critical and problematic terrain in which to imagine the quotidian construction of black women's political subjectivity. I pay particular attention to both the obvious and subtle ways that race, rights, and humanity have been inextricably yoked together and critiqued in the work of political theorists before me in black, African, African-diaspora, postcolonial, feminist, queer, and critical ethnic studies. Next, I explore how vulnerability as a political theory might be a generative hermeneutic frame to consider the particular labor of black women, and their reception, in the public sphere. Finally, with particular attention to recent critiques in feminist and African American literary and historiographic study that call attention to the place of critical desires in constructing histories, traditions, and political legacies (not to mention objects of study), I briefly describe my archive as I move through the work of each chapter in imagining the lives and afterlives of five key black women celebrities of the era. This introduction maps out black feminist thought as the powerful and undercited base for a reconception of the political writ large, describing a politics from where the vulnerable figures of my study stand, as they were and as they are repeated, remembered, and reread.

Black Celebrity, Black Effect, and Black Study

In 2018's "Black Effect," The Carters (the artistic collective moniker for Jay-Z and Beyoncé on their joint album *Everything Is Love*) list their "Black Effect(s)"—the commodities, qualities, and features that evince their still-black cultural bonafides and that, in the song's formulation, invite criticism from but also have the potential to silence their haters. Namechecking the Jay-Z–owned streaming service Tidal, forewarning forthcoming documentaries on Trayvon

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Martin (in the wake of the acclaimed Jay-Z–produced Kalief Browder documentary), and claiming "I'm like Malcolm X," Jay-Z rhymes until the three-minute mark, when Beyoncé takes over:

> I'm good any way I go, any way I go (go)
> I pull up like the Freedom Riders, hop out on Rodeo
> Stunt with your curls, your lips, Sarah Baartman hips
> Gotta hop into my jeans, like I hop into my whip.

Beyoncé's range here includes civil rights and conspicuous luxury consumption as well as a callback to the Baartman controversy: a reclaiming of fictional phenotypic racial categorization by "owning" Baartman's embodied legacy as Beyoncé's own, the locus of her and Baartman's fame and their infamy as well as their performative livelihoods.

The corrective histories of "nonheroic" black women such as Baartman, those one might characterize as infamous rather than famous, include and engender a deep suspicion of the feminized public sphere of celebrity as the domain of the political, much as do earlier dismissals of Beyoncé's political heft pre-*Lemonade*, skeptical of her lack of overt engagement with recognizable race politics due to her focus on the pop culture domains of love, wealth, personal loss, fashion, and beauty. I suggest infamy as a frame, then, because it also includes the disapproving public attention of fame, as well as a legal valence in its history as describing a state of rightlessness (Paik 2016), a deprivation of rights as legal "consequence" (OED 2017). But in Foucault's designation of infamy as visibility only due to an encounter with power, embodied black womanhood during this period stands as a public conviction turned question, a stripping of what one might think of as basic human rights if one was to think of "rights" as even existing before the categories of "black" and "woman." In choosing to focus on the formation and circulation of celebrity figures, I consciously engage the vulnerabilities, pleasures, and risks of representation, including objectification.[5] Celebrity bodies and attachments to academic objects of study can elicit similar commitments, surprises, and desires from their audiences, where "political desire is always excessive—excessive to the conditions, imaginations, and objects that are used to represent it" (Wiegman 2012, 26).

The infamous bodies of Wheatley, Hemings, Baartman, Seacole, and Bonetta inspire and occupy these terrains of political desire—always confounding, thwarting, and interrupting the idea "that if only we find the right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool, our critical practice will be adequate to the political commitment that inspires it" (Wiegman 2012, 2–3). As black women in the public sphere, these five figures exert varying levels of recognized

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"authority" over their representational spheres in their own moments and beyond, challenging their transhistorical audiences' interpretive devotions by insisting on a "fame" that does not rely on the kind of precision of accomplishment Douglass implores when thinking about black women's contributions to the race in the opening epigraph. Instead, these five figures largely move us away from the illusory control of self-authorship and self-representation as the central or only way to understand black feminist cultural resistance, and hence away from visions of (un)agency and its attendant genres of heroism and tragedy as the model of black political subjectivity. These figures are, to call on Ann duCille (1994), one route to both engaging and disrupting black women as "hot" political/intellectual/academic objects of attention that pushes up against the understandable impulse to authentication and ownership that duCille ambivalently unpacks.

Like the work of Brooks and McMillan, I retain the possibility of alternative readings of seemingly overly scripted performances of black women's embodiment, but I focus on methodologies that consider *critical* dissent and distance more than a focus on the political intent and capacities of black women cultural producers. Brooks's (2006) conceptualization of the "viability" of black women's bodies and performances, in particular, informs the work of this book, as a way to reconsider the intimacy that "star images" (Richard Dyer's [(1986) 2013] term for the constellation of texts of and around the celebrity) create between celebrity and audience—one that renders agency as an impossibly *unpure* question rather than as a definitive critical location (Brody 1998). Brooks, McMillan, Jennifer DeVere Brody, and other scholars of black celebrity and embodiment, along with scholars of black erotics, form the critical and creative space for the archive of *Infamous Bodies*, one which spans particularly wide historical, geographic, and generic terrains to create a genealogy of modern political subjectivity that hinges on the work of black women's embodiment in the cultural sphere.[6]

The celebrity as a figure—as a decidedly modern creation of the same formational time period of rights themselves—begins to get at this unique space of intimacy and inquiry. If Dyer's ([1986] 2013) conception of the "star image" and "star text"—and his later trenchant reading of whiteness in filmic celebrity—rests on the height of the Hollywood star system that so many theorists of the modern find themselves grappling with, one might also join other celebrity studies theorists and historians in thinking through the canny strategies of "extraordinary ordinariness" cultivated in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including Monica L. Miller's (2009) work on the formation of the

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black dandy and Francesca T. Royster's (2003) work on Cleopatra.[7] Joseph Roach (2007, 13) links modern celebrity's appearance to the "deep eighteenth century," arguing that the period "is the one that isn't over yet. It stays alive among us as a repertoire of long-running performances. In fact some of them we can't get rid of, hard as we might try: chattel slavery and colonialism, for example, still exist as themselves here and there and as their consequences everywhere. The deep eighteenth century is thus not merely a period of time, but a kind of time, imagined by its narrators as progress, but experienced by its subjects as uneven developments and periodic returns." Leo Braudy (1997, 595) refers to this period as the "democratization of fame," where, "since the eighteenth century, the imagery of fame has been more connected with social mobility than with inherited position, and with social transcendence as an assurance of social survival." Sharon Marcus (2019) dates celebrity to the nineteenth century, and she retains Roach's focus on the technologies of celebrity while also scrambling definitions of agency and authorship through her feminist concept of "drama"—making audiences, fans, consumers, media producers, and stars all performers on a stage of narrative creation and social meaning-making.

Braudy and Roach locate the discourses of Enlightenment and fame/celebrity as intertwined, "predicated on the Industrial Revolution's promise of increasing progress and the Enlightenment's promise of ever expanding individual will," and "inseparable from the ideal of personal freedom. As the world grows more complex, fame promises a liberation from powerless anonymity" (Braudy 1997, 297). Following Brody's (1998) foundational work on how the centrality of blackness was used to create an anxious illusion of white purity in Victorian English culture, I point to the ways that black women's constant embodied cultural presence in this earlier era undergirds the very core of political discourse of the time. Following Sharon Marcus (2019) out of the historical real time of celebrity development, this project insists on the significance of cultural production and reception—the optics and narratives of race, their "making and maintenance" (P. Williams 1991) work—as a mode that labors alongside law and civic participation in the public sphere to make the "drama" that constitutes and reconstitutes the afterlives of rights.

This "drama" displaces a primary critique that locates celebrity culture squarely within the realm of Marxist theory. *Infamous Bodies* critically and curiously explores what capitalism's seeming products—celebrity and commodity culture—afforded through and opened up for black women's embodiment. This approach refuses to consider the formal realms of law and politics proper

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as exempt from commodification, but more importantly, it takes seriously the social economy that provided women the most access as producers, objects of attention, and as audience/consumers.[8] The feminized public sphere, that of celebrity culture, is another site of Foucault's (1967) production of infamy, the "encounter with power," the scene/scenario that makes black women legible in the archive, or gives us access to their archive. How, this book asks, can public performances of black femininity be taken seriously, not in the way they approximate the formal sphere of politics as it is already known but in how they articulate a different form of "politics"—the political as a category of analysis that asks how a certain genre or milieu imagines, organizes, and governs social relations, rather than as a strict designation and disciplining of a singular formal realm. This includes and exceeds the feminist credo of "the personal is political," as *Infamous Bodies* refuses to make what was excluded from the formal realm of the political recognizable only in its relationship to the conceptual terrain already "known" to be politics. Instead, I argue that celebrity itself marks an important terrain to remake ideas and ideals of what constitutes the political, particularly in black studies.

My analysis then builds off of the work of black feminist emplotments of "the modern" that have shifted the terrain of political and aesthetic interpretation toward black women's celebrity. Jayna Brown (2008), Shane Vogel (2009), and Anne Anlin Cheng (2011), for instance, position black women performers and cultural producers at the center of modern aesthetic practice: for Brown, black women's embodied subjectivity defines "the modern woman" in the early twentieth century; for Vogel, it is in their "spectacular" publicity that black women's sexuality transforms the political subject; for Cheng, the convergences between the display of black skin and modernist aesthetics produce a new sense of "surface" meaning—surface as meaning—in the same era. Cheng provocatively marks her focus on surface as a conceptual repositioning fundamentally linked to the struggle over the political: "It is the crisis of visuality—rather than the allocation of visibility, which informs so much of current liberal discourse—that constitutes one of the most profound challenges for American democratic recognition today" (171). Celebrity can materially embody a history of racial formation that shows not just the well-known hegemonies but also the seams and breaks of such narratives—the idiosyncratic iterations of meaning that public circulation threatens and promises. In the orbit of celebrity comes the intersection of race, sexuality, gender, and nation in the relics of fame: the art objects left behind, the performances that both conform to and conflict with dominant narratives of identity, the globalized market for racialized celebrity in the contemporary moment of late

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capital, and the rush to memorialization as reparation. These images and after-images shape modernity and can reshape our political imaginations within it.

Celebrity presents a different frame than heroism for what we know and why we know it about black women in the public sphere of Enlightenment modernity—taking seriously what gets recorded in the modern age of media, whether that be portraiture prints in circulating manuscripts for a rising literate audience or early photographic practice in the Victorian era. In looking to figures who are not race heroes, or "race women" (Carby 1987)—difficult celebrities who, in Celeste-Marie Bernier's (2012, 26) words, disrupt "the politics and poetics of otherwise excessively sensationalized, grossly oversimplified, and willfully misunderstood acts and arts of Black male and female heroism"—I move away from icons and archives of those who have traditionally been thought of as representing "race as a form of charismatic self-display" (Stephens 2014, vii). Instead, I view my subjects and their "excessively sensationalized" afterlives as staging the radical uncertainties of what Fred Moten (2003) calls the "thingness" of blackness in the antiblack world, in a manner that refuses many of the existing terms of memorialization even as they drag its affective terrain.[9] The infamous bodies taken up in this book are both material and spectral, repeated and distributed in both quotidian and exceptional cultural flows. Celebrity and its cultures matter through and beyond their original iterations, and point to innovative futures in theorizing race if decoupled with the search for self-authorship and agency as the ultimate ends of political imagination. By emphasizing iconic figures like Baartman, this book takes black aesthetics seriously—like Beyoncé's claiming of "Sarah Baartman hips" as a political "Black Effect" that stands uneasily aside and within legacies of traditional protest narratives and uplift narratives. It is to the particular problems of public intimacy for considering black women's political meaning within and beyond agency, inside and outside of the academy, that I now turn.

Black Feminist Visions of Agency, Rights, and Humanity

At the center of the corrective histories traced in this book are the longstanding debates around, claims of, calls for, and challenges to "agency" in black feminist thought. Agency often marks the grounds for and limits of discourse around political action and inaction in feminist discourse, and as such, it functions much like rights discourse in the above critiques, with a focus on vulnerable actors. Wheatley, Hemings, Baartman, Seacole, and Bonetta constitute and represent the tension point of the agency/submission crisis in black feminist studies. They have all represented, at different stages, the hopes, dreams, and

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failures of black political freedom and politics in the time of modernity—utopic and dystopic, heroic and tragic, resistant and complicit. As flashpoints and flesh, these figures operate in ways that confound ideas and ideals around human will, choice, and volitional action that are organized around the masculine subject. Rights discourse also occupies this constructed terrain where one is either oppressor or oppressed, as legal scholar Patricia Williams (1991) has mapped and which she herself pushed back upon, refusing to abandon rights to this permanent dichotomy. Historians of enslavement in the Americas have been grappling with this political bind of rightlessness for the advancement of rights for many years—how to represent enslaved peoples as "human" while also making visible the obliterating violence and terror of the chattel slavery system.[10] Theories like that of Orlando Patterson's (1982) "social death" have been used to imagine the absence of agency for enslaved peoples in the white public sphere or in political understandings of will. And while Patterson himself is clear to mark social death as a designation that does not exclude the vibrant lives and socialities of enslaved peoples among themselves, his terminology has lived on in efforts to both dig into the capacious injury of enslavement and to develop a richer portrait of enslaved lives that centers on already recognizable political resistance.

Black feminist historiography has, of course, resided in this both/and space at its very inception and core, especially in the study of black women's lives under enslavement. In their work on enslavement and black women's sexuality, Deborah Gray White (1999), Jennifer L. Morgan (2004), Stephanie M. H. Camp (2004), and Brenda Stevenson (2013) have laid out an early map of the common intersection of black women's simultaneous lack of rights and, in Harriet A. Jacobs's infamous characterization, their carving out of "something akin to freedom" within enslavement (Jacobs [1861] 1988, 60). In a post–black nationalist period, these scholars resisted the strains of enslaved heroism and masculine resistance that Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner, Douglass, and other icons offered of armed rebellion, physical fight, or at least flight from enslavement. In doing so, black feminist historiography also had to negotiate a representational terrain that involved both the politically recognizable promise of coding quotidian expressions of human feeling as "resistance" and redress, as well as the equally recognizable narratives of tragic and totalizing injury.[11] This work, which must somehow balance the demands of critiquing both white devaluation of black women's lives and black political paradigms of resistance that are built on models of masculine individualism, has, along with woman of color feminist theory, remade and continued to push an analytical

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model that imagines black women's subjectivity as the paradigmatic political subject. Historians and cultural critics of black women's sexuality and sexual labor have created an underresourced theoretical/conceptual space for political theory that this book seeks to recenter beyond agentic models.[12]

Agency as a concept is linked to the currency and language of political power, born of fantasies of ideal rights and their deserving subjects that came of age during Enlightenment, an era defined through science, invention, and massive-scale, systemic brutality predicated on an invented emphasis on biological difference—namely, race and gender—which endured postemancipation. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, Lisa Lowe, and Edlie Wong have exposed how liberal humanism and its statist forms were constructed through chattel slavery, colonialism, imperialism, postemancipation, and the fictions of "free labor" as a means to dangle access to full citizenship rights for some at the expense of others, and to sustain capitalism through the very language of individual rights, liberty, and personal responsibility—even through the vehicle of the law itself. These scholars, as well as Roderick A. Ferguson, Lisa Cacho, Angela Naimou, and others working in ethnic and queer studies have brought attention to what Ferguson (2003, viii) calls the "liberal capital of equality" that Enlightenment modernity inaugurated and that continues in the contemporary neoliberal moment. This critical ethnic studies scholarship labors alongside four other bodies of scholarly inquiry that frame the question of this period and its "echoes" (in the formulation of Joan Wallach Scott [2011] and as expanded by Lisa Ze Winters [2016]) in contemporary political debates over rights: postcolonial studies' deep investigation of modernity as a political, geographic, historical, and cultural designation; human rights histories and critiques of the universality of rights and uneven development; African studies' interpretations of rights through a rubric of responsibility and duty, not individual entitlements; and renewed interest in investigating and excavating the category of "the human" in black studies.[13]

These lines of thought around agency and rights are deeply gendered. For instance, to think of romance or tragedy as the genre of modernity, following David Scott (2004), takes on a wholly different political valence when centered on the political and social labor of black women. Rather than rely on narratives that circumscribe certain experiences of sexual and gender violence as irrecoverable and unredemptive in an effort to rescue, condemn, or abandon agency or rights, these renegotiations of the human in relationship to black subjectivity can emphasize the deep and varied attachments these terms have to culture itself—to the making of social life, meaning, and knowledge

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and to culture's possibilities to stage, disrupt, and remake personhood through imaginative, embodied practice.[14] It is here, alongside the work of Fleetwood (2015a) and Salamishah Tillet (2012) on black iconography's shaping of the dominant public and the civic imagination, that I locate the celebrity figures of this text as those who emerge at the crux of generative debates around the definitions and meaning of political agency, and who shaped, challenged, and continue to shape and challenge the institutional sites that uphold and contest them. Black feminist theories on and around agency offer the opportunity to expand on Regis Fox's conception of the "liberal problematic" (2017) and Crystal Parikh's "embodied vulnerability" (2018) as the basis for a different conception of politics that includes but does not limit itself to narratives of will, agency, or injury. Like the radical statement by the Combahee River Collective (1978)—wherein they vow to "organize around our own needs"—this project maps how certain black women's bodies, like Baartman's, have been appended to rights discourse and how that places black women as political subjects in a constant creative and interpretive state of injury and repair. How might conversations about needs and risks act as generative of a different conception of black political subjectivity?

Intimacy and Vulnerability

Early black women celebrity figures and figurations pose the modern world as one constituted and characterized not by the ideal of the liberal subject but by a radical state of public vulnerability. In *Private Bodies, Public Texts*, Karla FC Holloway (2011, xx) argues that "human legibility is determined by a stratified recognition of personhood. Public discourse proceeds from the version of eligibility that certain bodies produce," where "private individuation is rarely an opportunity" (7) for marginalized raced and gendered bodies. She continues by asserting that "the experiences of women and black Americans are particularly vulnerable to public unveiling" (9), easily exposed, read, known, and seen by and to the public even as they are not recognized with full public personhood. To remain unrecognizable in the purview of rights and yet inevitably public in the sphere of culture/the social—here marks the impasse of black women's celebrity bodies, a feminized twist on Hartman's thesis in *Scenes of Subjection* around black personhood and criminality.

Patricia Williams (1991, 24) counters the will to either champion or suspect black women's visibility, understating: "I continue to ponder the equation of privacy with intimacy and of publicity with dispossession." Stepping back from the immediate calculus of commodification as bad and interiority, or a

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retreat from public exposure, as a good, Williams's "equation," when thought of with Roach's (2007, 36) formulation of female eighteenth-century celebrity, foregrounds the difficult "public intimacy" fostered by celebrity—and its "simultaneous appearance of strength and vulnerability in the same performance, even in the same gesture." In this frame, one that questions the very terms of private and public spheres as feminist historians have done for decades (Hine 1989b; Kerber 1988), the figures in this book offer us an opportunity to imagine rights formation through a black feminist politics that decenters recovery and repair from the assumed "damage" of public vulnerability. Taking seriously Janell Hobson's (2017a) argument that "celebrity feminism . . . invites us to view public women beyond arguments about victimization and agency," *Infamous Bodies* explores vulnerable critical attachment to feminist critique and to its objects of study that are as visceral and affectively bound as fandom, including the "haunts" of respectability and suspicious reading. This study then offers a hermeneutic of vulnerability that imagines intimacy as an embodied "sensation" (Musser 2014) across what theater and performance scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert (2017, 7) terms a "temporal multiplicity" of black celebrity.[15] If the figures in this book have been stuck between the racist publics and antiracist counterpublics that claim them, I route them through their infamy, rather than either recovering or disavowing it, as a way to critically and generatively read vulnerable attachments to them.

This book, then, follows Christina Sharpe's (2016, 134) invocation of what she calls "wake work," citing poet Dionne Brand: "here there is disaster and possibility . . . and while 'we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force.'" When Sharpe references "continued vulnerability," she suggests that critical territory as part of what is already known to and as black subjectivity in modernity. Narratives around each of these five figures expose vulnerabilities in the political futures of social justice. Following contemporary black feminist critics such as Fleetwood (2010), Aida Levy-Hussen (2016), and Nash (2014b)—who critically take up and critique the desire within African American visual, cultural, and literary studies to read representation as the site of injury but also the site of cure, repair, and healing—I do not claim that critics *should* feel differently but rather recognize these critical desires as productive of particular trajectories of interpretation—and suggest opening up to other political desires and questions. Here, I engage Williams's speculative "proliferation" of rights and Claudia Tate's (1998) theory of "desirous plenitude," "a critical strategy for analyzing a unique form of desire—the implicit wishes, unstated longings, and vague hungers inscribed in" (178) African American art

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and literature, as ways to upend foreclosed readings of vulnerable black feminine embodiment, even as Tate and Williams do not offer utopic methods that solve the "problem" of black feminist embodiment. Tate locates a hermeneutic focused on "the plenitude of a writer's fantasmatic pleasure [that] also exceeds reason, prohibition, and indeed possibility" (188). Here, I take on affects that include and exceed pleasure and the "radical fantasy of surplus delight," (188) exceeding the agentic author/performer to consider the critic, the spectator, and the audience in constructing the subjects of "black political longing," in Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's (2012) terms. I expand on Tate's practice of reading, then, in form, genre, geography, era, and feeling, but I retain her insistence that "the fantasy of personal plenitude complicates expressions of the elusive goal of freedom in black texts" as my central jumping off point for reconsidering interpretive practices around early black women's celebrity (189).

Beyoncé's Baartman controversy unearths and performs the contradictory, competing, and seemingly compulsory desires surrounding black women's political subjectivity and how bound critical attachments are to the sphere of cultural representation. Even the noncasting has cultural reverberations—the think pieces, the rethink pieces in light of Beyoncé's more recognizable political formations in *Lemonade*, the mock-up trailers of a potential Beyoncé-as-Baartman film, the citing of Baartman's body as one of Beyoncé's comfortable inhabitations of her blackness in "Black Effect," and even Morgan Parker's 2016 poem "Hottentot Venus" in the *Paris Review*, later reprinted in her 2017 collection *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*. In Parker's poem (which she explicitly states in a 2016 *Paris Review* interview that she wrote in the wake of the Beyoncé-as-Baartman controversy), she fiercely opens:

> I wish my pussy could live
> in a different shape and get
> some goddamn respect.
> Should I thank you?

If Elizabeth Alexander's (1990) Baartman poem offers a first-person meditation on black interiority, Parker's Baartman confronts the externality of black women's sexuality as a mode of cultural production, of authorship, and of paid labor. Her Baartman narrates the vulnerability not just of her own body, but how black women's cultural labor so frequently is deployed to shore up the vulnerability of white audiences:

> No one worries about me
> because I am getting paid.

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I am here to show you
who you are, to cradle
your large skulls
and remind you
you are perfect.

Parker invests in Baartman as what José Muñoz (2007) calls a "Vulnerability Artist," a performer who leaves herself open to the affects of others, though she does not promise repair.

Infamous Bodies holds this focus on mutual but radically uneven experiences, effects, and aesthetics of vulnerability but, like Parker, moves away from a focus on the possibility of mutual reparations; instead, I focus on the critical desires to read for repair and resistance. Resituating infamous women like Baartman in relationship to the formation of law and rights allows for a skeptical view of scholarly itineraries and opens up flexibility in methods of interpretation—the questions critics feel we can ask while still maintaining deep, ethical commitments to our subjects of study and to the complex world they have helped to create. This book resists reading black feminist theory as a "normalizing agenc[y]" that "fantasize(s) the subject's liberation into autonomy and coherent self-production [while also] imagin[ing] the possibility of doing so as the singular goal of interpretive practice as a whole" (Wiegman 2012, 33, 23–24). Like Wiegman, and in the vein of Nash's black feminist method of "letting go" (2019a), I imagine ways to read that render critical practice vulnerable, not to destroy it but to embrace a state of risk that refuses critique as (only) a mode of shoring up, of certainty.

White patriarchal supremacy has conflated rights with the absence of risk, deploying a strategic refusal to bear harm to the self even as it burdens risk on others (the examples, just when one thinks of stand-your-ground laws or hate speech, are staggeringly present). Such an overdetermining structure creates a political situation where to let up any pressure on the constant narrative of black suffering, risk, and injury feels like one is giving up on a political future, save for minor pauses for black excellence or triumphs over overwhelming antiblackness. Recent popular terminology such as "toxic masculinity" and "white fragility" can help here to think about the psychic nature of risk and the way narratives and capacities for vulnerability absorb cultural formations of rights-as-entitlements and ties to agency. With these structures and structures of feeling of white patriarchy in mind, I turn toward vulnerability in the feminist imagination.

The language of vulnerability referenced by Christina Sharpe (2016), by Kimberly Juanita Brown (2015, 8) in her work on vulnerability as both openness

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to violence and “open to reading” (which is echoed in Julietta Singh’s concept of “vulnerable reading” [2018]), by Crystal Parikh’s (2017) investment in embodied vulnerability as a means to articulate human rights otherwise, and by Darius Bost, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, and Brandon J. Manning (2019) as remaining “radically available” both to injury and to feeling across various temporal frames and moods, is an evocative affective vocabulary that has its own cultural, political, social, and legal history. Vulnerability evokes injury, threat, precarity, and paternalism as well as concomitant displays of the force of the security state and rhetorics of personal entitlement and responsibility. Alexandra S. Moore (2015), however, has asked the field of literary human rights study to decouple securitization from vulnerability, seeing the former as a particular appeal to the normalization of the liberal humanist subject that some feminist articulations of human rights traffic in (as deconstructed in the work of Wendy Hesford and Rachel Lewis [2016]), and the latter as a mode of relationality (Moore 2015). Judith Butler (2016, 25) has also turned to vulnerability as a mode of understanding and imagining possible nonviolent resistance, or nonmilitaristic and inclusive ways to politically reveal and collate that move from the presupposition that “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by that exposure.”[16] Elizabeth Anker (2012) and Parikh follow up on this with particular investments in the “embodied vulnerability” (Parikh 2017, 36) of the subjects of human rights—for Anker, a concern with the materiality of bodies without an attachment to their coherence and absolute repair; for Parikh, a deep engagement with the unruly desires that constitute human subjects and literary imaginings of other, more just worlds, each taking seriously the unevenly distributed but “shared bodily exposure to the world” (36) as the *subject of* rights, as well as a *desire for* rights (rather than a constant will to the nonnormative). For critic Candace Jenkins (2007), this positionality is particular for what she terms “black intimate subjects”—defined by she calls a foundational “doubled vulnerability” to bodily exposure that, following Du Bois, is inherent in the experience of being a black human seeking relation and finding scrutiny in the social world.

Following Jenkins, I remain skeptical of some of the more utopic aspects of vulnerability as political and reading practice,[17] tracing from her careful work on the particularity of black vulnerability a new way into legal theorist Martha Albertson Fineman’s vulnerability theory—one reworked through a tradition and trajectory of black feminist approaches to political subjectivity—most saliently Christina Sharpe’s claiming of black women’s subjectivity as “internal”

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to "all US American post-slavery subjects" (2010, 182, 187). Fineman's theory in many ways builds on the famous capabilities theory of Martha C. Nussbaum (2003) and Amartya Sen (2004), but instead of focusing on people's ascension to well-being, vulnerability theory assumes a state of risk and need: "If vulnerability is understood to be an inherent and inevitable aspect of what it means to be human, and also as the source of social institutions and relationships, it must necessarily be the foundation for any social or political theory. The universal political and legal subject we construct should reflect the reality that we all live and die within a fragile materiality that renders us constantly susceptible to both internal and external forces beyond our control. The social contract that binds society together should be fashioned around the concept of the *vulnerable subject*, a construct that would displace the autonomous and independent liberal subject that currently serves to define the core responsibilities of policy and law" (Fineman 2014, 307).

Within this vulnerability there is not a flattened common injury, but specific variances of experience that demand the studied strengthening of the institutions—what Fineman calls "the responsive state" (2010b)—that create and support what Fineman deems "resilience." In her terms, "Resilience is a product of social relationships and institutions. Human beings are not born resilient. Resilience is produced over time through social structures and societal conditions that individuals may be unable to control. Resilience is found in the material, cultural, social, and existential resources that allow individuals to respond to their vulnerability (and dependencies)" (Fineman 2010a, 362–63). Or as she reframes it in a different context, "recognition of vulnerability does NOT reflect or assert the absence or impossibility of agency—rather, it recognizes that agency [in the form of resilience] is causally produced over the life course and is limited and constrained by the sources and relationships available to any specific individual. Vulnerability theory asserts that agency or autonomy—like the concept of resilience . . . should always be understood as particular, partial and contextual" (2015a). The language Fineman uses is a call for a recognition of structurally and temporally unequal assumptions of risk and a call for responsible care in the face of such structural inequity (2014, 613). Even as I write this, though, I bristle at the suggestion that we might organize a politics around a capitulation to the world that is, rather than as we might wish to see it in heroic terms—where we would all have access to autonomy, dignity, sovereignty, and individual consent without harming or risking the lives of others.

Vulnerability takes seriously, politically, the desires and attachments to the very systems that fail us—what Lauren Berlant (2011) terms "cruel

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optimism"—and how that intersects with the ways public culture already collectively imagines the compromised lives, deaths, and afterlives of the five figures in this book. Under impossible circumstances that categorically refuse rights, agency, autonomy, dignity, and self-determination, one might pause in championing these categories, however tempered by utopic definition, as political goals. Vulnerability is a politics that speaks from, to, and with the materiality of something like Hortense J. Spillers's (1987) "flesh," which imagines what is left after the obliteration of what we think we know to be human and exposes the fictions of rights and their mythic tenets of personhood. If "the condition of black life is one of mourning," as Claudia Rankine (2015) has hauntingly headlined, and the key practitioners of this living and mourning are black women, then perhaps it is time that, following Anker (2012), we, as critics, refuse the fantasies of both dignity and "bodily integrity" that have never been the province of the marginalized and the vulnerable—particularly black women. This sentiment also infuses Holloway's (2011) reading of black bodies as public texts[18] that leave us, as scholars and as political subjects, critically vulnerable (Campt 2017; C. Sharpe 2010, 2016). Vulnerability as a reading practice, then, is not a race to the bottom, so to speak, but a call to consider the "bottom" as constitutive of political subjectivity, rather than its margins or lack (Stockton 2006). Such a reading practice aims to retain the specificity of black women's experience but to refrain from treating vulnerability as exceptional or unusual trauma, even as it is historically specific and unevenly distributed.

Infamous Bodies imagines ways—with and through expressive cultures—of vulnerably inhabiting the political that might exist with, from, and beyond the site of known critique. I push against the assumed use of history as rescue, as corrective, as a critical mission of human rights and social justice. In doing so, this book attempts to build a case that positions violence, trauma, desire, pleasure, risk, and vulnerability as inextricably linked to, and unevenly distributed by, human embodiment. This book assumes the presence of these tense partners in sociality as the collective base of *being* a political subject, rather than as categories either one inhabits or to which one aspires. It imagines, in other words, black women's experience in Enlightenment modernity as the center of political subjectivity.

Like the embodied vulnerability that is at the core of vexed receptions of Baartman's body and Beyoncé's choice to not represent her body, this book highlights a state of material risk, and the ways that Enlightenment modernity has misrecognized black women's vulnerability as a necessary, tolerable, and/or inevitable burden. I want to mark these vulnerable states not as the exceptions but the rules of civil sociality in modernity—but not end the critical plot in the

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naming of the injury. This study seeks to alter the plot of subjection as a critical teleology but not as a fact. Instead, I argue for a reading practice that engages Patricia Williams's (1991, 433) terms of "distance and respect" as organizing principles around political change—terms that resonate with the uncertainty that appends the fractured, partial archive of black women's embodied experience in modernity, their "mystery," in Kimberly Juanita Brown's (2015) formulation.

This phrasing also echoes a tenet of humanistic interpretive methodology: critical distance. Here, rights are conceived not as a cure but through an affect and effect of inevitable misunderstanding, a formulation that refuses the cloak of personhood as equally distributable. Instead, "distance and respect" imagines that all things, including people, are worthy of distancing from our own desires and exercises of individual power as much as possible. It is, of course, depressing and risky to think outside the terms of personhood as rights-bearing within the legacy of black lives and their relationship to property. Following Moten's (2003, 2008) continued interrogation of the possibilities of objectness and objectification, this imaginative reorientation can stop seeking a recognition of humanity, which as Patricia Williams (1991, 412), among others, argues has been a "dismal failure" for black political gain. To claim the ground of black politics on vulnerability is to embrace the possibility of abjection (alongside Darieck Scott [2010]), vulnerability, precarity, codependence, and intemperance—of feeling, acting, and being—as the center of black scholarship and political theory.[19] It is to unmake race heroes in favor of uncertain and impermanent alliances, coalitions, and desires—some of which might make us wince in their seeming unrelation to "freedom" as we have come to commonly understand and reify it, all of which are and will be dangerously imperfect and impure.[20]

This book is then a call to look at representation and culture not for a cure but for a question. As this introduction sketches out, I, along with other scholars in the wake of Hartman's (2008) "critical fabulation," retain the possibility of representation not with an attachment to getting black feminism "right" but with a commitment to staging different questions that ask us what "the changing same" or "repetition with a difference" mean, constitutively, about black feminist critical practices of looking, reading, and interpretation (Butler 2016; McDowell 1987). Patricia Williams's (1991) theory of political understanding based on the recognition of not just difference, but distance, undergirds an interpretative practice built around incompletion, the assumption of misunderstanding, and the impossibility of understanding, seeing, reading, or knowing in full that is echoed in Hartman's powerful call to responsibility and care for the vulnerable body in black feminist study.

DUKE
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PRESS

Corrective Histories, Vulnerable Archives

I reckon with these early black women celebrities in their own diasporic frames, reading moments of their eruptive visibility that have made plain the cultural genres and performances of law and rights for what they are—fictions in their own time and beyond. Instead of trying to correct the record, to place these figures in the order of things that we already know about the failures of law and rights in relationship to race, I look to the ways that these infamous bodies reimagine the contours and content of the political in their own time, but most significantly beyond it, in the ways that they inhabit and transform the imaginable limits of political being and living in a patriarchal, antiblack world. I don't do this to fetishize life but to think of black women's living and representational practices around that living as political labor. This is a question of reception, but also of the temporality that I signal in my use of the word "early" in this book's subtitle. I use "early" not because these figures are, arguably, the "first" black women celebrities in the modern media frame, and not because they strictly function as the "before" of the amply studied "after" of twentieth- and twenty-first-century black women celebrities and performers, though their historical moment and import are significant to excavate. I use "early" to denote a political orientation, to write these figures out of the corrective histories that find them tragic, belated, and passé, their politics and histories always too dated or too late, even in their contemporary moment. This book revisits their histories to trace genealogies of critical attachment and desire, imagining these early black women's embodiments as doing the hard and vulnerable work of proliferation and plenitude, altering interpretive practices across law, literature, and public culture.

Baartman and the other four figures of this book embody the paradox of Hartman's (2008) call—representation with a simultaneous recognition of its impossibility (and the implicit black feminist externalization of those cultural politics: living through what seems unlivable)—through their vast archival presences. The cultural and critical field continues to return to these figures because, in their celebrity, they are archived: because of their fame, they are archived; because of their archives, they have fame. These figures are, in all problematics of the terms, *objects*, accessed endlessly through the print and visual cultures that conjure their very individual existences in and beyond their lifetimes.

I organize the chapters historically not to give an unbroken sense of political hegemony or teleology of each figure's times but to disrupt this "calculus" of value, in Hartman's (2008) terms, and the imagined scenes of repair in

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the corrective histories that follow. Each figure reemerges most saliently at flash points in diasporically specific shifts in racial-political discourse; it is the premise of this book that early black women celebrities are revisited to reinterpret and represent blackness in a configuration that challenges, expands, contests, or aligns with the rights debates of that moment. There is a clumping effect, of course, of cultural representations that hew toward the complicated but expected lines of their respective progressive political contexts. But these repetitions are also understudied components of these oft-told political histories, ones that show how significant the front of culture is to the negotiation of politics (Fanon 2004). Moments emerge that push against stories commonly told of particular eras and movements (like the unexpected pathos and glamour of Phillis Wheatley in former Black Panthers' Minister of Culture Ed Bullins's 1976 play), that suggest other ways to engage black political subjectivities, particularly gendered narratives and embodied histories. To trace the constant return to these figures and to place those returns next to the most important, visible, public struggles for rights, freedom, and black liberation of their time is to take seriously the possibilities and the limits of corrective histories. As I reread the more contemporary moments of their reimagining, I also generatively renegotiate these figures' historical contexts and their past critical receptions to trace alternative sites of black feminist political imagination. The chapters then revisit corrective histories of both racism and racial justice to track new ways of charting black political history's present, and possible black feminist futures.

To engage in these deep and long histories is to engage unevenly—I take up only a particular aspect of representations of these iconic figures. The goal, then, is not comprehensive coverage or definitive analysis of each celebrity figure and her corrective history but to think about historical reuse as a political and cultural strategy in relationship to black feminist thought. This project looks at and in the sphere of cultural production as a site of political meaning making—both reflective and constitutive—that interacts with and exceeds legal, formal, and official genres and regimes of public politics.[21] Most of the texts this book covers are authored by black women, but I also seek to decouple a naturalized connection between black women as cultural producers and black feminist reading, and the book includes cultural producers and critics—including myself—who are *not* black women as part of its critical conversations about the field. Following duCille (1994), I disrupt the anthropological gaze that expects and demands only sociological attachment from its nativized sources and hence gives over the field to black women seemingly out of deference but in effect abandons black feminist thought as only needed

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and important to black women themselves. As duCille lays out, this caution about claiming exclusive territory is an uneasy one, and that ambivalence suits a project that focuses on public lives of black women that also engender much debate across difficult affective terrains, like Beyoncé and Baartman's intersection. The first chapter begins with an interrogation of black women's celebrity and its relationship to fantasies of freedom, with freedom standing as the foundational concept and aspirational goal of both liberal humanism and black politics. Each subsequent chapter takes on an aspect of freedom and rights: the romance of freedom and/as consent; the fiction of freedom through contract; the adventurous desire for civic engagement; and the lure of sovereignty, including genres and forms of self-development, as embodied freedom discourse.

Chapter 1 focuses on Phillis Wheatley as the figure at the heart of the intersection of race, Enlightenment ideas of human rights, and the rise of the concept of freedom as the locus of meaningful political subjectivity. Wheatley is repeatedly imagined as a site of the trials and failures of freedom, yoking the invention of blackness to its relationship, even in political philosophy and especially in the formation of modern law in the West, to the domain of culture (here literature and literacy), and positing that relationship *as* the scene of freedom, so to speak. I look at the repeated representations of Wheatley in relationship to fame in order to read the work done by, through, and in the name of Wheatley's body, tying her to blackness and rights, positively and negatively. In doing so I restage this foundational figure in both the birth of the US republic and in the articulated experience of African and black subjection as a public mediator between race and rights—the first black celebrity and an origin story of Western human rights. I then trace less-recognizable routes of intimacy in Wheatley's work and her reperformances, particularly in twentieth-century drama and contemporary art and poetry, to reckon with the legacy of uncertainty and doubt as potential black feminist political methods.

If Wheatley is "the primal scene" of African American literature and the deep relationship between African American cultural representation and metrics of freedom, humanity, and rights, then Sally Hemings—enslaved Virginian and mother of Thomas Jefferson's children—is, in the true sexual Freudian sense of the primal scene, the obsessively returned-to figure, remembered and represented, via her relationship to Jefferson (Gates 2003, 1). In chapter 2, I argue that it is through the supposed contradiction between the notion that "all men are created equal" and the decades-long, scandalous (even its own time) entanglement that produced living enslaved progeny of Jefferson that we can

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understand sexual consent as at the heart of histories of US democracy and the violence of enslavement. Through readings of novels, poetry, film, art, and curated historical space, this chapter calls for sustained and centered attention to black women's sexuality as the base of analysis for the project of the modern democratic state and body politic, not by proving again and again Hemings's inability to consent but by imagining unconsent as the start of all political subjectivity. Hemings here, then, inaugurates the modern political subject as based in radical vulnerability rather than the ascendant ideal of a consenting agent.

Chapter 3 thinks through how fictions of consent also undergird the promise and pitfalls of contract through the labor and recirculation of Sarah Baartman, the founding figure of this introduction. This chapter approaches Baartman's legacy through representations of her 1810 trial on the validity of her labor contract, which laid bare the deeper implications of public discourse around the diminished humanity of African peoples in the law beyond the enslaved/free binary. A study of the public trial in which she appeared as a witness merges justifications that underpin colonialism and the chattel slave trade with contemporary conversations about the effectiveness of the law as an avenue for justice or achieving human rights for black subjects, particularly black women. The trial, reproduced in contemporary film, fiction, and drama, exposed/exposes the market for women's bodies that the modern West has refused either to regulate through the official protections of contract—putting women's work, in particular domestic, performative, and sex work, outside of the protective bounds of the state and yet subject to its social and sometimes criminal judgment. This chapter tracks the political, commemorative, and cultural texts that follow Baartman as well as examines the difficult critical affects around Baartman as a figure of black feminist discourse—including the fatigue of constant, repetitive, unremunerated critical labor. As the field confronts the failure of cultural, social, and legal forms to imagine better representational practices that can escape the teleology of Baartman's corporeal fate and cultural reception, black feminist thought finds itself negotiating a fragile way deeper into rather than out of seemingly negative critical feelings, including fatigue.

Chapter 4 moves from the critical exhaustion of overexposure to trace narratives of citizenship and civic desire—black, colonial, national, postcolonial, and empirical—through Jamaican nurse and hotelier Mary Seacole. Seacole, a celebrity and memoirist in the 1850s who has achieved a resurgence of attention in post-Thatcher Britain, challenges static narratives of racial, national, and colonial belonging for a black feminine subject, particularly in the way

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she is deployed around various racialized ideologies that limit black women's personal and political mobility. As the first and only figure in this book whose routes do not run directly through enslavement or indentured servitude, Seacole sits at a precarious moment of transition for black women's celebrity and affirmative intimacies with the state. Through her relationship with and against Florence Nightingale, a white feminist icon who refused Seacole's inclusion into her nursing corps in the Crimea, Seacole's political life is reanimated in a contemporary Britain desperate for antiracist rebranding through public and political commemorative acts. At the same time, she is remobilized in Jamaica and its diasporas as a figure of global ambition and capitalist success. Seacole and her adventurous afterlives remap the boundaries of black civic participation through the tensions between imperialism, multiculturalism, transnational feminism, global capitalism, and cultural nationalism.

In Chapter 5, I conclude with Victorian-era celebrity Sarah Forbes Bonetta and her inhabitation of multiple and conflicting genres of sovereignty in her day and in her newly emerging corrective histories. Thought to be of royal lineage in Africa, she was kidnapped from her home as a young girl and brought to Dahomey, where, in 1850, she was "given" to an emissary of Queen Victoria. She was "adopted" by Queen Victoria, becoming her goddaughter and living as an upper-class woman of English society. Her presence is recorded and unearthed largely through a series of photographs showing her in full Victorian dress. Her proximity to sovereignty in the forms of royalty as well as debates around colonial, native, and gendered autonomy are taken up with pride and with trepidation in the contemporary moment of her historical recovery, with visual art and fiction centering on Bonetta revealing the anxiety and intense labor involved with investing in autonomy, self-development, and self-determination as key features of black freedoms. Bonetta and Seacole, like Wheatley, Hemings, and Baartman, navigate institutional intimacy with whiteness and capital consumption as critics interpret their contemporary recoveries into corrective histories of inclusion and imperatives to use blackness as a repair to historical racial injury.

These chapters trace the specter of freedom and the presence of vulnerability in the afterlives of rights, moving through genres of the political and cultural: the fantasy of freedom in the face of risky, fleeting feelings of affiliation and the tenuous intimacies of community; the romance of securitization from embodied risk from the raw, open vulnerability of feeling across difference; the fiction of representational cures through exposure or refusal that collapse into the exhaustion of relentless critical labor and performance; the heroic adventure narratives of citizenship rights and inclusion that occlude the unruliness

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of personal and political desire itself; and the coming-of-age development narratives of sovereignty, self and otherwise, when wholeness and progress are consistently punctured by feeling badly, wrongly, and incompletely about both history and the duties of black feminist political protocols. Collectively, these figures also sit at the threshold of the Afro-pessimism movement, even as they push on the stakes of charismatic figuration (as formulated by Erica R. Edwards's 2012 critique) and political leadership in a critical time in black studies, one occupied by an insistence on death and abjection. Their histories of representation texture any historiography of antiblackness as a practice of reading rather than as an explanatory mechanism.

My reading then borrows from Nash's (2014b) "loving critique" of the field of black feminist theory in a call not to "do better" but to deeply grapple with affective analysis and interpretative desires that want so much to find the right or the wrong—the certain—reading or representation that will mark or undo or remap the political.[22] In the afterimages of Wheatley, Hemings, Baartman, Seacole, and Bonetta, this book reads early black feminist lives and afterlives as insistent on blackness's endless diversity, its ceaseless proliferation and plenitude, its ability to produce and elicit diverse ethical political practices beyond being "true and to use language truthfully," in Douglass's construction of fame. These figures embody attachments, intimacies, and recognitions that one cannot fully account for, understand, or know, in total. *Infamous Bodies* is dedicated to reading early black women celebrities and their afterlives through a frame of vulnerability and uncertainty, an interpretive practice that offers new political futures of and for black feminist study.

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Notes

Introduction

1 "Venus in Two Acts" refers not to Baartman but to an enslaved woman whose death is the centerpiece of a legal case.
2 See the debates in critical legal studies and the left (including Wendy Brown 2000) around rights and Patricia Williams's (1991) "defense" of her insistence on our ability to proliferate rights and hence shift their meaning.
3 As previously mentioned, these generative critiques include those of critical legal studies' relationship to rights, critiques of the "human" from black studies, and the near universal consensus of critical human rights studies of the paradox/failure of a human rights paradigm—poisoned both at the origin and in implementation by its attachments to universalism, individualism, capital, and property.
4 Anker (2012) argues for the implicit denial but use of embodied experience in human rights discourse and in human rights critique.
5 I should also note here the significance of scholars like Carby (1986); A. Y. Davis (1999); and Griffin (2001) taking up blueswomen and other cultural producers outside of respectability politics in the early to mid-twentieth century to my own project. Because of their pioneering work, considering the difficult legacies of black women's embodied celebrity and its interface with commodity culture in an earlier period is possible.
6 A brief bibliography of recent work beyond that cited previously would include J. Brown 2008; K. J. Brown 2015; Cheng 2011; Fleetwood 2015a; Paredez 2014; Royster 2003; Stephens 2014; Streeter 2012; Vogel 2009.
7 See also Marcus (2019), who locates modern celebrity in the nineteenth century, deeply considering its active reception, especially by female fans; Berenson and Giloi (2010), also located in the nineteenth century with the rise of mass media technologies; and the work of Latinx celebrity theorists Beltran (2009) and Paredez (2014) on the construction of twentieth-century celebrity cultures around race and gender.
8 Jaji (2014) does this brilliantly in her chapter on black women and the consumption of music culture through magazines. Fleetwood's (2015a) work on racial icons also takes this feminized audience for celebrity culture seriously. Jaji and Fleetwood's work dovetails with the work of Radway (1984) and Sterne (1997) on the market for romance or sentimentalism, as just two genres associated with the readership/audience of women, or Andrade's (2011) work on African women's novels in the era immediately postindependence.

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PRESS

9 This object-oriented relation to black subjectivity has been explored by critics such as D. A. Brooks (2006); C. Cooper (1995); Fleetwood (2010); McMillan (2015); Musser (2014); Nash (2014b); Darieck Scott (2010); Stephens (2014); and others.

10 Black studies has seen an explosion of work reconsidering appeals to "humanity": see Jackson 2015; Weheliye 2014; Wynter 2015. Anker (2012) also comments on not just the critical history of human rights usage of the imperiled body to garner rights but the ways that these critiques of the performance of suffering often find it difficult to represent the body or account for embodied experience at all.

11 These practices are critically tackled by historian Walter Johnson (2003) as well as by Hartman (1997) and J. Sharpe (2003), both of whom engage the theory of Certeau ([1984] 2011) on theories of bounded redress.

12 This necessarily partial list of historians working through black women's experience beyond those listed above include the work of Berry (2017); Feimster (2009); Finch (2015); Fuentes (2016); Gross (2006); Haley (2016); Hine (1989b); J. Jones (2009); M. Jones (2009); McGuire (2011); Mitchell (1999); Morgan (2004); Owens (2015); Painter (1996); Rosen (2009); Sommerville (2004); Stoler (1995, 2001, 2010).

13 For a fuller investigation of the relationship between literary and cultural production and human rights discourse (and critique), see Anker 2012; Hunt 2007; Parikh 2017; Slaughter 2007.

14 Likewise, the turn to investigate "the human" has just recently begun to think through the implications of black feminist thought. A progress narrative of rights that goes alongside a progress narrative of humanity is, not surprisingly, also the narrative, linguistic, and legal bind in which the "humanity" of enslaved peoples is articulated. Eighteenth-century studies scholar F. A. Nussbaum (2003) argues for representations of somatic difference as the locus of what defines "the normal" in this period, while Hartman (1997) argues that enslaved peoples in the United States are actually constructed as human through criminal culpability and responsibility even as they are excluded from so-called positive liberties. Weheliye (2014) ties this yoking of the black body, particularly the enslaved body, to the limits of the human rather than to the site of the camp or the figure of refugee. Weheliye does this to think through how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial exclusions could be used as the definitional pressure point of the failures of human rights as surely as the Holocaust atrocity of the twentieth century represented the failures of national protection and the ways that the nation-state itself was used to biopolitically demark different "genres of the human," which Caribbean theorist Wynter (2015) marks as the future of political discourse. Wynter's (2015) own construction of this capacious understanding of "the human" not as a monolithic category but as one that has been culturally constructed with a difference/differences and cannot be fully known is crucial here, both to think about the construction of blackness under the rubric of "rights" and to imagine black political possibilities and limits in and of the human. To imagine a denaturalized human is, for Wynter, a set of practices that require multiple historical, geographic, and cosmological narratives to converge—a recognition of the ways that the world as we know it is also a descriptor of the limit of what is known. Bogues (2010), like Wynter (2015), David Scott (2004), and Stuart Hall (2014), is a Caribbean theorist who sees in Afro-diasporic

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thought the possibilities of the human imagination in the world made by the violence of Western modernity. Bogues links the human to the imagination and imagination to freedom, arguing for emancipation and liberation as rights-based but reserving freedom for possibilities beyond the organizations of the body politic and politics as we currently know them.

15 This call to "sensation" both echoes Roach's (2007) language around the afterimage of celebrity that comes to stand in for the celebrity herself and invokes Musser's (2014) work on sensation as embodied, material ways to think about corporeal experience that doesn't give over to binary thinking around good and bad political feeling/action. K. J. Brown (2015) reworks the afterimage in the conceptual frame of Audre Lorde's poem of the same name ("Afterimages") to think through subject formation beyond "narrow containment of black women's visibility" (6).

16 For more on the politics of vulnerability, see Dufourmantelle 2018; Fretwell 2011; Moore 2015; Muñoz 2006; Oliviero 2018; Schuller 2018.

17 As Oliviero (2018) argues, for one, vulnerability is a stance and affect ripe for cooptation by the right. But instead of insisting on the real or particular definition of vulnerability here, instead of arguing that it is perfect but for misuse by some, I suggest black vulnerability as a version of the universal political subject. Instead of negating or collapsing black particularity into the universal, then, and following Nash (2019b) on black maternal aesthetics, I claim blackness here—particularly the experience of black women's embodied vulnerability—as a model for the universal political subject. The peril of this capital of/as vulnerability is also interrogated by K. J. Brown (2015) (who considers the possibilities of/for vulnerability); Nyong'o (2009); C. Sharpe (2010).

18 Holloway (2011) cites this as a deep and direct jumping off from Butler's (2016) turn to a politics of vulnerability through the act of speaking.

19 On abjection in black politics and literature, see Darieck Scott (2010).

20 See the February 2018 forum on rights spearheaded by Walter Johnson in the *Boston Review* for a longer discussion among black studies scholars on the question of investing in or abandoning freedom and agency.

21 Iton (2008) powerfully lays this out as emerging through the post-Reconstruction and civil rights failures of black inclusion in US politics, and I extend that to think about a range of post–Middle Passage and postcolonial organizations of black cultural production.

22 As Cherniavsky (2017, 4) so succinctly puts it in her reevaluation of the contemporary, postcitizenship landscape of critique, "It is difficult to read the present as anything but a degraded version of the past, and we tend to miss the difference of the contemporary moment, even as we also assert its novelty, often in increasingly anxious and overwrought terms." To "miss the difference" between past and present (and future) forms of the political is part of the liberal humanist framework itself, but it also forecloses other patterns and continuities one might locate in the cultures and histories of political thought beyond "better" and "worse," or complicit and resistant. To hope that better representations of black humanity—a better Baartman, a Beyoncé doing better by Baartman—will lead to the recognition and bestowal of rights and personhood might be cruel optimism, but one does not and should not throw out the cumulative power

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of culture and cultural representation with the realization that even if blackness, and black pain and suffering, could be seen more and better and differently, antiblackness would still not disappear. For two sensitive sides of reworking depictions of black suffering and pain in sentimental modes, see Foreman 2009 (on reading against the grain of black-woman-authored sentimentalism only as sensationalized depictions of black suffering for white audiences under racist codes and norms) and Wanzo 2015 (which deconstructs the depiction of black suffering as always already mitigated by lingering narrative norms of sentimentalism in politics and media).

1. Fantasies of Freedom

1 J. Brooks (2010), Jordan (2002), and Walker (1983) also resite Wheatley from such a trial to think about her in other economies of vulnerability—the difficult miracle, the public mourner for white women's losses, etc. Bernstein (2011) makes a thorough and compelling argument about the construction of black childhood and children against innocence in the nineteenth century, though we might consider some of those later strains of protest against these figurations in twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism, even as Wheatley wrote in the eighteenth century.
2 And yet, what if Wheatley, named after the very slave ship that ferried her enslavement (the *Phillis*), was Gilroy's model for the chronotope he constructs? What a different black Atlantic subject, what a different diaspora! I discuss this retroping further in the final chapter.
3 For more on theories of black freedom, see V. Brown 2020; Finch 2015; on liberty, see D. Roberts 1998; on black liberation, see Ferrer 2014; K.-Y. Taylor 2016; on freedom, see McWhorter 2013; Wynter 2003.
4 It's beyond the scope of this project, but one might think about the generation of Wheatley's freedom in terms of sonic blackness here, and a sonic gendering of what that "cry" could or should look like. See Stoever 2016.
5 This is a relationship that scores of feminist critics have mapped and nuanced in literary criticism. See Avilez 2016; Crawford 2017; Dubey 1994; Iton 2008; Jarrett 2007; Murray 2009, 2015.
6 Slauter's archival work documents the convergence of the end of neoclassicism (giving way to romanticism) and its relationship to the distance asserted by many invested in metaphors of political slavery from rhetorical and material overlap with chattel slavery. Reception of Wheatley's work, he argues, finds itself at the center of both emergent discourses of rights and writing.
7 Darieck Scott, in recently published articles and his second book (2010), articulates the genre of fantasy itself as a site of black erotic possibility.
8 Shaw (2006) and Slauter (2006) both research and understand the identification to have no grounds, though even the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* makes the claim for Moorhead's artistic authorship.
9 From the black feminist and multicultural recoveries, repairs, and wonderment of/at Wheatley's trial, the contemporary critical moment has also turned to Wheatley as a historical figure—enacting a literal corrective history by uncovering her public and

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