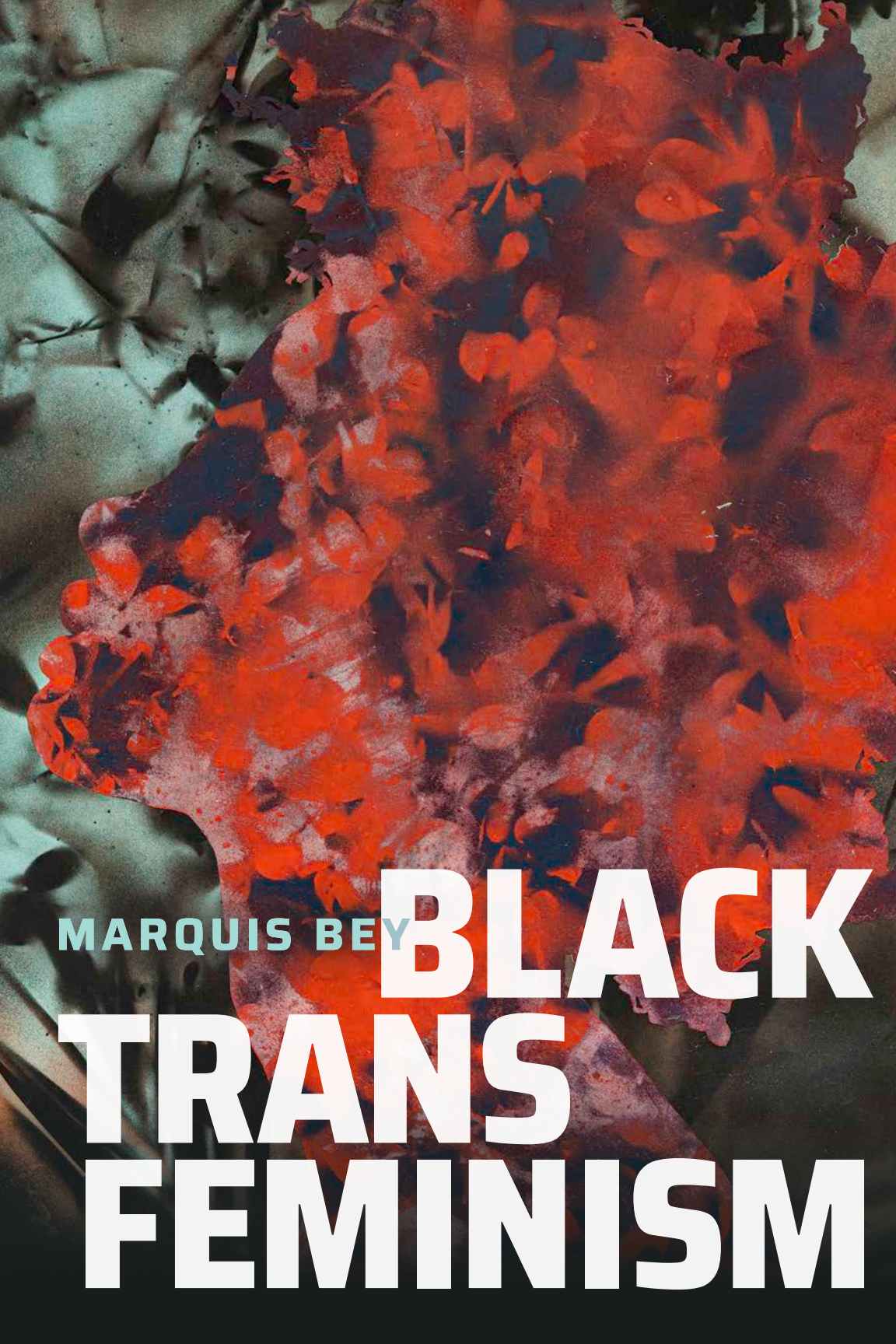




MARQUIS BEY

BLACK TRANS FEMINISM

**BLACK
TRANS
FEMINISM**

BUY

BLACK OUTDOORS

INNOVATIONS IN THE

POETICS OF STUDY

A series edited by

J. Kameron Carter and

Sarah Jane Cervenak

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For those we don't know yet

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Acknowledgments

If I were being honest, I wouldn't call this section the "Acknowledgments." The word seems to imply a kind of nod from the person who did most of the heavy lifting; it implies, on one reading, that *I* did the bulk of the work, whereas all these other folks were peripheral and "minor characters." But this isn't entirely true, as some of the people I will mention did an inordinate amount of work for this book, for my thinking, for my very ability to write it. So, instead I might call this section an account of my collaborators, my coproducers, my coconspirators, my accomplices.

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Introduction

Abolition, Gender Radicality

GUIDE QUOTES (AFTER SYLVIA WYNTER)

While, as Fanon asserts, there is an imposition onto the figure of the black that would signify the confluence of racial identity and racial inferiority, there is also, in a way that is prior to the regulative force of that imposition and calls it into question, a resource working through the epidermalization of afantasmatic inferiority as the anti-epidermalization of the radical alternative, to which the peoples who are called black have a kind of (under)privileged relation in and as the very history of that imposition. One might speak, then, of the blackening of the common, which would imply neither that any and every person who is called black claims or defends the sociopoetic force of that fantasy nor that persons who are not called black are disqualified from making such claims and enacting such defense.

FRED MOTEN, *The Universal Machine*

If feminism is, at its core, about combating the dangerously unfair ways that power and oppression, recognition and repudiation, are distributed to individuals based on how their bodies are categorized, trans concerns lie at the heart of feminism.

LAURA HORAK, "Trans Studies"

The black feminist position as trouble. . . . It refuses to disappear into the general categories of otherness or objecthood, that is,

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blackness and womanhood, and refuses to comply with the formulations of racial and gender-sexual emancipatory projects these categories guide.

DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA, “Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal Beyond the Limits of Critique”

Feminism will be trans-feminist or not at all.

THE WHOREDYKEBLACKTRANSFEMINIST NETWORK, “Manifesto for the Trans-Feminist Insurrection”

The future(s) of blackness move(s) us to name the ways in which refusal to sequester, to quarantine black from black, is inherent to blackness itself.

AMEY VICTORIA ADKINS-JONES, “Black/Feminist Futures: Reading Beauvoir in *Black Skin, White Masks*”

But I need to make a distinction between black women, black women as the subject of feminism, and black feminism as a critical disposition. . . . I should like to think that black feminism, as a repertoire of concepts, practices, and alignments, is progressive in outlook and dedicated to the view that sustainable life systems must be available to everyone.

HORTENSE SPILLERS, “The Scholarly Journey of Hortense Spillers”

From the Combahee River Collective (a collective of Black feminists meeting since 1974) and its critique of biological essentialism as a “dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic” to trans genealogies of Black feminism—*Black feminism [i]s always already trans*.

CHE GOSSETT, “Žižek’s Trans/gender Trouble”

Transgender is the gender trouble that feminism has been talking about all along.

JACK HALBERSTAM, “Why We Need Transfeminism”

Black. Trans. Feminism. Or black (trans feminism), (black) trans (feminism), and (black trans) feminism. Where blackness is concerned, there is the refusal of sequestration, which is to say both a refusal to be set

aside and isolated, as it is itself a sociality that demands relations of myriad natures; and, too, a refusal to limit this work to epidermalized demographics, dispersing its penchant for politicized subversion to all of those taking up the task. As mutinous relation to imposed ontology, blackness enables and conditions the inhabited spirit of subjective abolition. Transness, always shadowed by its echolalic blackness, as this book will demonstrate, unfixes gender from essentialist moorings and posits itself precisely as that unfixation, as a departure-from without the presumption of a stable destination, or indeed a departure that itself destabilizes destinational desires. This transness is endemic to a genealogy that has at its foundation the fundamental critique of the capaciousness of “man” (or “Man”) and “woman,” and as such the critique of the regulative regime of normative gender and categorization. Feminism, which is to say trans feminism—which is, more, to say black feminism—is an agential and intentional undoing of regulative gender norms and, further, the creative deconstructing of ontological racial and gender assault; a kind of gendered deconstruction, an unraveling that unstitches governant means of subjectivation; feminism as the reiterative un/gendered quotidian process of how not to be governed and given from without.¹ That is, feminism marks here the vitiating of imposed racial and gender ontologies that then demands an abolitionist modality of encountering the racialized gendered world.

What you hold in your hands is not another treatise on how we might righteously rail against harms done to an already-known “us”; it is not a meditation on the violences done to black or trans or femme “bodies,” nor is it one concerned, in the main, with flipping the valuation of maligned identities (e.g., the practice of lambasting white folks as the pinnacle of loving and doing black radical work, or the extent to which one points out the oversights of white [feminist] cis women as the extent to which one is a hardcore black feminist). I am quite uninterested in talking solely about bodies and about what we already (think we) know. Indeed, our bodies cannot and must not be coveted in the final instance. For sure, it has come to be the site that suffers oppressive forces because that is precisely how oppressive forces wish to construct our subjectivities—to form to them and understand themselves as formed, in toto, by them. What we have come to name our bodies, though, is not the only way we can or should think ourselves possible in the world. Our subjectivity—my preferred, though still imperfect, term—indexes the amalgam of the various ways that we engage sociality, an engagement that is not determined wholly by or confined to the surface of corporeality. And if aspects of the body have come to be that

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which are formed by violent forces, it is necessary to find liberation in the aspects that are not confined to the body; it is necessary to find liberation in the aspects of subjectivity that exceed and ooze out of the body. And this ooze, this uncaught-ness, is variously inflected and named, at least in part, by the black, the trans, and the feminist.

Additionally, this facilitates the dissolution of the things we may have come to regard as quite dear—namely, our given, and even reclaimed, identities. It has come to a point, it seems to me, where many of us have crafted as virtuous the mere fact of holding steadfast to the historically maligned identities we hold. Many of us have come to doubling down on racial identification, or gender identification and expression, on the grounds that such identities have historically (and contemporarily) been expunged from the province of positive valuation. There is little efficacy in clutching the purported fact (which is not a fact, unmediated and transparent) that one is right or righteous or unceasingly wise because they do not hold in contempt their racialized blackness or their cis womanhood, for instance, categories that have been and are marginalized. That is not what this all is about. These identities are at base hegemonic bestowals and will thus have diminished liberatory import in the final analysis; indeed, we cannot get to the final analysis—which I offer as an abolitionist analysis—with these identities if such an abolitionist terrain is given definition by way of the instantiation of the impossibility of violence and captivity. Black trans feminism cannot abide such classificatory violences, so it urges us also to abolish the categories we may love, even if they have not always been received well. If the aim of the radical project of black trans feminism is abolition and gender radicality, which is the case I will be making, it is imperative to grapple with what that actually means. We cannot half-ass abolition, holding on to some of the things we didn't think we would be called to task for giving up. If we want freedom, we need to free ourselves, too, of the things with which we capture ourselves. The project at hand is interested in a thoroughgoing conception of freeness, and it seems like black trans feminism, to call on Saidiya Hartman, “makes everyone freer than they actually want to be.”² When the white woman or the black trans person or the queer-identified person comes at such a project with their indignation about me, us, black trans feminism, trying to take away the very things that they've worked so hard to achieve, we are surely to meet them with a certain level of kindness as an ethical attentiveness to how such trauma has been felt and the joys of mitigating, in whatever way, those traumas. But, and I mean this, we are not to capitulate to a sort-of abolished world because some people who may

look like us or the people who have been forged in oppression are pleading to us. We still, even when Grandma doesn't (think she) want(s) it, work to abolish the world. That is what black trans feminism, as an orientation toward radical freedom, commits to. And that will not be easy, nor will it feel good in the ways we expect.

All of this converges into what will concern this text: black trans feminism. Black trans feminism names this convergence and grapples with the tense and conflicting legacies that inhere in its nominative permutations of black trans, black feminism, and trans feminism. The aim, then, is to mine each of these for how they contribute to the culmination of black trans feminism as a modality of worldly inhabitation, an agential and performative posture in and after this world. In this way, black trans feminism theorizes power, and, more important, the subversion of it, in excess of wholesale notions of immediately discernible "identities." Maintained, then, is how commitment to nonnormativity—where normativity is understood necessarily as "the *terror* of the normative," of which black (trans) feminism is disruptive and interrogative—is also concerned with an impossible desire for being held.³ While captivity connotes violent grips confining our flourishing, perhaps in thinking of a movement away from captivity that is not toward but facilitated in its movement by an embrace—perhaps an impossible embrace without arms, an embrace without being bounded, a bear hug by arms that never close—we gain a different understanding of that toward which we aspire. The work of black trans feminism is always an aim for the *creative* dimension of abolition and the worlds that arise because of the undermined hegemonic categories. Indeed, we are various shades of brokenness and lack, and I wish not to venerate this plight. We need to be healed and do not wish to remain writhing in our broken pieces. We need, in other words, to be held. But what I wish for, what black trans feminism might wish for, is the reconfiguration of how we hold each other without stopping, without *withholding*, all while we are on the run.

I want to wager that this holding and being held without withholding is how one might be able to find footing on what is ultimately no ground. We cannot import some of the violent things into the world we are trying to create and cultivate in the rubble of the old, in the same form, for we would belie the world we are creating. The urge to do that comes from wanting desperately to have a place; it comes from a desire promoted by a fear of loss. But, as Claudia Tate has put it, "while desire is constitutive of a loss, desire also generates by-products even as it makes that deficiency conspicuous."⁴ Desire makes things, it makes something else, it *invents*. There is

thus a different image of the world after the world I wish to posit because I wish to take the scariness seriously. So, abolition urges for the eradication of every and all violent holdovers. It is possible, though, that, even on groundlessness, even in a wholly other world, we can be held insofar as we are embraced by that which does not know us and, in this unknowing, truly loves and caresses us. Think: we might become anything at all, something wildly other than what we are, and in order to give in to that we need to be encountered by a world that really, actually, truly holds and loves us by never, ever presuming to know what shape we will take, what we will want, before we show up. We need to feel held, and we will be held when we are not known from the start—the world we inhabit after and amid abolition and gender radicality doesn't know a damn thing about us, and it smiles at such a fact, because when it finds out, it will know that we emerged from no coercion and no violence, no impositions. And then we can begin another kind of living.

There is, thus, a fundamental commitment to life and livability, and to modes of life that will not look like “Life” precisely because of their dazzlingly abolitionist dwelling in the generative rubble after the oft-mentioned end of the world. As such, black trans feminism is given over as a loving but appositional shimmying away from the constantly repeated rhetorical move “Violence against women, *especially trans women*; violence against trans women, *especially trans women of color* or *especially black trans women*.” The move is understandable, and, please, keep making that gesture when it is appropriate as a way to highlight the populations onto which violation is disproportionately imposed—because we know transantagonism is very much about the targeting of poor black trans women and trans women of color. I proffer a caution, though, in service of an attempted refutation of the assumption embedded in the italicized subclauses, an assumption that the subclause *is* black trans feminism, that one's black trans feminism is encapsulated by a pointing to the violated lives (and deaths) of black trans women. This to me troublingly only allows (black) trans femme subjectivity to emerge through violence. Black trans feminism as articulated in this book is a love letter, a box of chocolates, a warm hug, a place to sleep after a hot meal, a “They got problems with you, you come get me” for those who live in excess of that purportedly unlivable nexus and those hailed by those analytic nominatives—and, further, for those whose subjectivities are such that the world cannot yet accommodate them.

Black Trans Feminism's overall intent is to intervene in two primary discourses: first, a general identitarian discourse—which, to be sure, is not to

be haphazardly denigrated as an unthinking “mob” mentality—that considers blackness, transness, and feminism to be possessed identities from which politics emerge (i.e., “*I am black*,” “*I am trans*,” “*I am a feminist*”). My aim is to think about how we might rally around subversive politics, which then serve as one’s identity as such—Cathy Cohen’s political identities, or what Judith Butler calls thinking in alliance. I wish to deem the corporeal surface as only one node of blackness, transness, and womanness, and the taking of such theorizations seriously will necessitate radically undoing what we have come to hold very dear. A subjectless critique, the broader argument of this book refuses to posit *a* or *the* subject of black trans feminism, rejecting a “proper” object of both study and knowledge production in service of an “eccentricity,” to take language from Teresa de Lauretis. It is a black trans feminism that does not coincide with the amalgam of black and/or trans and/or women subjects, assuming that the being of these historicized demographics intends a certain relation to power and normativity and worldly inhabitation, but, instead, a black trans feminism that “arises as a force of displacement, as a practice for the transformation of subjectivity,” a methodology in conversational politicality with Nahum Chandler’s desedimentary, originary displacement and paraontological Negro problematic that is also, I would argue (and have argued), a gender problematic.⁵

The second discourse in which I am intervening is that which surrounds intersectionalist feminisms, or social justice work done through an intersectionalist frame. Oftentimes this discourse takes the identities that make up the various titular intersections to be givens, needing no critique or, even more treacherously, abandonment. While it is certainly a valiant and useful type of political work to reckon with how one’s race *and* gender, for example, bear on their situatedness in relation to institutions, history, and discourses, there is much to be wanted that black trans feminism seeks to examine. I maintain, in alignment with another loving critic of aspects of how intersectionality is deployed, that “intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility,” a mobility to which I wish to give primacy as the constituent force of black trans feminism.⁶ In other words, what could be missing in intersectional feminisms is an attention to what is happening on the sidewalks along the road, the sewers underground, the skyscrapers up above; or what it sounds like out there, how hot it is outside, what snoozed alarm made the person late for work and in need of going fifteen miles per hour over the speed limit in the first place. Black trans feminism desires an attention to these things

as well, and ultimately the possibilities for reconfiguring what streets can look like, what kind of vehicles we use, and how the traffic patterns move in tandem with the pulse of the city.

Inevitably, in all of this, one wonders about the role and status of the body. While blackness, transness, and feminism are not entirely extricated from the body—it remains that the processes of materialization known as race and gender shape how we experience (what we come to understand as) our bodies—there is still an insistence here, first, on their fundamental distinction from being confined to corporeality. On this score, *Black Trans Feminism* makes a twofold argument: first, that matter and materiality are not to be equated with mere being, a transparent and unmediated facticity of “the body.” I am critical of an understanding of the material body as an unmitigated bearer and disseminator of truth, as if matter cannot be and has not been touched, as it were. The matter that makes up black and transgender and women’s subjectivities is in fact a regulatory ideal that has been made to congeal into a certain look, a look that inevitably excludes other looks for what might validly be considered black or transgender or woman. We come to know what a “proper” one of these subjects looks like by way, unbeknownst (or willfully ignored, when it gets down to it) to many, of highly regulated parameters that I am in the business of deconstructing. It is precisely those regimes of regulation that, while they give us the shape and feel of marginalized identities held dear, are the culprits of various normativities inherent to which are violent hegemonies. Regulatory norms create the obviousness of the “fact” of such and such a body as black or transgender or woman through a forcible, which is to say coerced, reiteration of tenets of what is said to be possible for one to be. Because black trans feminism seeks to destroy such coercion, violences, normativities, and hubristic assumptions, it is necessary to express a critical eye toward a simplistic formulation of materiality that fails to consider its highly regulated grounding. It is thus my contention that if such grounding were dutifully critiqued it would yield the necessity for an abandonment of how “matter” and materiality are commonly understood in favor of a joyous disposition toward the tinkering and playing with how materialization has and can occur differently. There is an ongoing agency to materiality, thus processes of materialization, what we come to understand as matter, are glimpsed in the transness and transing of matter.

The second component of the twofold argument is that “race” and “gender” are necessarily different from this book’s constitutive terms, which cannot be located on or in, strictly speaking, the body. That is, the constituent

terms of this book's title cannot be said to be "simply" names for race and gender (or a disposition gotten to by a specific gender identification [e.g., "woman"]), nor can they be "found" on or in the body in some legible and transparent way. So, while we indeed feel various oppressions in a visceral way, I want to make the claim that it is not because of our immediate access to a material body that is acted upon by external forces, subsequently translating those feelings to a "self" that has perfect communication with that body. The body, too, or what we have come to understand as our body, is subject to epistemic scrutiny; it is not privy to unmediated knowledge or our unproblematic possession. We feel oppressions by virtue of those oppressions giving to us a subjective shape that houses that oppression, is formed in the image of that oppression. The various ways we come to be confined and disciplined, which is to say the form and texture of our bodies, does not preexist ontologizing forces—whether benign or malevolent—but is coeval with them.

In short, the construction that is "the body," which is never as simple as the definite article implies, since other identificatory vectors always complicate its definitiveness, *becomes* largely through hegemonic structures that trek along on axes of epistemology, ontology, ocularcentrism, and neuro-normativity, all of which is to shorthand what we might recognize as the project of Western civilization. These are territorializing projects—colonial and imperialist projects, if you will—that must be subverted even if they are the visceral bases of our comfort. Indeed, black women and femmes along the jagged orbit that meanders around cis and trans have long taken their imposed corporealized ontologies as indicative of a system with instabilities and fractures that they were made to bear the weight of and thus are poised to deploy those fracturative forces against the system itself.⁷

I want to commit to the argument that neither blackness nor transness, nor the implicit "woman" as the subject of feminism, is tied to a specific kind of body or identity. They are, to me, inflections of mutinous subjectivities that have been captured and consolidated into bodily legibilities. With this, however, it is ethically necessary for me to say something about the lives of those who live life as black and/or trans and/or women and to dwell on something perhaps idiosyncratic about these identities *as* identities (ethically necessary because of my own identificatory positionality, which reads a certain way but is, I wholeheartedly submit, inaccurate [curious minds will want to read this endnote]).⁸ Thus, I choose not to recapitulate the worn discourse of "lived experience" that I speak to a bit more in chapter 2 but to advance the much more complex and rich notion

of “opacity.” Given its most fleshed-out articulation by Édouard Glissant, opacity denotes a departure from the Western imperative of transparency, inherent to which is a reduction. In other words, to be transparent and thus legible to the predominating schema of intelligibility one must always have the breadth of their subjectivity reduced, distilled. One’s differences that may fall outside of scripts of possibility (e.g., gender nonbinariness) must be captured by the norm, linked to it in some way, which deprives the difference of something “essential” to it. Glissant offers opacity to combat this “enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy.”⁹ Opacity refuses reduction and perfunctory transparency and preserves the singularity of those who are so often coerced into making themselves digestible. Opacity also allows for a kind of quiet (or loud) claim to something unable and unwilling to be given to others. Such a privacy is ethically important because of its potential for something like solace amid regimes of violence. I am conceding the fact of opacity for those who live through the identificatory markers of blackness, transness, and womanness because it may very well be one of the few things keeping them alive. And I am committed to nothing if I am not committed to life.

But there is more to be said of opacity as it relates to my concerns. Opacity is more robustly a tactical evasion that eludes medicalized, biometric, and regulatory frameworks of “knowing” a subject. Marginalized and oppressed subjects like those indexed by the titular terms of this book can retain the specificities of their positions as differentially subject to the aforementioned regulatory regimes. And this is what I must hold on to, though the “unfixation” I delineate in a later section of this introduction must still be foregrounded. To do this, I urge readers to understand opacity as a vehicle precisely for the eradication of those differentiations that are, at base, violences structured and created by forces of hegemony. To be understood as categorically black or trans or woman is, fundamentally, an identity imposed—a “given ontology”—that, ultimately, in the world after the end of the world, must be discarded because of its link to being forged in the cauldron of an originary violence.¹⁰ Opacity in my usage argues that one’s situatedness is important in that it provides access to the mechanisms of power that have created the conditions for ontologized accidents (e.g., epidermal blackness, nonnormative gendered physicality) to be denigrated and expunged from the province of social validity. There is a way that being forced to hold this denigration on what gets consolidated as a kind of body that approximates but does not measure up to the human ideal in some way

is crucial to note, as bearing the viscera is a different kind of knowledge that some do not have access to. *But opacity does not end here*, and certainly not in the way that proponents of an unceasing and uncritical valorization of lived experience as the pinnacle of epistemic argumentation put forward. Opacity concedes this experiential specificity as radically inclusive, which is to say that it is specific to certain kinds of bodies but it provides knowledge and world-making onto-epistemic forces that can be mobilized by any and every body and nonbody. Immediately following Glissant's mention of the impenetrable autarchy, he goes on to say that "opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics." This is to say, one's experiential blackness or transgender identity is and can be opaque to nonblack and nontrans people, indeed; it says, simultaneously, however, that the knowledge and itch for otherwise ways of living gleaned from being positioned as such is not parochial and is in fact weavable, convergent, coexistent with everyone else.

Furthermore, this is to say that opacity is not static. One is not simply to be black or trans or woman, being opaque to those who are not black/trans/women, which is then the end of the story. Opacities shift and move depending on how various identities get positioned in a given context and also, perhaps more importantly, how identities get deployed in order to create opaque pockets that become impenetrable to power (or, if penetrated, how that probe may enter but not come out, to creatively remix Zora Neale Hurston).¹¹ We come to understand that opacities are *created*, not simply given or possessed ontologically, so the shifting of opacity is predicated ultimately on how we create zones of opacities. And that is what I mean by political identities.

UNFIXATION

I maintain as axiomatic that, as Nat Raha has clearly argued, a radical feminism must center the needs, experiences, and material concerns of trans women, trans femmes, and nonbinary femmes. Any black/trans/feminist worldview is undeserving of the name if it is not grounded by the various epistemic forms proffered by the aforementioned demographics. Too, though, I want to maintain this while simultaneously maintaining the unfixation of transness—and blackness and feminism, and their factorial proliferations—from the sole terrain and ownership, and thus burden of

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responsibility for liberation, of those who are said to (and/or say of themselves) embody the numerous imbrications of these identities. The black trans feminism I want to begin to theorize, nonexhaustively so, is one that, again, as Raha notes, “is not simply about the inclusion of trans bodies or transfeminine people into feminism,” and also one that is not simply about assuming that one’s embodied marginalized identity is sufficient for proffering a radical politics.¹² To do black and/or trans and/or feminist work is not done solely or monolithically by those whom historico-sociality has deemed black or trans or women, or all three. Indeed, if the project of radical trans feminism, and most certainly black radicalism, is characterized as a “heterogeneous, decolonising anti-capitalist feminist project,” then black trans feminism here wishes to think itself and its adherents as those who commit to engendering themselves through these performative enactments.¹³

To inhabit the world as unfixed requires one to let go profoundly. But this profound letting go is with respect to a profound gaining of something else that might allow us to do things differently. The present conditions must undergo an immense detachment; we must detach, unfix, from such conditions if we are to engender something other than this. It is untenable to stick with what we have now, what exists now, if we heed that a radical end of the world requires a radical *end of this* world and its signatories. The other world that is here and now, an other world that harbors otherwise states of becoming and a “you beyond you,” to borrow from Alexis Pauline Gumbs (whose work will be discussed in chapter 4), necessitates the serious rethinking of who we are and what we know. It is a fundamentally radicalized onto-epistemic vitiation in service of finding another way to live with one another.

Black trans feminism is nothing other than radicalism and is a departure from typical definitions of “radical”—the etymological going back to the roots—toward, well, a more radical definition: radical as an imaginative will to engage life unbounded. The radicality discussed in these pages is an adjectival mobilization toward what has not (yet) been realized or conceptualized, an imaginative speculation about how we might be, where we might end up, what might exist, and what might be possible. “Radical” and “radicality” denote a way of being un beholden to normative constraints for legibility, politics, subjectivity, knowledge, and relationality. Blackness’s radicality functions in a transitive manner because it is inflected with respect to but not confined by sedimented notions of racial quanta.

It staves off certainty, invites troubled orientations, ill-abides taxonomy, keeps at a distance existence ahead of itself; it is an unfolding of the fold that demands a different subjectivity. Transness's radicality functions differently than, but not to the exclusion of, "transgender." Specifically, it "functions as a way to think about how things come together and how they work with, on, and in one another." About movement and change, transness asks us to meditate on the manifold ways a thing can present itself differently and, as Kai M. Green states, "allows us to let go of the stability."¹⁴ Black feminism's radicality, that perpetual refusal of institutionalization, manifests as an attunement to the regimes of ontological genders and works those regulative traps by unsuturing them and fracturing gender's impositions. Black feminism and its underpinning trans feminism mutate the state's attempt and function to render things immobile, a function Michel Foucault has noted, and names that which cannot be kept in place or moored to the normative ledgers of history. Taken together, these understandings of blackness, transness, and feminism undergird the start of the hieroglyphic theorization that will come to be understood as black trans feminism, an abolitionist gender radicality.

An ontological blackness and ontological gender are anathema to those abetting the proliferation of black trans feminism, as these ontologies tend toward a reification by which race and gender in particular become treated as if they exist objectively and independent of historical contingency or subjective intentions. Resultant is a categorically essential racial and gender consciousness unable to hold difference and hostile when met with critique, leading to a nebulously and inconsistently exhaustive principle of Racial and Gender Identity, their "thoroughgoing index" entrapping more than liberating.¹⁵ Indeed, "the terms homosexual/heterosexual and transsexual as well as other markers like man/woman, masculine/feminine, whiteness/blackness/brownness," Jack Halberstam writes, "are all historically variable terms, untethered in fixed or for that matter natural or inevitable ways to bodies and populations."¹⁶ The contingency, though merely a speculation of what might have been, is precisely the space in which I dwell here, as what might have been is what we are after, since it is in contradistinction to the violence of what has been and is. Rather than seeing contingency as a bygone thought, it is read here as the seeds of the possible ways we might unfix ourselves from the violence of what has been and is. If what might have been, that historical contingency, is fundamentally not what has been and is—which is the battleground on which

we do all this radical work—then it serves as a potent and rich dossier of rethinking ourselves differently, of unfixing ourselves, and unfixation is an extricative transitive relationship to power's grasp and its ability to coerce meaning onto us. What might have been can be what will soon be.

Readers may have begun to notice something that could be seen as troubling—namely, the seeming overlooking of structural barriers. A structural, and indeed terrestrially, sociohistorically ontological *anti-blackness, sexism, and transantagonism* is an onus not elided in an anti- and antecategorical blackness/transness/feminism. No, no, do not mistake me. What I offer is a celebratory and radically liberatory analysis of these modalities instead of a rehashing-type account of how their identificatory corporeal signifiers are hemmed and maligned by hegemonic forces. And this, I assure you, is in service of the absolute eradication of the forces compelling the hegemon. Antiracism, transantagonism, sexism, and the (hierarchized) gender binary are all structures that disallow such freedom of choice and movement that I have implied thus far, one might think. And, to be sure, one thinks this on justifiable grounds, as one cannot merely opt out of the plight of antiracism, say, by willing oneself in excess of those structural fetters. But the radicality of self-determination, for example—to claim and fashion one's own subjectivity even in the "objective" face of historical, material, and social structures—is a bedrock of any subversion of the very ills that foundation oppressive structures. An outside to the structures must be imagined if there is any chance in negating their sovereignty. Their utter undermining in the form of gender self-determination might be one of those outsides. And there are others. Inasmuch as perinatally designated sex and gender, or white supremacist epidermalization of value, or cis male supremacist subordination and invalidation of those who are not cis men are structural regimes, their cessation requires an irreverence toward their organizing logics and all of their claims about the world. The politicality of blackness, transness, and feminism allows this to occur, as they are not tied to the structures that attempt to "know" subjects on grounds that precede them. Blackness, thus, will outlast "race"; transness will outlast "gender"; feminism will outlast "women." They outlast the identities often sutured to them because, as engendering fugitive forces, they precede and exceed their capture in these identities, and further, they referentially index one another as different literal and proverbial hues of one another—blackness, transness, and feminism are radical and fugitive rhymes for one another.

The moment “Ain’t I a woman?” had to be addressed by Sojourner Truth, the moment she had to bare her breasts to prove that she was the woman, was already a queer, a trans moment. So that rather than seeing ourselves as outside blackness, as outside the dialogue of queerness and trans, I think that we need to place ourselves as black females at the core of the dialogue.

BELL HOOKS, “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body”

Black trans feminism indexes a thing that has been simmering for a while now, bubbling up in the most and least incendiary of places. It is instructive to excavate the historical archive for the way it has tried to manifest blackness through the vector of fugitivity, though imperfectly, as all manifestations of fugitivity are happy to be. And it is fugitivity that I want to use here, for now, as an indexation of the paraontological distinction between blackness and people deemed black, which will then open up transness and black feminism to similar distinctions. So, into the archive.

Approved and signed into law by George Washington on February 12, 1793, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 articulates a preoccupation with stateliness and territory. In the burgeoning formation of a nation, boundedness in more ways than one—national, corporeal, intellectual—became prioritized. Fugitive slaves, then, were broadly conceived of as those who transgressed imposed boundaries: breached the geographic confines of the plantations that they did not and could not call home; undermined the perceptual boundaries of the limits of slave, or Negro, capacity; escaped the grasp of whips, horses, dogs, laws, and desires demanding their confinement; and demonstrated the capacity to autonomously steal that which was deemed property—themselves. Fleeing the “State or Territory” was effectively an escape to life-in-freedom, as the fugitive’s status as slave, being bounded by the state or specific location from which they fled, dissolved on the run. Of note, too, in Section 6 of the amended Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is that “in no trial or hearing under this act shall the testimony of such alleged fugitive be admitted in evidence,” an extension of imposed incapacity onto the very ontology of the slave, in this era (and, arguably, into the contemporary moment) synonymous with blackness. But in all of this, the law cannot hold. The two laws were inadequate, as they could not ensure the fugitive’s capture. On some accounts, in fact, it became even more

difficult to recapture fugitives as they became more adept at eluding power's grasp. Mr. Mason of Virginia, he who introduced the 1850 law because the previous one lacked sufficient severity, tellingly notes that under the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law "you may as well go down into the sea and endeavor to recover from his [*sic*] native element a fish which has escaped from you, as expect to recover such a fugitive."¹⁷ The runaway, the subject engendering another iteration of themselves, transing themselves, quintessentializes the tenor of fugitivity: a perpetual, fishy, escapeful slitheriness that power's hands cannot contain. The law attempts to enact sovereignty on an insovereign nonentity.

In both laws fugitivity extends to those who do the work of aiding and abetting a fugitive and, more notably, impeding the capture of fugitives. Fugitive slave law enlisted everyone, claimed everyone, to make a dire choice: choose the proliferation of captivity or the proliferation of escape. With the historical mobilization of fugitivity through blackness, I want to gesture toward their interrelatedness. I want to gesture toward, because of this historical proximity, blackness being given the capacity I intend for it through fugitive slave law. As the 1793 law states in its second section, "If any person or persons shall, by force, set at liberty, or rescue the fugitive from such agent while transporting . . . the person or persons so offending shall, on conviction, be fined . . . and be imprisoned"; and as the 1850 law says in its seventh section, those assisting runaways "after notice or knowledge of the fact that such person was a fugitive from service or labor as aforesaid, shall, for either of said offences, be subject to a fine . . . and imprisonment."¹⁸ I am thoroughly aware that, say, white abolitionists helping usher fugitive slaves to the North do not occupy the same historical and ontologically abjected position as the runaways themselves, and I do not wish to conflate the two. My assertion, in part, is that these white abolitionists engendered themselves and their world through and in proximity to a paraontological blackness; they, as I expound upon later in this book in a slightly different context, "became-black" and subjectivated themselves politically via a deployment of fugitive blackness. Blackness becomes nonproprietary in a radical and serious, a seriously radical, sense. On this front there is this to say:

This [paraontological] movement . . . refuses to give definition or essence to purportedly extant historical figures precisely because, via the desedimentary, deconstructive, *différential* workings of thinking these subjects, there is to be found no definition or last essential analysis.

The deconstructive work of desedimentation, its paraontological sinews and ligaments, is, if you'll allow me this neologism, nondefinensential. Because of this, we cannot and can never distinguish between who or what is within or without the ostensible boundaries of the very thing we mark as possessing a transparent definition or essence. Hence, the criteria for inclusion and exclusion dissolve into nothingness, thus making the work of paraontology the recognition of this dissolution and, from there, joyfully conceding that there are no criteria for subjective verification, no ontological ground on which to stand in order to be viable, and indeed a no-groundedness that invites subjects into it as a place to stand, para- and non- and nega-ontologically. . . .

Blackness, in its paraontology and the taking seriously of that paraontology, can and must be mobilized by any and all who commit to radicality and ontological desedimentation named in that insurrectionary radicality.¹⁹

My assertion, in an additional part, is also that neither do two different fugitive slaves occupy the “same position,” that positions are ever-shifting and dependent upon myriad vectors of subjectivity, so the matter of deeming only those who have and are subjected due to what was called then “Negroid” phenotype is moot. One is indeed placed, as it were, in a box by virtue of racialized blackness. That box, however, does not imply a closed input-output loop allowing us to predict the outcome every time (or, one might say, as a gesture toward radical transfiguration, *any* time). Being put in a box says little about how one occupies that box and how others relate to that box. A slave in this era may, if you will, be sitting in the bottom right corner of the box; another might be standing in the center of the box; one more might have tunneled out the bottom unbeknownst to anyone else; and still another might be running around the box without clothes, taunting the box's edges, finding seams in its walls to stick a toe into or peer out of. All of these textured ways of inhabiting the box matter more than given credit, and it is the way we move and live, or not, in the box, and what others understand about the box—do they call it a box or a cube or square? Do they like boxes or not? Do they know how the boxes were made and do they plan to do something about the presence or shape or internal temperature of the box? Do they tell others about those in certain kinds of boxes, and do they do things to eradicate boxes or exploit the seams in those boxes to create more air flow?—that matters quite substantively. It is not sufficient to say, as I *know* some of y'all are thinking, that “they're still

in a box” precisely because one is not known and one does not live only via the vector of imposition. “We” are not in our entirety “box people” because we, too, interact with the box, forging who “we” are in that relation, so much so, perhaps, that “boxed” says less and less about our circumstances and mode of inhabitation than other, *as important* stitches of how we show up in this and other worlds.

My interest lies in the thing, or nonthing, that is being punished—fugitivity—as the site of proximity to blackness, which then serves as blackness as such. It is blackness that is the “criminality that brings the law online,” a lawless force that, though named blackness, “must be understood in its ontological difference from black people.” Important, too, is Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s claim that while this “anoriginary drive” they deem blackness—an *anorigin* that is the surplus of an always unlocatable origin, a displacement of origins and desires for origins—is distinct from people called black, those deemed black “are, nevertheless, (under) privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it.”²⁰ The opaque beings that index and allude to the open onto-epistemic trove. That trove is the “understanding” to which the (under)privileged are given, but the understanding is open to being understood by any and every one and non-one.

But, in the spirit of this introduction, indeed this entire book, there is the immense need to examine the *gendered* components of this fugitivity. What if to argue for blackness’s fugitivity and fugitivity’s blackness is already to argue in and through the volatility of gender, gendering, and ungender(ing)? To illustrate this in a historical sense, we can fruitfully turn to a variety of laws and social decrees that derogated gender expression not “befitting” one’s “true” gender. Setting a biblical precedence is Deuteronomy (“second law”) 22:5, which notates that “a man’s item shall not be on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman’s garment; whoever does such a thing is an abhorrence unto Adonai [or, Jehovah or God].” To don dress, which is potent with an implicit and expected revelation of gendered veracity, that does not align with one’s gendered assignation is a divine abhorrence. To trans one’s gender through the sartorial in this case is a transgression of the sovereign force of God, biblically speaking. Briefly, then, we see how transness and blackness converge, where a trans expression is a rebuking of purported divine sovereign decree, and blackness’s radicalism is found in “the critique of political theology and thus of ‘God’ as governor or world manager,” blackness as indexical, according to J. Kameron Carter, of “sacrality without property and without sovereignty.”²¹

If we can conclude preliminarily that laws and customs prohibiting certain modes of dress served to curtail people from inhabiting social space in ways not part of the legibility of sociality as dictated by discursive and sociohistorical power, there is a crucial connection to be made.

Even before explicit laws prohibiting people from appearing “in a dress not becoming his or her sex,” there are glimpses of regulation in the United States as far back as the early eighteenth century. Using South Carolina as a case study, Act No. 586 of its “Act for the Better Ordering and Governing Negroes and Other Slaves” (ratified on March 29, 1735) dictated which textiles enslaved people were permitted to wear, sedimenting maximum measurements for “nigger cloth,” which emboldened white citizens to seize any and all clothing deemed too extravagant or refined for the enslaved. The language of the law reads,

And whereas, many of the slaves in this Province wear clothes much above the condition of slaves, for the procuring whereof they use sinister and evil methods; for the preventing, therefore, of such practices for the future. Be it enacted by the authority aforesaid. That no owner or proprietor of any negro slave or other slave whatsoever, (except livery men or boys,) shall permit or suffer such negro or other slave to have or wear any sort of apparel whatsoever, finer, other, or of greater value, than negro cloth.

Further, in 1795 a “regulation” was adopted to prohibit both the enslaved as well as free persons of color from wearing anything that might disguise themselves. What these prohibitions do is highlight “the anxiety felt by the [white] ruling class about people appearing or pretending to be something other than that which local customs and laws permitted them to be. In short, the laws of early South Carolina in general and Charleston in particular were very much concerned with physical appearances in the public realm and their role in constructing and maintaining a traditional social hierarchy.”²² Pervasive throughout this era was the forbidding of disguise—that is, dressing in manners associated with a different class status or profession, and donning apparel that made white people appear as indigenous (as was often the case during populist protests like the Boston Tea Party) or black people appear as white.

The laws became gender-specific beginning in 1848, when an ordinance in Columbus, Ohio, declared that it was forbidden for someone to appear “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex.” Picking up steam in March 1868, an anonymous member of the City Council introduced “A Bill to Prevent

and Punish Indecent Exposure or Improper Conduct, and For Other Purposes,” which was subsequently printed in the local newspaper. The bill reads, in part, as follows:

Be it ordained by the Mayor and Aldermen, That if any person shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity, or in a dress not becoming his or her sex, or shall make any indecent exposure of his or her person, or be guilty of any lewd or indecent act or behavior, or shall print, engrave, make, exhibit, sell, or offer to sell, any indecent or lewd book, picture, or any other thing, shall be subject to a fine of not less than twenty dollars, nor exceeding one hundred dollars, or imprisonment not exceeding one month.²³

The decree conflates indecent exposure (e.g., nudity) with dressing in a manner not becoming of one’s sex, and gender nonconforming dress is seen as on par with a criminalized offense (“guilty”) of lewd or indecent behavior of one’s person or of material like books and pictures. In other words, gender transgression is akin to, and punishable on par with, legal transgressions of indecency. This instantiates the gender binary and cis genders as natural law, deviation from which is likened to deviation from the pristine tenets of lawfulness.

Such a deviation, though, was and is necessary for some, indeed life-sustaining and -creating. There are myriad instances of the enslaved using, in the words of C. Riley Snorton, “gender fungibility as a contrivance for freedom,” including Harriet Tubman’s wearing of pants and disguising a black man in a bonnet to facilitate their escape, and Eliza of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* cutting her hair and disguising herself as a boy (and her son as a girl) to facilitate her final flight to Canada to Harriet Jacobs’s assumption of masculine garb (“a suit of sailor’s clothes, jacket, trowsers [*sic*], and tarpaulin hat”), among others that may have escaped the historical ledger. Enslaved black life utilized the fissures in normative gender as a means of escape, which is to say that black life and blackness enable their freedom—their ability to live—precisely through fissured gender, making blackness and black life given not only to fissuring gender but, indeed, to being and becoming *through* fissured gender, blackness as itself always and already proximal to, indexical of, and given to an understanding of transness. This is what is being made clear in the above epigraph in which bell hooks draws a queer, trans, and black feminist lesson from Sojourner Truth’s need to negotiate her racialized (non)womanhood. As allegorized through Truth, there is a way that the nexus of black and woman, instead of being an

untroubled additive gesture, asserts that “rather than accepting the existing assumptions about what a woman is and then trying to prove that she fit the standards, Truth challenged the very standards themselves. Her actions demonstrate the process of deconstruction—namely, exposing a concept as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a simple reflection of reality.” What occurs at point zero of the convergence of black and woman is, Patricia Hill Collins concludes, “deconstructing the concept *woman*.”²⁴

Blackness, as I have asserted and will continue to expound upon, is a force of transfiguration, of being and becoming otherwise-than, a modality facilitating mutability and paracategorization. Inasmuch as black skin has been made to index (albeit imperfectly, as with any categorization and taxonomy) this modality, and inasmuch as it is often presumed that such a physiognomy is an immutable bodily characteristic, other ways of adorning oneself as a mechanism for identification took on a potency that needed to be made as immutable and categorical as physiognomy. Thus, the various ways that one expressed oneself via dress, which was rife with class and gender signifiatory power, needed to be curtailed. To mutate one’s dress as a method for expressing a gender “not becoming of” one’s sex was taken as needing to be fixed, sedimented, like physical blackness was presumed to be. And this is substantiated explicitly in the twentieth century, when medico-juridical practitioners invented medicalized notions of gender as a form of race, as a phenotype.²⁵ There is thus a generative convergence between blackness and gender nonnormativity. Historically, there is often a connection made between blackness and nonnormative gender—or, rather, transness—through the thread of the possibility of insurrection or abolitionist sentiments. As an example, in 1859 Caroline Wilson was arrested by the chief of police after “circumstances transpired which led to the belief that he [*sic*] was not what he [*sic*] seemed.” (Because of the inauspicious and non-self-determined nature of the “outing,” it seems to me that I can neither assume “he” pronouns [or “she” pronouns, for that matter] nor a certain identificatory grounding for Wilson.) Wilson confessed that Wilson “had regularly appeared in woman’s apparel since he [*sic*] was ten years old,” though “confessed” is much closer, in my view, to coerced. Too, surviving reports indicate no charge for the arrest, the arrest having come from, in effect, no identifiable wrongdoing on Wilson’s part—or, at least, no de jure laws were transgressed. The point of noteworthiness here is what was said in the local press: “It is suspected that this disguise has been assumed for some ulterior purpose,” it said, “as he [*sic*] has been seen frequently in close conversation with negros [*sic*], a suspicion has been raised

in the minds of some that he [*sic*] is an Abolition emissary.”²⁶ Gender transgression is made to be close kin with a proximity to blackness, indeed, to abolitionist sentiments. Wilson’s transing of Wilson’s gender evoked nefarious plots to upend the conditions that subtend pervasive captivity. It might be argued that Wilson indexed and mobilized anticaptivity, dramatizing the interarticulatory nature of blackness and transness as abolitionist gender radicality. Gender transgression was made legible *through* blackness and abolition; in other words, gender transness cannot help but evoke blackness, for both are radical insurrectionary postures enacted through the sociopolitical sites of race and gender. And such is the very aim of *Black Trans Feminism*: to excavate and delineate the nebulous and generative texture of abolitionist gender radicality.

ABOLITION AND GENDER RADICALITY

The organizing framework of this text’s conception of black trans feminism is what I will be understanding as abolitionist gender radicality. Surely not to the exclusion of other possible ways of organizing black trans feminism, I understand abolitionist gender radicality as a prime analytic for clarifying the effects and implications, as well as structure (if such a term is even apt), of black trans feminism.

Abolition, as articulated here, is broader than just prison abolition, both in that it is concerned with systems of oppression and captivity that are things other than prisons, and in that the “prison” is to be understood much more capaciously than just the institutions that incarcerate people behind bars. Abolition can be succinctly defined as a modality and orientation to life and livability that is not reactive against “bad” prisons but a way to make forms of carcerality impossible. Abolition is not one spectacularized event but a quotidian working toward eradicating carceral logics as predicates for sociality and relationality. Like what Sarah Lamble terms “everyday abolition,” I offer abolition as “changing the ways we interact with others on an ongoing basis and changing harmful patterns in our daily lives,” questioning punitive impulses and relations of captivity.²⁷ This book urges abolition in a broad sense: the making impossible—and creation of a sociality indexed to the impossibility—of carcerality, any form of captivity, which can include categorical taxonomies, agential circumscription, and the like. We create abolition and do abolition in each moment we move toward the alleviation of subtle ways of curtailing the ability of anyone to become liberated. It is

fundamental to an ethics of nonviolence, which is to say the commitment to refusing the proliferation of the originary violence of ontology. Abolition, in doing away with the very violence that has orchestrated our very sense of ourselves and the world, an orchestration that has dictated who we have been permitted to be and who we permit others to be, is a quotidian effort of mitigating violation.

I understand and proffer abolition as putting pressure even on terms such as revolution. A prominent understanding of revolution is akin to a Marxist seizure of the means of production; it manifests in taking (back) the government or capturing the office of the CEO. Underlying this, however, is the assumption of an inevitable and natural government and office. Uncritiqued and simply taken for granted is the shape of power itself, which is implied to inevitably look like the state—by which I mean not simply “government” but a horizon of stanching possibility and set of practices predicated on circumscription, order, law, and discipline; the state, that is, as a relation inflected through punitivity, transaction, capitalist investment, and hegemony—and, furthermore, there is the assumption that the state and its limbs are recuperable rather than, definitionally, progenitors of violence. On one reading, revolution seeks to equally distribute the violence embedded in the state. Abolition, on the other hand, is a doing away with the state. And since the state is a relation rather than a mere establishment, the state-relationality takes myriad forms, racial taxonomization and gender binaristic impositions and hierarchical sex classification among them. More than just resistance, abolition as made here to engender black trans feminism is committed to moving “*beyond* the state in the service of collective liberation,” making a founding coalitional drive constitutive of it. It is also a call for something other than epistemic mastery over where we should go from here; it is “a provocation to *care* more than we can *know*, to extend our analyses past the ruins of the world (and the discipline) as we know it.”²⁸ We do not need to know for certain the parameters of what comes after this hell. And perhaps we cannot know, if we are truly to get to a place not beholden to extant modes of conceptualization. What is primary is that we care for and about one another’s livelihoods. We then cultivate the conditions that can lovingly accommodate such livelihoods.

Black trans feminism is also committed to gender self-determination in a way that slightly departs from the term’s popular conception. Typically, gender self-determination is believed to simply be the acceptance of everyone’s right to choose whatever gender they want. I say my gender is *x*, which means you must respect that, and if you do not you are impinging

on my right to determine my own gender. This is sensible and not entirely off the mark. But the gender self-determination argued for here, nuancing the popular conception, disallows the building of hierarchies for genders. It disallows battles between genders based on proximity to a mythical realness or authenticity. Gender self-determination is much more than “any person, any gender,” for such a conception of gender self-determination, the one that seems to be in place now, bears traces of neoliberal individuation presuming that the process of gender is extricated from sociality and nevertheless evaluates the contours of that gender through a marketplace economy of its use-value, legibility, and ability to still be productive. The gender self-determination affixed to black trans feminism is a social dance, but a sociality not really here; black trans feminist gender self-determination avows a subjective cultivation of ways to do illegible genders, genders that abolish the bestowal of gender, genders that allow us all to be and become expansively outside of the very desire to have to bestow onto ourselves gender. This means that when we advocate for gender self-determination from this purview we do not say “Yes” to any and all genders one chooses; it means we advocate for the ethical requisite to say “No”—or better, to decline to state—with regard to the imposition of gender.

How, then, does a wide-reaching abolition that includes the abolition of the ontologies of racialization and gender hold with it gender self-determination? It is maintained that gender self-determination, as argued by Queer (In)Justice, “require[s] that we reach toward abolition, *not just of prisons*, and for some of us, police, but of the systems that produce them, and which replicate systems of policing and punishment beyond prison walls.”²⁹ The systems spoken of are not discrete entities that we can do away with while leaving the general landscape intact; they are the ontological order that has bestowed a fundamental sense of being onto anything that can be said to properly exist. In order to self-determine one’s own gender it must be the case that, first, there is an unviolated self, which is to say the abolition of self toward something like another self; and, second, what is determined by that self must be noncoercive and noncompulsory, which may, again, be to say abolition of gender as we know it. Gender self-determination is both a theoretical/philosophical practice (like part 1 of *Black Trans Feminism*) as well as a discursively enfolded practice (like part 2 of *Black Trans Feminism*) that utilizes a coalitional desire to create a space in which gender might be fashioned radically noncompulsorily and nonviolently, or without imposition and immutability onto oneself and others. Thus, gender-self-determination is a movement toward dissolving given gender ontologies;

self-determination is a kind of desedimentation or paraontology inasmuch as it is not given from without.

In short, the commingling of abolition and gender self-determination is actually reciprocally facilitated by each since one cannot emerge through what I would deem genders that might have arisen but for Gender if the latter has not been abolished. If abolition must be a project not only of closing violent doors (Gender) but the cultivation and proliferation of nourishing and transformational things (genders that might have arisen but for . . .), abolition cannot occur without gender self-determination as Gender is one of the chief forms through which coercive, compulsory violence and captivity are carried out, and gender self-determination cannot be actualized without widespread abolition. Indeed, “sex,” rooted in the gender binary, hands over gender assignation to someone outside of oneself, someone buttressed by the medical and juridical institutions that bestow the validity of gender. One’s inaugurative possibility is quite literally deprived from them and instantiated in another. This is far from self-determination; this is another’s literal determination of oneself and one’s self. So gender as well as sex abolition enable gender self-determination. Sex and gender assignation can be read as a perinatal ontological foreclosure in service of maintaining the established ontological ground, a primordial violence seeking to quell the mutiny of black anoriginal lawlessness or unruly transitivity.

And, lastly, all of this—abolition and gender self-determination, or a gender radicality, which I will discuss below—is in service of a radically open claimability and indiscriminate demand. They require that we all get touched by abolition and gender radicality, as it were, forcing us all to become woven into it, for we cannot stand on the outside if we are seeking to abolish such ontologized distinctions; we cannot simply be “in support” of abolition without sullyng ourselves and dissolving, abolishing, the very things abolition stands in contrast to, meaning that we, too, *become* through abolishing the ways we ourselves have been formed. Put differently, “if we really take the queer, trans, gender-non-conforming political *position* seriously,” writes Che Gossett, “we have to understand that to undertake the work of gender self-determination and gender liberation, we don’t simply ‘stand alongside/behind’ our queer/trans peers; we inhabit a position *with* them in absolute political intimacy.”³⁰ Abolition and gender self-determination, fueled by and fueling black trans feminism, means that when we do these things we inhabit the space with and through them; when we take on the work of abolition and gender self-determination we

take on the work of black trans feminism, which is to say we, and I mean this, take on, in and as ourselves, the black, the trans, and the feminist.

In turn, gender radicality is radical insofar as it is presented as the *undoing* of roots (not a going back to the roots), indeed rootedness itself; radicality is an extirpation, not a tending. Radicality refuses to reduce its aim to static templates of what is only possible in the current discourse. Thinking of radicality as a departure rather than a return shifts the line of thought toward a fundamental dismantling of the current order of things. To be radical is not to wish to go back; to be radical is not to want to go back to a prelapsarian image of perfection, but rather to seek that which can be possible—or maybe even to seek that which is *impossible*. Gender radicality yearns for genders that might have been but for the normative binary regime of gender. They are otherwise genders that imagine what might be possible and impossible; they are imperfect and molten genders that subjectivate us differently.

Gender radicality, as the underlying tenor of black trans feminism, indexes what Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones calls a black/feminist future, a black feminism that is notably imbricated with the transness of black fugitive study that Jack Halberstam designates as an “unregulated wildness.”³¹ Drawing on Beauvoir and Fanon, Adkins stakes her black feminism in a radical liberatory “perigendered, periracial world” that insists on pursuing freedom, that space of abolition, “within an ethics of community that questions the assumptions of the aesthetics and politics of difference and that acknowledges the abilities of ‘the other’ to move across various social categories as a beginning to enact independence.”³² A gender radicality, notably not a radical gender, is fundamentally perigendered and periracial, ante and prior to the forces of gendering and racialization—gendering’s and racialization’s discontented alternative modality of subjectivation, I’d argue—and as such builds community on the interrogation and undermining of race and gender insofar as they are predicated upon notions of purity. If the politics of difference rest on normative logics that have cordoned off where racial and gender categories begin and end and have themselves instantiated categorization as the means by which one enters into valid (read: normative) subjectivity, questioning those assumptions is the grounds for advancing a future of gender radicality. The Other as a proxy for those who move away from normative confinement can and must move across categorization because it is the becoming that works before, after, and outside of static being that is originary. In short, Adkins concludes, blackness moves

in excess of race since race “is inflected by a desire for purity and fidelity,” and imagines that “the future(s) of blackness move(s) us to name the ways in which refusal to sequester, to quarantine black from black, is inherent to blackness itself.”³³

What intrigues me and powers this articulation of black trans feminism is a deviant echo of a mellifluous chiming by Jasbir Puar on Brian Massumi’s work: How might we degrid the cartographical maps that have been imposed not simply on but *as* our bodies? How do we, salvifically, refuse positioning ourselves retroactively into a gridlocked self—which is to say, definitionally, Identity—for something that we are forbidden from becoming: unrecognizable, unbounded, unself, all of which are to say, in different ways, an abolition of the strictures of having to *be something*? How can we, as Eliza Steinbock says of trans studies, remain in an indeterminate, non-fixed space and suspend the desire for retroactive installment of ourselves and others into the paradigmatic (racialized, gendered) grid?³⁴

It is to the end of abolitionist gender radicality that each chapter serves. I’ve broken the book up into two distinct parts. The purpose of this organization is to facilitate a discretion in service of a collaboration, by which I mean I want to fracture and break toward the end of bringing together and communing. I am, admittedly, attempting in my own way to actualize Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s instantiation of black women who “make and break narrative” by, here, breaking the narrative components of this text apart in order to make something not able to be made were it not for the breaking. Surely *Black Trans Feminism* could have been a straightforward theoretical meditation thinking philosophically about how the three titular terms speak to and through one another; and surely too it could have been a literary meditation, taking up the 1980s and 1990s black feminist tradition of close reading novels and poetry and racialized and gendered literary language; or it could have attempted, as indeed is done in the conclusion, to think about black trans feminism strictly as a certain kind of legible praxis via activism and protestation and livability. Yet the project this text sets out on is a promiscuous one, needing all of these different approaches. It is also a project that wishes to think about the dissolution of genre (especially considering black trans feminism’s gender abolitionist project and the etymological link of “genre” to “gender”)—a kind of allusion toward gender abolition through, as it were, genre abolition. Thus, the literariness of part 2 moseys into the theoreticality of part 1, and the theory of part 1 skirts into the literariness of part 2, which is also to say that the theory of part 1

is concerned with nothing but how to think about life and livability on a broad, philosophical scale, and the literature—poetry, essays, tweets, blog posts—of part 2 is written and disseminated oftentimes literally to sustain one's life.

Part 1, then, ought to be understood as a philosophical articulation of black trans feminism, where philosophy is a sustained practice of thought toward neither knowledge acquisition nor epistemic mastery but, rather, a way of conceptualizing meaningfulness in excess of the semiotic regimes currently in place. Part 1 theorizes black trans feminism from different angles that cultivate the altered understandings underlying it, grappling with the philosophical concerns implied in such a sociopolitical and epistemic shift. To that end, chapter 1, “Black, Trans, Feminism,” aims to think the three terms of my title in relation to one another. What is meant, and what is illuminated, by thinking black and trans together? Black and feminist? Trans and feminist? Though necessarily incomplete and a bit disingenuous insofar as the omitted term always creeps into my discussion—and insofar as the discussed terms are already embedded within one another—I use this chapter as an occasion to mine in detail the nexus of black/trans, black/feminist, and trans/feminist with the hope that the three terms’ constitutivity becomes even more apparent. The chapter makes the case for the nonidentitarian ethos of blackness, transness, and feminism, which is to say the politically identificatory queerness of the terms in the vein of Cathy Cohen, and furthermore excavates black studies, black feminist theorizing, and transgender studies for their recalibration of identity through a subjectless predication on abolitionist gender radicality. The case is made for a blackness and transness and feminism that understand themselves as radically open claimable postures that place a visceral and rigorous demand to do the ethical work of approximating the “poverty-in-spirit” inflected in variegated ways by way of history’s contingency.

Chapter 2, “Fugitivity, Un/gendered,” theorizes how inhabitation of a fugitive spirit, as it were, must incite an un/gendered subjectivity. To that end, I meld the theorizations of Hortense Spillers’s “flesh” and Kai M. Green’s and Treva Ellison’s “tranifest” to create what I call “traniflesh.” If Spillers understands flesh as a distinct liberated subject position that stands in contrast to the body, flesh refuses gestures of cohesiveness and foreclosure. Green and Ellison articulate tranifest—to transformatively manifest—as an operative comportment that runs exceedingly across and to the side of normativizing racial, sexual, and gendered gestures. Such a conceptualization is used in this chapter to think subjectivity—a subjectless and

unsubjugated subjectivity—outside of cohesive logics of power through traniflesh, or a haptic and tactile (the *hac[k]tile*) grammatical refusal through fissure and dehiscence. Conversant with L. H. Stallings’s “illusive flesh” and C. Riley Snorton’s “appositional flesh,” traniflesh is a move to un/gender, to feel “somewhere elseone,” to be on the run from gender in gender’s undercommons.

“Trans/figurative, Blackness,” as the subsequent chapter, advances Spillers’s claim that blackness—or, in her words, “black culture”—is “no longer predicated on ‘race’” and instead names insurgent “vantages” from which one un/relates to the hegemon. Such a move unfixes it from the terrain of corporeality and gives blackness over to a trans analytic, a trans/figured promiscuous assemblage that mobilizes instability. Drawing on the biblical “Transfiguration” of Jesus as a changing of form, my use of the slash to, well, transfigure transfiguration refuses the inherent valuative hierarchy of the biblical precedent and (un)settles on trans/figuration’s work as a destabilizing becoming otherwise. This, I argue, is the work of blackness and its inherent transness, a trans/figuration that refuses dichotomy and finds its ethos in excess. It is a “de-personed” modality of presentability (not representability), a metamorphosis-in-black, a boundless movement outside the tendrils of History that cannot be anticipated. In short, it is the means by which we might disorder the world otherwise.

Part 2 of this book articulates black trans feminism literarily and textually, specifically *poetically*, providing readings of both well-known radical black feminist writers (Gumbs) and lesser-known black trans poets and essayists (dodd, Selenite, Edidi). Poetry has emerged as the genre of insight in this text because it seems to be the genre, the discursive avenue, through which many black and trans and femme people have chosen to write. Those who find themselves living and agitating at the nexus of black and trans and femme have not really used the form of the novel to express the kind of black trans feminist work to which this book is attesting, nor have they utilized short stories or other kinds of long-form fiction. They have, as has been illustrated by people like Shaadi Devereaux and Monica Roberts and Raquel Willis and Kat Blaque and a few others, utilized the form of the essay—or, more precisely, the online think piece—to illuminative effect. There is, however, more of a *journalistic* utility to many of these writings, a conveyance of information rather than primarily a meditation on black trans feminist life. This is not to diminish the journalistic essay; it is, though, to assert a different tenor and texture to what that genre is doing. Poetry seems to be, at the present time, the genre that harbors the weight

of black trans feminist *thinking*. Indeed, novels and short stories and essays are sites of thinking as well, but the poetry of the writings in this text are doing *black trans feminist thinking* in a sustained, intentional, affective, intellectual, and committed way. It is not for simply informative ends, as in the journalistic essay, nor is it a fictionalized account used to illustrate what it's like to be black and/or trans and/or femme. Poetry appears to be, as will hopefully be made clear in part 2, black trans feminist writing; it is the literary form that black trans feminism takes. And I don't know entirely why. But, I hope, that's okay.

In light of this, there is something crucial to be gained by not simply drawing on the work of established black women or black femme writers whose books have been published by academic presses but focusing also on black and trans women who have self-published their books or published with small, lesser-known, independent presses, focusing on the black trans women—a nexus, in this instance, simultaneously identificatory and not, as this book will make quite clear—who have needed to create Patreon accounts to make financial ends meet and who need to ask for donations via Twitter in order to pay rent. This is a different, though no less or more important, avenue into understanding black trans feminism. Part 2 provides readings of texts and discourses by these thinkers to give discursive and literary flesh to the theorizations in part 1. Chapter 4, “Feminist, Fugitivity,” examines Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s poetic triptych: the books *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, *M Archive: After the End of the World*, and *Dub: Finding Ceremony*. The chapter reads these three texts through a lens of excavating their radical recalibration of blackness and gender. *Spill* showcases people who, as Gumbs says, are fugitive from patriarchal definitions of masculine and feminine, which indexes the black and trans feminist underpinnings of the text. *M Archive*, in turn, is the assessment and evaluation of the end of the world by a black feminist metaphysician. As *Spill* thinks racialized gendered subjectivity outside of given ontologies and as “fugitive from patriarchy,” so, too, does *M Archive* assert a different analytic evaluative frame for what happens when the current regime is abolished. *Dub*, lastly, is an interspecies communion that attempts to go beyond taxonomic structures, beyond taxonomizing gestures, and find the kinship between those entities said to in no way be kin. *Dub*’s interspecies, non-taxonomic betrayal of the regime of Man, with Man’s constitutive whiteness and cisness, advances a coalitional movement defiant of the hubris of phrases like “We the people” or, even more fundamentally, “people” as an automatic kinship.

The fifth chapter, “Questioned, Gendered,” concerns black trans femme writer and poet jayy dodd’s work. dodd’s corpus puts under scrutiny, and examines the potentialities of, racialized gender, conveying radical ways of thinking alongside blackness and gender nonnormativity. The chapter proceeds by meditating on what to dodd it means to be “blxck,” her own idiosyncratic spelling for “black,” which I argue is for her a mode of inscribing, or making graphemetically apparent, blackness’s gender trouble, its indexation of the departure from normative gender symbolics; to be trans, a transness that is always already what she calls a “peak blackness”; to be feminist, or a fraught feminism that resides in the radical praxis of illegibly inscribing otherwise modalities of subjectivity; and to be someplace not here, which I theorize through a close reading of two poems in dodd’s 2019 poetry collection *The Black Condition* ft. *Narcissus*.

Chapter 6, “Trigger, Rebel,” reads Venus Di’Khadija Selenite’s essays and poems in conjunction with Dane Figueroa Edidi’s poetry and interviews. Selenite and Edidi, both black trans women, imagine other ways of living. From Selenite’s refusal to work a traditional nine-to-five job as a way to opt out of capitalist logics and the violence of the sphere of professionalism, among other things, to Edidi’s understanding of herself as a goddess who has existed before herself and in numerous locations, this chapter mines their essayistic and poetic acumen for imaginative politics. Indeed, Selenite and Edidi imagine how things might operate differently through the blackness and transness and womanness of their lives. They express self-determinative black trans feminism unbounded by normative discourse or intelligible notions of history and time. Their black feminist theorizations, James Bliss might say, are “out of place,” as they definitionally mark themselves as outside of institutionalizability. Black trans womanhood becomes, for them, a force of gender defiance, genealogical fracture, spiritual interstitiality, and triggering without warning.

The conclusion is an attempt to showcase what it will look like to live through black trans feminism. Black trans feminism requires a substantial kind of hope, which propels one’s in- and exhabitation of the world. It is a stalwart defense of hopefulness that does not capitulate to rosy imagery of things getting better but to what I term “fugitive hope.” The conclusion, which I’ve titled “Hope, Fugitive,” essentially gives the theorizations in the previous chapters a way to live. How, the chapter asks and tentatively answers, does one live in the world black trans feministically? Often is it argued that the abjected and marginalized must and should leave the world, must go to outer space, in order to exist. But I want to posit that

black trans feminism and all those who take up its demand can claim the world; black trans feminism, too, has a place here, can stay here blacking it up, transing and feministing it up. In claiming the world, the world is overturned and disallowed from simply spinning as it has done; taking hold of the world through the dictates of black trans feminism, in effect, ends the world in order to claim the world, a world emerging in the rubble of this world, anew, in order for something that used to be us to live. It is a chapter and ultimately a theorization of life. Death, though pervasive in academic, material, and social discourses, will not enter here. This chapter is wholeheartedly and tearfully about life. We move, we find joy, we continue to live, we are “still fucking here,” as Miss Major would say. And that is all life. We are “won’t die things,” we refuse death. We, in a word—or, two—hope fugitively.

As I write this, I know that I am on lovingly embattled terrain. I know, for example, that there will be black trans women out there who vehemently disagree with things I say herein. And I am pained, truly, by this fact, for I often feel so strongly that the work I write and think within, the people who have gifted me this knowledge, are trying to inscribe in some faint way a liberatory path precisely for, among many, many others, black trans women. But I have come to realize, via some tough and challenging conversations, that black trans feminism is not *about* black trans women. The radical politics that black trans feminism names are not beholden to “being” a presumed type of subject because it is denoted here as a politics that knows full well that, as micha cárdenas argues, “there is no longer a link that can be assumed between transgender experience and radical politics, if there ever was one”; that identifying as and being identified as black is not a proxy for political radicality; that deeming oneself female or feminist does not do the necessary *werq* feminism, in this radicalized iteration, demands.³⁵ It is not the aim to think of black trans women as a monolith or automatically, by identificatory virtue, right about what black trans feminism is or might be. Even as I understand myself as part of the project of black trans feminism I must remain cognizant of its heterogeneity, that some under its heading will approach it differently, will feel differently about it. Thus, what I am engaging in these pages is the tradition of immanent critique, wherein I hope to provide a critical and alternative vocabulary—and an excavation of vocabulary that has long been here but has been obscured and forgotten—for the very fields I find myself a part. (I am also engaging “intramural critique,” as Spillers would call it, which is surprisingly hard to come by in certain

pockets of my fields and social spaces; it is a mode of critique that many have been less concerned with than they perhaps should. So, I am concerning myself with it.) There is the risk that while I aim to write something that will ultimately be liberatory for us at a radically fundamental level (i.e., the level of ontology) I may still be read as hostile to the very people and legacies that have birthed me. My hope is for the former.

Black Trans Feminism is in many ways a plea that tries to invite into its vicinity all those who wish to oppose, undermine, counter, appose, destroy, abolish, or refuse the hegemonic constraints of power. It wants, indeed needs, us all because it is the only way we can save ourselves; it knows, like Malcolm X did in his later, wiser years, that “the only way we’ll get freedom for ourselves is to identify ourselves with every oppressed people in the world.”³⁶ Every oppressed people *in the world*. While this particular iteration of black trans feminism takes many of its sources and discourses from Americanist texts and histories, it is with the aim of a borderless and thus geographically dissolutionary world. A specificity in service of an unspecificity; it is, and can be and should be, “about” unbounded sociality, portable outside of the specific U.S. context. I have little interest in anchoring this project, because anchorage is much too close to the conceit of origins; because genealogies are always fraught and unable to account for the links in the lineage that needed to be forgotten in order for the genealogy to maintain its cohesion; because kinship and affinities are promiscuous and irreverent, temporary and dis/located from legible coordinates; because geologies, even if of a darker hue, are logics I ultimately seek to dislodge, for what is place and space at the quantum level? In other words, I am in the business of dissolving borders and boundaries. As I note in my discussion in chapter 5 on jayy dodd, when she discusses being-but-not-being in the United States, much of what I argue is an attempt to write the unbounded and thus is in search of something that also defies national boundaries. Like dodd, while I occupy and draw citations from the place called the United States—which may no doubt circumscribe my audience, a consequence I accept—I am writing with those citations toward and in service of someplace not here, nor there, strictly speaking.

We are still searching for our mothers’ gardens. This book is an homage to those who imagined and lived imaginatively in otherworlds while still being here, yet refusing to concede to here’s violence. If our mothers and grandmothers, our many-gendered othermothers, moved “to music not yet written. And they waited,” as Alice Walker says, what I’ve penned here is an attempt to write the music to end their waiting.³⁷

Notes

INTRODUCTION: ABOLITION, GENDER RADICALITY

1. Readers may take note of my separation of “trans” and “feminism,” uncommon among most usages of the term, which is often combined as “transfeminism.” My hope is that this does not strike readers as uninformed or unethical, as, I assure you, it is not my intention to imply either of these about its usage here. I am following Julia Serano’s insistence on their separation, Serano writing: “*Many trans feminists prefer spelling ‘trans feminism’ as two separate words, where trans is an adjective that modifies feminism. The single-word version—‘transfeminism’—looks somewhat alien, and seems to suggest that this is not actually a strand of feminism but something else entirely (just as the single word ‘transwomen’ suggests that trans women are something other than women). Along similar lines, we do not describe people as Catholicwomen or lesbianwomen*” (emphasis in original). It is because I concur with Serano’s rationale that I replicate the practice in these pages. Additionally, of note is my pervasive use of “trans” instead of “transgender.” The prefixal use of “trans” rather than a more specific “transgender” or “transsexual” is intentional, since it allows for the open-endedness I seek. Following Bobby Noble and Sarah Lamble—and this thinking can be extended to blackness and black feminism—rather than as a mere “umbrella” term I am deploying “transness” as “a political approach that questions, disrupts, and transforms dominant ideas about what is normal.” Because the more explicit “identity” that “transgender” signifies, and the “pedantic” distinctions between “transgender”/“transsexual”/etc. “cannot hold,” as Noble says, “trans” is my preferred term because it “signif[ies] subjectivities where bodies are at odds with gender presentation, regardless of whether that mis-alignment is self-evident in conventional ways or not.” See Serano, “Trans Feminism.” See also Johnson, ed., *No Tea, No Shade*, 237; and Scott-Dixon, ed., *Trans/Forming Feminisms*, 102.

2. Hartman, quoted in Wilderson and Soong, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,” 30.

3. Villarejo, "Tarrying with the Normative," 69–70; see also Brown, "World on Fire," 581–82. Villarejo clarifies further: "In its most benign form [normativity] appears as a bullying insistence toward obedience to social law and hierarchy, and in its most lethal form it carries the punishment of death for resistance to them. In my view, queer theory brings immense resources to the analysis of, engagement with, and critique of normativity, resources precisely calibrated to the degree to which 'queer' is deployed as a catachresis, as a metaphor without an adequate referent." Brown also brings in black feminism as integral to queerness, writing, "Radical black feminisms, my subject in this essay, are already queer, as they critique normativity and normativizing processes."

4. Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, 10.

5. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 107; see also Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects"; Chandler, *X*; and Bey, *Problem of the Negro*.

6. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 213. There is also a way that intersectionality might, as Mark Rifkin explains in his meditation on black and indigenous "irreducible differences," advance as if, say, one's race and gender "have determinate boundaries . . . [which] can end up reifying those boundaries in ways that not only rigidify" them but also naturalize them. As Anna Carastathis has noted, some models of intersectionality "also naturalize politicized identities, constructing the boundaries between groups as pre-given and obscuring their genealogies," such as the shifting and nebulous ways the very meaning of "black" and "woman" have come to emerge. See Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*, 33.

7. See, for example, T. Ellison, "Flex, Conjure, Crack."

8. This is a bit of a vexed subject, one I have long avoided. It used to be (and somewhat still is) a common practice, especially back in the 1990s and early 2000s, for those in critical race theory or feminist/gender studies, if they were not of color and/or women, to make clear that they were *not* of color and/or women and could never know those realities. That is, white people studying "race" and cis men studying "gender" or "feminism" would often make clear, to sometimes spectacular and yawn-worthy effect, the limits of their epistemological reach due to their identity. There is a monstrously large archive of text after text noting how one's whiteness disallows them from *really* knowing what the life of blackness is like or how one's (biological? assigned?) maleness disallows them from knowing the depths of women's lives. All of this is fine, I suppose. It is, however, something I have not really done.

And why is this? On one hand, the aforementioned rhetorical moves often struck me as disingenuous at worst and nowhere-going at best. The same song and dance—I'm white so I can't know black stuff, or I'm a dude so I can't know woman stuff, and, later in the game, I'm cis so I can't know trans stuff—got old very quickly, seeming perfunctory and cordoned off from the theorizing or intellectual work that followed (which I must admit was much more interesting to me). And now I'm putting my own song and dance, as non-sing-songy and non-dancey as I might

think it is, into my own text, albeit in an endnote, which I hope you know, reader, is intentional; let me not make another spectacle like the ones I feel so iffy about. On the other hand, I am still unsure as to where my “identity” lies, and to what I may lay “claim.” For instance, I am black. That has never been questioned, as I identify as and am identified as black all the time. After this, things get tricky (or maybe *because* of this they do). I would not be as unwavering in saying that I am “straight,” though “gay” does not accurately capture me in any substantive way, nor does “bisexual” or “pansexual.” I have come to find a comfortable kind of home in “queer,” though many would say that my sexual history (which is not to say, at least for me, that queerness is only concerned with sexuality) does not qualify me for queerness. My queerness comes from a commitment to gender self-determination and the axiom that gender cannot be determined simply by looking at the body. To say that I understand myself through queerness is to say that I may be (and have been) attracted to a non-op trans man or trans woman, or a trans woman who passes as cis but is adamant about holding onto the transness of her womanness, or a nonbinary person, all of which do not map onto straightness. It would be at the very least simply *off* to say that I am straight when, say, expressing attraction for a trans woman, as it would possibly, in a sense, disqualify her transness from being *constitutive* of the body and identity to which I am attracted.

I do not intend to do that thing, you know, where ostensibly “straight” people perform their lament of their straightness—*Oh, god! Straight people are so problematic, so basic, and I hate that I’m one of them. I wish I could just, you know, not be.* I kind of get it, I do: it seems at times *politically* necessary to distance oneself from heterosexuality, and its accompanying cisnormativity, in order to be sufficiently radical and given to liberatory politics. I don’t want to knock y’all for that desire. But this skews too close, for me, to a biological determinism and the retroactive naturalization and purported inherency of a sexuality that is in fact a historicized construction. Sexuality is not some innate thing, with its parameters all in place beforehand. That is not to say one can choose to be gay or straight or bi or pan; rather, it is to say that straightness and gayness and bi-ness are predicated on historically and culturally delimited understandings and requisites for where one locates both one’s sexuality as well as where one locates the operative erogenous hotspots on one’s desired object. To the first part, I wish to quote Eve Sedgwick: “It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, and so on) precisely one, the gender of the object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of ‘sexual orientation.’” “Sexual orientation” or “sexuality” is the product of an a priori delimitation and foreclosure of other weighted criteria that might have come to take the lead in determining it. See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8. Emphasis in original.

(Not to mention, too, that my sexual desire, and the desire of those given to sexual and gender radicality, is one very much unconcerned with reiterating the script of one's ostensible sexual identity according to a given definition of proper usage of sex organs, proper identification of sex organs, proper alignment of sex organs between partners, and proper connotations and implications resultant of proper usage, identification, and alignment. This would be what Paul Preciado calls "realists," "genitalists," or "straight/homosexual 'naturalists.'" By contrast, I and the sexual and gender radicalist approach sexuality (if it can be called such) on untethered and unfixed grounds, being and becoming "those for whom the organ (biological or synthetic, alive or technosemiotically incorporated) is merely the interface by which they access certain forms of pleasure or affects that can't be represented by sexual difference, gender, or sexual identity." These are called, in Preciado's lexicon, countersexualists. Abolition and gender radicality asserts a countersexual relation to imposed ontological sexual identities. See Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, 9–10.

To the second point—that of where one locates erogenous hotspots on desired objects—that we can say one's gender does not reside in perinatal gender assignation (not least of which is to say that genitals, themselves not readily given to transparent meanings as "penises" or "vaginas" [perhaps the "or" should also be in scare quotes], are largely hidden from view when one even determines their sexual attraction to another person or thing) means that how we *know* the gender of our desired object is mired in something(s) that have, as it were, been prechewed. In short, to "be" a "man" attracted to other "men" bypasses that where one locates, reads, sees, *knows* another's "manness" is tainted from the start, which is to say our sexualities, though feeling so deeply rooted, are damn dirty liars. Take Judith Butler on this front: "Anatomy is a *condition* of sexual fantasy, but it also gets radically transfigured"—an apt phrase, considering chapter 3 of this book—"by sexual fantasy, so I think we would be making a big mistake if we thought that the sex between Barry Winchell [a proclaimed straight man] and his lover [a drag performer] was straight or was gay." Butler continues:

I'm not sure we can say. I'm not sure we *should* say. It may well be that it is romantically and even sexually very straight for both of them, extremely straight, even though there are two penises in play. That just means that the *meaning* of the penis is going to be transfigured within the sexual scene. Or that penis may well be put out of play; we don't know what kind of play it was in. But if it's put *into* play, the question is, 'In the service of what sexual fantasy is it put into play?' For example, think about *Boys Don't Cry*. Are we going to say that Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena was having straight sex with her girlfriend/his girlfriend? Or is it lesbian sex? My sense is that their sex puts the distinction into crisis and that it is probably all the more interesting and exciting by virtue of the fact that it eludes the categories that are available for it. Where's anatomy in that? (J. Butler, in Olson and Worsham, "Changing the Subject," 756. Emphasis in original.)

In fact, the meaning of genitals is radically displaced when we interrogate their role, the affixed subjects, and their function, which dissolves the question of sexuality,

indeed, into a question itself. One cannot maintain the discrete categories of homosexual or heterosexual, for example, unless cisnormativity is maintained, a cisnormativity that necessarily violates aberrant subjectivities and identifications. Thus, with my own nebulous and timid nonbinariness, my they/them pronouns (see below), and with the nebulousness of others' identifications and somatic meanings, sexuality cannot be so vociferously clutched as if innocent. In part what I am arguing is that to presume the innocence of sexuality is to overlook its violation of otherwise identifications that have not been sanctioned by what Butler would term the heterosexual matrix, or, put differently, cisheteronormativity.

Neither am I so sure I would identify as “cisgender” or “cis,” though most would say I surely do not qualify for transgender or transness. Sure, there have been a decent number of occasions when someone assumed that I was transgender because of the work that I do (fourteen times [that I know of], and counting), and sure I use and am hailed sometimes by they/them pronouns and think my subjectivity through nonbinariness, but does that mean I have “access” to saying that I “am” trans? But before answering so quickly, two things must be noted: first, that it is well known, at least in trans studies, that transness is not simply, or even primarily, about *being* a certain kind of (gendered) body. Transness lies elsewhere, in short. Can one “access” transness and be validly woven through the subjectivity of transness via other realms that both lie outside the body and that *assert the meaning of the body in a radically different way*? Can bodiness itself be transed by the engendering of sociality and interpersonal semiotic meaning-making in ways not beholden to the normativities of this world? Second, because of my blackness and the fact that blackness makes for gender trouble—that blackness's somatic endowment and its anoriginal desedimentary problematizing of ontological mandates are not given over readily, or perhaps at all, in the gender binary, in cisness, per Hortense Spillers and Che Gossett and Kai M. Green and C. Riley Snorton and Diane Detournay and Hari Ziyad and, and, and . . . —am I automatically unable to claim cisgender status even if I wanted (which, to be sure, I so vehemently do not)? (Though someone like Savannah Shange would say that it is not a matter of jamming black people into the category of cisgender, which black people and blackness do not fit within, but rather one of recognizing that we are *nontrans*, which acknowledges the cisness disallowed black people and blackness but does not relegate those who might otherwise be called cis to the status of trans, relinquishing them, unjustifiably, from what could be called “cisgender privilege.”) I, though, am not simply talking about privileges and double standards; it is, and must be, about different and differing modes of subjectivity.

So, where I'm at right now is understanding myself in the following way: I am black, or more accurately, I do blackness, a kind of categorical irreverence unwilling to abide normative impositions; I am *not* straight, though neither am I gay or bi or pan, but perhaps I do queerness, which is to say, *I have a queer relationship to sexuality*; and I am not trans *per se* but enact subjectivity in ways that seek a trans and

transed engendering of sociality, or inter- and intrapersonality, which is to say *I have a trans relationship to gender*.

9. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

10. I take this phrase from Fred Moten's "Case of Blackness." Moten writes, somewhat famously, "What is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events" (187).

11. I draw here from Hurston's *Mules and Men*, in which she writes, "The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries" (2–3).

12. Raha, "Radical Transfeminism."

13. Raha, "Radical Transfeminism."

14. "Interview: Kai M. Green."

15. Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 11; see also J. K. Carter, *Race*, 159.

16. Halberstam, *Trans**, 8.

17. *Radcliffe College Monographs*, 31.

18. "Fugitive Slave Act" (U.S. Constitution, 1793); "Fugitive Slave Act" (U.S. Constitution, 1850).

19. See Bey, *Problem of the Negro*, specifically the chapters "Paraontology" and "Uninscriptions."

20. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 47.

21. J. K. Carter, "Black Malpractice," 86, 69.

22. N. Butler, *Under False Colors*.

23. See N. Butler, *Under False Colors*.

24. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 15. Emphasis in original.

25. See Gill-Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 122. She writes: "It makes sense to say that in its invention gender *was* a form of race. The morphology of the sexed and gendered body was a racial formation in [John] Money's schema of development. Put more simply, gender was a phenotype, much as sex had been during the preceding fifty years" (emphasis in original).

26. See N. Butler, *Under False Colors*. This information is found in the *Charleston Courier*, November 18, 1859, page 4, first column. Interestingly, too, Wilson was identified as "the same gay lothario who was discovered showing the cloven foot in Charleston very recently." It seems that "gay lothario," whether accurate as to how Wilson would identify or not, is a kind of stand in for gender transgression. That is, the language of transness or transgender was unavailable to them to describe Wilson's gender enactments,

so “gay lothario” might be the closest approximation to this—it was the only available spot in the “grid of intelligibility,” in Ann Stoler’s nomenclature.

27. Lamble, “Transforming Carceral Logics,” 254.

28. Shange, *Progressive Dystopia*, 10.

29. Stanley, Spade, and Queer (In)Justice, “Queering Prison Abolition, Now?,” 122. Emphasis added.

30. Gossett, “Abolitionist Imaginings,” 330. Emphasis in original.

31. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 7. See also Halberstam, “Wildness, Loss, Death”; and Halberstam and Nyong’o, “Introduction.”

32. Adkins, “Black/Feminist Futures,” 718.

33. Adkins, “Black/Feminist Futures,” 719.

34. See Puar, “I Would Rather Be a Cyborg,” 49. Puar writes at the outset of the essay, which I draw on here, “‘Grids happen,’ writes Brian Massumi, at a moment in *Parables for the Virtual* where one is tempted to be swept away by the endless affirmative becomings of movement, flux, and potential, as opposed to being pinned down by the retroactive positioning of identity (2002, 8). For the most part, Massumi has been less interested in how grids happen than in asking how they can un-happen, or not happen.” See also Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 12. Steinbock writes: “The greater challenge of transgender studies would be to stay with the indefinite period or moment in suspension from the gridded paradigm, while fully acknowledging a tendency or intensity that suggests direction, location, context. With gender transition comes a potential bodily change through self-multiplication across the shimmering passage of unresolvable disjunction in which we all live and breathe.”

35. cárdenas, “Dark Shimmers.”

36. Quoted in Antwi, *Words of Power*, 73.

37. Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” 402.

CHAPTER 1. BLACK, TRANS, FEMINISM

1. Davis and Lowe, “Interview,” 318.

2. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xx.

3. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxi.

4. Yes, *they*. Think about it: Butler has written, with notable and, I would argue, intentional first-person point of view, “If I do not recognize myself as ‘she,’ does that mean that I fail to recognize that someone seeks to interpellate me within that pronoun?” While the conditional “If” opening the sentence shuttles the question into the proximity of a discursive gesture to illustrate a point, it remains that Butler is un-