

In a Field

MISSED ENCOUNTERS WITH

BLACK FEMINIST THEORIZING

James Bliss

of
Static

**In a
Field
of
Static**



BUY

**Black Feminism
on the Edge**

A series edited by

Jennifer C. Nash and

Samantha Pinto

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

In a Field of Static

Missed Encounters
with Black Feminist

Theorizing

James Bliss

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2026

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

© 2026 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bliss, James, [date] author

Title: In a field of static : missed encounters with Black Feminist
theorizing / James Bliss.

Other titles: Missed encounters with Black Feminist theorizing |
Black feminism on the edge

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. | Series: Black
feminism on the edge | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026013515 (print)

LCCN 2026013516 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478039167 paperback

ISBN 9781478034223 hardcover

ISBN 9781478062806 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Feminist theory | African American feminists | Queer theory |
Critical theory | Feminist criticism

Classification: LCC HQ1190 .B5725 2026 (print)

LCC HQ1190 (ebook) | DDC 305.4201—dc23/eng/20260330

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026013515>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026013516>

D

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Contents

i	Introduction	In a Field of Static
	Part I	Missed Encounters
33	Chapter One	Open Letters, and the Irrelational Erotics of a Black Feminist Negativity
65	Chapter Two	Buried Subjects, and the Lines from Intersectionality to Abolition
	Part II	Fields of Static
97	Chapter Three	Hope Against Hope, and the Queer Negativity of a Black Feminist Poiësis
137	Chapter Four	Nowhere, and Notes to Not Belonging
183	Epilogue	In a Burning House
195	Acknowledgments	
199	Notes	
235	Bibliography	
253	Index	

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Introduction

In a Field of Static

And so my idea was to try to generate a discourse, or a vocabulary that would not just make it desirable, but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation. And that is a theoretical conversation about any number of things but one of the things is certainly the feminist project. I had to write a piece called “Interstices . . .” for a feminist conference at Barnard College in 1982. I was supposed to talk about black women, the sexuality of black women. And I thought, you know what, before I can get to the subject of the sexuality of black women I didn’t see a vocabulary that would make it possible to entertain the sexuality of black women in any way that was other than traumatic. Before you could have a conversation about sexuality of black women you had to clear the static, clear the field of static.

Hortense Spillers, “Whatcha Gonna Do?,” 300–301

The conversation is always caught in a field of static.

Marking the twentieth anniversary of her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers described the discursive static she was writing within and against in the first decade of the institutional life of Black feminist theorizing. By the 1980s, Spillers was one of dozens of Black feminist scholars announcing and analyzing the work of their contemporaries, building new traditions of Black feminist criticism, designing curricula and courses, mentoring students, and re-discovering the work of previous generations of Black women writers. All of this work took place within and against contexts hostile to the project of Black feminism. “What happens is that the forces that are really hostile to black life, to black people, are always operating,” Spillers warned, “the forces of opposition are so forceful and so powerful and they’re always pushing against us, they always want to enforce forgetfulness.” Black feminist

theorizing emerged from within that context of “psychological violence, epistemic violence, [and] intellectual violence,” and the conversations we might have are always swimming against the tide of a forced forgetfulness.¹ From one angle, Spillers’s “field of static” emerges from the forced and forceful forgetting of the Blackness peculiar to the figure of the Black woman, the figure that conditions the subjectivity of all social subjects, and the forced and forceful forgetting of the Blackness internal to all living. That static conditions every conversation about Black women—in the flesh or on the page; as social subjects, sentient objects, or discursive figures—even, or especially, within the fields of inquiry that were made possible by Black feminism and Black feminist theorizing.²

In a Field of Static argues that the debates that have shaped contemporary feminist and queer cultural studies have been missed encounters with Black feminist theorizing. It reads between Black feminist theorizing and feminist and queer cultural studies to understand how our attempts to escape the discursive static of antiblackness fall apart from within. The four chapters that follow each engage in some conflict, turn, debate, or disagreement that has informed the present shape of feminist and queer cultural studies (and, in a necessary way, the interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences more generally). Audre Lorde’s public falling out with Mary Daly, feminist theory’s arguments about intersectionality and assemblage theory, queer theory’s debates over negativity and futurity, and the transnational and diasporic turns in feminist and queer studies, each demonstrates how our debates, misunderstandings, and missed encounters have drawn the horizons of our political and conceptual imaginations, and how we might imagine different horizons.

Within my treatment of those conflicts, I am particularly interested in the conceptual stakes of relationality, subjectivity, negativity, and belonging. These concepts are central to the work of feminist and queer studies as a privileged place-name for the attempt to think the relationship between power, meaning, and being—that is, the interplay of generative and repressive deployments of power, the production and reproduction of meaning, and the status of subjectivity and the terrain of ontology. These concepts lead us toward the question of the invention of the Human as a privileged genre of being and toward a critique of the Human. In *Engendering Blackness*, Patrice Douglass offers a provisional definition of the Human as “the modern philosophical and scientific social construction of a being that is actionable and willful because it is not a slave or an animal.”³ The constructedness of this figure, and the nature and stakes of its construction,

has been a recurring theme across the long itinerary of Black political and social theory, as well as Black artistic and political practice. The most radical critiques of the Human—in its historical and contemporary outline, its ontological and political expressions—have been pursued under the heading of Black feminism. Black feminist theorizing, then, names a kind of speculative practice and an art of invention or inventiveness, an apocalyptic *poiēsis* within a field of static—the world of indeterminacy produced between Blackness and antiblackness. Across this project, as different chapters hold focus on particular conceptual problems, the indeterminacy of Blackness and antiblackness recurs as a guiding idea.

The past decades have seen a resurgence of academic, aesthetic, and activist discourses, often explicitly feminist and queer, confronting antiblackness. These discourses have been some of the most vital and energizing critiques of contemporary racial capitalism. They give shape to the mess we find ourselves in. Within the academy, they also represent a desire to build intellectual and political communities worthy of our most radical dreams of freedom. To be sure, the academy is a fraught and inhospitable site for building community, and scholarship is only one vehicle for cultivating a collective political imagination.⁴ We all well know our employers are not our comrades. But we use the spaces available to us to cultivate discourses that might sustain the open revolt we hold in our hearts. Within these discourses confronting antiblackness is a tradition of Black feminist theorizing that cuts to the center of the historical, political, and ontological figures of the Human and the Slave—and, further, the systems, structures, and institutions that emerged in the wake of these figures. From these figures, an entire world emerged. Black feminist theorizing is one name for the desire to write a new world from the indeterminate position of the enslaved.

The current renaissance of feminist and queer Black studies scholarship is not new. A Black feminist invention and inventiveness has burst onto the American scene before. In different times and places, Black women have announced when and where they would enter the national conversation. Much of the Black feminist scholarship produced between the 1970s and the 2000s, that began from the rediscovery of those earlier expressions of Black women's cultural production, now awaits a similar rediscovery. More than that, many of that literature's most radical, innovative, and counterintuitive interventions have been forgotten, simplified, prettied, and appropriated. In her afterword to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Hortense Spillers noted the

emerging status of “the community of Black women writing in the United States” as a “vivid new fact of national life.”⁵ But she warned against taking this vivid new fact for granted. A literary tradition “arises not only because there are writers there to make it, but also because there is a strategic audience of heightened consciousness prepared to read and interpret the work as such.” Traditions are not, “like objects of nature, here to stay, but survive as *created social events* only to the extent that an audience cares to intersect them.”⁶ This insight spoke to a moment when much of the work of a recently dubbed “Black feminist criticism” was recovering and recuperating the works of “lost” Black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset, as well as discovering and producing first readings of emerging writers like Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker. Spillers’s insight holds new meaning today as much of this Black feminist criticism is itself long lost, out of print, and understudied, and a burgeoning field of inquiry is once again recovering and reimagining Black feminist theorizing itself. Part of this work of recovery is to recover Black feminism from its own academic reception. That is, tracing how an emerging Black feminist criticism was filtered through field formations that at once relied on and resisted Black feminism.

In a Field of Static is interested in the material lives of ideas and discourses, and it proceeds from a practice of close or symptomatic reading. It is situated in the academy, in academic discourses, but it is also about how we make sense of the world, how we act on or within the world, and how our practices for making sense and making change get disrupted from within. The project is interested in the internal limits of our creative and critical practices (the indeterminacy of the field of static), how those limits shape how we relate or fail to relate to our world and its objects (which is to say that there are only ever different kinds of missed encounters), and, finally, how often those limits become externalized as figures of Blackness, and especially the Blackness of Black women. As the epilogue argues, Black feminist theorizing is not immune to this relationship to indeterminacy, but Black feminism opens a space for a creative or critical or political practice to be elaborated through indeterminacy, heterogeneity, promiscuity, incoherence, incompleteness, and impossibility.

This introduction will (1) begin to articulate the titular figures of the project; (2) lay out some of the interventions I understand the project to be making in the overlapping fields of Black studies, gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, and critical theory; (3) describe the practices of

reading I deploy across the text; (4) and briefly summarize the arguments of each chapter. Along the way, it will begin to articulate the stakes of something called *Black feminist theorizing* in relation to the itinerary of Hortense Spillers, and in relation to the concept-metaphor of *indeterminacy*. My engagement with Spillers cuts across all of the chapters that follow, as does the figure of indeterminacy as an essential element of Black feminist theorizing.

A FIELD OF STATIC

The figures in my title, *In a Field of Static: Missed Encounters with Black Feminist Theorizing*, shorthand the constellations of desires that animate this work. The figure of a “field of static” is a recurring image from the work of Hortense Spillers. In the preface to her *Black, White, and in Color*, Spillers says of her long essay “All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” “[It] does not offer a ‘solution,’ . . . but, rather, finds and circumlocutes certain static in a field of force.” “Doing so,” she adds, “may be preferable, after all, to the false certainty of solutions.”⁷ Here, static is simultaneously that which stands in the way of an object of study and an object in its own right. We learn about the object through the outline of the distortions that make it available to us. In the essay on eating in the diaspora that introduces the volume, Spillers describes her “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” as “a provisional reading of the sexuality *concept* as discursive static in the field of black women’s historicity.”⁸ Again, the object of study is figured through the metaphor of static, a stuttering disruption in a field of stuttering disruptions. In the conversation, marking the twentieth anniversary of the publication of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” that serves as the epigraph to this chapter, Spillers emphasizes the moment of “Interstices” within her theoretical itinerary. Spillers would go on to describe her work across the 1980s as a contribution to a larger, collective project of cultivating a theoretical and conceptual apparatus that might allow Black women to “actually be in battle.”⁹

But let’s step back a moment, to the occasion of “Interstices.” In the essay that opens *Black, White, and in Color*, Spillers reflects on the 1982 Scholar and Feminist Conference at Barnard College, where she first presented “Interstices.” “Whatever the truth was about black women and sexuality would be, for all of thirty minutes or so, entirely in my hands! And

I knew impeccably well what one must do: *Tell* something about ‘sexual experience’ that would roughly equate with the suspect positioning of the ‘native informant’ to an audience of other cultural nuance.”¹⁰ This impetus toward, and anxiety around, *telling* touches something central in Spillers’s critical practice. The Spillersian text always seems to be protecting itself, and Spillers herself remains something of a mysterious figure. The challenge and often the thrill of reading Spillers is that her text insists on this distance. It is a style that remains private in public.

Though well known as a stylist, Spillers’s work has rarely been read as if it were, itself, literary. In the recollection of her former student Nick Davis, “People sometimes say to me, ‘Hortense, why can’t you just express these ideas more simply? Why do you have to use all these difficult words?’ And the answer is, because that’s the version of the fucking thought that I had, and those are the words that mean what I am trying to say.”¹¹ Put differently, it may be that Spillers has a certain reverent irreverence toward the “difficulty” of her writing, and toward writing as a practice of thought.¹² Spillers never pursued the project of systematizing her concepts into a larger architecture (or, such a project has never appeared bearing her signature). And it is *to her credit* that she never did this. So many intellectual projects founder at the attempt to turn a provocative essay into a coherent book.¹³ If she had chosen to settle the meanings of these ideas, they’d become problems costumed as solutions. Spillers’s text is simultaneously critical, theoretical, and literary. Her theorizing is a literary act.¹⁴ So why have so many critics in her wake, and I don’t mind including myself here, grasped at her world of concepts as if it aspired to simply *represent* the lifeworld? Why has such a literary practice been read so literally?

Instead of showing or telling, her paper at Barnard became, in her words, “a provisional reading of the sexuality *concept* as discursive static in the field of black women’s historicity. This view of the question, then, shifted the topic from the genre of the public (im)personal confession, with its links to the traditions and habits of pathos and sentimentality, to an examination of a field of discursive objects and events.”¹⁵ Around the occasion of the Barnard conference, Spillers seems to imagine the left turn toward discursivity as a way to short-circuit the choice between “the public (im)personal confession” and finding herself saying nothing, or having nothing to say. In what she *does* say at Barnard, Spillers turns our attention away from the things that might be said about Black women’s sexuality and toward the discursive world that Black women’s sexuality finds itself in. “Whatever my mother, niece, and I might say and do about our sexuality,”

Spillers writes, “remains an unarticulated nuance in various forms of public discourse as though we were figments of the great invisible empire of womankind.” This is the beginning of Spillers’s formulation of invisibility and hypervisibility as two forms of the same conundrum. And it is here that we find the best-known passage of “Interstices”: “With the virtually sole exception of Calvin Hernton’s *Sex and Racism in America* and less than a handful of very recent texts by black feminist and lesbian writers, black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and when by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues.”¹⁶ The “beached whale” of the sexual universe—the image borders on the psychedelic. What type of universe is sexuality? What is the difference between an ocean and a land mass in that universe? What leads whales from the safety of the ocean to suffocating under their own weight on the shores of the sexual universe? Why has this image been treated with an almost sociological seriousness, as if it were self-evidently referencing reality? Let’s belabor this point a bit more. What does it mean for this whale to be unvoiced? Or misseen? Why is it that a beached whale is awaiting a verb? What is it about a beached whale that *needs* a verb?¹⁷

The litany of concepts emerging from Spillers’s body of work has beckoned generations of critics: ungendering, the pornotrope, flesh and a hieroglyphics of the flesh, the zero degree of social conceptualization, *being for* the captor, psychoanalytics, the socionom, the intramural, and the “beached whale” of Black women’s sexuality. These concepts have an esoteric quality, like riddles or shibboleths. We may imagine we’ve pinned one down, or we grasp at another critic’s interpretation, and the meaning is fixed, for a moment at least, in the citational sediment of academic practice.¹⁸ It is the singular strangeness of her metaphor that calls out to us. In her essay “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism,” Jennifer Nash puts Spillers’s image in a list with concept-metaphors from Darlene Clark Hine and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. Nash writes, “For black feminists, terms like the ‘culture of dissemblance,’ the ‘beached whale’ of black female sexuality, and the ‘politics of silence’ have provided frameworks for considering how black women strategically avoid describing their own sexuality as a way of guarding against ‘over-exposure.’”¹⁹ The weirdness of Spillers’s formulation is stripped in a way that presumes something knowable about both Spillers’s metaphor, its referent, and her project as a theorist.

The indeterminacy of Spillers's meaning touches at the fuzzy boundary between theory and literature, which I also take up across chapter 2, where I consider the overlapping itineraries of Spillers's figure of the interstice and Kimberlé Crenshaw's figure of the intersection. Spillers's work has been central to a genealogy of work by Black feminist critics, and about Black women's invention and inventiveness, possessing a conceptual lexicon that is singular and resistant to systematization. Further, her work almost never simply "responds to" or "builds from" the work of her predecessors or her contemporaries.²⁰ If Spillers saw her project as "clearing a field of static," she was not replacing that static with something more clear—nothing like "the false certainty of solutions."²¹ And so the present project approaches its subjects within these irreducible fields of static. This book is about finding new ways of relating to and within the indeterminacies of our fields of static.

The recent history of Black studies, in its imprecise and overlapping relationship to Black feminist and queer studies, has offered many species of indeterminacy. Consider the wayward, the monstrous, the ensemble, the (black) fantastic, the utopian, the beyond, the ecstatic, and the afterlife of slavery. Or errancy, grotesquerie, creative destruction, funk, emancipation, abolition, and apocalypse. Then there's excess, exorbitance, extravagance, anarchy, insurgency, fugitivity, maroonage, and the underground and undercommon. We also have figures like *poiësis*, plasticity, thingliness, quiet, and the otherwise. There is Blacksound and (brown) *jouissance*, magic, madness, aliveness, (afro)fabulation, disorder, counterlife, *mu*, terror, and the end of the world. All of these figures can be, or can become, markers of indeterminacy *and* strategies for containing the indeterminate. They close off potential lines of flight in order to pursue others. To the extent that *static* is another name for indeterminacy, another way of domesticating it, I turn to it for the ways it resists wrestling indeterminacy into a specific prescription for critical practice.²² The traditions of Black feminist theorizing that I read in this text don't have all of the answers, but the questions they pose and the questions they make possible aim at the foundations of a world worth reinventing.

In different ways, these figures reflect back the excess and incoherence of a racialized world, the "structuring irrationality" of antiblackness.²³ They also indicate the ambiguity and ineffability of Blackness itself. Figures of the indeterminate may have special purchase within Black studies because the field's object of study is, itself, indeterminate. Put it this way: Is the "black" in antiblackness the same as the "black" in Blackness? Or in

Black Study, Black feminism, or Black feminist theorizing? Does Blackness name some kind of positive content, or does it name an absence? If it names an absence, is it a foundational absence? In her study of Afro-Indigenous performance in Mexico, Anita González asks, “Is blackness a skin color, cultural persistence, a sense of marginality or, perhaps, a distance from notions of modernity?”²⁴ These questions can only have provisional answers, answers that allow an argument to be elaborated, a text to be written, a work of art to be created, a community or a collectivity to cohere, or a political project to be pursued. I add “static” to the field’s figures of indeterminacy because I want to mark the contingency of my answers to these questions—they are the answers that enable *this project*.

At the same time, I take these questions to be essential to any study of the relations between power, meaning, and being—which I take to be the throughline that connects the best work of Black studies, feminist and queer theory, cultural studies, and critical theory. In the opening pages of *Disturbing the Peace*, Bryan Wagner summarizes the predicament at the heart of Black cultural studies. “Africa and its diaspora are older than blackness,” Wagner writes, and “blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black during a particular stage in their history.” In the world that invented Africa as Black, “blackness indicates . . . existence without standing in the modern world system.”²⁵ Blackness problematizes the guiding assumptions of cultural studies because Blackness enters discourse “not as a shared culture but as a condition of statelessness.”²⁶ In Wagner’s formulation, Blackness is an effect of antiblackness, the historical residuum of the racialization of slavery. Those beings marked by Blackness live in a shared (though not undifferentiated) relationship to antiblackness.

In this formulation, where Blackness emerges from antiblackness, the latter term imprecisely names a system of domination on the basis of continually invented and reinvented perceptions of “race.” The paradox of this formulation is that it requires a prior Blackness, a Blackness that only comes into being through antiblackness. One way to resolve this contradiction is to place Blackness into a historical or anthropological sequence of successive regimes of creating in- and out-groups. In these accounts, Blackness is the form of non-belonging that succeeds the figure of the infidel or barbarian. It emerges from the specific historical and geopolitical conjunctures of the previous millennium (the emergence of capitalism, the changing value of labor following centuries of plague, the complex of sugar cultivation and plantation slavery that spread across

the Mediterranean world, the consolidation of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the loss of old trade routes and the search for new ones, the incipient consolidation of nation-states in Europe, and so forth). To my mind, although those accounts are significant as works of history or anthropology, they do not resolve the paradoxical relationship between Blackness and antiblackness.²⁷

Within the text that follows, *antiblackness* is one name for the tactics, methods, strategies, and impulses that have been mobilized to push away the indeterminacy, incoherence, incompleteness, negativity, deathliness, and excess internal to life, living, or aliveness. Antiblackness writes that disavowal onto the surfaces of the body and has built a world from that species division, of those who live as Humans within the fantasy of coherence and those made to live otherwise. The critique of antiblackness can also be a critique of this figuration of the Human, can also aim at a world without the forms of coherence the Human so desperately chases. The counterintuitive privilege of racialization, then, is being excluded from the Human and so having access to the fullness of humanity.²⁸ And then, for that privilege, being rendered open to violence without limit: “From the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life.”²⁹ Recent theorists of antiblackness have called this genre of being a type of deathliness, marked by the impossibility of relationality.³⁰ This tendency is organized in part around an encounter and engagement with the forms of social and civic death that coalesce around Blackness. And, further, the forms of lethal state and state-sanctioned violence disproportionately experienced by Black people. As we will see in chapter 1, it may also be that “death” is our ready-made language for a space bereft of the possibility of relation—that we experience ourselves as dead insofar as we experience ourselves beyond the reach of the socially structuring fantasy of the intersubjective. *Blackness* is one name for a crisis internal to relationality.

There is a split, here, between Blackness as one condition or aspect of African and African diasporic life across the long duration of modernity and Blackness as the indeterminacy internal to living. It may also be that the positive content of Blackness is the form of living that emerges *through* a violence without limit, or a humanity without foundation, fabricated in and as a no-place within and outside of the Human. In a given context, to *be* Black is to represent indeterminacy for others (and, potentially, for the other within oneself). The symptoms that appear across the different field formations in the following chapters—second-wave lesbian feminism,

assemblage theory, queer negativity, queer futurity, transnational feminism, and diasporic queer studies, among others—represent different missed encounters with Blackness as one name for the indeterminacy, excess, and incoherence within life itself. The field of static, then, is both the discursive static produced by antiblackness, and the enabling impossibility internal to the collective enterprise of Black Study.

AND A MISSED ENCOUNTER

Spillers was reticent to participate in the conference where she delivered “Interstices.” The 1982 Scholar and Feminist Conference at Barnard took on “The Politics of Sexuality.” The uproar around the conference is well known as a node in the history of the feminist sex wars. In a 2011 essay, Spillers described receiving a call from Carole Vance inviting her to present at the conference. In the kitchen of her faculty house at Haverford College, Spillers recalled being “chary of phone calls like the one I perceived this to be.” Black women in the academy “were talking among ourselves about our token position at feminist conferences and how we should refuse to cooperate in it.” On the other end of the call, Vance “seemed implicitly aware of the fragile moment that the movement had entered, but in her own courteous way did not seem prepared to take no for an answer.”³¹ Vance’s invitation may have struck Spillers as the beginning of a missed encounter. At the time of Vance’s call, the most famous missed encounter of that moment was unfolding between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly, though, as we will see in chapter 1, their conflict took on its historical importance over a longer span of time.

The occasion of the Barnard conference seems to have provoked a special constellation of anxieties for Spillers. The conference organizers produced a special volume for the occasion of the conference, called *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*. It collected the meeting notes of the planning committee, formatted as diary entries, and snippets from the participants, some of which were formatted in the style of personal ads. The document was playful and iconoclastic, and it also became a site of controversy. Spillers’s statement in the *Diary* reads as follows:

It is every teacher’s nightmare—an analogy on every writer’s dream of death: Suppose I got up there and forgot everything, or worse, could think of nothing to say? What would happen? In preparing my piece for

“The Scholar and Feminist IX” conference, I imagined just that, and every time I did I read another paragraph or stalked another book, or jumped up from wherever [*sic*] I sat or lay and scribbled another note. Fragments shored against a possible ruin is what it is! Truly, we strive as much in the name of a “good name” as we do for our ourselves. Here’s hoping. When I read this again, in a different context, under other lights, my “twenty minutes,” a perfect solitude before 10,000 others, in effect, will be over, or nearly. I won’t know until then. . . .³²

The nightmare of standing on stage, or at the lectern, and your words have left you. Tasked with saying something about Black women’s sexuality, would she suddenly turn aphasic? Around the occasion of “Interstices,” Spillers seems to describe two different but related anxieties. First, that she will be on the unwelcome end of a missed encounter with white feminists, of the sort that had become a known issue among Black women in the academy. Second, she seems afraid of her own missed encounter with herself, or with the subject of Black women’s sexuality—however it might intersect with her own sense of herself as a Black woman.

The debates, fights, misunderstandings, and missed encounters that shaped feminist and queer studies have drawn the horizons of our political and conceptual imaginations. These intellectual and institutional histories live with us in the present, long after what were once pitched battles have faded into the archive. This book reads these old histories in new ways, drawing out lessons from the archive of Black feminist theorizing. It is not interested in exploring “missed encounters” in the hope of, instead, having “true” or “authentic” encounters with Black feminism. I first began thinking about these questions through the figure of the missed encounter when I was introduced to Herman Rapaport’s intellectual history of deconstruction in the United States, *The Theory Mess*. In it, Rapaport traces the academic and intellectual career of deconstruction as a winding network of missed encounters. Rapaport’s guiding concept-metaphor is the Derridean figure of the *faux bond*: “My working thesis is the idea that over the past thirty years critical theory has obeyed the principle of the *faux bond*: the false bond, no show, failed encounter, or missed interlocution that creates some kind of linkage, despite itself.”³³ For Rapaport, “the *faux bond* . . . resembles two ships passing in the night. They may miss. But even so, they come into proximity. It’s the two ships together we are talking about, the missing of an encounter whose meeting place was at least staged and whose conditions were at least partially realized.”³⁴

In the present text, I argue that different missed encounters with Black feminism have created the linkages and the meeting places that we otherwise call feminist and queer theory, critical cultural studies, and critical theory; that we also call the various disciplines of the university; and that we might call intellectual life, as such.

For what it's worth, Rapaport has an inchoate sense of this. By way of opening his intellectual history of deconstruction, he turns to Ann duCille's "The Occult of True Black Womanhood," with an eye toward her most famous passage: "Much of the newfound interest in African American women that seems to honor the field of black feminist studies actually demeans it by treating it not like a discipline with a history and a body of rigorous scholarship and distinguished scholars underpinning it, but like an anybody-can-play pick-up game performed on a wide-open, untrammelled field. Often the object of the game seems to be to reinvent the intellectual wheel: to boldly go where in fact others have gone before, to flood the field with supposedly new 'new scholarship' that evinces little or no sense of the discipline's genealogy."³⁵ It is duCille's account of literary criticism's missed encounters with Black feminist theorizing that sets Rapaport's study in motion. Or, rather, it is Rapaport's missed encounter with Ann duCille that sets his book in motion. Immediately he writes, "What bothers duCille and what should bother us is a certain failed encounter with African-American studies, *if not black feminism*, when critics ignore disciplinarity, history, and intellectual genealogy and write whatever comes to mind."³⁶ Here we have the *faux bond* of displacing Black feminist studies for African American studies, as though the former were reducible to the latter. In his study of "deconstruction in eclipse," Black feminism is eclipsed. It is in this spirit, of a book on failed encounters with deconstruction that begins with a missed encounter with Black feminism—the everyday tragicomedy of being undone by one's own intentions—that I turn to the figure of the missed encounter.

This book is not so much interested in asserting what a "correct" encounter with the texts or traditions of Black feminism might consist in. Rather, it is interested in reading the symptoms of the encounters that *do* happen. My argument is not that some encounters with Black feminism are pathological and others are not. It is that every encounter carries within it something pathological. When I say pathological, I don't mean in the sense of being bad, broken, or defective. I mean, precisely, that all encounters, and all experiences of intersubjectivity, are mediated by the unconscious and so cannot be given anything like a complete or coherent

accounting. In an encounter with Blackness, with what will be called a buried subjectivity, with a crisis internal to subjectivity, or with a subjectivity under erasure, the pathology internal to relationality can operate in still more peculiar ways. Ultimately, I read the symptoms of these encounters to ask what they make possible (or fail to make possible), and to ask if there might be different encounters that make different things possible.

Around when I began this project, practitioners in the field were talking about a “post-Black feminist era.”³⁷ It was an era during which the debates produced by, and in some sense productive of, Black feminist theorizing had been “folded into the cultural imperatives and interpretive strategies of a new millennium in which black women and *their* literature” were “no longer in vogue in the academy or anywhere else.”³⁸ The short, happy life of Black feminist theory had come and gone. In 2007, Farah Jasmine Griffin noted that Black feminist theorizing had been, since the 1990s, “one of the most intellectually exciting and fruitful developments in American literary criticism,” but that it was experiencing “a backlash from both the left and the right.”³⁹ The Right’s rage over “political correctness” and multiculturalism was metastasizing into open fascism. The Left, moving beyond the polarizing radicalisms of the past, saw in Black feminism retrograde attachments to identity and essence. Further, the pipeline of graduate training was in crisis. Institutional antipathy and other formal and informal barriers to more widespread training prevented broader groups of scholars from engaging meaningfully with Black feminist theorizing.⁴⁰ The wholesale abandonment of the intellectual mission of the university, through which we now live and work, began with assaults on Black feminist theorizing.

In the 1990s, when Cultural Studies was ascendant and the interventions of poststructuralism were taken for granted, Black feminism seemed to signal whatever was “other” to Theory. Carole Boyce Davies wrote that “many scholars in the academy participate in the devaluing of Black women who are writers and theorists by not recognizing them or engaging their ideas” via citational absence and restricted access to modes of publication and distribution as well as larger structures of intelligibility within the academy, preventing Black feminist theorizing from being recognized *as theory*.⁴¹ In order to elaborate Black feminism in this sense, the present text produces an archive and genealogy of Black feminist theorizing that reads both broadly and deeply within the tradition. Throughout, my emphasis is on those elements of Black feminist theorizing that have historically been occluded from scholarly study. Historically, Black

feminism's structural critiques of the apparatus within which academic work (or "knowledge production") takes place have been recodified as different resistances to theory—where "theory" itself is reduced to a handful of poststructuralist projects.

Here, we might return again, unhappily, to a debate over "theory" and "practice" that, on Deborah McDowell's reading, was "often racialized and gendered," as Black feminist thought, "with precious few exceptions, [was] constructed as 'practice' or 'politics,' the negative obverse of 'theory.'"⁴² In the late twentieth-century theoretical moment, Euro-American theorists sought to exorcise their racial demons through scattered engagements with Black women's literatures.⁴³ As a discourse, Black feminist interventions were not typically seen as interventions that might orient a theoretical practice. Moreover, in the wake of Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory," the methodological gap between practical criticism and theoretical criticism became a proxy for the presumed political distance between different critical practitioners, and the abstraction or negativity of theoretical criticism was read as a species of political quietism, obscurantism, or elitism. Rather than read Black feminism as an expression of concreteness, or as an insistence on the agential capacity of the self-contained subject, its body and consciousness, my analysis elaborates elements of the negative and the irrelational, the insovereign, abstract, and nonpractical.

AND BLACK FEMINIST THEORIZING

At the same time, I insist that Black feminism is irreducible to this archive of the negative, and irreducible to any archive and any genealogy. The book resists a narrow conceptual definition of Black feminism that would treat the field as separate or separable from the more "universal" concerns of cultural studies and critical theory. If Black feminism is repressed in and among the identity knowledges, it isn't solely some truth or fact of "the Black woman" that is repressed and that must, or might, be recovered. Repressed are the questions that Black feminist theorizing makes possible, and that are repressed so that field formations can become coherent to themselves. Black feminist theorizing can be read here as a genre of Black invention—where the Black female, femme, feminine, mater, and maternal operate as synecdochic figures for a species of *poiësis*. The critical task here is to approach the subject of Black feminism not as a known or

knowable object but as a generative capacity, as an absent core that produces questions toward the foundations of subjectivity in the afterlife of slavery. The work is to inhabit a field of static and explore its potential for the practice of thought. The work of recovery is never the end of the story. It is never about restoring some missing content, but about discovering what questions are made possible when we allow our critical and theoretical work to be elaborated by, or in some other relation to, Black feminist theorizing.

When “Interstices” was published in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Spillers’s research agenda was laden with possibility. She described herself as at work “on a critical theory of black women’s writing, a critical perspective on the rhetoric of the African-American sermon, and a long piece of fiction.”⁴⁴ As the decade progressed, she would stop describing herself as a writer of fiction (the draft of her novel now resides among her papers at Brown University), and her work on the African American sermon, the subject of her doctoral dissertation, also disappeared from her academic biographies for decades. Her “critical theory of black women’s writing” would become a project called “In the Flesh: A Situation for Feminist Inquiry.” By 1993, “In the Flesh” was “forthcoming,” but in the years that followed, its title was replaced by brief, shifting descriptions of the project. In 1996, the project had split into “a collection of essays and a monograph on women in slavery and its implications for feminist critique.”⁴⁵ The collection became *Black, White, and in Color*, a primer for Black feminist theorizing, and by the time it was released in the spring of 2003, Spillers was “at work on a new project called ‘The Idea of Black Culture.’”⁴⁶ The gift of Spillers’s published work lives alongside the dream of all the work she promised but didn’t publish.

Black feminist theorizing may be one name for the space between a gift and the dream of something more. It may live in the space between what is possible to say, what can be written, and an inarticulate and illegible excess, an indeterminate and impossible account of unfreedom and its others. The space between what is and what might be is also the space of desire, of demand. In “The Race for Theory,” Spillers’s contemporary, the late Barbara Christian, described another experience of the demands made of Black feminist literary critics. “Some of us are continually harassed to invent wholesale theories regardless of the complexity of the literature we study,” she wrote. “I, for one, am tired of being asked to produce a black feminist literary theory as if I were a mechanical man.”⁴⁷ For Christian, the *theorizing* of people of color—“and I intentionally use the verb rather

than the noun," she added, parenthetically—occurred "in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic." This theorizing could be narrative, could take the form of "riddles and proverbs," or could appear "in the play of language." The "grace and pleasure" of this play of language gestured toward a theoretical practice "in the form of the hieroglyph," something "both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative."⁴⁸ Responding to the institutional pressures of her moment, as Theory became a common currency in university English departments, with unequal effects for women of color critics, Christian understood the conceptual language and stylistic conventions of Theory to be inapposite to these other forms of theorizing.⁴⁹

Though both critics theorized, in the sense that both engaged in speculative practices on the relation between power, meaning, and being, Spillers and Christian had different *orientations* toward the act of producing a critical theory of Black women's writing. Spillers promised such a volume for over a decade. Christian maintained that with so few working experts in Black women's literature, it would be "presumptuous . . . to invent a theory of how we *ought* to read."⁵⁰ Ultimately, neither ever produced such a work. Moreover, although there was a powerful desire (and individual and institutional demands) to produce general theories of Black women's expressive cultures, no single-authored work is understood to have produced such a theory—not by Spillers or Christian, not by Claudia Tate, Nellie McKay, Cheryl Wall, or Hazel Carby, nor by Barbara Smith, Akasha Hull, Shirley Anne Williams, Hortense Thornton, Deborah McDowell, Valerie Smith, Mae Henderson, Sandra Adell, Carole Boyce Davies, Mary Helen Washington, Ann duCille, Abena Busia, Michele Wallace, Wahneema Lubiano, Eleanor Taylor, Joyce Ann Joyce, Trudier Harris, Frances Smith Foster, VèVè Clark, June Jordan, or bell hooks. As a field of study, there are many dozens of works with different names for the indeterminacy that Spillers intended to call "In the Flesh" and that Christian identified in the figure of the hieroglyph. But Black feminist theorizing is irreducible to one figure. By the time the moment of Theory faded into the era of Cultural Studies, producing a theory of Black women's writing lost its urgency. By and large, the chapters that follow live between the moment of Theory and the time of Cultural Studies, though in the current crisis state of the academic humanities, neither theory nor cultural studies enjoys pride of place. The chapters that follow offer different perspectives on how we lost theory *and* cultural studies as orienting ideas and gained perpetual crisis. It may

be that the crisis implied by Black feminist theorizing has been generalized across the speculative humanities.

This book is not a theory of Black feminist theorizing. In this book, Black feminism names a necessarily heterogenous and heteroglot assemblage of interventions that are resistant to systemization—not, or not only, or not reducible to, an academic (inter)discipline or party program. It names discourses, archives, genealogies, and communities of practitioners (past, present, and future). What interests me in bringing together a diffuse group of authors and texts is not a shared set of avowed theoretical positions or methodological or epistemological assumptions. What I refer to as Black feminist theorizing is, perhaps, a shared insistence that “there is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women.”⁵¹ If Blackness is a genre of living marked by its vulnerability to violence without limit, but also a living with access to those forms of experience prohibited and disavowed in the pursuit of a fictive coherence, in the name of a form of living called the Human, Black feminist theorizing may be a theorizing of or from the experience of being made to embody indeterminacy, of having indeterminacy written onto and read from the surfaces of the body, of remaking the skin from the site where intimacy and alienation cohabitate into a marker of one’s proximity to violence and violation—dynamics that, by now, implicate *all* subjects, that speak to any experience of human being.⁵²

The thread that connects Black feminist theorists within this study is their capacity to open up new fields of thought at “the nexus of violence and sexuality,” the indeterminate space of Blackness.⁵³ If Blackness emerges at this nexus of violence and sexuality, it is not only because of the ways violence and sexuality figure into the historical emergence of Blackness. Rather, it is the indeterminacy of violence and sexuality, their porous borders, their fundamental ineffability, that bind them to Blackness, generally, and the Blackness of Black women, especially. Similar continuums connect force and violence, sensation and sexuality, and Human and Black. Over several centuries, and within a matrix of changing and emerging social institutions, the varieties of indeterminate human experience settled around the idea that indeterminacy, excess, and incoherence could be written onto and read from the surfaces of the body, which is one angle of the story of the racialization of slavery.

Theorizing from the vantage of a Black feminist theorizing is also an argument about the persistence of slavery as a structuring force in the

contemporary world. This book resists an approach that engages with slavery as a bounded historical event, albeit one that might survive as an inheritance or legacy or source of accumulated disadvantages. I am interested in thinking slavery following Jared Sexton's provocation: "But what if slavery does not die, as it were, because it is immortal, but rather because it is non-mortal, because it has *never* lived, at least not in the psychic life of power? What if the source of slavery's longevity is not its resilience in the face of opposition, but the obscurity of its existence? Not the accumulation of its political capital, but the illegibility of its grammar?"⁵⁴ Here, "slavery" is freighted with both its historical materiality (the history of slavery and its racialization) and the gravitational pull of its discursivity (its life in and as discourse). In a paper given at the English Institute in 1987, Spillers articulated the overlap in the material and discursive lives of slavery. "As concretely material as the 'institution' was, as a natural historical sequence and as a scene of pulverization and murder," she argued, "'slavery,' for all that, remains one of the most textualized and discursive fields of practice that we could posit as a structure for attention."⁵⁵ As much as slavery reshaped the physical world, political and economic systems, and the material lives of individuals, the institution was also *lived* in discourse. Spillers continues:

In a very real sense, a full century and a half "after the fact," "slavery" is *primarily* discursive, as we search vainly for a point of absolute and indisputable origin, for a moment of plenitude that would restore us to the real, rich "thing" itself before discourse touched it. In that regard, "slavery" becomes the great "test case" around which, for its Afro-American readers, the circle of mystery is recircumscribed time and again. This realization is stunning: as many times as we reopen slavery's closure, we are hurtled rapidly forward into the dizzying motions of a symbolic enterprise, and it becomes increasingly clear that the cultural synthesis we call "slavery" was never homogeneous in its practices and conception, nor unitary in the faces it has yielded.⁵⁶

In this formulation, slavery lives and is lived in discourse, in the ways meaning is written onto and read from the surfaces of the body, in the ways these meanings circulate across the time and space of the premodern, modern, and postmodern. Black feminist theorizing is one name for a practice of reading the discursive lives of slavery—not only the ways they circumscribe our political imaginations and underwrite sociality and social institutions, but their presence in and as the literary.

In this context, in which “slavery’s critical agency in Western self-conceptualization . . . is nothing short of foundational” and “the quintessential ‘slave’ is *not* a male, but a female,” we might rethink how Black feminism interacts with other claims toward understanding social relations in their totality.⁵⁷ Across this study, the structural position of the Black woman is not (yet another) particular position; it is what Slavoj Žižek has called a *universal singularity*, “a kind of direct short circuit between the singular and the universal, bypassing the particular.”⁵⁸ “The Black woman” is an abstraction that Black women in the world live in relation to in myriad ways; it is one name for the experience of being made to represent indeterminacy, excess, incoherence, and deathliness for the world around you. It may also be a “structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, this is to say, following the Combahee River Collective, that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”⁶⁰ Put differently, any politics that is not invested in a feminist Black radicalism is not invested in freedom *as such*. In our missed encounters with Black feminism, we reinvest in our own unfreedoms. In some way, our anxieties over Black feminist theorizing are anxieties over our own ambivalence toward freedom.⁶¹ Across the field formations emerging from critical cultural studies, the question that avoids being asked is, what do we want, what do we keep wanting, in place of this wild freedom?

What would it mean to want a Black freedom more than the freedoms of slave owners, capitalists, subjects, and sovereigns? In a recent work, Sara Clarke Kaplan looks to the figure of “the Black reproductive”—“the constellation of national discourses, state policies, and individual practices through which Black reproductive acts, capacities, and labor have been imagined and administered in the United States for some 350 years”—as the point of departure for imagining a “Black feminist politics of freedom.”⁶² For Kaplan, “the generative potential of Black freedom” resides in “aporetic instances of the contingent and ephemeral, the unsustainable and the ruptural, the still-not-achieved yet not-quite-impossible.”⁶³ It may also be that we don’t know what it would mean to be free. We may know that the liberal tradition’s account of liberty is vouchsafed by antiblackness, but we lack language for articulating different species of unfreedom or for imagining a free world, a Blackened world, and what we might be within one.⁶⁴

The adopted procedure for this essay is neither fish nor fowl and, as such, breathes in the impure air of literary interpretation, verging on social theory. It assumes for the moment a sort of critically illegitimate stance—the literary text *does* point outside itself—in the primary interest of leading the reader back inside the universe of the apparently self-contained artifact.

—HORTENSE SPILLERS, *BLACK, WHITE, AND IN COLOR*, 131

Reading slavery in this way demands a critical procedure that can think through what Spillers called “the (il)logic of the ‘symptom.’” It demands a symptomatic reading practice attuned to how “an ‘inside’ materializes in an ‘outside’ as a specified break in a kinetic relay of movement.”⁶⁵ For Spillers, “slavery . . . offers an analogous spectacle of successive displacements” to the Freudian symptom, where the task of the critic is “to hear its stutter more clearly.”⁶⁶ Methodologically, *In a Field of Static* is a metacommentary on field formation and a study of the necessary absences around which these formations in critical cultural studies cohere. By and large, rather than attempting broad surveys of different discourses, my critique proceeds by way of close readings of individual authors emblematic of discursive formations, if not unproblematically representative of them. This close reading across the intellectual itineraries of the authors opens space for symptomatic readings, attuned to different forms of “discursive static” that are produced by missed and anxious encounters with Black feminism.⁶⁷ Part of this work, then, is an exploration of the psychic life of field formation. Working in a productive tension between methods associated with historical materialism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, my critical operation is an experiment in thinking *with* Black feminist theorizing. It is a speculative practice *enabled* by Black feminism rather than an attempt to systematize or instrumentalize Black feminism as a practice of reading.

What Spillers called breathing the impure air of literary interpretation verging on social theory was already becoming, by the mid-1980s, emblematic of a growing genre of literary and cultural criticism called Theory. Compared to earlier, practical criticisms, this criticism could be inventive, or irresponsible, in its treatment of the literary work of art, aspiring itself to be a literary act.⁶⁸ There was considerable acrimony; this

new theoretical-qua-literary criticism generated several new star critics and many more detractors and imitators. It also shaped the emergence of a field of practice called Cultural Studies, that combined interpretation and social theory within the terrain of the interdisciplinary. The whole short, happy life of Cultural Studies would be the topic of another book (though I cover some of it here in chapter 4), but it represented both the generalization and politicization of Theory. Theory opened a space for the different varieties of academic practice, which had once understood themselves as narrowly interested in the production of knowledge, to become creative, inventive practices. Building from this, the model of Cultural Studies opened a space for different forms of academic practice to understand themselves as political interventions. If every act of knowledge production was implicated in relations and operations of power, then the act of producing knowledge might *intervene* in larger relations and operations of power.⁶⁹ The desires called Cultural Studies may have failed to generate a historical bloc, but they opened a space for the practice of reading I pursue in this book, a practice that is interested in what becomes possible in the indistinction between the theoretical and the literary.⁷⁰

If we expand the ambit of the theoretical, we allow other sets of concerns within the work of literature to announce themselves. For instance, “124 was spiteful” is an argument; it theorizes.⁷¹ So do lines like “come into the / Black / and live.”⁷² The literary’s arguments can only be made by rejecting or letting go of closure, of letting go of the presumption that arguments must (or can) close down on themselves. There is also something literary in the text of theory—some part of the idea that can only be expressed through beauty, terror, joy, or anguish.

There are openings in the text of theory that are properly literary, and there are other openings in the text of theory that make space for anxieties of one kind or another: the anxiety that the argument cannot be made (at all), or cannot be made by me (whoever “me” happens to be), or cannot be made by me now as I’m writing it (maybe it needs to be made by someone smarter or someone who can see or read or write better). There are openings in the text of theory that make space for these anxieties, and there are openings that make space for silence, for the undecidable or unknowable. All of these the text of theory shares with the literary text. The challenge is in the balance we allow between these forms of discourse. The challenge is not to allow the openness of the text to be an alibi for fear—fear that the thought we mean to express, the argument we mean to make, takes us somewhere we don’t want to go. And so we settle for beauty,

ambiguity, or sentimentality. We settle for an easy and pleasing beauty, to protect us from the fearful no-places our arguments may take us.

In a Field of Static works between genres, reading history, criticism, prose, and poetry as forms of theorizing. This practice of reading is one inheritance of the deconstruction internal to Black feminist theorizing—a serious attention to the indeterminacy of the literary and the theoretical, the ways that each form of expressive speculation is implicated in the other. In literature, it is taken for granted that there is no transparent relationship between argument and author, that the argument is more *and* less than the author's intention. On the other hand, we understand the text of criticism, philosophy, or theory to collapse the space between intention and argument. In the case of Black literary art, these distinctions have always been in crisis. Often, the interpretation of Black literary art has been caught in a reductive empiricism. In a 1974 response to Sara Blackburn's *New York Times* review of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Alice Walker wrote that Blackburn, "like only too many reviewers before her, is incapable . . . of experiencing black fiction as art but must read it instead as sociology."⁷³ This tendency to read Black literature as sociology, to bracket away the indeterminacy of the literary text, has also shaped the reception of Black theorizing, and in particular Black feminist theorizing, which is reduced to metasociological reflections on works of sociology.

Jennifer Nash has identified in recent Black feminist scholarship a formal turn toward "risky" genres, writing inflected by the personal and poetic, or what she terms "beautiful writing." On Nash's analysis, beautiful writing in contemporary Black feminist theory is "the form *required* to develop cartographies of black women's losses," where "loss" encompasses "absence, erasure, what is missed and missing, what is taken or stolen, what is unknown and unknowable."⁷⁴ These works belong to hybrid genres, caught between a formal inventiveness that the thought invites, and the institutional demands of journals, presses, and universities. The theorization of a Black feminist invention seems to demand, if not formal *innovation*, then at least forms other than our generic, disciplinary, or received forms of scholarship. These forms, these innovations on reading, remind us that reading, as a critical practice, *does something* to its objects, something more or something other than simply *revealing* the object. Reading is itself a practice of invention.

Along those lines, Black feminist theorizing seems to demand different practices of reading. In her work on the receptions of "intersectionality" in the neoliberal corporate university, Tiffany Lethabo King builds

out a distinction between “anxious” and “loving” reading practices. “Lovingly pushing back against post-intersectional theories,” she “calls for a less anxious and therefore more loving reading practice that tarries with the potential and future of intersectionality rather than overcoming it in a neoliberal era of disposability.”⁷⁵ There are two orders of King’s distinction. On one hand, she distinguishes between reading practices that tarry with the potential and future of a text against those reading practices that race to find reasons to disengage from a text. The present text endeavors to follow King’s advice, and example, on this front. On the other hand, there is the remarkable phrasing of “a less anxious *and therefore more loving* reading practice.” The tension here between anxiety and love is one of the central themes of this study. Across the chapters that follow, I read different engagements with the texts and interventions of Black feminist theorizing as “anxious.”⁷⁶ I am interested in how critical, intellectual, and political anxieties manifest, and what they tell us about what it means to try to think with Black feminist theorizing.

What are the stakes for critique of this distinction between anxiety and love? Is the distinction itself tenable? Surely in our everyday lives, as simultaneously anxious and loving beings, the distinction is more aspirational than actual. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Sigmund Freud called anxiety the universal currency of the affects. Any feeling might become anxiety and anxiety might become any other feeling.⁷⁷ For the work of criticism, anxiety is easy to diagnose but hard to unravel. Though Jacques Lacan is said to have called anxiety the only affect “which does not deceive,”⁷⁸ anxiety is both itself and the feelings it translates, transmutes, or exchanges for. An anxious reading is a signpost for the unknowable, for the inaccessible inner life of the critic. But anxiety is also a short circuit between the unconscious and the sociomom.⁷⁹ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes that “the Negro is a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety.”⁸⁰ “What this means,” Ronald Judy argues, in a signal reading of Fanon, “is that the black body does not live on the symbolic level in an anti-black world. It is locked in the serious, material values of the real.”⁸¹ Elsewhere in the same study, Judy writes that, “in revealing . . . the anomalies of affect responsible for what Fanon comes to call nègro-phobogénèsis, he reveals a pathology that is coterminous with the very symbolic order of modernity, and not just colonialism.”⁸² This is all to say that critical encounters with Black texts—in the present study, with the texts of a Black feminist theorizing—are freighted with anxieties that precede and exceed both critic and text, that cut across the semantic

fields of modernity while also touching our innermost lifeworlds and unconscious minds.

In chapter 3, the relationship between love and anxiety finds expression across the discourses of Black feminist theorizing, queer negativity, and queer futurity. Each reveals, in some way, the overlap between love and anxiety. Love is not a safeguard against anxiety. Fanon is just one theorist of race to argue that negrophobia and negrophilia are both expressions of a stimulus to anxiety. Love is never guaranteed, and love is never a guarantee—of fidelity, exactitude, felicity, reciprocity, care, or goodness. That love can never be guaranteed, that love cannot guarantee, is one reason anxiety is so powerful.⁸³ A loving reading can be beholden to the same pathologies as an anxious one. A fraught endeavor. We can only pursue a critique without guarantees, where failure (or something worse) is a potential outcome.

AND AN AFFIRMATION

The chapters that follow are organized around different debates, different conflicts that shaped feminist and queer cultural studies, different missed encounters with Black feminism that touch ideas central to a critique of the Human—relationality, subjectivity, negativity, and belonging. The first two chapters are organized around different missed encounters: in one, the missed encounter that unfolded between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly; in the other, the missed encounter between two discourses—intersectionality and assemblage theory. Those chapters are interested in both the immediate stakes of those missed encounters and the ways they live on in academic practice and Black feminist theorizing. The second pair of chapters looks more broadly at field formations, at the ways specific debates or interventions coalesced from missed encounters with Black feminist theorizing: in one, queer theory's competing discourses of negativity and futurity; in the other, the transnational and diasporic turns in feminist and queer cultural studies. In those chapters, I trace the symptomatic presence and absence of Blackness across those field-defining interventions, focusing on how their most important insights might be reimaged in relation to Black feminist theorizing.

The first chapter, "Open Letters, and the Irrelational Erotics of a Black Feminist Negativity," unpacks the racial politics of relationality across the early histories of lesbian feminism and the institutionalization of women's

studies as an interdiscipline. Through an extended engagement with the work of Audre Lorde, and with special attention to her missed encounters with Mary Daly, immortalized in her “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” I read relationality as a fantasy underwriting the politics of second-wave or sisterhood feminism. Lorde’s practice of reading, and her readings of contemporaneous feminists and the whiteness of women’s liberation, revealed the ways Black women functioned for feminism, as what made feminist sisterhood possible and feminist politics impossible. Across her work, across the essays and poetry she produced during her missed encounters with Daly, Lorde began to articulate a Blackened mode of relationality, an irrelational erotics that traverses the terrain of a structural impossibility, that explores the fullness of a buried subjectivity, of a subjectivity lived through indeterminacy. The chapter reads contemporary theorizations of relationality in Black studies, especially those informed by the interventions called afropessimism, for their accent on the *impossibility* of relationality. In the failed relation between Lorde and Daly, I find an alternative relation to impossibility that might be called irrelational. The irrelational is relationality touched by impossibility, the erotics of a Black feminist negativity.

The second chapter, “Buried Subjects, and the Lines from Intersectionality to Abolition,” begins from the tension internal to Black feminism over its institutionalization and the impossibility of Black feminism as an institutional project. Intersectionality and the critique of intersectionality is one privileged example of this tension. The chapter offers a reading of the spatial politics of Black feminist theorizing to examine those critiques of intersectionality produced under the heading of assemblage theory, and most famously in the work of Jasbir Puar. I argue that these critiques produce intersectionality as a spatial metaphor that locates and fixes compound subjects, a fixing complicit with the work of the national security state. Intervening in these critiques of intersectionality, I trace alternative theorizations of spatiality and subjectivity internal to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work, extending them through Hortense Spillers’s theorization of the interstice as the indeterminate nonsite of the Black female subject. In this rereading of Crenshaw through Spillers, I explore how intersectionality belongs not only to a tradition of Black feminist theorizing on particularity and compoundedness but to a tradition of Black feminist theorizing on placelessness, singularity, and absence. Rather than bolster oppressive institutions through liberal models of inclusion, Black feminism names a monstrous potential for a different theorization of freedom from the vantage of a buried subjectivity.

The chapter also takes seriously the irreducible promiscuity of the conceptual languages we use to give substance to, and to make sense of, the knowledge of freedom expressed otherwise through collective struggle. On either end of the popularization of intersectionality, the chapter engages with Crenshaw's earlier contributions to Critical Legal Studies and Critical Race Theory and, more recently, the rise of an abolition feminism as the radical edge of feminist politics. Crenshaw's early work gives context for understanding the history of Black freedom struggle that informed her theorizations of intersectionality. As that theorization was popularized, first in gender and sexuality studies curricula and then in the cultural mainstream, as "intersectionality" became a nominal principle of one of the United States' two political parties, and as the most radical insights of Crenshaw's text were jettisoned, the radical edge of political activism and lay political theorizing moved toward "abolition" to express and to structure an evolving set of political principles. The chapter traces some of this movement from intersectionality to abolition and how each is animated by the problem of imagining the subject of a Black feminist theorizing.

The third chapter, "Hope Against Hope, and the Queer Negativity of a Black Feminist *Poiēsis*," turns to competing discourses within queer studies, queer negativity and queer futurity, to theorize Blackness as one name for the negativity internal to intersubjectivity, for the fecund absence that generates a Black feminist *poiēsis*. The queer negativity of Lee Edelman pursued a theorization of queer positionality that aligned it conceptually, if not politically, with the project of afropessimism as one expression of a Black feminist negativity. Meanwhile, the queer futurity articulated by the late José Esteban Muñoz expressed itself through an antiracist politics that, nevertheless, aimed for the radical promise of a relationality prior to antiblackness, what might be the desire for an antiracist antiblackness. Rather than dwell in the moment of that debate, such as it was, the chapter travels prehistories of queer theory in the Black women's writing of the post-Black Power moment and the foundational works of Leo Bersani.

Beginning with a reading of Toni Morrison's 1976 essay "A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say)," the chapter considers the dialectic of hope and hopelessness central to the Black radical tradition, and the ways Morrison finds this dialectic expressed across generations. Morrison's essay troubles an easy formulation of reproductive futurity, even as it dramatizes a familiar tension

between pessimism and optimism. The chapter turns to the early works of Beverly Smith and Barbara Smith, twin sisters who cofounded the Combahee River Collective while charting individual paths as writers and activists. Alongside discussions of the published diary writings of the Smith sisters, the chapter pursues an extended engagement with the theoretical itinerary of Leo Bersani, whose foundational work around the antisociality of homosexual desire helped shape the discourses of negativity and futurity in queer studies. Bersani's innovative reading between Freud and Foucault allowed for the theorization of a negativity that shatters subjectivity, but Bersani's project sought redemption in a sociality untouched by antiblackness, which is also to say a desire for a sociality untouched by Blackness. In productive tension with Bersani, Beverly and Barbara Smith theorized the relationships between violence and sexuality from the perspective of a Black feminist theorizing. Turning back to the debate over queer negativity and queer futurity, the chapter reads the intergenerational interlocution between Audre Lorde and Alexis Pauline Gumbs for the beginning of a queer Black feminist theorization of negativity. Returning to Morrison, the chapter closes on Kara Keeling's account of a Black future, as an alternative to both reproductive futurity and queer futurity, and Joy James's formulation of Afrarealism as an orientation that pursues what is generative and sustaining within negativity—a hope against hope, or a hope without hope.

The fourth chapter, “Nowhere, and Notes to Not Belonging,” reads the organizing terms of the transnational turn in feminist and queer cultural studies—hegemony, citizenship, and sovereignty—as desires for a belonging that salvages the Human as a shared and shareable form of being. Each term touches some aspect of belonging: hegemony is belonging imbued with agency, citizenship is belonging imbued with rights, and sovereignty is belonging imbued with power. The texts of transnational feminism return, symptomatically, to Blackness and to Black feminism as failures of belonging, and transnational feminism and diasporic queer studies tell stories about power and resistance that avoid the world created from racial slavery. Through readings along the itinerary of Saidiya Hartman, the chapter posits the racialization of slavery, the anoriginary and an-archic invention of Blackness, as the irrelational moment that sets belonging into motion. Enslavement is being without belonging. It might even be a *shared* experience of being without belonging, drawing focus to the indeterminate distance between being in common and belonging. Following Hartman, the chapter posits a feminist Black radicalism, or the

indeterminate anarchism of Black feminist theorizing, as one possible name for a politics of collective being without belonging. As an extension of Black feminism, this anarchism holds the promise of a politics that starts nowhere, wants nothing, and threatens everything.

The epilogue turns from theorizing in a field of static to theorizing in a burning house. The Black feminist negativities explored across the book open a space for something to the side of optimism and pessimism. By way of closing, I return to Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" and her Black lesbian reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The scandal of Smith's reading of Morrison set a new mode of Black feminist theorizing into motion. Returning to that scandalous beginning, I meditate on the figure of the burning house offered by Morrison's novel. In the fraught and promiscuous potentiality of that space, the book closes on an affirmation of different names for indeterminacy: a Black feminist anarchism, the impossible inventiveness of Black feminist theorizing, and the nonagenital affirmation of the Blackness internal to being.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Spillers et al., “Whatcha Gonna Do?,” 301.
- 2 Without *fixing* the meaning of Black feminist theorizing, we might say that it names one activity of Black feminism, it is one expression of Black feminism, it is the breath or the pulse or the energy of Black feminism. Insofar as the terms are mutually co-constitutive, there is some overlap in how I deploy them throughout the book.
- 3 Douglass, *Engendering Blackness*, 2.
- 4 It may be that scholarship has taken on an outsized role in the production and dissemination of radical discourses because the academy is one of vanishingly few sites in the contemporary United States where creative and scholarly writing are even minimally subsidized. The consolidation of the creative industries by monopoly capitalism and the open ideological warfare against the remnants of the academic humanities are two sides of an attack on our capacity to collectively articulate alternative visions for our shared existence.
- 5 Spillers, “Afterword,” 249.
- 6 Spillers, “Afterword,” 250.
- 7 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, xvi.
- 8 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 13.
- 9 Spillers et al., “Whatcha Gonna Do?,” 301.
- 10 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 12–13.
- 11 From Davis’s introductory remarks at Spillers’s lecture “To the Bone: Some Speculations on the Problem of Touch,” given at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 15 November 2018.
- 12 On writing as a practice of thinking, see Chandler, “Figure of W. E. B. Du Bois.”
- 13 In “Theory as a Body of Work,” the longtime editor William Germano discusses the difficult journey from essay to book that remains a feature of the academic career path.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

- 14 In a recent Festschrift honoring Spillers, Nicole Spigner writes that “Spillers’s
essays are literary not only because essays *are* literary production, but because
of her dedication to and use of poetics in her writing. Her academic work is
criticism, theory, and literature, simultaneously” (“All the Things,” 192n1).
- 15 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 13.
- 16 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 153.
- 17 In “The ‘Beached Whale,’” Sharon Holland raises some of these questions in re-
lation to the methodological space between gender studies and sexuality studies.
- 18 On the place of the Spillersian lexicon in feminist theory, see Pinto, “Black
Feminist Literacies.”
- 19 Nash, “Strange Bedfellows,” 58.
- 20 This is true even for the writing that predates her engagements with post-
structuralism, as well as her book reviews and, indeed, her short fiction.
- 21 J. Hillis Miller is instructive here. Remarking on the state of literary study at
the turn of the millennium, Miller offered a set of aphorisms that ended with
the following: “Though a given critical theory or methodology is universaliz-
able, able to be appropriated by others, institutionalized, or translated, what
is most valuable in a given critic or scholar is a distinctive tone or note that is
unique to him or her and cannot be successfully imitated. This means other
critics should be read as literature, with the same care, the same attention to
detail. Any critic not worth such careful reading is not worth reading” (“Lit-
erary Study,” 66). The present project is, in part, an experiment in reading
Black feminist theorizing *as literature*.
- 22 As one aspect of Black feminist theorizing, “static” is a kind of “strategic
device, opening onto its own abyss,” and Black feminist theorizing is “an un-
closed, unenclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading,
interpretation, and writing” (Derrida, “Time of a Thesis,” 40).
- 23 Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 231.
- 24 González, “Indigenous Acts,” 133.
- 25 Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 1.
- 26 Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*, 2.
- 27 In *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe offers an expansive overview of
the cultural, intellectual, and geopolitical histories of slavery in relation to
what he calls the “becoming black of the world.”
- 28 As I understand it, this has been one throughline of Fred Moten’s itinerary
across his poetry, criticism, and his thinking-in-common with Stefano Harney.
- 29 Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 232.
- 30 These readings of Blackness as deathliness build from the work of David
Marriott, especially his *Haunted Life*.
- 31 Spillers, “Quarrels into Ploughshares,” 236.
- 32 In Alderfer et al., *Diary of a Conference*, 42.
- 33 Rapaport, *Theory Mess*, 2.
- 34 Rapaport, *Theory Mess*, 3–4.

- 35 DuCille, "Occult of True Black Womanhood," 603, quoted in Rapaport,
Theory Mess, 2.
- 36 Rapaport, *Theory Mess*, 2; emphasis added.
- 37 See Alexander-Floyd, "Disappearing Acts."
- 38 DuCille, "Short Happy Life," 33.
- 39 Griffin, "That the Mothers May Soar," 484.
- 40 See McKay, "Naming the Problem," and Painter, "Black Studies, Black
 Professors."
- 41 Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 55.
- 42 McDowell, *Changing Same*, 157–58.
- 43 Exemplary readings here include Abel, "Black Writing, White Reading," and
 duCille, "Occult of True Black Womanhood."
- 44 Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, xiv.
- 45 "Contributors," *boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1996): 258.
- 46 "Contributors," *boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (2003): 222. "The Idea of Black Culture"
 remains one of the works Spillers intends to publish.
- 47 Christian, "Race for Theory," 53.
- 48 Christian, "Race for Theory," 52.
- 49 An earlier version of the present project included a chapter on the moment
 that produced "The Race for Theory." That chapter grew into its own manu-
 script project, "A Race, for Theory: Critical Theory, Black Studies, and the
 Beginnings of Black Feminism."
- 50 Christian, "Race for Theory," 53.
- 51 Spillers et al., "Whatcha Gonna Do?," 308.
- 52 For an extended theorization of the ways race operates on the surfaces of the
 body, see Visperas, *Skin Theory*.
- 53 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 9.
- 54 Sexton, "Curtain of the Sky," 16.
- 55 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 179.
- 56 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 179. The opening epigraph of Frank
 Wilderson's doctoral dissertation attributes to Spillers the following: "Every
 generation of African Americans must rediscover the institution of slavery
 for themselves. It's never finished." The epigraph echoes arguments Spillers
 makes in her paper for the English Institute, as well as her long-standing
 interest in the matter of the generational in the African diaspora. The line
 Wilderson attributes to Spillers indicates another kind of species division in
 modernity—between those subjects for whom slavery is a primal scene that
 must always be rediscovered, and those subjects for whom slavery is a primal
 scene that must always be repressed and that returns in the form of different
 psychic and social symptoms.
- 57 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 17, 215.
- 58 Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 17.
- 59 Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 58.

- 60 Combahee River Collective, "Black Feminist Statement," 276.
- 61 Toni Cade Bambara opens *The Salt Eaters* with this problematic, as her Minnie Ransom asks, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (3). As the opening chapter unfolds and the theme is formulated and reformulated, Ransom warns, "Wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well" (10). Put differently, the problem of freedom and our necessarily mixed feelings and conflicting desires should not be reduced to bad politics and false consciousness.
- 62 Kaplan, *Black Reproductive*, 3.
- 63 Kaplan, *Black Reproductive*, 25.
- 64 Elsewhere, I treat the question of theorizing freedom and unfreedom in relation to the anarchist tradition and contemporary abolition feminisms. See Bliss, "To Strive and Fail."
- 65 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 20.
- 66 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 20. In chapter 4, especially, I trace the obscurity of Black unfreedom across the itinerary of Saidiya Hartman, as well as in the symptomatic appearances of figures of Blackness, in their relation to the figure of the slave, within the transnational and diasporic turns in feminist and queer cultural studies.
- 67 Here, my method works at an angle to Clare Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter*, and her practice of citation that emphasized the ways ideas circulated across feminist discourses and minimized the individual author. Engaging with ideas as though they belong under a single and singular signature can lead to intellectual scapegoating, to the negative construction of some thinkers as racist, heterosexist, and retrograde. My own process relies on an intimacy with the "voice" of the writer.
- 68 Elizabeth Bruss's posthumous *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* remains a remarkable analysis of this shift in the life of criticism. I consider Bruss's work in relation to contemporary Black feminist and queer studies in Bliss, "Defense, Redemption, Care."
- 69 In *Object Lessons*, Robyn Wiegman explores in a nonjudgmental way the tactics by which cultural studies scholarship (or those corners of cultural studies Wiegman calls "identity knowledges") has attempted to express radical political commitments in the form and content of scholarly prose. The "daunting hope," as Wiegman calls it, is that "if only we find the right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool, our critical practice will be adequate to the political commitments that inspire it" (3). Over the last several years, the political commitments rendered through cultural studies scholarship have expanded from the traditional range (from radical to left-liberal) to include politics that are alternatively precious and exhausted, bedraggled and optimistic. These texts have tended to aim for various otherwise experiences of a world beyond repair or redemption. After decades of this kind of work, decades that have coincided with a general de-democratization and the

emergence of new fascisms in the United States, it may be time to reevaluate the efficacy of critical cultural studies as a genre of political intervention. We might, like Wiegman, allow ourselves to be interested in the desires given shape by these discourses and by these forms of academic practice.

- 70 See Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies.'"
 71 Morrison, *Beloved*, 3.
 72 Clifton, *Good News About the Earth*, 1.
 73 Alice Walker, letter to the editor, *New York Times Book Review*, 20 January 1974, 27.
 74 Nash, "Writing Black Beauty," 103; emphasis added. This line of thought is expanded in Nash's *How We Write Now*. The question of loss will be taken up again in chapter 4.
 75 King, "Post-Identitarian and Post-Intersectional Anxiety," 116. King's distinction between "anxious" reading and "loving" reading recalls the stakes of a queer feminist criticism that pitted "paranoid" reading against "reparative" reading. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is the key figure here, though the most useful reading of the *distinction itself* might be found in Tim Dean and Robyn Wiegman's "What Does Critique Want?"
 76 To be sure, if I were less opaque to myself, I might write a book that *reads* my own anxieties—rather than a book that *catalogs* them.
 77 Freud, *Standard Edition*, 16:403–4. Freud, of course, revised this position at different moments in his thought.
 78 See Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 41.
 79 I borrow *socionom* from Spillers, who has built the concept out across several of the essays collected in *Black, White, and in Color*.
 80 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 117.
 81 Judy, "Fanon's Body," 79.
 82 Judy, "Fanon's Body," 54.
 83 In "The Psychopharmacology of Everyday Life," Jamieson Webster puts it this way: "The problem here, or maybe even the solution, is that we anxious people do know the truth: we are all going to die alone, others do what they like, something in sexuality inevitably fails, who even knows what anyone is thinking, I don't know what I want, I don't know how to give you what you want, and I certainly don't know what is going to happen, between us, or at all. Anxiety is always the signal of a truth that is calling you."

CHAPTER ONE. OPEN LETTERS, AND THE IRRELATIONAL EROTICS OF A BLACK FEMINIST NEGATIVITY

- 1 Lorde, *I Am Your Sister*, 83.
 2 Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 48.
 3 Gumbs, "Speculative Poetics," 132. With her recent biography of Lorde, *Survival Is a Promise*, Gumbs, at once, documents the various forms of Lorde's

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS