ABSTRACT

Title of Document: MOVING PAIN HOME: CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE OUT OF BLACK TRAUMA AND TERROR

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This project will look at performances of terror and trauma centering Black bodies and the ways that they perform in everyday life and bracketed performances. In this project, I examine how the work of Black cultural producers questions the imaginary logic of white supremacist hegemony. This is best theorized through lived experiences of Black people, real and imagined. It is only through the interrogation of performed Black embodiment as traumatic negotiation that we can understand the complex instruments that have ensured the survival of precarious Black bodies in a metaphorical war zone.

First, I question the idea of what it means to "go to war" in the context of police brutality inflicted on Black bodies. In the midst of anti-Black sentiment, or a metaphorical war with material consequences enacted against Black bodies, Black people are subject to hypersurveillance and it is this phenomenon of

hypersurveillance that is the focus of the first part of my project. If one is able to survive the war, one must then ask how do we come home from it intact, despite the invisible traumas of unending threats. I discuss how *Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts I, II, and III* as a theatrical development has responded to intentional and unintentional sites of harm in the forms of oppression and violence. Examining dance as an act of corporeal linguistic agency, in the final section I look at the transhistorical phenomenon that is blues dancing, moving beyond its potential as a strategy of survival and identifying in it sources of recovery, resistance, and emancipation. In doing so, I sift through a history of Black vernacular dance in order to illuminate the possibility that dance among these other Black cultural products creates spaces of solidarity and healing.

Keywords: trauma, terror, theatre, performance, Black, police, social dance, blues, Suzan-Lori Parks, Father Comes Home From the Wars

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By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2020

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Dedication

To Leslie Kimbrough, Ms. Kim, Jewell Dulin, and Henry Dulin, because I wanted to make you proud.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my lovely people without whom this project would have not been possible. I am deeply grateful for and indebted to Dr. James Harding, who somehow saw a spark of my potential when we weren't even in the United States. His support and patience have been never-ending and for that I am so appreciative. I am also thankful for my committee members: Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, Dr. Caitlin Marshall, Dr. La Marr Bruce, and Dr. Jason Geary.

I would also like to thank Leigh Smiley and the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies for their support in theory and in praxis. My project was made possible by funding from the school and the International Program for Creative Collaboration and Research. Without the wonderful, gracious staff, I would not have gotten past day one and for this I am grateful to Crystal Gaston, Jocelyn Callister, Bobby Hunter, Sandra Jackson, Susan Miller, Renee Nyack, and Dr. Kate Spanos. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the effervescent Crystal Davis as she has me a better mover and scholar. Thank you for all the doors that were open when I needed to peek my head in "for just one thing." Your patience and giving spirit have been needed many a time.

My thanks go to the many that have mentored me as a undergraduate and graduate student. I am so appreciative of Dr. Jeanmarie Higgins, whose teaching and scholarship inspired me to enter into the theory and dramaturgy worlds. I am so thankful for the many ways Dr. Higgins has showed up for me, many times with less than twenty-four hours notice. I am awe of the practitioners and scholars that have

helped to build the ground on which I stand: Robin Witt, Dr. Beth Murray, Dr. Andrew Hartley, Dr. La Donna Forsgren and Dr. Esther Kim Lee.

Without the support and continuous cheerleading from my colleagues and friends, this journey would not have been possible. Thank you to my TDPS folks: Victoria Scrimer, Jonelle Walker, Po-Hsien Chu, Jordan Ealey, Jenna Gerdson, Allison Hedges, Kelly Holley, Gianina Lockley, Christen Mandracchia, Medha Marsten, Q-mars Haeri, Leticia Ridley, Fraser Stevens, Otis Ramsey-Zoë, Dr. Khalid Long, and Dr. Christina Banalopoulou. A shout-out is also necessary for my last class at UMD, THET 408T, who have endured many traumas and terrors with me and given me so much hope.

To my countless friends and dancers, I am thankful for you. Chris Lewis has brought me immense amounts of joy and held more space than I could ask of anyone. I am also grateful for the support of Olivia Radley, Amber Gruner, Natasha Kolosowsky, Richard McConochie, Dr. Andrew Godbehere, Dr. Cara Snyder, and Iris and Matthew Brickey.

Finally, I am eternally grateful for my family members who have endeared and rallied right alongside me. I have endless amounts of love and high regard for my parents, Ron and Sharon Gray, who have never ceased in their faith in me or in God to protect me. My love also goes to Jaspen, Morgan, Biscuit, Doris Evans, Ianthe Nivens, Sandra Cuthrell, and Susan Heaggans.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: A Meditation on State Sanctioned Terror and Transgenerational Trauma

> This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators. (hooks 23 "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness")

This is not a project. This is not a dissertation. As Black folks like to say, I'mma take you to church.

Many Black people have for a long time found comfort in the church. For many of us, spirituals and hymns have signaled our commitment to faith while simultaneously communicating a way to survive and move forward. Sometimes to escape oppression and the almost certain promise of social death on the plantation. And while I am certainly moved by a good rendition of Amazing Grace...

My favorite hymn goes like this:
Farther along we'll know about it.
Farther along we'll understand why.
Cheer up my brother.
Live in the sunshine.
We'll understand it
All by and by[1]

And now I must admit here that I have a problem. I have a problem with the idea of the capital "T" Truth. We know that Christianity was inherited like our names through slavery. And that the adoption of it is a site of discomfort that extends far beyond the scope of this meditation.

Thus, we come to my inheritance of the Truth and the acknowledgment of the limits of my understanding. My truth is that while I am deeply moved by that song, it also makes me profoundly sad; I tear up or cry whenever I sing it. But I do still find myself singing it. When I do cry, my mom asks why? Was this service not the site of edification I needed it to be? And the truth is that I have no idea how to answer that question.

When is this "farther along?" When will we "know all about it?" This "it," for me, being many things. To name just two interconnected ones: my pervasive struggle with disability and the constant alienation I feel from the idea of comfort. I struggle with

[1] The song "Farther Along" or "Further Along" is attributed to W.B. Stevens written in 1911.

the idea of these bodies. These stolen Black bodies. These traumatic Black bodies. These murdered Black bodies. Where is the "farther along" for them? When we know all about those that have so mercilessly taken from us in this unending war?

I am not sure.

But I do know that despite these crises of faith, these doubts, I still keep singing that song. Because that song is about a kind of homecoming. Because if those who have come before me can use it as a tool for survival, maybe so can I.

As a point of departure for this project, I want to reflect upon a particular aspect of Jacqui Malone's book *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Vernacular Dance*. I use this reflection as my point of departure because of Malone's emphasis on dance as a mechanism of survival and due to the ways in which Malone's interests offers an important segue into the larger concerns that are the impetus for my dissertation, concerns that broadly speaking, center on this question: how can Black cultural production offer insight into mechanisms of survival in the wake of pervasive anti-Black terror and trauma? Keeping this question in mind, it is worth looking to *Steppin' on the Blues*. In her book, Malone posits the notion that, "African American vernacular dance embodies African American values. It reaffirms a way of looking at the world and provides means of survival" (7). What is of particular importance in Malone's argument for my project is the idea that a performative act, which might initially be perceived as superficial, may in fact be a strategy for survival. This notion gives bearing the dissertation's ultimate goal of acknowledging the ways in which Black people have historically survived the literal and metaphorical war on their bodies and have continued to thrive through processes of cultural production.

Artists like Suzan-Lori Parks have refined these strategies of survival and incorporated them as a central part of their aesthetics. In her three part epic drama *Father Comes Home From the Wars,* Parks presents a complicated protagonist facing the almost impossible decision to go to war and fight alongside his master and the Confederacy. The text, as well as the production, perform anachronisms that allow for the collapsing of the distant Civil War past into the present political moment. It is my contention that by inserting anachronistic gestures such as the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" sign (which addresses a different kind of states' rights to revoke bodies), Parks creates a distinct cultural product that complicates ownership of one's marked body and history while illuminating potential for Black performances of hope in the midst of despair. In this cultural product, Parks thus allows room to imagine and contemplate the historical means by which Black people have resisted social and literal death.

Reflecting on Parks's work, we could do far worse than to ask what does it mean to come home from the war – whether it is a war waged on a traditional battlefield with conventional soldiers or urban warfare waged with police brutality. This is, in fact, the kind of question this project asks and answers. Organized around the concepts of getting away from the terror of war and making one's way toward terror, this project queries the meaning of seeking and performing respite from the terror in a post-traumatic state. Larger framing questions include: What does it mean to offer up cultural products in states of terror and precarity? How do Black bodies perform resistance in sites of marginality? In this respect, "coming home from the

war" has a very specific resonance as a concept within this project. It means to attempt to return home ceaselessly from a relentless, terrorizing world.

This project will look at performances of terror and trauma centering Black bodies and the ways that they perform in everyday life and bracketed performances. In this project, I examine how the work of cultural producers questions the imaginary logic of white supremacist hegemony. I argue that this is best theorized through lived experiences of Black people, real and imagined. It is only through the interrogation of performed Black embodiment as traumatic negotiation that we can understand the complex instruments that have ensured the survival of precarious Black bodies in a metaphorical war zone.

First, I question the idea of what it means to "go to war" in the context of police brutality inflicted on Black bodies. In the midst of anti-Black sentiment, or a metaphorical war with material consequences enacted against Black bodies, Black people are subject to hypersurveillance and it is this phenomenon of hypersurveillance that is the focus of the first part of my project. Here, I scrutinize the use of surveillance in relationship to Black bodies and the ways in which Black people have been policed to death in a "war" that has existed since the advent of slavery. The operative questions for this section of the project include: How then does surveillance and what Steve Mann calls "sousveillance" perform in these sites? What does it mean to share the kind of videos wherein Black people are murdered? Is it a way of mitigating or perpetuating terror and trauma?

There are countless names of Black men and women that within the last five years have circulated after their untimely deaths: Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Philando

Castile, Eric Garner and many others. After Keith Lamont Scott was killed just a few steps away from my former home in Charlotte, North Carolina, I continued to mourn the people that had been killed by police, feeling more and more helplessness about my own precarity and guilty about my complicity in white supremacy. My and many other people's mourning signals the war that has been staged on our bodies, causing me to fear for my life when something as simple as a headlight in my car is out. I focus on these men and women so that their lives and names are not forgotten. An academic project will not bring them back, nor will it ensure the justice so frequently deferred and denied to their families. What it will do I hope, is to solidify a national narrative of anti-Black state sanctioned domestic terror and to underscore the processes of healing and solidarity that surround it.

If one is able to survive the war, one must then ask how do we come home from it intact, despite the invisible traumas of unending threats. I discuss how *Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts I, II, and III* as a theatrical development has responded to intentional and unintentional sites of harm in the forms of oppression and violence. A close examination of Parks's work acts as the backdrop for the argument that violence, like trauma, transcends spatio-temporal locations and its relationship with Black bodies and theatre has been one that is fraught. One way to conceptualize that backdrop can be found in Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849.* She writes that in the Atlantic world, slaves were coerced into illiteracy; "Africans who shared languages were separated from one another by slaveholders to prevent any common language other than English from generating communities of sense among the

enslaved" (14). Here, I want suggest that Dillions emphasis on forced aliteracy is directly related to Orlando Patterson's idea of "social death," a concept on which I will be expanding upon. Like Dillion, Parks masterfully highlights subjugation through linguistic and physical repression. Parks also shows us how as Black people in the United States have been denied social life, they have also created methods to resist social and literal death. Provided that chattel slavery as an institution was meant to ensure the subjugation and social death of Black people in the Atlantic world, I argue that something integral to life worlds of Black people can be found in these cultural products that through gestures of solidarity and language attempt to reconcile the multiplicity of traumas enacted on Black bodies. In her work, I interrogate what it means for Suzan-Lori Parks to lay claim to her imagined slave/soldier, an embodiment of Blackness, in the wake of historical and contemporary pervasive anti-Blackness. I am invested in the possibility that Parks's response to transhistorical violence articulates a way to mitigate harm. Indeed, I am interested not merely in how Parks's work has been and continues to be a place where neat, linear histories are thwarted, and where those that have been historically left out of history are highlighted, but also in how those tendencies might plot key strategies of survival. This specific case study, I submit, unlike other works, focuses precisely primarily on the Black male subject before, during, and after a war he has been unfairly compelled to fight in ultimately pointing to the places where social death and literal death collapse into one another. What *Father* does is illuminate the ways in which men (and women) historically and contemporarily fight real and metaphorical battles, waging war against white supremacy's hold on their lives and wellbeing.

Just as the forced aliteracy Dillion discusses does not preclude language acquisition, confinement did not completely prohibit joyful movement in Black bodies. Examining dance as of an act of corporeal linguistic agency, in the final section I look at the transhistorical phenomenon that is blues dancing, moving beyond its potential as a strategy of survival and identifying in it sources of recovery, resistance, and emancipation. I attempt to sift through a history of Black vernacular dance in order to illuminate the possibility that dance creates spaces of solidarity and healing. If it is, as Christina Sharpe argues, that we operate "in the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation," then my hypothesis is that there is a potential emancipatory power in dancing Black vernacular dances in the wake of anti-Blackness (5). I am drawn to this particular case study if only because since 2014, social dancing has become a major part of my life. I am specifically interested in how blues dancing as a site of homemaking can be a place of rest or resistance. In particular, I am interested in the Slow Drag, a frequently mentioned but under-theorized blues idiom dance. My attention will be focused on those people who historically have clung to each other, moving in barely perceptible ways with each other in times of terror. It is my belief that the Slow Drag and its associated blues aesthetic epitomize the purpose of my project, which is to highlight those multivalent performances that often go unrecognized as well as to illuminate the distinct life worlds of Black diasporic people.

Fundamentally, the project is always oriented toward a process of liberation and freedom for Black people. I take the stance in that, though the war on Black bodies may be unending, at least we are capable of and perpetually crafting and

sharing tools, often driven by joy and pleasure, that enable us to survive. I hope to gesture to the ways in which Black bodies have historically and contemporaneously thrived. I hope to not only recognize what Sharpe calls "wake work," but also to take it up as part of the process of this project.

The project is a nonlinear overview of the radical potential for examining cultural products and performance that emerge out of terror and trauma. Though the study privileges my own Black embodiment primarily as it operates in the United States, it is not limited in its geographical scope. Questions such as why the largest African-American vernacular dance camp is in Herrang, Sweden broaden the geographical reach of the project to international terrain.

In order to accomplish this project however, I intend to ground it in the following historical registers. Above all, the enslavement of Africans in the Atlantic world must serve as a constant place of return, an integral site of trauma. If slavery provided the oppressive structure by which hegemony could effectively function through the bodies of the enslaved, then I seek to understand how the preceding bodies of Black progenitors repudiate the infrastructures of white supremacy. Books such as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* make it explicitly clear that we are not out of the shadow of racist legislation designed to prevent Black people from thriving in the United States. She specifically points to the ways in which current felons are treated as Black folks were in the 1950's. I argue that this is important in examining the way that Black people are not exempt from state sanctioned terror.

The cultural products I examine reflect how the bodies of people of color have been disciplined and terrorized by larger institutions of power. I first turn to Frantz

Fanon who positions terror and the terrorized acknowledging, "we must persuade ourselves that colonialism is incapable of procuring for colonized peoples the material conditions likely to make them forget their quest for dignity" (*Wretched of the Earth* 147). Put simply, I explore terror as that which actively counteracts what Fanon calls the "quest for dignity" and cultural production as the means by which we attempt to reclaim ourselves from trauma that results from terror. I do not argue that this terror is an orchestrated attempt by a singular entity intended to oppress Black and brown bodies, but rather a reflection of the nefariousness of embedded (and elected) white supremacy by the State. In light of this working definition, I want to briefly think through whether the actions of artists are a way of propagating or mitigating racism and terror. I contend that these cultural products that are predicated on the terrorization and trauma of Black and brown bodies demand a closer look in their (re)production of terror.

The interrogation of what constitutes Black bodies, terror, trauma, and surveillance are integral to my project. The Black body serves as an overarching theme, one that must be articulated carefully. I turn first to Harvey Young's *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Bod*y. He argues that the body acts "as the repository of black memory and historical experience" constituting a different archive that can be examined and returned to as a home (Young 25). I intend on using Young's definition of the Black body as a building block to discuss what cultural theorists call "ontological blackness" and the ways in which Black people or Black bodies have created sites of uplift in the midst of terror. Also pertinent to this study is E. Patrick Johnson's idea of the *becoming*

Black body, one that is constantly emerging and being shaped. It is in this way that I will continue to show that the Black body remains somewhat elusive, even as cultural producers attend to it in various ways. The seemingly divergent trajectories of Young's idea of the archival Black body on the one hand and Johnson's emergent Black body on the other are critical to my consideration of the ways Black people seek and return home.

I also draw from Black feminist thinkers, such as bell hooks, who identify how Black people have and continue to move toward liberation. She specifically highlights how "spaces of agency exist for black people wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see" (116). Specifically, hooks offers up sites for home-making where communities are forged, which is important to my own project in that I present that Black people are constantly seek home in the midst of the "war." While hooks primarily focuses on the ways in which Black people have externally crafted homes and communities, I add to this discourse by examining the in what ways those places where we are able to "look back" are also places of making home internally in our bodies as well as externally in the presence of anti-Black attitudes. hooks also relevantly insists that the home is a "site of resistance," a place of return where Black identities are formed as well as a place of reprieve.

In the second section of my project, I argue that performances of everyday life for Black people in the United States have been drastically altered by increasing and adaptive technologies of surveillance. My argument draws heavily from Simone Browne's *Dark Matter* in order to closely scrutinize terrorization enacted on Black

bodies. Demonstrating the ways Black bodies have been historically surveilled, Browne draws attention to the need for surveillance studies to include notions of racialized bodies. I am interested in Browne description of a kind of Black fugitivity in her definition of "dark sousveillance." Building upon Steve Mann's work on sousveillance**,** Browne argues that "Dark sousveillance is a site of critique, as it speaks to Black epistemologies of contending with anti-Black surveillance" (21). Using Browne's "dark sousveillance," I examine cases of police brutality and their relationship to post-modern and post-democratic discourses, illuminating the terrorized Black subject's agency and embodiment and how they are fundamentally altered.

Throughout the project, I draw attention to terror is a visible entity. Terror operates as a key conceptual site in this work. Discourses of terror after 9/11 have mostly been oriented toward a specific kind of "war on terror." In his titular essay, Jonathan Weinberger traces a genealogy of "Defining Terror." He cautions that we should, "Note that many would insinuate the use of military force as a legitimate use of power, whereas any sort of non-military use of force or violence can be considered a form of terrorism" (65). This is relevant in that I make the argument that the police officers in the United States have historically and continue to exert military-style force on unarmed Black men and women. Despite its popular use in foreign matters, I intend to implicate "terror" as it can be understood in state-sanctioned action and domestic affairs.

Terror, in its definition and in its performance, is also a staple of my project. In performance discourse, Rustom Bharucha speaks to the interrelationship between

terror, performance, and theatre. Bharucha interrogates discourses of terror through the lens of performance constituting an intervention that was previously oriented toward security and defense, something distinctly different from performativity. Ultimately, he accomplishes the goal of extracting terror from terrorism by emphasizing the banality of everyday violences that have occurred around the world pre- and post- 9/11. My project continues this line of inquiry by making visible the corporeal knowledges that are invoked by terror. I am diverging from some of Bharucha's claims by pointing to the ways in which images of terror, specifically those of police brutality, can possibly be used for solidarity and coalition building through their foregrounding of acts of state sanctioned terrorism. My intent here is to connect this argument with the war that has been waged on Black bodies, as it appears in police brutality and the literal American Civil War.

These wars offer a touchstone for the sites in which terror is perpetuated and mitigated as I examine in each section of my project. In his article "Stages of Terror," Anthony Kubiak also discusses the relationship between theatre, performance, and terror, giving us a brief, but problematic historicization of these ideas. He notes, "the media do not merely 'need' and support terrorism, they construct it as a phenomenon, because American culture as a whole needs it, is fascinated by it, desires it, and utilizes it as a central impulse in its foreign and domestic policy" (4). In terms of my research, I fundamentally disagree with this in that his argument sets up the idea that America and its culture would "need" Black people to be killed[2]. He goes on to

[2] This, when paired when afro-pessimist thought is not an untenable idea. His argument could conceivable be supported by the notion that slavery and the accompanying relentless force and murder perpetuated against Black bodies set up a culture in which Black subjugation in necessary to thriving whiteness.

illuminate a history of terror, pain, and theatre. Not dissimilar to Bharucha, Kubiak takes up the claim that the dissemination of terror results in its decimation. This, I argue is fundamentally contradicted by the images and videos that are perpetuated in mediated sites, wherein terror is also dispersed by not being made invisible. Rather, I contend, it is made hypervisible. Contrary to my argument, Kubiak comments:

> Terrorism is now called "theatre" while we try to convince ourselves that what happens onstage can have anything to do with the real terrorisms of ruptured bodies and wounded minds. Finally, as the actual practice of terrorism is dissolved into the numbing repetitions of terror's mediated images, violence and terror *seem* to be everywhere, and theatre and terrorism become, ironically, *emptied* of terror. (6)

This backs up Bharucha's claim that in the reproduction of the event, terror disintegrates and is decimated in its mediation. In my research, I consistently work against this idea by arguing that as a direct result of the dispersal of objects or images of terror, one can also find signs of solidarity and resistance. At some level, arguments such as these necessitate a response, and my work answers that call.

A critical examination of terror is a necessary complement to my consideration of trauma. The effects of terror are made evident in trauma. Where trauma can also be utilized as a verb, I examine trauma as a noun, as the persistent psychic and corporeal residue of terror. Throughout my dissertation, I turn to discourses of trauma as a way to explore the life-altering effects of white supremacy but also particularly in the later sections, to consider processes of healing. Trauma studies suggest ways of considering contemporary and historical trauma and proposed methods of recovery

from it. As a discourse, it bridges multiple dialogues from the social sciences to cultural studies. At the forefront of this field are scholars such as Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth. Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* lays out a history of feminist trauma studies examining topics such as hysteria and rape. I am particularly interested in Herman's explicit and crucial breakdown of how trauma affects the human body and psyche. What is relevant to my project is the suggestion that trauma's relationship to the body is not disconnected; trauma is inscribed on the body, transgenerationally or immediately. She writes, "the salient characteristic of the traumatic event is its power to inspire helplessness and terror" (34). This, I will show, makes evident a clear connection to the range of post-traumatic feelings that enacted and legislated white supremacy elicits as can be found in *Father*, police brutality videos, and blues dancing. While cultural studies have attended to Black people as those living in a "state of exception," I link this to cultural traumatic events that result in Black bodies in a state of exceptional terror. It is my belief that out of these literal and social deaths is produced social life, such as that found in blues dancing. I add to this discourse by offering that blues is a productive process that has helped and continues to help people through centuries of continued trauma. As a dance, blues is a collective endeavor, a performed thing that surfaces trauma while reducing the chances of atomization. I present the notion that the effects of trauma are then performed both in blues music and in blues vernacular movement such as the Slow Drag.

The collaborative effort of blues actively works against symptoms of a traumatic state. Herman also breaks down trauma into specific states: "hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction." I am most interested in intrusion or the resulting

“indelible imprint of the traumatic moment” (Herman 35). This, Herman argues alongside Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry, is a place wherein traumatic memory is “not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (Herman 37). Rather, pain eludes language and subsequently produces a nonlinear genealogy of trauma. Herman argues that the reenactment of trauma can also be present. I contend that we not only replicate the traumatic event but also the mechanism with which we deal with the removed traumatic event, sometimes replacing one for another (39). In these distinct choreographies of violent intrusions, it becomes possible to find the residue that is trauma.

Consequently, throughout my project I put trauma into dialogue with theatre and performance studies. Specifically, my interests revolve around how the Black body performs and resists a post-traumatic state. It is here the work of scholars, such as Andrew Sofer, are helpful to my project. While trauma studies theorists argue about the difficulty of putting trauma into language, theatre and performance studies scholar Sofer perhaps picks up where Caruth and Herman left off, applying their theories to the performing body on stage. In his chapter, “Invisible Wounds: Rehearsing Trauma on the Contemporary Stage” in *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theatre and Performance*, Sofer positions himself in direct conversation with Caruth's theorization of trauma's inaccessibility by imagining it onstage. He states, "The body becomes an involuntary rehearsal-machine, performing variations of a lost event that is not so much distorted as *unavailable*" (121). Through a close reading of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, Sofer reveals the way that "rejecting linear

narrative and catharsis, Parks recasts the rehearsal of trauma-effects as what she calls "Rep & Rev (Repetition and Revision)" (127). I would like to extend his argument further by examining the role of repeated, revised, and reconstructed cultural memory as it appears in *Father Comes Home From the War*. Furthermore, in these multiple cultural products, I focus on the ways that performances of trauma can appear as "various forms of unconscious repetition [that] begin speaking through him or her symptomatically" (Sofer 121). According to my argument, these symptoms are attended to in Black cultural production as a way of meditating on and perhaps neutralizing pain and suffering.

To illuminate the historical and contemporary moments of social dance, one must look at scholars such as Katrina Gordon-Hazzard and Jacqui Malone and so for the purposes of my own project, it is worth pausing to examine their work in some detail. In her book, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*, Hazzard-Gordon tracks Black dance traditions as they are tied to place and space. She works her way from the confines of the slaveship to the ballrooms of Black elites. Looking at the jook joint, a makeshift place of dancing, drinking, and gambling, Hazzard-Gordon plots out the ways Black movement and the people in the early and mid-twentieth century that made spaces of reprieve and release for themselves. She recognizes such places as the jook joint, the afterhours bar, the honky-tonk, and the rent party as equally relevant as the more conventional sites of dance such as the nightclub or ballroom, both later primarily urban developments in African-American vernacular dance culture. Speaking to the erotic life of blues and other idiomatic dances, Hazzard-Gordon offers, "In an atmosphere of

increasing urban anonymity and pleasures of a good time, dance in the honky tonk became more directly associated with sensation and sexual coupling" (87). She later goes on to say, "the slow drag spread far and wide in the semiurban honky tonks known as barrelhouse joints," pointing to a rich history of blues dancing that is often understated in narratives of social dance formation (88). Hazzard-Gordon traces the development of dance as Black people moved from forced choreographies under the terror of slavery to the free dances in non-white dominated spaces. Her work is intrinsic to my project as it highlights the development of dances, such as blues, contextualizing the sites in which they were originally danced, which I agree are continued spaces of respite. The Slow Drag, as I conceptualize it, is simultaneously a site of trauma, solidarity, pleasure, and resistance.

A resurgence in Black vernacular dances occurred in the early 2000's that attempted to revitalized forms from the early twentieth century. Historically, blues idiom dances were cultivated in a historic moment informed by state sanctioned terror and urban mobility. Malone argues that institutional Black vernacular dance styles and rituals are culturally important, undervalued, and under-theorized. She falls in line with a larger tradition of Africanist dance scholars who understand that Black vernacular movement can be traced back to a multiplicity of African dance traditions. Malone defines vernacular dance as a dynamic process "adjusted to the needs of the present" (2). This argument of vernacular dance's inherent fluidity and dynamism is central to my argument that blues idiom dance, the Slow Drag, is a transhistorical gesture toward Black survival. Rather than reaching backward to further analyze the

Slow Drag, my projects attempts a contemporary diasporic and auto-ethnographic understanding of the trajectory of blues dancing, a place of home and respite.

In my discussion of the Black body in my project, I contend that its movement within the Slow Drag signals a place of rest from fighting in the "war," interchanging fighting for dancing and alienation for connection and community. The exertion and assertions of the moving Black body becomes an important point of reference for Malone as she combs through Black vernacular dance history in order to provide a context and relevance for contemporary Black movement, something that often seems to circle back on itself. Ultimately, Malone draws on preexisting scholarship arguing that an embodied knowledge embedded in dance gesture can be and has been historically transferred in social dance forums. In blues traditions, the dancer responds most visibly to the music but also the way in which they respond offers up critical information. Consequently, I contend that acts of continuous movement through times of ruptured rhythm can be read as a way of surviving in the United States.

As products of the erotic, blues music and dancing serve similar purposes and work in and on Black people in comparable ways. While there are limited resources that deal with the social dancing Black body, I turn to a larger field of blues music and dance discourse that centers on Black dancing bodies as performing subjects. Due to a significant lack of scholarship on blues and social dance, I will draw heavily from scholarship that is focused on blues music, particularly that of Black women. A general history of social dance has also been extensively covered in other works such as the anthology *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular*

Dance Reader edited by Julie Malnig however, little focus has been placed on blues idiom dances. The book approaches many forms of social and competitive dance by cultivating specific histories and entry points for each dance. Scholar Danielle Robinson seems to be responsible for large contributions to social dance scholarship. In her works, she looks at contemporary social dance as a phenomenon. This builds on existing scholarship that either examines social dance through periodization (such as 18th and 19th century dance) or through genre. In this way, I will continue to add to discourses on dance specifically as it relates to Black bodies.

Additionally, I discuss the affective potential of dance and movement as it occurs through connection to other bodies. I meditate on the the erotic, as a force, and its offering of insight into the almost indescribable moments of collaborative effervescence that can occur in dance. I will argue this by specifically employing Audre Lorde's erotic in order to articulate how blues dancers actively resist the constraints of normalized socialization, allowing their bodies through their sensuality to move in ways that disrupt white supremacist cis-normative imposed social order.

I add to the discourse of social dance formation by specifically honing in on the prevalence and contemporary resurgence of the Slow Drag with its intimate, sometimes depressed movements. I add to the aforementioned history a contemporary context and examine the resurgence of blues dancing culture and the principles of pleasure that operate in these spaces. Coming back to hooks' work, I also put the development of Slow Drag into conversation with ideas of homemaking insisting upon the concept that blues offers a space in which Black people establish home.

Secondly, I hope to establish a tradition of bringing disability studies

alongside women's and gender studies into conversation with performance studies in my auto-ethnographic examination of the Slow Drag. Employing Black feminist thought, I embrace, literally and figuratively, Black and white folks dancing the erotics of the diaspora.

The subjects of Black bodies, theatre, and social dancers as products of terror have been examined by multiple discourses but not necessarily alongside each other in a way that illuminates the interrelationship between these cultural products. This project will contribute to growing literature related to performance studies, trauma, and terror. It expands upon current literature that explores those sites of exception that are performed in everyday life. I contend that my project expands on the ways in which Black people have and will continue to actively engage in transformations of their everyday lives.

I would like to also pursue multiple genres of cultural production and performance including performances of surveillance, sharing media, theatre, and social dance, each as performatives that constitute shared diasporic Black identities. That is not to say that in order to "be Black" one has to have experienced or performed any of the events recounted in this dissertation, rather that there is a productive way in which each of these can be viewed as responses to trauma that also signal collective Black agency, resilience, and resistance. The beginning chapters focus on the experiences, lives, and deaths of Black people in the United States with an eye also on similarities in diasporic Black experiences. This applies particularly in the ways that Black bodies perform, as they are widely surveilled and policed. My methodology ranges from close readings of performances of terror and out of trauma

to my own practice-as-research meditating on the ways in which terror comes home, forcing those that it disproportionately impacts to move forward.

In this dissertation, I want to put into practice a methodology of nonlinear theoretical associations, working forward, backward, and sometimes and in between/through impactful moments of terror and trauma. This project gently pushes back against linearity or chronological thought a sthe framework of a history of traumatic Blackness is less constructively considered in terms of genealogy and more fruitfully thought of in what Deleuze and Guattari term a rhizomatic structure. They argue, "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7). Following this line of thinking, Anny Mokotow offers, "Rhizomatic choreography exhibits the fluidity of decentered bodies as they move through space changing through formlessness to form, from pattern to anti-pattern. The dramaturgical elements in choreographies respond to nonlinear and non-narrative structures, moving through themes that are implicit within the movement surface" (Mokotow). Consequently, I would like to employ a methodology of "rhizomatic choreography" to produce knowledge surrounding the Black cultural products that arise out of terror. If, as Hortense Spillers argues, that notions of Black kinship, gender, and social formation were indubitably altered as a result of the slave trade in the United States, it can also be argued that Blackness itself is resistant to or subsequently queers the notion of genealogy. That is to say, Black bodies in the United States cannot be neatly periodized and organized from slavery until today. For these reasons, this project examines a constellation of cultural objects that are not

necessarily offered in a chronological way and dances in and between these histories with rhizomatic choreography. Given this, the way that trauma can manifest itself is in ways that often obfuscate or destroy memory. It is in this way that I attempt to work in and through the ways of trauma, working against that which actively destroys kinship, language, and linearity.

This project will examine the contemporary moment in its relationship to a history of performing terror and trauma as well as surviving it. In my methodology, I hope to re-enact the often-cyclical choreography of performances of terror by non-linearly examining each cultural product in relation to the moments that have produced it and will continue to produce them. Methodologically though, I hope to avoid simplifying complex relationships between Black bodies and white supremacy into a dialectic.

Specifically, I interrogate Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts I, II, and III.* In my close reading of the script, I point to the ways in which the Black body attempts to return home, interrogating "home" and "the war" as contested sites that function trans-historically. My reading of the text will be supplemented by the 2016 performance of the play I saw performed at Roundhouse Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland. Drawing on this particular performance is complicated by the fact that time has passed since my viewing of the production and that I am only speaking to one specific staged version rather than multiple ones, which might yield different readings of the play's content. Secondly, this project will look at murders of Black men and women that have taken place within the last ten years, focusing on those that have some element of surveillance associated with them.

Finally, I address blues dancing, or the Slow Drag, as a place of respite from the "war," wherein the symptoms of Black struggle are manifest and treated. This section will provide some historical background of blues as a social dance but will be ethnographically limited to the dancers that I am able to meet and dance with nationally and internationally.

To better scaffold this project, I would like to introduce and outline some key concepts that are instrumental in my analysis of Black bodies, Blackness, terror, and trauma.

Disability Studies and Black Bodies

Disability studies and crip theory, which comes out of the former, greatly inform some of the analysis that is done in this project. Disability theorists acknowledge multiple models of disability, each of which has its strengths and appeals. Most popularly considered in the public sphere is the medical model of disability, which treats disabled bodies as pathology; bodies and their impairments are to be diagnosed and treated. A social model, proposed by scholars such as Jerome E. Bickenbach, considers the ways that disability is socially constructed much in the same way that other identifiers such as race are. This model attempts to rectify some of the failures of the medical model that does not take into account how disability is co-constructed in our societies. In her book, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Allison Kafer contributes a "political model." According to Kafer, this model destabilizes some of the binary oppositions constructed in the medical and social models; the notions of disabiled versus able-bodied or able-minded are more closely examined rather than

being taken for granted as static positions. Some disability theorists have historically found it useful to suss out categories of the purportedly antithetical notions of able-bodied/mindedness by proposing the terms impairment and disability. Impairment suggests a disablement that arises from environmental factors rather than social ones. Kafer argues against this saying that “drawing a hard line between impairment and disability, and having this distinction serve as the foundation of theorizing disability, makes it difficult to explore the ways in which notions of disability and able-bodiedness affect everyone, not just people with impairments" (Kafer 8). Kafer, among others, acknowledges the almost inevitable likelihood that at some point in our lives, each of us will experience some kind of disability. Kafer’s critical feminist work actively revives the body politc that is stripped in the medical model’s pathologization, seeing it as a “potential site for collective reimagining” (Kafer 9). For Kafer, this opens up opportunities to redefine how disabled bodies are understood spatio-temporally.

I deploy both disability studies and crip theory in my work to understand the ways disability functions as a visible material reality in relation to power. Robert McRuer introduces to us the term “compulsory able-bodiedness” building off queer scholarship that proposes that we inhabit a world of compulsory heterosexuality (McRuer 2). Moving away from a time of pathologization, McRuer offers:

> The relatively extended period, however, during which heterosexuality and able-bodiedness were wedded but invisible (and in need of embodied, visible, pathologized, and policed homosexualities and disabilities) eventually gave

way to our own period, in which both dominant identities and nonpathological marginal identities are more visible and even at some times spectacular. (2)

McRuer argues that the time for invisible minoritarian subjects has passed. He opens up a space wherein these people can be identified, understood, and uplifted. In his work, McRuer positions the disabled body alongside the queer one as he introduces the notion that "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwove with the system of cumpulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (370). It is in this way that acts of queering and cripping are decidedly similar in the ways that they critically interact with dominant narratives and systems of power.

Of consequence are also the ways that Black bodies are particularly marked through disability, impairment, and woundedness. Disability scholars such as Chris Bell, Sami Schalk, and C. Riley Snorton acknowledge the ways that race, specifically Blackness, intersects with disability, pointing out the whitewashing of disability studies. Bell points out in his critical essay "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal":

> As it stands, Disability Studies has a tenuous relationship with race and ethnicity: while the field readily acknowledges its debt to and inspiration by inquiries such as Black Studies, its efforts at addressing intersections between disability, race, and ethnicity are, at best, wanting. Disability Studies claims to examine the experiences of a vast number of disabled people, yet the form that representation takes is, far too often, a white one. (Bell 278)

At the time of its publishing in 2006, there were no scholars publishing books on the intersections of disability and race, much less disability and Blackness. Bell intervenes into the field by calling out the specific inadequacies and failures of the discourse. He went on to publish an anthology on Blackness and disability in 2011, closing some of the gaps in the studies.

With these ideas as foundation, I think through how the Black body is perpetually harmed and spectacularized through disability and how cultural producers such as Suzan-Lori Parks employ narrative prosthesis and acts of cripping, including cripping time. I will also discuss how such lenses centering disability and bodies can be used to understand relationships between Blackness, trauma, and terror.

Narrative Prosthesis

In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and Dependencies of Discourse*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder introduced the concept of "narrative prosthesis" into the field of disability studies. They argue that disability is frequently used literally or as metaphor as a way of moving literary plots forward. They write:

> Literary narratives support our appetites for the exotic by posing disability as an "alien" terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience. Literature borrows the potency of the lure of difference that a socially stigmatized condition provides. Yet the reliance upon disability in narrative rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency. (55)

What Mitchell and Snyder reveal are the ways that disabled bodies are used as props without acknowledging the material reality of existing as a marginalized body. This effect is one that is compounded by the case of Blackness in performance representation as I will explore in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home From the Wars: Parts I, II, and III*.

Cripping Time

Kafer also gives us a deep dive into what she calls "crip time" or "crip temporalities," which is also addressed by Elizabeth Freeman in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Kafer states that crip time is often assessed as a "a wry reference to the disability-related events that always seem to start late or to the disabled people who never seem to arrive anywhere on time." Superficially, this can be connected to what Black folks often refer to CP (Colored People) time which operates around 15 minutes later than expected. Kafer goes on to say that "operating on crip time, then, might be not only about a slower speed of movement but also about ableist barriers over which one has little to no control" (Kafer 26). Consequently, she asks us to take into account those social and political barriers that can inhibit bodies and distort the experience of time. Kafer puts forth a significant proposition relevant to my study of what it might mean to alter our understanding of time/body relationships, a concept reinforced by rhizomatic choreography. "Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled minds and bodies" (27). I will engage this reconsidered relationship between bodies and time as I discuss traumatic (and often

disabled) Black bodies, gesturing toward disabled futuralities. Among other things, this includes establishing a tradition of bringing disability studies alongside women and gender studies into conversation with performance studies in my auto-ethnographic examination of the Slow Drag. To me, the dance can be understood as a way that Black movement (or the lack thereof) in the dance, crips time. Kafer extends a kind of uncondescending care to disabled bodies that is often denied, taking into account how time might operates differently for marginalized and bodies as she gestures to the ways acknowledging this can render disabled bodies more visible in our collective sense of futurity. This, Kafer contends, is ultimately made possible by purposeful acts of often precarious coalition building.

Disability and Policing

This project will also address the area of disability and policing, honing in on the often unnoted events that harm or destroy Black disabled bodies. In her book, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*, Andrea J. Ritchie devotes an entire chapter to underscoring the hyperpolicing of Black disabled women. She cites multiple examples including Sandra Bland and Miriam Carey, wherein Black women's disabilities can be directly tied to their deaths at the hands of police. Unfortunately, even if their names are remembered, as the activists behind *Say Her Name* attempt to ensure, their disabilities are often not. Ritchie articulates how Black women are imagined to be strong and lack the femininity of their white counterparts. For this reason, they are not considered worth the same protections and their bodies are subject to police violence. More succinctly,

Black women (and men) with disabilities are disproportionately more susceptible to warfare waged by police who enact their terror with impunity.

The War on Black Bodies

A phrase that is frequently circulated in our cultural vernacular is the "theatre of war." I want to interrogate and complicate this notion of staging war. In this project, I choose to frame the relationship between actions motivated by the perpetuation of white supremacy against Black bodies as warfare. This is partially oriented around Parks's work and her highlighting of a man going to war, at war, and after the war. I am interested in highlighting these processes as they relate to Black people and cultural production. Though *In Father Comes Home From the Wars*, the protagonist Hero goes off with his master to enter the Civil War as a confederate; That particular war is not really being waged against him, but rather on behalf of him (which is certainly not to benefit him or his well-being). The war that he faces, I believe, is informed by the forceful continuation of white supremacy. This warfare is characterized by terroristic action enacted on Black bodies since the beginning of the slave trade. While it is easy to characterize the perpetrators of this war as white, I don't believe it is that simple. This is proven by events such as the murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012. Zimmerman was a man of mixed-heritage and for some, this muddied the narrative of white-on-Black crime. However, the war that I am looking at is much larger than interpersonal crime. Rather, these unceasing battles are a clearly orchestrated series of actions fed by the anger and fear of white supremacy, upon which the United States was established. One might conceive of this

war as being alternatingly perpetuated by (often legally) empowered vigilantes and militarized police forces.

I want to also point out that war, surveillance, terror, and violence are inextricably linked. Surveillance, terror, and violence are all means through which war operates; they enable war on bodies to take place. In this project, I point out the particular ways that these function in relation to my case studies. As Brown instructs us, surveillance of Black bodies goes back to the advent of the slave trade and chattel slavery. Black bodies were and continue to be constantly disproportionately surveilled for the purposes of strict control and state-sanctioned murder. And what is war but a often form of state-sanctioned terrorism?

Through this surveillance, Black bodies become not only victims but the site upon which battle is fought. That is to say, Black bodies have always served as a battleground, the stage, for a white supremacist war in America. I want to break down this war into parts to build the scaffolding of theory I will engage. First, I will focus on the warfare that is government backed and then explore that which is not explicitly condoned, but is enabled through (intentionally) failed juridical processes.

Government-backed War and Militarization

Perhaps one of the most obvious contemporary factors in the War on Black Bodies has been the militarization of the police. In his article, "Rise of the Warrior Cop," journalist Radley Balko sketches out the evolution of the militarized police force. He articulates how SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) teams were invented to counter the efforts of Black Panther activists and prepare responses to

events such as the Watts riots. He goes on to discuss the impact of SWAT training on the War on Drugs, an ongoing war that disproportionately punishes Black men and women in the U.S. In this progressive militarization of often improperly trained or undertrained police officers, Balko also mentions the authorization of "no knock raids" executed by federal and local governments, allowing agents and officers to violently enter a suspect's home and suppress potential resistance with tear gas and flash bang stun grenades (Balko). The effects of such tactics are evident in the 1969 police and FBI orchestrated assassinations of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, well-known Black Panther members, who were killed in their sleep ("Police Kill Two Members"). Later, as the War on Drugs expanded, so did the war on Black bodies with presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton expanding the number of police patrolling the streets. Of course other politions bought into this logic; notably, in a 1996 press conference, Hillary Clinton called for measures to address the "superpredators" roaming the streets "with no conscious, no empathy." She emphasized that these superpredators must be "brought to heal," employing the same language one might refer to a relationship between a trained domesticated dog and its master (1996). In this way, we can come to understand how through juridical processes and the purposeful militarization of the police that Black men and women have been murdered. Historically, we can point to laws aimed at the capture and containment of Black bodies, whether through Fugitive Slave Acts or the Thirteenth Amendment; laws in this country have been crafted to ensure that Black people are subdued, whether physically, mentally, and by any means necessary. As Achille Mbembé notes in his article, "Necropolitics", "War, after all, is as much a means of

achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill" (12). How that war is undertaken is extremely pertinent to my studies.

Vigilante and Guerrilla Warfare

The second type of warfare I would like to highlight is that which is extrajudicial. This guerilla warfare is conducted by motivated white people, frequently operating in mobs, who seek to carry out their own kind of justice. As Elizabeth Alexander points out, "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries" (78). While the mutilated bodies of Black boys and men such as Emmett Till and Rodney King are notable and well-known examples of such spectacles, there are also many women who have similarly been subjected to these extralegal processes of "justice." Victims such as seventeen-year-old Marie Scott and a pregnant Black woman named Mary Turner, were killed by swarms of angry white people attempting to set their world that they felt had been wronged, right again.

In her book *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship 1890-1930*, Korintha Mitchell takes on the expansive and riveting dramatic genre that captured the assaults on Black bodies. Much in line with my project, Mitchell writes about a cultural product that "was developed by African Americans aware of their communities' strategies for living with lynching—strategies that required a keen understanding of U.S. culture" (1). However, she is not just looking at lynchng dramas but also contextualizes how lynchings performed, in their time and in the larger cultural memory. She uses the language of theatre saying,

"when real-life lynchings became theatrical, whites literally used pieces of black bodies as props to perform their master status" (3). She offers that Black bodies in this theatre of war were used as stage prop(erties), summoning a long legacy of asserting white possession. Dealing with images of war, much like Susan Sontag did in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Mitchell comments:

> By treating the pictures [of lynchings] as records, we pretend that they offer an objective view, that they are less biased than the testimonies of those targeted by this terror. But the pictures are anything but objective. They represent a particular perspective, and they helped the mob to accomplish its work, during and long after the victim's murder. The photographs did not simply document violence; they very much perform(ed) it. (Mitchell 6)

Mitchell confirms that cultural products are not neutral and are very much informed by the perspective of the producer. As a counter to the narratives produced by these performances orchestrated by whites, Mitchell turns to lynching dramas that allowed Black women and men, to focus not on the tree or lightpole holding lifeless Black bodies but rather turn our gaze to the Black home, showing that the inhabitants were "targeted valued community members, not isolated brutes" (9). Mitchell goes on to say that white artifacts of a war on Black bodies alienated Black people and showed how whites historically and contemporarily harm Black people without fear of recourse. She states plainly, "In an environment where their extermination was said to make the nation safe, African Americans perceived the truth behind the facade—that lynching was really master/piece theater, designed to reinforce racial hierarchy" (Mitchell 17). Ultimately, lynchings and acts of white mob guerilla warfare were less

about performing white superiority rather than about punishing Black success, joy, and survival. Consequently, it was through these acts of war that white people in the United States insisted on a truth that would continue up to our contemporary moment; Black people now and have never truly been citizens in their home.

State of Exception

The term "state of exception" was first coined by Carl Schmitt in his work *La Dictature*. Later the term was taken up most notably by theorists Achille Mbembé and Giorgio Agamben. The state of exception is a kind of logical conclusion following Michel Foucault's ideas on biopolitics and sovereign power. Mbembé focuses on:

> those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations. Such figures of sovereignty are far from a piece of prodigious insanity or an expression of a rupture between the impulses and interests of the body and those of the mind. (Mbembé 14)

Mbembé is interested in the states of exception that are intentionally created by the sovereign power (government and law enforcement in this case). He cites Michel Foucault's notion of biopower in that he understands the sovereign to be those that are capable of making the decisions of who "to make live and let die" (241). Agamben points out that, "The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order" (17). This means

that in order to declare the law, in some ways you become beyond the law. Agamben goes on to say:

> The exception is a kind of exclusion. What is excluded from the general rule is an individual case. But the most proper characteristic of the exception is that what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without relation to the rule. On the contrary, what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule's suspension. (18)

Agamben argues here that while exception sounds exceptional, it is not as it falls within the purview of the law and always functions in relation to the sovereign government who intentionally created it. Consequently, "The state of exception is thus not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension" (18). As this project thinks through bodies as homes, it seems easy to extend the logic of the sovereign and the exception to the domestic sphere. To me, this is the deep conversation that occurs on the Southern porch; it is deemed inappropriate for both inside and outside but its outside-ness only falls in the relation to the perspective of the house. This somewhat liminal space operates as a domestic site of exception. Agamben perhaps best summarizes the shaping relationship between rule and exception saying, "The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule" (18). Thus, Agamaben succinctly summarizes a complex interrelationship. In this project, the rule is created by those that enforce the logic of white supremacy, placing people who kill

with impunity in the category of human and the Black non-subjects that they murder in a state of exception.

Mbembé points to the plantation as one of the earliest spaces of exception. He states:

> If the relations between life and death, the politics of cruelty, and the symbolics of profanity are blurred in the plantation system, it is notably in the colony and under the apartheid regime that there comes into being a peculiar terror formation I will now turn to. The most original feature of this terror formation is its concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege. Crucial to this concatenation is, once again, race. (38)

Serving my project, this is useful in that he identifies a clear relationship between states of exception and terror. It is out of the actions of a terrorizing sovereign government or institution that Black states of exception have been formed and protected. To this end, it could be argued that diasporic Black people, descendents of stolen and traded people, have always lived in a space of exception. Mbembé reveals that "the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a "home," loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)" (Mbembé 21). These losses have only been replicated and expanded over time. I want to focus on this "loss of home" and its multivalence in the ways that it has been challenged, destroyed, and displaced in Black life. To his point, the body and home are not distinctly separate entities as the Black body operates as home to intergenerational trauma and terror.

Agamben also theorizes on the ideas of "bare life" and the "homo sacer." The term "bare life" came into being through the work of Walter Benjamin who defines it as "the bearer of the link between violence and the law" (Agamben 42). The state of exception includes bare life and is excluded from the judicial order. He defines the homo sacer or "sacred man" as he "who may be killed and not yet sacrificed" (12). Consequently, the homo sacer is one whose life is not valued and can be killed with impunity. These entities are both important in that they place bodies in relation to the governing sovereign and its assertion of violent power. Agamben concludes that: "Sovereign violence is in truth founded not on a pact but on the exclusive inclusion of bare life in the state" (64). Both these concepts provide a framework for considering the biopolitical state of disenfranchised people which characterizes the status Black people in the United States.

As a site of contrast, I want to also foreground Black scholarship responding to these terms and larger schools of thought that I have summarized. In his book, *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Alexander Weheliye offers a counterargument to Agamben's notions of barelife and Foucault's biopolitics. He states:

> Bare life and biopolitics discourse not only misconstrues how profoundly race and racism shape the modern idea of the human, it also overlooks or perfunctorily writes off theorizations of race, subjection, and humanity found in black and ethnic studies, allowing bare life and biopolitics discourse to imagine an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization. The idea of racializing assemblages, in contrast, construes race not as a biological or

> cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite humans, and nonhumans. (Weheliye 4)

He also says that "concepts of bare life and biopolitics… are in dire need of recalibration if we want to understand the workings of and abolish our extremely uneven global power structures" (Weheliye 1). This falls in line with many Black scholars and ethnic studies thinkers that believe that white scholarship fails to serve the needs, history, and culture of Black people. Weheliye argues that we should attempt to conceive of race and racialization as "sociopolitcal processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body" (5). Recognizing this as a valid conception of how we can theorize about Blackness, in this project, I fall more in line with the ideas of Agamben, Mbembé, and Foucault. While race and racism is mentioned, but not necessarily foregrounded, I believe that just as Jews during the Holocaust can be considered to be existing in a state of exception, so can we consider the same for Black people beginning when they were stolen from the African continent and brought to America. As I will show, the treatment of Black people in this country exposes the paradoxes of the states of exception that Agamben discusses. We are simultaneously valued for our labor and cultural contributions while also being perpetually stripped of citizenship and access to due process.

In writing about police brutality videos and how souveillance performs and circulates on the internet, I forced myself to watch videos of Black suffering and death. As more videos appear to attest to the continuation of the public lynching, the Black people, bodies, stories, and circumstances begin to blur together. On social

media, the videos and mention of them is inescapable. It feels like I am constantly living in this post-9/11 moment where I stare at the television only to watch the planes fly into the towers. Over and over again. In game studies, scholar Olli Tapio Leino refers to this as a "death loop," a bug in the gameplay, an Agamben state of perpetual exception. In this project, I will demonstrate how the spectacle of Black pain in death loops can serve multiple purposes and that the exposure to such pain has been a site from which Black people have grown and created beautiful cultural products

Blackpain

In her book *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, Debra Walker King examines how historically Black bodies have been considered incapable of feeling pain while paradoxically their bodies have purportedly necessitated painful discipline in the racist cultural imaginary. This idea is one that is visible even in the production of 18th and 19th century children's toys featuring Black bodies with which white children bestow upon their own kind of juvenile terror[3]. This is to say, states of enacting Black terror often contains contradictory arguments; Blacks do not feel pain so they must be brutally beaten and they are beaten as to be disciplined by pain (which according to established logic, they can't feel). It is in this way that she illuminates how the white supremacist imagination is very capable of contradiction. Though, King demonstrates the exploitation of spectacles of Black torment are not

[3] See Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights.*

meant to actually acknowledge the interiority of black suffering She argues that black bodies subject to pain are often susceptible to becoming visible phenomenological spectacles rather than sites of empathy. To counter this, King deliberately focuses on what she terms "blackpain" or a transhistorical suffering that is characterized by its "metonymic function as a sign of social, economic, and cultural woundedness" (King 17). King posits the Black body in relation to a national history of domestic terror and the lack of acknowledgement of Black suffering, drawing heavily from the phenomenology of pain that is explored by theorist Elaine Scarry.

These kinds of woundedness are identifiable in the distribution of spectacles of pain to enforce terror and re-inscribe trauma but perhaps also to interpellate viewers into being subjects of solidarity. King notes that Black bodies have become "cultural capital," used to make transactions possible. These transactions are not limited to the plantation, rather King talks about the ways in which "American popular culture treats images of black bodies in pain as symbolic experiences" (32). This is not dissimilar to my previous discussion of narrative prosthesis, with painful shared Black experiences standing in for impairment.[4] What King advocates for is a change in cultural production stating, "we must seek out and speak out against cultural fields of conflict in which black bodies are inscribed with pain while being stripped of subjectivity" (King 21). This, of course, applies to the mediums that have been conducive to denying agency to Black people and the cultural products that reinforced this movement. Like many scholars, King exposes the complexity of a contemporary moment by returning to the past. She says, "history, even contested

[4] Though, as I will show, these two are not mutually exclusive of each other with countering discourses discussing the overlap between Blackness and disability.

history, is always present in the body. It is inescapable and, as such, forces black people to become inextricably linked to or linked with historical black pain" (33). Thus, she is arguing that Black people are always already connected to suffering. She writes that "the black body is always a memorial to African and African American historical pain." It is this consideration of Black bodies and Black experience, I believe, that lends itself to an argument that can clearly fall in line with the scholarly efforts of afro-pessimists that emerged out of discussions of Black social death (King 6).

Social Death and Afro-Pessimism

The concept of social death is one that came about through the scholarship of Orlando Patterson. In his book *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson establishes the nature of slavery and its relationship to power. According to him, the condition of slavery is less about the labor that is produced. Rather, he emphasizes the means by which it occurs, that is violent power, it occurs. To him, slavery was an endeavor of violent social control (3). Patterson categorizes slavery according to three distinct features of coercion: an enforced powerlessness, physical and cultural removal from one's homeland or what he calls "natal alienation," and denial of honor or dignity (10). These concepts are important as they lay the foundation for Patterson's formulation of the slave's social death.

Patterson argues that for a slave, there are two types of social death, intrusive and extrusive. Intrusive social death is a slave that is a "permanent enemy on the inside," who is not a part of the community as they hasten from a "hostile, alien

culture" (39). On the other hand, extrusive social death occurs when "the dominant image of the slave was that of an insider who had fallen" which he offers is a person that no longer fulfilled the necessary requirements of their community" (41). More succinctly, Patterson summarized that "The one fell because he was the enemy, the other became the enemy because he had fallen" (44). Both categories are characterized by the violent means of acquisition of slave bodies. Patterson merges his theory about the nature of slavery and his description of social death when he says:

> Institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power. It was in this too that the master's authority rested. For it was he who in a godlike manner mediated between the socially dead and the socially alive. (46)

He goes on to posit the question of a slave's ontology without the presence of a master, a person he considers to be mostly devoid of the benefits of personhood. He remarks on the liminality of the slave and a refusal for them to be labeled as "outcaste," when in reality, like the homo sacer, they exist very much within an established order (48).

Though Patterson and his work are a cultural theorist's touchstone, he is not exempt from justifiable criticism, some of which has emerged from afro-pessimistic scholars. Perhaps most notably, Jared Sexton takes Patterson to task in his article, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." Sexton acknowledges how crucial Patterson's work is to Black discourse and yet is deeply critical of some of his conclusions. First, he takes issue with some of Patterson's

assertions regarding slavery in the United States writing that Patterson is not capable of reorienting his work "from the perspective of the dominated." Yet, he nonetheless takes the liberty of speaking about the dominated, and the result is travesty" (Sexton 19). Consequently, Patterson is faulted for some of the things he deduces from this perspective. Sexton comments specifically on Patterson's remarks regarding Black cultural heritage as "an instance of the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of analysis[5]" (20).

Sexton not only closely aims his criticism toward Patterson but also takes to task those that draw meaning from his work. To Sexton, the idea of social death is not a universally widespread experience. Regarding the notion of social death he says, "It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel. That is, there are problems in the formulation of the relation of power from which slavery arises and there are problems in the formulation of the relation of this relation of power to other relations of power" (21). Over the course of this project, I will engage with this idea and the possibility that social death is a concept that can travel through time attached to Black bodies and experiences in the afterlife of slavery. Ultimately, in his discussion of the fact of Blackness, distinguished from Black life, concludes that "black life is *lived* in social *death*" (29). This leads us to a school of thought known as afro-pessimism.

Afro-Pessimists, a moniker termed by cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman, is an intellectual endeavor forged by scholars such as Hartman, Sexton, and Fred B.

[5] In a fascinating and somewhat disturbing comment in a *New Republic* book review, Patterson disparages the cultural lives and legacies of enslaved people saying "It was not a heritage to be passed on. Like their moral compromises, this was a social adaptation with no potential for change, a total adjustment to the demands of plantation life and the authoritarian dictates of the masters." Counter to the arguments I put forth in this work, he goes on to add that "There is no intrinsic value in survival, no virtue in the reflexes of the cornered rat" ("The Peculiar Institution Again").

Wilderson III. In his book, *Red, White, and Black Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Wilderson discusses the fairly recent plight of afro-pessimist scholars. He, like other scholars, is clearly offering a response to Patterson. Wilderson writes, "Violence is at the heart of power" (247). It is that violence and not the fact of labor that made slavery into what it was creating a distinction between slave and human.

The distinction that afro-pessimism makes is important in that it problematizes any positive affirmation of identity as non-Black categories are defined against the Blackness they are not (Wilderson 9-10). Simply put, afro-pessimists discuss Blackness in the language of negation with it "not being" white. Wilderson offers regarding Blackness that, "Afro-Pessimism theorizes it as a position of accumulation and fungibility; that is, as condition—or relation—of ontological death." To go even further, "the Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field...is structured by anti-Black solidarity" (58). This world of anti-Black sentiment is one that will be explored over the course of this project.

Sexton also highlights what afro-pessimism is not. "Black optimism is not the negation of the negation that is afro-pessimism, just as black social life does not negate black social death by inhabiting it and vitalizing it. A living death is as much a death as it is a living" (Sexton 28). Here, it is clear how he builds off of Patterson, suggesting that the social death of enslaved Black folks simultaneously constituted their social lives. He says also, "Blackness is not the pathogen in the afro-pessimist imagination and it is a wonder how one could read it so even as it is no wonder at all. No, blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is" (Sexton 31). He

claims, “The most radical negation of the antiblack world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world” (37). Though the language of afro-pessimism is often filled with negation, the social lives of Black folks is not being negated. Rather, Sexton and other afro-pessimists concur that it is always already function in relation to violent force and death.

I am deeply ambivalent about these claims although they put forth critical ideas regarding the formation of Blackness in the United States. That is to say, my work peers at the ways in which social life comes out of a legacy of social death and inherently questions whether social death as a concept is constrained to slavery. I am interested, however, in how Black folks have attempted to and succeeded at living lives compelled by the “quest for dignity” in the wake of social death. In his footnotes of his article, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” Sexton briefly entertains a discussion between two scholars and their takes on the author of *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates. They go back and forth on Coates’ state of pessimism. Yet, even in their attempt to criticize it, they emphasize the fungibility and adaptive nature of Blackness. Coates’, like other afro-pessimist is called a fatalist in that he holds very little, if any, space for Black hope in the wake of slavery. However, what I think is offered in lieu of hope is a lack of despair, and I attempt to show, is how this lack of despair in a country where Black people continue to be lynched in 2020, we are still propelled forward to create, to move, to build coalitions, and to simply take up space where we know we were never intended to be. Consequently, this project attempts to hold space for such things as joy, pleasure, and the erotic, as much as it recognizes the anguish that often works counter to it.

Though it is steeped in the trauma, terror, and violences enacted on Black bodies, this project is oriented toward resistance and the potential for liberation in these Black cultural products. That notion of liberation is complicated though by the fact that we are constantly living in a state of perpetuated white supremacy that enacts terror on our bodies. In this project, I will show how through the lens of performance, Black people have found ways of surviving, resisting, and locating joy in the midst of almost ceaseless pain.

Chapter 2: Mythologies of Traumatic Black Masculinities: Examining Blackpain in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts I, II, and III*

Mark it. The small agricultural Davie County borders the larger city of Winston Salem, North Carolina to its east. The county once housed multiple functioning plantations, many of which are preserved as cultural landmarks, and now are sites for walking dogs and hosting weddings punctuated by nostalgic Southern charm rather than the bodies of slaves. Driving to my home in the county from Winston until 2006, two major bridges on I-40 had to be crossed. One, over the Yadkin River and the second over cleared farm acreage accented with a looming confederate battle flag. One might say it welcomes you into the county. Of course, I use "welcome" liberally as the intent was not to welcome but rather to allegedly stave off those who attempted to make the small, predominantly white[6] town of Advance into a suburb of the greater Winston-Salem area. Eventually, the land was sold and with little legible resistance, the flag came down to make way for soccer fields. It was only after the flag was removed and out of a weird nostalgia for an artifact I hated, I began to consider my own complicity in what this flag represented to my family, my community, and to me.

Mark it. On June 27th, 2015, a Black woman named Bree Newsome scales a flagpole at the South Carolina Statehouse in Columbia to take down the confederate flag that has flown daily. In the organized removal of the prominent display,

[6] According to 2014 data, the county Advance resides in is 90.4% white and 6.5% Black.

Newsome's defiant act dredges up a legacy of institutional racism, oppression, and narratives of complicity. While some acknowledge the act as long overdue, I hear others repeat one of the favorite refrains of those contesting the racist implications of the confederate battle flag; it represents "history, not hate."

"Mark it," instructs the chorus member hailing other characters and audiences alike. "Mark it" calls us forth as simultaneous witnesses, collaborators, and conspirators of histories, of the slavery "mark-it" place. This phrase underscores moments of Suzan-Lori Parks's 2015 play, *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts I, II, and II.* Watching the epic play during its 2016 regional premier at the Roundhouse Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, I quickly realize I have been interpellated and once again forced to consider my ancestors' and my own residing place and culpability in Civil War narratives. Attempting to think through the Black body as a traumatic artifact of slavery and war, I question whose trauma and histories are made legible and how *Father* performs and refutes narratives of complicit Black slaves and soldiers. Set in 1862 in the Southern United States during the Civil War, the triptych drama follows the enslaved character Hero as he grapples with a multiplicity of life-altering decisions, each of which further obfuscates his ability to enact freedom and agency before, during, and after he serves in the war alongside his master. I argue the play acts as a historiographic intervention into the historicization of traumatized, ambivalent slaves and Black confederate soldiers. In challenging the way that these histories have suspended agency, Parks skillfully employs marked histories, marked words, and marked bodies.

If individual slave and Black confederate histories serve as the archive, then *Father* performs as the repertoire of contested narratives. In this way, the words and ideas that comprise Black male bodies will be read across those that appear in Parks's play, highlighting the specific ways they articulate notions of freedom juxtaposed with markedness. It is important to also recognize that I am closely reading the text of *Father* supplemented by my own viewings of the Roundhouse Theatre productions. The text, as well as the production, performs anachronisms that allow for the collapsing of 18th and 19th century America into the present political moment. Words and movements in the play traverse the spatio-temporal boundaries that are often assumed to be impermeable. Through the rhizomatic choreography that Parks generates, Blackness, with its ancestors and progenitors, concretely emerges from the Black hole in Black genealogy that slavery intended to create. Inserting anachronistic gestures such as the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" sign, Parks disentangles notions of ownership and freedom as they relate the marked Black body.

In this chapter, I set forth to recognize the potential for underscoring ways of knowing about Black slaves and confederates that can be read through the text and production of Parks's play which elucidate rather than revoke the agency of Black bodies. For performance theorist Diana Taylor, the function of performance is to enable "vital acts of transfer," which when repeated, transfers "social knowledge, memory, and sense of identity" (3). Central to this consideration of Parks's work are the concepts that Parks shows us regarding how Black bodies commit these "vital acts." Taylor argues, "We learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices. Performance, for me, functions as

episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis" (Taylor xvi). If this is so, then how can *Father* represent a kind of knowledge production that has been made in the form of historical archive and continues to emerge as repertoire? Using Taylor's logic of archives and repertoire, which are always already dissolving into each other in the behaviors and bodies that produce knowledge, Suzan-Lori Parks interrogates history and historicization by representing it onstage. Put simply, Parks imagines and shows us the "Mark it" place, a site of history and also one that is always indicted by the present moment.

Marked Histories: Greek Heroes

In *Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts I, II, and III* , Parks does work on history and bodies through acts of reclamation and explicit efforts to, as Parks puts it, "make the bones sing" ("Possessions" 4). Parks also frequently "marks it," that "it" being histories, words, and bodies. To demonstrate how Parks considers markedness, that is to say traumatic histories, I will provide an analysis and close reading of the texts to reveal the ways in which Parks deals with cultural and political narratives through intertexual acts of queering these histories and traditions. Rather than beginning at the advent of the slave trade, Parks grabs ahold of subjects from Greek epic poetry. In particular, she utilizes names and themes from *The Odyssey* to serve as a vehicle for her narrative of Black slaves.

Father Comes Home From the Wars Part I begins with Hero, a slave in 1862, struggling to decide whether to enter the war alongside his master or stay home and face uncertain consequences. After showing Hero resolve to join his master to fight in

the Civil War, *Part II* features Hero as a body servant alongside the Colonel, lost in the Southern wilderness after they have captured an injured Union officer. *Part III* details the return of Hero—now called Ulysses—and his dog to their home a year later and his attempt to reconcile his decisions and relationships, old and new.

Of course, this story parallels in some ways and deviates in others from Homer's epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, tracing Ulysses' path as he goes through the Trojan War. He then strives to return home to Ithaca whereas Parks's Hero wants to return home to the plantation. Buried in the expanse of epic poetry and drama, both characters are seemingly motivated to return to their homes and the women they left behind, Penny and Penelope. It is in this vein, I will articulate how in Parks's acts of queering, that is a performative action of making cultural objects strange and recovering history, Parks crafts her work around the genre of the epic mode. In this section, I will focus on the cultural traditions of orality, mythic histories, and episodic stories while delving into some of the convergences and divergences of Parks's and Homer's works. I am underscoring this particular case of intertexuality because it demonstrates how exactly Parks queers and uses Homer's hero as a vehicle for navigating the treacherous, complicated, but necessary narratives of slave life. Parks dramatically piggybacks off an established and canonical work in order to create and manipulate the points of reference we willingly trust. Parks capitalizes on this trust and allows queered historicized subjects to emerge. She works playfully but poignantly with mythic storytelling we often assume to be dominated by dead white men.

Many things differentiate the telling mythology of *The Odyssey* from the queering of history that Parks does. Greek traditions of mythmaking were heavily based on orality and the narrator's ability to verbally pass down epic poetry. Phillip Zarrilli notes, "When spoken words are committed to writing, they are translated into a manual/spatial mode of communication that necessarily restructures thought." He goes on to say, "While primary oral communication is to some degree analytic in that it breaks things down into component units, in contrast, written records 'fix' words" (17). Plainly stated, the nature of orality invokes story-making that is distinctly different when it is written down. One must then consider who is empowered to do the "fixing." In Homer's case, the history being written is centered on the victors, while Parks complicates that notion. The trajectory of Homer's work and Parks's work are distinctly different. Homer's transitions from an oral tradition to being solidified into the written word, while the fact that *Father* is a performed work transfers it from being a written drama to spoken production. Parks centers her work around embodiment. She says: "Language is a physical act. It's something which involves your entire body-- not just your head. Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests--and through digesting creates a performance onstage" ("Elements of Style" 11). Parks consequently traffics in a tradition of myth-making, where the word is made flesh in that its transferal hinges on the material acting body. Mythologies give stories a weight and legitimacy of expansiveness, both of which characteristic of an epic poem; this makes its themes feel transhistorical. In contrast, Parks's play focuses less on the universal and more on the particulars inside of the

epic drama, allowing space for transhistorical gestures such as the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" movement Hero makes.

One of the elements of the epic mode is the part myth, part historical narrative that is articulated by the aristocracy. Zarrilli offers:

> In the eighth and ninth centuries, BCE epic bards like Homer 'recited or sang' their own monologic versions of lengthy stories of the gods and epic heroes of bygone eras, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Their performances gave life to the deeds of a heroic aristocracy, populating a murky, distant, quasi-mythic, quasi-historical past. (58)

Parks queers this tradition by telling the story from the bottom up instead of focusing attention on the higher ups. While *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* prominently feature authoritative bodies, Parks moves the story forward by drawing precise attention to the lifeworld of the protagonist Black slave, Hero, and the other slaves that live on the Colonel's plantation. This is significant in that in her interrogation of history, she reorients the narrative of slavery from those who enslaved to those that were enslaved. In her imagining of actual history, Parks generates a mythic epic drama that subverts notions of monolithic cultural producers.

Parks also touches upon another quality of epic poetry; it has an episodic nature "wherein one lives in the here and now" and the orator picks and chooses what parts of the story are told (Zarrilli 5). While in *Father,* we are not blessed with a narrator, we do have two distinct choruses of slaves in Parts *I* and *III* who, characteristic of Greek theatre, encourage the plot to progress and for characters such as Homer and Hero to make decisions, whether it be to run away or go to the war.

Erich Auerbach notes, “The Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning” (13). Such is not the case with Parks’s multivalent, multi-gesturing play. Unlike *The Odyssey*, *Father* is “fraught with background” in that there is suspense generated around what has happened and what will happened despite the fact that we know that father will indeed return home from the war (Auerbach 15). In *Father*, we are given clear snapshots of Hero/Ulysses’ life and his journey home. Parks plays with the episodic nature of epic drama by building in history and exposition. This is apparent in *Part I* when Homer, a jilted fellow slave, reveals he has found out that Hero has once been promised freedom before the start of the war when in a not-so-heroic move, he once gave up Homer to the master divulging Homer’s plot to run away. Legend, Auerbach maintains:

> arranges its material in a simple and straightforward way; it detaches it from its contemporary historical context, so that the latter will not confuse it; it knows only clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives and the continuity of whose feelings and actions remains uninterrupted. (19)

This is not so in *Father* as Hero is neither a clear hero nor victim. The play is neither removed from a historical archive nor the contemporary moment. Rather, it revises and reinscribes on the bodies of the characters.

Parks also toys with the developmental arc of an ideal epic hero. Parks gives us the period between the Civil War and emancipation as points of reference to understand how time operates and signals the shifts in relationships and trajectories for the characters on and off the plantation. Auerbach states that:

> So little are the Homeric heroes presented as developing or having developed, that most of them--Nestor, Agamemnon, Achilles--appear to be of an age fixed from the very first. Even Odysseus, in whose case the long lapse of time and the many events that occurred offer so much opportunity for biographical development, shows nothing of it. Odysseus on his return is exactly as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier. (17)

Strategically deploying her much used repetition with revision, Parks repeats this epic narrative slightly changing the progression of the character. In the same way that Odysseus does not seem to have a character arc, Parks's Ulysses changes little, but instead shows the different facets of his moral character, or lack thereof. He is still a man trifling enough to sell out a fellow slave, but is capable of freeing a Black Union soldier. Yet still, he comes home to his equally adulterous wife only to announce that he has taken another one.

In their meditation on Homer's *Odyssey*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer discuss the relationship between Odysseus and the women he interacts with and is questionably bound to. "Marriage represents not only the account balancing order of the living but also solidarity and steadfastness in the face of death" (59). Of course, while his wife waits for him in Ithaca, Odysseus is seduced (and at one point held captive) by the Goddess Circe and the nymph Calypso.

Similarly, Parks's Hero clearly violates the boundaries of his union with Penny by taking on another relationship. While they both cheat, Odysseus at least has the common decency to not announce he is bringing one of his lovers home with him (59).

Despite their indiscretions, home is where their sights are set. Adorno and Horkheimer comment, "Homeland is a state of having escaped" (61). Home is a place of return, but even in the title, Parks marks that word with the residue of trauma by signaling a direct relationship between the juxtaposing words "home" and "war." Home should serve as a safe place. But as stolen people, there is always already to a degree, a state of perpetual homelessness that is the product of inhabiting a state of exception. Odysseus navigates his way toward home by manipulating the multivalent nature of his name; he linguistically signals himself as both "hero" and "nobody," each of which guide him. In contrast, Hero transitions to considering a Black future as an unowned, worthless Nobody, to emerging home as Ulysses, an established Somebody. Parks distributes marked names to her Black characters, sometimes allowing them to fall in line with their Homeric counterpoints and at other times gifting us with sites of meaningful traumatic departure.

What I want to underscore here are the ways Parks, unlike in the epic tradition, allows Hero/Ulysses to not remain static and changeless but rather to shift his position back and forth over the course of the play. Her characters assert a type of elasticity that is missing from epic dramas and this allows us to imagine the multiplicity of unknown "heroes" that possibly emerged during the actual war. By positioning her characters to break away from tradition, Parks opens us up to queer Black futures emerging from traumatic marked pasts.

It is interesting to also look closely how not only Parks queers or exposes the monopolizing white supremacist, patriarchal cultural traditions surrounding Ulysses but also her arrangement of her narrative along and against Homer's work in

particular. There are a multitude of parallels: Ulysses' wife Penny/Penelope, the diligent faithful dog, Achilles/Boss-Master, among other examples. Of note, there are the moments where Parks makes unexpected changes to the hero-coming-home narrative. For instance, Homer's Ulysses' dog, Argos, dies upon his master's arrival whereas Oddsee, an embodied by human character, reveals such information as Penny's pregnancy and repeatedly holds all in suspense as he reveals that Hero has not died in the war and is returning home. However, in some way, each dog announces their owner's return to unsure circumstances.

Given this, I offer that Parks articulates a queer praxis, where talking dogs are intuitive and prophets of the critical information that will put to rest the fears (the slaves and the audiences) that we will be deceived and Hero is dead and will never return to a home that has socially shifted in his absence. Catherine J. Nash and Kath Brown draw attention to concept that "Queer scholarship, then, in its contemporary form is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted 'stabilities' in our social lives" (7). The forces of domination ensure that there is no insured stability on the plantation and Parks fearlessly directs our attention to the contradictions of wanting to return and make home in the place that you were virtually expelled from as a pariah. But then again, being an emancipated man new to the concept of self-possession that has emerged from a state of Nobodiedness, where would he even go? Home is a marked word that for many people in the United States who are attuned to land inhabited by their disenfranchised ancestors. Though the rhizomatic choreographies that have been forged by me and my forebears is distinct and resist a monolith Black Experience, I am certain that for those of us whose bodies

bear the literal genetic markers of trauma by virtue of our collective multigenerational relationship to terror from the abduction of Africans, the stifling degenerative space of the slaveship hold, and the perpetually displacing homes constructed on plantations, our connection to an elusive marked home is frequently shared.

Parks's cultural product also works on the role and threat of slavery in comparison to Homer's works through moments of queering. Diane Thompson maintains that with *The Odyssey*:

> back home at the palace their women, dependents, slaves and treasures are waiting, vulnerable, never sufficiently protected. Many stories in the *Odyssey* affirm the fragility of the good life in a comfortable palace. People who stay home may be captured by pirates and sold into slavery; people who travel are also constantly vulnerable to being seized and sold into slavery. This is not a secure situation from without or from within. (69-70)

For those who remain home, the threat of being sold into slavery is palpable in both cases though the majority of figures in *Father* are already slaves. The possibility of their transfer being initiated by the death of their master is an imminent source of terror. Consequently, this is the crux of Hero's choice whether to go to war in *Part I*. He is tortured by the decision, at one point he even decides to cut off his own foot to spare the other slaves from the master's anger. Thompson's argument about capture is also relevant as Black people were subject to anti-emancipatory orders such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 if they were found out to be runaways or interpreted as such. It is through the violence of slavery and the claim to minoritarian bodies that

Parks uncannily makes the connections between the Trojan War and the Civil war evident.

Marked Histories: Slaves and Soldiers

Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts 1, 2, and 3 intervenes into a complex history of Black confederates who fought and died in the Civil War. While some historians attempt to shed light on the contributions and impact of Black confederate soldiers, the historical narrative of their lives and situatedness in it complicates their decision (be it real or not) to fight for the people who enslaved them. Theatre historian Odai Johnson argues, "If terrorism was the harsh voice of empire, equally disturbing was the silence of the vanquished, the survivors whose unhistoried voices were left mute in the wake of conquest" (Johnson 13). In the same way that Johnson views silences of history as opportunities to recover lost voices, I invite us to understand the ways Parks works a contested history with marked silences and contradictory voices to restore agency to Black bodies. Drawing from multiple histories of bondspeople and Black confederate soldiers, I show how these histories are juxtaposed with the cultural imagination and how Parks's characters embody these marked histories.

The narratives of Black confederates are popularly invoked in order to argue that the Civil War was one that was fought for "states' rights" rather than to uphold slavery. Inevitably, the conclusion leads back to states' rights to retain slaves and uphold their contested economy built on stolen, captive, Black bodies. A Virginia textbook recently included reference to "thousands of black confederate soldiers" who fought in the Civil War (Sieff). The number is not just a site of contestation but it

is also a place of meaning-making regarding the real repercussions of how such an assertion operates in the cultural imaginary. While groups such as Sons of Confederate Veterans argue for a history that includes "thousands" of Black soldiers fighting for the confederacy, one might also wonder if they would so willingly accept the descendants of their grandfathers' body servants into their numbers. These archives are constructed to serve the records of those who have historically profited from their orchestration within without fully realizing how they might lend themselves to a contemporary repertoire. Parks demonstrates how a contested history is made evident in a contested present.

In order to fully take into account the marked history that Parks reproduces, one must begin with the multiplicity of relationships and kinships that Parks constructs. The affective potential of these relationships between slaves, as well as slave and master, carries the weight of the narrative and also the weight of history. In his book, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African-American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South*, historian Dylan Penningroth indicates how Black property reflected social relationships in the United States during the nineteenth century. He presents the argument that, "Property ownership brought Black culture closer to the individualism and nuclear family structure of European Americans, values and practices that better prepared Blacks for the new modalities of freedom than did the old 'community' of the slave quarters" (7). He offers that in order to truly understand the rich and complex lives of slaves, scholars must look outside of the traditionally interrogated Black-white relationships to conceive of the dynamic social lives of Black people.

In *Part I,* the audience quickly sees the slaves—a chorus of three, Hero, Penny, The Oldest Old Man, and Homer as members of a real and imagined community. Their actions and ways they forge community correspond with a real archive of enslaved people in the United States. Parks's play begins with the slaves participating in "small scale negotiations that went on every day within ordinary households and communities" with the enslaved chorus waging bets on whether Hero, the play's protagonist, will decide to stay on the plantation or go off to war (Penningroth 14). The moment is one of levity, with a shoe and a spoon serving as artifacts of ownership.

In the beginning of the play, Hero's almost-wife Penny, The Old Man, and the other members of his plantation community each weigh in, betting their limited prized possessions on his decision to stay or go to war. Hero dramatically swings between the decision to stay and be punished or fight, revealing that his master has promised his freedom in return for his service. Penny is suspicious of the master's promise:

> He's promising you your Freedom again, ain't he?
>
> Such a sweet promise!
>
> But how could you even think of saying yes to him
>
> When you know good and well
>
> That his Freedom-Promise is only. Ever. Linked.
>
> To something. Bad. (Parks 31)

Penny gestures to a history that problematizes the offering of freedom and the threat of freedom itself. The promise of freedom is accounted for in historical

archives of white confederates, while warnings against it are also present (Jordan 192). Cautions against freedom are embedded in narratives and songs after John Brown's failed terrorist plot in 1859: "Now all you Southern Darkies, a word to you I'll say;/ Always mind your masters, and never run away, / And don't mind these Northern agents, they tell to you a lie, / They get you at the North, and starve you 'till you die" (qtd. in Jordan 3). A similar warning seems to be echoed in the play with slaves frequently either in process of running away or considering it. The song also reinforces the protection of slavery, warning that outside of it, slaves and free subjects were possibly subject to more harm—a different kind of domestic terror existing in the Black and white cultural imaginations. Materials were frequently circulated, some even authored by slaves, that condoned slavery in its ability to harbor slaves from harm. In *Father*, The Old Man, a mediator full of wisdom seems to reinforce the merits of slavery somewhat playfully to the slaves and audience:

> Good thing you all ain't free.
>
> Good thing they days ain't they own to fill.
>
> Good thing they time is still owned by the Boss-Master,
>
> Cause, if they time ever was they own, mark it:
>
> They'd be filling it all up with foolishness. (12)

Here Parks employs not a necessarily pro-slavery rhetoric, but offers up a character that gives voice to the anxiety generated with the threats of war and freedom. The Old Man performs the safety that can be found in the certainty of slavery, an idea that many took refuge in when deciding to fight. The Old Man's consideration of the Boss-Master's ownership extends past corporeality and to even

the time they occupy performing a more nuanced idea of ownership. Historically, Confederate propaganda also frequently insisted that Union soldiers were liable to resell, redistribute or even kill slaves (Jordan 21). Though, calls to join the confederacy were not limited to pro-slavery persons.

In his 1861 writing, "How to End the War," abolitionist Frederick Douglass remarks on the necessary efforts of Black people to end slavery through fighting. He laments "the brave fellows, who broke away from their chains and went through marvelous suffering to defend Fort Pickens against the rebels. —They were instantly seized and put in irons and returned to their guilty masters to be whipped to death" (449)! While Douglass' propaganda calls for all to act to end slavery, the reality of relationships between Black confederates and Black Yankee soldiers is one that has gone largely historically unexamined.

Parks's repertoire of the Black confederate archive is a bit more complicated, featuring an ambivalent enslaved Hero fighting alongside his master juxtaposed with a free light-skinned Yankee, who in spite of already having freedom, seems to have taken up Douglass's urging to fight to abolish slavery. Historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. is critical of the writings published in Douglass's paper stating that, "There is no evidence, however, that the Confederacy was widely arming slaves at this point, or, indeed, that it ever widely armed them" (Gates). It is in this way that Parks positions Hero's choice as historically embedded in a context where propaganda, myth, and the real threat of corporeal harm made the decision to runaway, stay on the plantation, or to fight more problematic. As a point of departure, I would like to bring the silences

of history that Johnson insists we should be attune to. In this case, I highlight how Parks exposes the understated historicization of lacking choice.

Historian Ervin Jordan argues that when looking at the 1860 lives and decisions of enslaved Black people, "conveniently forgotten was the realization that if a choice were offered, black Americans would not have selected the kind of existence they had known and endured in the United States, an existence of victimization and desperate injustice" (14). Given this, it is important to contextualize the historical decisions made by slaves in a time where there were few choices to be made. The Old Man concisely summarizes the illusion of choice that often is performed in the archive saying:

> The great Boss-Master-Boss gives you freedom of choice.
>
> Like he figures his freedom of choice is gonna somehow
>
> Take the place of the Rightful Freedom that he's been denying you. (19)

This kind of historicization is executed by Parks to re-imagine a complex moral universe where much was at stake, eschewing simplistic slave narratives that revoke Black agency in the decision to fight on behalf of the Confederacy.

In Hero's meditation during *Part I*, key elements of plantation life before and during the war are presented before the audience. The Oldest Old Man acts as a de facto father figure for Hero, encouraging the community to allow him to make his own decision and even offering to wield the knife to maim Hero should he choose to stay. He instructs to the slaves:

> Even though you all are owned by another man
>
> Your words are your bond

They're part of your record.

Words and deeds both. (48)

Parks sets up a contradiction between acting with allegiance to one's community and one's master. Jordan argues, "Slavery and racism were grim idiosyncrasies of the Confederate republic, an oxymoronic nation which systematically repressed blacks while insisting on their allegiance" (Jordan 23). Unfortunately, Hero violates his bond with the enslaved community. The Old Man eventually disinherits Hero after it is revealed that Hero was not only responsible for amputating the foot of a fellow slave named Homer, but that he also gave their master information to find him after he ran away. The Old Man laments, "All we've got is the trust between us. I can't call you son anymore" (51). Hero's relationship to the Oldest Old Man orients the audience to the stark reality that Penningroth points to, which is "that slavery was defined as the absence of kin" (8). Instead of finding solace and kinship in the midst of a harsh material reality, Hero cannot belong and turns to the war as way of forging his place in the world. For this to occur, Parks has to present and deconstruct the historical notions of family and bonds as Hero makes the choice to leave for the war with the disappointment of his community and the promise of freedom attached to his complicit body.

In *Part II,* after setting off to war with his master, Hero finds himself in the company of a captured white-passing Union soldier named Smith. Hero's master, a boisterous drinking Colonel, playfully banters with the soldier who has been shot and presumably left to die before his capture. The Colonel states, "Lucky you're not a Union nigger. If you were, I'd be obligated to shoot you on the spot." The Colonel,

then speaking directly to the audience says, "An obligation that's not in any book, not written down, history would find it barbaric, so we keep it unspoken we don't speak of it we just shoot on sight" (Parks 59). This information is corroborated by Jordan, who offers, "Several runaways were luckless enough to be caught in Union army uniforms. Black soldiers and their officers were considered to be participating in slave insurrections, a crime punishable by death" (Jordan 81). Jordan goes on to cite a Confederate declaration that condemned rebellious Blacks to death without being subject to any judicial process.

It is in this way that Parks points to a history that has not often entered into the popular cultural memory. Ironically, even as the Colonel declares this information, his own memory of the already-happened event is undermined by the fact that Smith is indeed Black. Smith, whose death in the war is abstractly performed onstage, functions as a liminal character, operating between whiteness and Blackness, freedom and slavery, and named and unnamed. Smith's white-passing, captured body produces misrecognition, solidarity, and presents the opportunity for a distinct entry point into under-theorized narratives of Black livelihood and marked words that exist in the Black past and present.

Marked Words

In this section, I would like to devote some attention to a theory of "marked words." Many would argue that ultimately, *all* words are in some way marked[7]. We obviously utilize them carefully to articulate a multiplicity of ideas. However, I want

[7] J.L. Austin and is work *How to Do Things With Words* would almost undoubtedly fall into this category.

to hone in on a category of word markers that I believe are marked by trauma. Like Austin, I am invested in how words perform, whom they do work on and why. Parks frequently proposes binaries captured by repeated marked words only to complicate them through their deployment. Words like "Freedom" (usually capitalized), "own," "steal," and "worth" circulate with their own cultural and historical capital generating specific meanings that transcend the world and context of the play. Employing these marked words alongside marked histories, Parks positions always already destabilizing binaries of white and Black, freedom and ownership, and naming and the unnamed as ways of recognizing the complicated agency that Hero retains as a slave and Black confederate soldier.

The Colonel performs a whiteness that on first glance seems like a predictable reinforcement of what critical race theorist George Lipsitz would refer to as a "possessive investment in whiteness." However, this whiteness is undone in his interactions with the captured Smith (who he assumes to be a fellow white man) and Hero. After Smith insists upon his Yankee-ness, the Colonel counters, "Underneath your blue coat you and me are more alike than different" (64). The assumption of Smith's whiteness immediately begins to complicate the Colonel's assertion that they are "more alike than different." The blue coat that Smith wears as a Union soldier unleashes its metonymic potential as a stand in for Black skin and also freedom as it is eventually given to Hero. In the character of Smith, whiteness collapses into a misrecognized and an assumed to be worthless Black body.

Whiteness is also foregrounded as a way of making visible historicized simplistic notions of human worth. If, as historians suggest, slavery was a system of

reducing Black bodies to property, Parks responds by alienating whiteness and its anxieties from the Black experience. In the play, The Colonel begins a game of attempting to get Smith to guess Hero's original market price and implicitly his value. The ensuing dialogue is a dehumanizing description of Hero's person and his associated skills, a conversation suspended just before the Colonel demands Hero to undress. Gesturing to the ways in which a skill was a valuable and portable kind of "property," the Colonel lists Hero's knowledges alongside his physique (Penningroth 51). Smith overestimates Hero's monetary cost and once again Hero's freedom is denied. The Colonel begins to hypothesize about the outcome if he is to keep his "Word" in releasing Hero after the war. In a brief moment of convoluted empathy, he breaks down at the thought of losing Hero. Only then does the Colonel recover to pontificate on his whiteness, insisting on his gratitude that he has been born white and despite whatever misfortune, "I can at least rest in the grace that God made me white." Facing the audience, the Colonel goes on to say:

> And if the Lord should choose to further advance my economics, then I will be received in all the great houses. Not so with the lower ones. The lower ones will always be lowly. No matter how high they climb. There is a kind of comfort in that. And I take that comfort. For no matter how low I fall, and no matter how thoroughly I fail, I will always be white. (83)

This revelatory moment injects into the scene a white supremacy that has been deeply embedded into larger American history and culture. As the Colonel breathes a sigh of relief in his assured continued domination as a white man, he further makes explicit the degree to which ontological Blackness and Black pathology have been used as

ways of separating white from Black and devaluing Blackness. His worth is invested in his whiteness, just as his ability to align he and Smith to values of whiteness empower his behavior. Smith chips away at this underlying foundational concept with a question: "Colonel if you were put up on the auction block, what kind of price would you bring, do you think?" (83). The Colonel, removed from the safe, pedestal of whiteness is positioned on the auction block; this relocation equalizes owned and owner. The jab at the Colonel's worth presupposes that if Hero can be reduced to a monetary value, so can his master. While the Colonel dangles promises of freedom, highlighted throughout the play, Parks proficiently uses the multi-signaling words of ownership and property as a way of trans-historically offering agency to Black bodies while also complicating their relationship to structures of power.

In his elucidation of the mechanisms of slavery, Jordan states, "by definition and custom a slave was a Black human being held in hereditary servitude whose body, labor, liberty, and property were under legal control of a white person from cradle to grave" (4). He goes on to say that slaves were explicitly legally forbidden from reading and writing as well as owning dogs. Parks puts forth ownership and mastery as ways of reclaiming agency for the enslaved Hero. For example, the Colonel argues to the suspicious Smith that Hero is incapable of running away because "running off, well, that would be the same as stealing" (Parks 67). The Colonel performs a part of the white cultural imagination that has frequently suggested that Blacks made the decision to stay enslaved and participate in the war "without as second's thought" (Parks 67). The concept of stealing one's own body is

a recurring theme in Parks's work as to "steal" becomes metonym for possessing one's own body and enacting contrary agency and resistance.

In the chapter "Unequal Justice," Jordan pieces together the ways justice was dispensed on free and enslaved Black bodies during the Civil War. He highlights that slaves were particularly susceptible to accusations of stealing, whether it be goods, clothing, or one's own body (161). Justice was often deferred for those who were not considered a whole person and therefore denied equal protection under the law. The lack or suspension of justice, that is characteristic of dwelling in a state of exception, is wholly tied to personhood and ability to enact agency over one's body and property. Similarly, Hero's regard for his own body as property reflects the judicial paradigm in which he operates. In this way, Parks demonstrates Black bodies that have inherited legacies of not quite being whole persons that are capable of corporeal self-control. While Hero seems to be more outwardly complicit in the possession of his body, Parks's work also performs more subtly resistant repertoires of Black agency.

In a conversation with Smith, who is revealed to Hero and the audience to be a Black Union soldier, Hero struggles to grasp the concept of agency and self-ownership. Hero asks Smith to whom his body will belong after freedom. Smith tells him, "You'll belong to yourself" (96). Here, Parks references and refutes a history that slaves had no knowledge of impending freedom and the aftermath of war (Levine 66). She also contradicts a historical narrative that highlights animosity between Black confederates and Black Union soldiers, foregrounding Black investment in Confederate pride (Jordan 191). Similarly, Parks recognizes how claiming

confederacy operates as a way of accessing the social status of whiteness with war serving as a means by which Black people would see monetary compensation for their service. Penningroth, in his project along with Camp, precisely details how the enslaved were the owners of property and time while Parks looks closely at how they might articulate ownership over their bodies. Still, the marked word of freedom emerges clearly as part of Hero's vocabulary.

Jordan looks at the lives of free Black folk, who had escaped to the North, first labeled as "contraband" and later as "Colored Refugees" (83). This is elucidated by Parks's introduction of Smith to Hero, who offers insight into life as a free Black man still subject to rampant anti-Blackness. In Virginia, measures were put in place to "hinder Afro-Virginian mobility, stifle process, and prevent the mingling of slaves and free blacks" (156). Jordan argues that law enforcement heavily policed Black behavior in the midst of Black population growth. In this moment, Black people were (as they frequently currently still are) subject to frequently being stopped on the street and beaten if they were found without adequate identification or passes. In her book, Stephanie Camp points out that slaveholders "acted as judge, jury, and executioner when it came to the violation of planters' rules and society's laws" (Camp 25). The implementation of the law, which governed Black and white bodies, was often left to those who consistently performed mastery. While the law and ways in which it was frequently carried out exist in the archive, it is interesting to imagine how slaves who would soon see Emancipation conceived of their freedom. Parks thus does significant work on the archive by profoundly meditating on Hero's hopes and fears with his imagining of freedom.

Hero also complicates notions of historicized and contemporary ownership in his consideration of how he will be policed. He imagines being hailed by a police officer: "So—when a Patroller comes up to me, when I'm walking down the road to work or what-have-you and a Patroller comes up to me and says, "Whose nigger are you, Nigger?" I'm gonna say, "I belong to myself"? Today I can say, I belong to the Colonel." Camp insists that Hero's fears will be realized with slave patrollers frequently halting Blacks, free and enslaved, for papers (Camp 25). Hero underscores the value of claiming one's ownership by repeating, "I belong to the Colonel," situating the claim of ownership against the threat of violence. Despite Smith encouraging Hero to "steal yourself," the context of an already-lived experience exposes that Hero, like so many other Black bodies in the wake of Emancipation, will never be completely self-owned or completely free (Parks 96).

Parks through Smith further negotiates with the future of freedom saying, "Maybe even with Freedom, that mark, huh, that mark of the marketplace, it will always be on us. And so maybe we will always be twisting ourselves into something that is going to bring the best price" (Parks 98). Here again, Smith is complicating the idea of Black body's worth as he considers the "mark-it" place, where chattel slavery was enacted. His language foreshadows the ways in which Black people, out of slavery, will continue to negotiate their own worth in the context of white supremacy. He also echoes the sentiment of Colonel who is emboldened that he will never be one of the "lower ones" as one of those perpetually "lower" entities. He goes on to propose that, "God willing, some day we'll have a place besides just the auction block. And maybe that starts by stealing yourself. Steeling yourself, making yourself

like metal on the inside. Maybe it'll get better from there. But, I don't know" (99). This reflects the adaptability and fungibility of Blackness under duress that Afro-Pessimists proclaim to be key characteristics. While Smith's words do not give Hero a concrete way of surviving, there is important knowledge sharing taking place and he offers up his coat, which Hero places under his own, as he follows after his master. In a simple speech act, Smith bestows upon Hero the idea of Freedom and allows him to change his allegiance to the Union army. Alongside this speech act, he offers him a material possession, a meaningful transferal of property from one Black man to another signaling what Camp calls "mobility in the face of restraint" (7). From this point on, Hero operates in a similar liminal space, between enslaved and free, Union and Confederate. Though he allows Smith to go free and follows after the Colonel, it is clear that Hero has been thoroughly changed as he navigates a "geography of containment," armed with the knowledge and language of freedom (Camp 7).

Along with the ability to own oneself, Smith also introduces the ability to self-name when he comments that they were both "satisfied with the names they gave" (98). When Hero leaves for the war, his community un-names him saying, "maybe we won't call him anything at all" (Parks 51). When he returns from the war, he proclaims that he will now go by Ulysses after Ulysses S. Grant. Though he is adopted a new name, he is incapable of disinheriting the legacy of terror and oppression which have constituted his subjectivity. With Hero/Ulysses, we are presented with the rendered synechdochal Black body that stands susceptible to varying degrees of harm from misrecognition to brutal violence.

Marked Bodies

In *Part II*, after Smith reveals himself to be Black, he and Hero compare the marks that signal their bodies as property, "to tell the world you belonged to him" (Parks 94). I have already underscored in what ways Parks weaponizes the words of freedom, ownership, and worth to resurrect erased Black voices that are often indicted while being assumed ignorant and complicit in slavery and Civil War. In this section, I would like to further consider these interventions as they are applied to the bodies onstage arguing that Parks reconfigures agency for Black bodies by examining its hailing, misrecognition, and legacy of pain. In this analysis, I recognize that enslavement frequently reduces Black people to their laboring bodies. Hopefully, in studying the representative bodies in *Father Comes Home From the Wars*, I continue to activate agency rather than perpetuate epistemic violences related to Black corporeality.

In his book, *Embodying Black Experience, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, Harvey Young begins by surveying the complexities surrounding hailing Black bodies as it "transforms, dislocates, imprisons, and objectifies" (Young 2). Referencing Frantz Fanon, who also looks at racialized hailing, while building upon Louis Althusser, Young presents his own corporeal experiences being hailed as Black as a way of navigating his own subjectivity related to other Black bodies. Revisiting the monologue wherein Hero considers what it means to own one's *own* Black body, I draw attention to instances where Parks performs a history of interpellating Black bodies as subjects.

In the stage directions, Parks explicitly says, “Imagining being confronted by a Patroller, Hero holds up his hands. Reminiscent of: “Hands up! Don’t Shoot!” Onstage, midway through the monologue the actor playing Hero puts his hands in the air as if being hailed by a police officer, echoing the last assumed gesture of the murdered Michael Brown. Here we see how past terrorism echoes present terrorism, with hyper-policed bodies being represented across time. Parks signals an archive in which Black bodies have been subject to violence. Similarly, Hero performs a repertoire of misrecognition and a knowing that one’s body is subject to be criminalized or harmed without reason (96).

Young examines how precisely multiple similar misrecognitions constitute Black experience and what is deemed “the Black body.” In *Father,* Black bodies are frequently subject to a multitude of misrecognitions. The representations of these misrecognitions echoes similar projections cast historically upon Black bodies that deny its ability to enact agency. In allowing space for these misrecognitions, Parks restores the possibility of resistant and complicit subjectivities.

The play features two moments of misrecognition of Black bodies that refer back to an archive of Black complicity. In *Part I*, Homer broadcasts to the plantation community that Hero is more responsible for his punitive amputation than previously known. The drunk Boss-Master, had spoke to Homer as Hero, reminiscing on the time Hero betrayed Homer. Homer, among the chorus of slaves says pointedly:

> And he starts talking to me as if I’m you.
>
> I dunno, Hero, do we look alike? (49)

He goes on to detail how this misrecognition of Homer leads to the revelation of "The First Promise," or the ensuring Hero's freedom through actively revoking Homer's plight for the same. This misrecognition alludes to the ways in which historical Black subjects attempted to survive in the context of slavery and the Civil War. Homer and Hero become interchangeable socially dead characters, both recipients of the disdain of the master and the love of Penny. Homer is resistant and punished for his display through amputation and is left on the plantation while Hero is invited to war. Jordan offers:

> Only in the reminiscences of ex-Confederates are body servants given any sort of appreciation. As intelligent human beings, they were sometimes able to manipulate the slavery system for their own purposes and obtain unprecedented opportunities. Experience had long taught blacks about white perceptions of exceptional black fidelity. (200)

Jordan highlights the need to survive is the first and foremost priority while conceptions of ownership and loyalty fall second. In a similar way, the Boss-Master mistakes Hero to be a loyal subject incapable of "stealing himself" away. In confusing Homer and Hero, the master also demonstrates how markedly different they are in how they each attempt to survive the harsh reality of being enslaved. Jordan's project endeavors for us to reconsider a complicated history of Black confederates' complicity and agency, which echoes Parks's. Both respond to a need to emphasize that the "unique and praiseworthy contributions are reminders of freedom's promises unfulfilled yet with our grasp" (Jordan 309). Still, historians

disagree about the reality of Emancipation, which is briefly featured in the play and the project of reconstruction as it was experienced and negotiated by free Black folk.

Parks again releases in the theatre a history of complex Black subjectivity with the threat of freedom lending itself to coerced Black action. Where in the popular cultural imagination, Black subjects operate in recognized unilateral solidarity in the state of slavery, the reality was less than, with Black slaves betraying other slaves and even free Black people holding slaves of their own. Parks makes less tidy narratives of Black loyalty to their masters and to each other, and the necessity of continuing a culture of harm in order to survive.

Parks simultaneously calls up a legacy of misrecognized Black bodies subject to a white gaze. As I explored in the previous section, Smith is misidentified by the Colonel as a white body. However, Hero, as a Black body, recognizes that Smith is similarly "colored." The Black body then becomes a specific historically enabled reference point for performing agency and freedom. Because Smith is misrecognized as white, he is considered to be of value, and worthy of keeping prisoner. Ironically in recognizing Smith as a marked Black body, a rhizomatic or horizontal kinship is initiated and Hero sets Smith free. This relationship lays in stark contrast to that between Hero and Homer who are marked more as adversaries than kin.

Absent from this conversation thus far is a meditation on the marked Black body and questions of worth in capitalism through the lens of disability studies. I am specifically invested in examining the characters of Hero and Homer and their relationship to physical trauma. Hero and Homer can also be considered through the lens of disability as it intersects with race and class. I agree with Nirmala Erevelles

that the phenomenological experience of Blackness has the potential for collapsing into disability. *Father* presents white agents as bodysnatchers and constructors of disability, who have created an industry out of mutilating Black bodies so that their status as property is maintained. Though it is of import that Erevelles warns that due to the relationship between abjection and disability, the role of violence inhabits a tricky territory. I would like to open up the space of trauma that is woundedness in order to further examine the disability politic that is, to me, a large part of how Black masculinity is constructed in *Father* (Erevelles 26). I contend that with both characters, Parks queers history and crips the notion of the masculine Black body as well. In order to prove this assertion, one must first investigate the crucial intersection of Blackness and disability.

In her text, Suzan-Lori Parks alternates between moments of low vision and high visibility. By allowing up entry into the daily lives of slaves, featuring them not working or laboring in the fields, she only amends history while providing some insight into moments of low Black visibility. She specifically looks at the Black confederate soldier, often a character misappropriated in historical narratives and sheds light on the decision that he must make, whether to go to war or to stay and face the consequences. Though Parks allows us to "see" the everyday slave, she does not allow their spaces of interiority to be made visible; we do not really know what is going on inside their heads. Instead, she provides us with "spells," or moments where the characters are their most visible selves.

By examining the intersection of race, gender, and disability, I introduce more visibility as to how disability can function as both material condition and also as

discursive projection. In doing so, I would like to chart out all the registers of disability that play a role in *Father* recognizing that no (visibly) disabled bodies perform onstage. Through the further illumination of intertextual resonances of *Father* with other epic forms, I will show how Parks allows disability to play a pivotal role.

Disability scholars have warned us about the use of disability as metaphor. Specifically, David T. Mitchell points to the rampant use of disabled characters as what he calls "narrative prosthesis." In some ways, Parks may be guilty of such usage in her use of Homer. Homer plays an central role in the play as his existence and disability essentially make Hero's decision for him. Hero goes back and forth about whether to go to war until he is found to not only have mutilated Homer but to have also been responsible for that impetus for that mutilation. However, Hero can also be viewed through the lens of disability; our vision of him is sometimes obscured and at other times he is hypervisible.

In regards to the intersection of Black bodies and disabled bodies Josh Lukin offers that:

> African Americans have been extremely averse to race/disability analogies; when scholars seek to include disability alongside race and ethnicity in multicultural curriculum, objections still arise from representatives of racial minorities who take offense to the suggestion that they could have anything in common with the disabled. (313)

Keeping this in mind, I would like to consider how historically "compulsory able-bodiedness" was grafted onto Black bodies. Disability studies scholar Dea H.

Boster points to the ways slaves for purchase were rendered "sound" or "unsound" in their physical and mental capabilities. With doctors judging the able-bodiedness of slaves, it is important to also note the lack of racial infallibility in 19th century medicine. For example, Boster reminds us that Samuel Cartwright's pathologization of disobedient Black bodies created an illness out of those who were moved to take flight from their respective plantations. Consequently, those that appeared as runaways could be deemed unfit for selling. Parks introduces the concept of Hero's "soundness" as a slave early in the play. The intactness of Hero's body is positioned against Homer's disabled one as the slaves discuss what they are willing to bet regarding Hero's choice. The second slave remarks:

> Homer used to have two feet and now he don't got but one feet.
>
> But Hero, on the other hand, Hero is as he was born.
>
> Big, brave, smart, honest, and strong.
>
> The favorite.
>
> He ain't missing nothing. (9)

The slave's analysis of Hero is concerned with his markedness as a whole body and with what it means to be a whole man. In their eyes, he is complete and therefore sound.

Boster elaborates that soundness was ultimately something for doctors and judges to determine as soundness allowing for "breaches-of-warranty" for sold slaves. However, it is also important to recognize that "definitions of disability or unsoundness in slaves were elusive and constantly under negotiation in southern courtrooms" (Boster 213). As Hero is forced to perform his soundness for Smith and

his master in *Part II* of the play, this becomes evident. As I have discussed, the Colonel offers Hero his freedom, for the fourth known time, if Smith can guess his worth. What ensues is an examination of his "moral" and physical character. The inspection is only halted when the Colonel goes to examine Hero's genitalia and Hero's hesitancy is met with a beating. The lack of compliance and its relationship to disabling violence is further highlighted in the play in the character of Homer.

Acts of reproductive displacement also embrace a forced rhizomatic (horizontal) transfer of genealogy and ontology as whiteness is collapsed into Black bodies (Erevelles). Hero has lost both his father and mother to chattel slavery and the Oldest Old Man steps into their place. However, Erevelles argues that Deleuze and Guittari fall short in their theoretical framework specifically in "that it is rendered inadequate in the historical context of transnational capitalism" (28). Again, Erevelles is interested in the material consequences for bodies. She goes on to say that this is a space wherein "bodies encounter each other in often violent collision that such captivity and mutilation are no longer metaphors, but instead inform a brutal materiality that foregrounds the hierarchical binary of Master/slave "(28). Perhaps most potently, Erevelles argues that the metaphor fails where violent corporeality begins.

If Robert Mcruer asks the question, "What might it mean to welcome the disability to come, to desire it?" then Parks answers with the threat of Hero's mutilation. He desires a disability, one that is not so debilitating that it won't allow him to work but is instead just enough to dissuade the master from taking him to war (Mcruer 207). It also begs the question, could the act of Hero considering amputating

his own foot with the intention of avoiding disabling or death at the master's hand constitute a crip act?

A crip act is an act that, like queering, makes something strange and reveals the spectacle of compulsory able-bodiedness. In his act of possible mutilation, Hero seeks to join the other bodies that fall outside of compulsory able-bodiedness. A chorus member of the slaves reinvites us to consider the spectacle of Hero's soundness:

> Hero you were born perfect and lived your whole life whole
>
> Is that to end here? Is that to end now
>
> In front of a ruined cabin with an old knife? (36)

The text goes on to show that the aim of Hero's potential act is two-fold. One reason is to protect his community from the master's anger and secondly to protect himself from being further disabled or killed by the war. However, as an always already disabled subject, these choices are a moot point. As Hero goes back and forth about whether to amputate his foot, Homer, in perhaps one of the foremost moments of lucidity and high vision, states:

> Ain't no game hero
>
> Cause you shouldn't be doing neither
>
> Cause you shouldn't stoop
>
> To do neither
>
> Cause both choices, Hero,
>
> To stay here and work the field
>
> To go there and fight in the field

Both choices are

Nothing more than the same coin

Flipped over and over

Two sides of the same coin

And the coin ain't even in your pocket. (42)

At the intersection of Blackness and disability, Homer and Hero are firmly situated as non-citizens in a state of exception so much so that Homer's likeness is confused with the person that wounded him. Ultimately what Homer reveals, from his place of disability, is that Hero is similarly disabled in his choices. Those things that appear to invite Hero to operate under his own free will, only further demonstrate the control of the master. Truly, in this moment, the only real choice is to own one's body and to run away.

Dragging and Cripping Time

I want to return again to the image of Hero with his arms in the position of "Hands up, Don't Shoot." While the practice of asking suspects to reveal their hands is not new, the gesture contains a specific resonance in 2016 that it would not have in other decades. In her "Fact Checker" article, Michelle Ye Hee Lee established that based on the Department of Justice's findings, the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" performing of the gesture by protestors was built upon on the false premise that victim Michael Brown performed such before his murder in August of 2014. Jane Rhodes offers, "It's a universal symbol of surrender. It's also a very simple gesture, and that's part of what makes something resonate." Whether or not the gesture was

originally performed by Michael Brown, it still became a rallying cry for those who were organizing themselves in protests.

In her way of cripping and dragging time, Parks reintroduces us to this gesture. "'I belong to the Colonel.' I says now. That's how come they don't beat me. But when Freedom comes and they stop me and ask and I say, "I'm my own. I'm on my own and I own myself,' you think they'll leave me be" (96). Smith does not know what to say in response to Hero's question. I argue that is a crucial moment, as Hero lifts his hands up in the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" gesture and speaks his truth about what it might mean to own himself. What we see onstage is a moment of low opacity, where Hero does not know the future of the ownership of his body. However, the audience, with the image of Michael Brown's body lying dead in the street in our cultural memory, is more than aware of Hero's possible future as a Black man. Performed in this moment, not in the moment of actual danger, I offer that Hero performs a crip act in that he initiates a performative gesture that gives the audience higher visibility and insight into the structures of power that "Let live and make die." At this time, we are able to see the utter and complete vulnerability of the Black flesh, one that hands up or not, is permeable to a bullet.

In the end, despite the various trials Hero and the other characters undergo, we are still left with a complicated "Hero" of a war fought for the Confederacy. Parks allows her characters to be culpable, complicit, and contradictory without relinquishing the burden of history upon them. The play is apt and urgent in that as repertoire, *Father Comes Home From the Wars Parts I, II, and III* performs and validates the current and historical experiences of Black bodies. These bodies, I have

put forth, are subject to contested narratives, having their voices and property often muted and alienated from their own experiences and made complicit in ways that serve narratives of white supremacy. Parks collapses the Black body and Black home with Hero who, moved by the course of history, must leave the plantation to shift toward a freedom that he cannot quite reconcile, only to return to a home that has been changed by his absence. Mark that.

Chapter 3: Ethics of Engagement: Examining Spectatorship, Sousveillance, and Performances of Police Brutality Videos 2014-2017.

Turn your hazards on signaling you are going to pull over. Pull over where it is well lit if possible. Turn on all the lights in the car. Roll down the window. Keep your hands on the wheel. Be still. Say where your license and registration are located. Ask if you can get them out now. No, you do not know what you did wrong. It doesn't matter now. Your body, your life is precarious. Like a child, you have found yourself in trouble. You must now use the skills that were drilled into you by your parents long before you touched a steering wheel or got your license. You need to stay alive.

And if they kill me, I hope my books aren't turned into a weapon and my words into bullets. I hope if I reach for registration, it doesn't become a concealed gun.

It has almost become a routine. A video plays of another quickly escalating scene of a Black man being confronted and then killed and in turn my friend and I mourn and wonder aloud if our own histories will be used to incriminate us. If we don't have a record and a body that can lie in the street for hours, be thrown around in a police van, or held down to be executed in a metro system, will our stories still be recorded and visible? What will people watch? Will the revolution be televised or Tweeted? I wonder. Did Emmett Till's mother anticipate people sharing pictures of her dead son's body for decades after his murder?

As more and more Black men and women are killed by police, we (this particular we being Black people in the United States) are forced to reconcile our precarious living bodies with the images of their murdered bodies lingering on our screens and in our communities. It begs the question of in this allegedly post-emancipatory moment,[8] who can lay claim to our bodies? Who do we belong to? In his book, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*, Marc Lamont Hill writes of the community reaction to seeing murdered teenager Michael Brown's body lying on a street in Ferguson, Missouri. He quotes one local, Keisha, as saying, "They just left him there… like he ain't *belong* to nobody" (Hill 10; emphasis added). This conjures up for me a previously discussed set of interactions between Suzan-Lori Parks' characters, Smith and Hero, in *Father Comes Home From the Wars Part II*. After Smith tells Hero of the glory of freedom, Hero inquires, "Where's the beauty in being worth nothing?" calling into question the ontology of freedom (Parks 95). He continues this interrogation into self-possession: "So-- when a Patroller comes up to me, when I am walking down the road to work or what-have-you and a Patroller comes up to me and says, 'Whose nigger are you, Nigger?' I'm gonna say 'I belong to myself'? Today I can say, 'I belong to the Colonel." Next, he responds to Smith's question about why he doesn't run away by equating running away with stealing. Smith comments, "Seems to me you got a right to steal yourself" (Parks 96). I bring up these quotes with hope of being able to put them in conversation with real life events, particularly as they pertain the state sanctioned murders of Black men and women in the United States.

[8] This idea is thoughtfully and rigorously challenged with the concept of unfinished emancipation brought up by Christina Sharpe in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Parks purposefully evokes Michael Brown's body in the way that the imaginary Hero interacts with an fictional patroller with a "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" gesture. What then does Parks's character's imagining of freedom call up when considering the continuation of a legacy of overpoliced Black bodies? This chapter poses a series of questions interrogating the ways in which state sanctioned police terrorism has altered performances of Black everyday life. Brown, we know now, was apparently accosted by the police after he had stolen cigarillos, and in light Parks's notion in *Father* of "stealing oneself," it makes a lot of sense to ask whether in this same way Michael Brown attempted to steal himself and failed[9]? But asking this question begs the larger ethical considerations of posing and unpacking this or any question essentially theorizing off a dead man's body in relating it to a fictional one. Ultimately is there, for Black folks in the United States, only freedom in death? How then can we maintain and perform self-possession or freedom through self-defense against the spectacle of Black suffering?

Surveillance and Souveillance: Building Blocks of Hypervisibility and Self-Defense

In this chapter, I present performances of everyday life for Black people in the United States that have been drastically altered by increasing and adaptive technologies of surveillance. I build off of the work that Simone Browne brilliantly tackles in her book, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, which tracks a

[9] For further discussions of Black fugitivity, see Daphne Brooks, Fred Moten, and Stacie Selmon McCormick.

history of surveilling Black bodies from slavery to contemporary airport security. I examine cases of police brutality and their relationship to post-modern, post-democratic, and disability studies discourses clarifying the process of emerging terrorized Black subject's agency and embodiments that are fundamentally changed. In order to do so, I will examine cases of police murder, neglect, and excessive force.

With some of these object lessons of spectacles of "Blackpain", a term which Debra Walker King uses to describe transhistorical suffering incurred by diasporic Black people, I closely read and make legible the significance of videos that have surfaced of violence enacted on Black bodies through the lenses of surveillance and sousveillance. Surveillance, of course, refers to the act of actively watching subjects, whether it is from behind a camera or in a police car. As Browne and other surveillance scholars have lain out, surveillance is not a site of neutral observation but is rather raced and gendered, reflecting the politics of racism and sexism around us. Sousveillance, on the other hand, is the act of watching back, surveilling those who are doing the surveilling. For further clarification as to its relevance to my project, I turn first to Browne who argues that in discussions of surveillance and race, sousveillance also plays a critical role. She claims:

> Dark sousveillance is a site of critique, as it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with anti-Black surveillance, where the tools of social control in plantation surveillance or lantern laws in city spaces and beyond were appropriated, co-opted, repurposed, and challenged in order to facilitate survival and escape. (21)

It is in this way, she references the multiplicity of ways that sousveillance can function contrary to the insidious mechanisms of surveillance. Following this logic, it seems that in each of the following instances of recorded police brutality and murder, sousveillance possibly functions as a site of Black resistance and mobility. In the cases of Eric Garner and Philando Castile, sousveillance operates in a way that profoundly affects the viewer. Images of Black bodies being assaulted, murdered, or otherwise harmed by our state sanctioned protectors often proliferate in the stale technological spaces of Facebook and Twitter. At times, the viral nature of these videos is countered only by the rate at which lives and bodies are extinguished, producing newer content for viewer consumption. This chapter examines repetitious and mediated performances of domestic terror enacted on the Black American body. As well as looking at the circulation of suffering, I will also be thinking through a mediated habeas corpus, how surveillance and sousveillance, "show the body." For the purposes of this essay, I argue that surveillance and sousveillance perform in markedly similar ways, used as evidence for social, but not often judicial, processes.

Surveillance studies scholars such as Browne and John McGrath have long directed our attention to the simultaneous usefulness and insidiousness of surveillance and its relationship to identity. John McGrath points out "we have entered a world in which letting the maximum number of people know our moods, our whereabouts, our opinions, our plans, and even our relationship to the afterlife has become, for many of us, a social necessity" (McGrath 89). Here, McGrath summarizes the modern culture of surveillance often carried out by those being surveilled. We are possibly to be indicted in general surveillance just as much as institutions that are founded to

conduct it. He goes on to argue, "the surveillance-data-sphere leads not to a fixing of identity, but to an eternal multiplication of selves, some of them in our control, some of them very much not" (McGrath 89). People have begun to identify themselves as brands, positing an entrepreneurial self on multiple social media platforms. While surveillance can be beneficial to its users, it can also be a technology of harm as it "is driven by a complexity of emotions, obsessions, desires" (McGrath 89). That being said, the way we have constructed these surveillance selves for ourselves are nowhere near as dangerous as the state sanctioned hypersurveillance that has been conducted which results in egregious violences.

I want to offer a brief note of the ethics of engagement with these performances of everyday life that have been altered by state surveillance. The Black people I cite all, to some degree, were policed to death. I want to make it clear that embedded in my argument is the idea that each of them were in some way murdered, despite whatever judicial processes may or may not have acquitted their murderers. In each section, I take time to describe parts of the violence inflicted on their bodies, not with the intention of rehearsing trauma, but rather to emphasize the degree to which their bodies were surveilled, (mis)handled, and policed. It is my hope that utilization of careful and nuanced language employed in this chapter will resist being a vehicle of further harm and emphasize how these Black bodies suffered in an age of unfinished emancipation. As a radical Black feminist, I realize that our attention is disproportionately directed to injustices enacted on Black male bodies. It would be ethically and scholastically irresponsible to proceed as if the same terror is not extended to Black female and non-binary bodies. Furthermore, neither fully

confronted nor purposefully erased from the specificity of my examples are those whose intersectionality often renders them invisible to the heteronormative cisgendered centric gaze. That is to say, trans men and women of color are often submitted to similar inhumane violences and their stories go untold. In scrutinizing these specific performances of domestic terror, it is my hope that space may also be held to consider the suffering that goes often undocumented and unacknowledged.

Performing Domestic Terror

In order to consider the ways in which documented brutality is shared and make way for its impact in constituting a kind of shared Black identity, I must first acknowledge the legacy of domestic terror as it pertains to Black American bodies. With the rise of social movements and hashtags such as Black Lives Matter, attention has been drawn to the disproportionate number of Black lives extinguished by white and non-white police officers. In an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times*, Charles M. Blow notes, "State violence, as epitomized in these cases by what people view as police abuses, conversely, has produced a specific feeling of terror, one that is inescapable and unavoidable" (Blow). The ability to collect and represent accurate data related to police brutality and the terror it produces is complicated, even though the Federal Bureau of Investigation maintains yearly statistics regarding "Justifiable Homicide" committed by police officers. Such quantitative data is not particularly helpful for meaning making as it extracts data that would provide any insight into this clearly systemic issue. The problem becomes more legible as organizations such as

The Guardian maintain a database[10] of their own, documenting not only statistics of police murders—justifiable or not—but also information on the victims of such violences. Starting a count from the beginning of the year, according to the database by June 2015, police were responsible for the murders of 304 Black men and women, 75 of who were documented as unarmed. I extend this quantitative information simply to acknowledge the widespread and recognized nature of a problem. However, positioning police brutality as domestic terror is wrought with political and ideological complexity.

In the introduction, I reflected on Frantz Fanon's "quest for dignity" and the ways in which it has been thwarted for minoritarian subjects. He goes on to say:

> Once colonialism has understood where its social reform tactics would lead it, back come the old reflexes of adding police reinforcements, dispatching troops, and establishing a regime of terror better suited to its interests and its psychology. (*Wretched of the Earth* 147)

While Fanon is responding to colonial rule as a regime of terror, he also foregrounds the relationship between material conditions and the goals of the oppressed while simultaneously gesturing to the "old reflexes" we have seen played out in the streets of cities such as Charlotte, Ferguson, and Baltimore. These are the contemporary scenes in which the inherent worth, dignity, and painful responses of human beings are met with brutal force and militaristic reaction. For the purposes of this project, I am utilizing my own working definition of terror as the execution of disproportionate

[10] See the "The Counted: People killed by police in the US."

armed actions and reactions that modify everyday Black life to the extent that life becomes at best inconvenient and at worst extinguished.

In light of this working definition, it is important to consider mediated culture as a reaction to or a means of performing or negotiating terror. Of course, domestic terror perpetuated against Black bodies is nothing new. Most frequently cited in the cultural memory are those such as Emmett Till and Rodney King. Additionally though, it is possible that in its capturing on video or as image, the harm inflicted on Black bodies commands a different engagement and thus constitutes a different performance of terror—one that can be called up and replayed with the push of a button. To interrogate terror applied to Black bodies, it is first necessary to position those who have historically held the power to unilaterally construct public narratives constituted by mutilating private bodies.

Roles of Images

As I have mentioned earlier, I think it is important to carefully consider how one creates an ethic of engagement as we are collectively historically and contemporarily fascinated by images of Black death and Blackpain. This is particularly important when engaging the exponential replication of such images and how they make their way into our newsfeeds and timelines. Perhaps most importantly, we must at least speculate about the role of the cultural producer or creator of the image in relationship to those viewing. In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin insists that art has been profoundly affected by technologies of reproduction. Though I am not examining

evidence of brutality for its aesthetic, it is important to contemplate how its ability to be reproduced "can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (675). It is in this way, that an immeasurable number of people have bore witness to the mediated performance of domestic terror than would have been capable of witnessing it as it happened. Consequently, video "enables the original [event] to meet the beholder halfway," exposing them to the event as a culturally and historically situated phenomenon. This also opens up an ethical dilemma of looking, whether one should look or turn away from the video lest they be considered a voyeur. This conversation is one that we will return to later in the chapter in discussing the idea of bearing witness. Benjamin's argument becomes particularly uncanny as he examines how the object filmed is "reactivated." If this so, is there not a way in which the bodies of Black people whose deaths have been filmed such as Eric Garner and Philando Castile become repetitively resurrected only to be killed again through the medium of video? Then, to that end, one must then consider the possible impacts of epistemic violence and traumas that are re-inscribed onto surveilled Black bodies as they are filmed.

Policing and Murder of Eric Garner

The recording of the murder of Eric Garner is one that I have seen probably more times than I would care to mention. To some extent, I was driven by a sort of morbid curiosity that was fueled by a lack of an ability to reconcile what the police had done with the idea of equal protection once promised to me. I had so many questions provoked by the video and the occurrence that will never be fully answered.

What happened before the video started that made him so angry? At what point was he considered a threat that needed to be neutralized? Why did the police not attend to his body once he was clearly unconscious? These questions still circle around in my head. Yet, with each murder of a Black man or woman, I become surer that these kinds of questions will never be fully answered. And this is frustrating. Not just for me but also for the many other people who sense the trauma the United States has never bothered been able to be healed.

On July 17, 2014, the police accosted a New York man named Eric Garner after he was accused of illegally selling single cigarettes. What followed was an altercation between Garner and police officers that attempted to control and arrest him. In this case, surveillance began with the police and continued with another resident of a nearby apartment building. According to the Al Baker, police had been watching Garner and other people participating in the evasion of tax law. In his article, he makes clear that Garner, along with others like him, was known as a "condition" by the police. This clearly demonstrates the pathologization of Black bodies that Hortense Spillers refers to as the "American grammar" of the aftermath of slavery (68). As Jacques Derrida points out: "We have no language--no syntax and no lexicon--which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (226). In this way, the use of the word "condition" signals far outside of its intended usage, to describe those bodies that "plague" the streets of New York. Ultimately, the condition and conditioning of Garner's body brought about vigilant surveillance and sousveillance.

The surveillance of Garner's body leading to his death did not end with the local NYPD. *The New York Times* notes that: "A landlord on Bay Street, Mr. Gjeshbitraj went online to 311, the municipal hotline's website, to complain about men loitering outside his Staten Island apartment building." This complaint of loitering is one that is directly tied to a history of surveilling and policing Black bodies in their performances of everyday life. The institution of the 13th Amendment, with its conscientious loophole, provided a means by which Black persons could be accused of minor violations such as standing in the same or wrong place for too long, whatever length of time that might be.

Reports vary regarding Garner's action and the (re)actions of the police force during his encounter with them. What is known, however, is what multiple onlookers subsequently recorded. One video begins with Garner's verbal altercation with two visible police in which he insists, "I didn't do shit." A woman, presumably another witness cosigns saying that, "Don't worry. He was just sitting here. I seen him." This claim in some ways responds to the fictional Hero's fear in Parks's *Father Comes Home From the Wars*; here Garner did not *belong to* anyone per se, but the woman attests that he *belongs in* the neighborhood; she claims him as part of her community. Another videographer comments later in footage that the police were attempting to arrest Garner for simply "breaking up a fight." Police clearly survey the situation including Garner and then, within minutes, disregard these statements, rush in and attempt to subdue Garner. Footage shows Garner being held in a chokehold by a plainclothes officer and then wrestled to the ground by others. His body is then compressed by officers, held in place with the arms and knees of other officers as he

is heard repeating the now infamous phrase, "I can't breathe" (*New York Daily News*). In the following moments, Garner is denied immediate medical care and despite his lack of consciousness, he is treated as if he were "faking it," to avoid his impending arrest. Eventually, his muted or lack of pulse is noted though he is still not attended to with medical intervention, such as oxygen, immediately. Instead, his unconscious, dying body is disregarded and he is sentenced to a preventable death.

Before investigating the possibility of self-defense in sousveillance, I first find it necessary to point out the distinction between the videos' filming and the circumstances of their reception. They were recorded and released to shed light on what was done to Garner. They wanted to show how his lifeless body was left alone, without interventions taking place to save his life. One man was arrested for seemingly doing nothing other than these things. They offered up a means for defending Black bodies from similar potential harm. The videos' reception is something quite different though. Once shared to the Internet, people, particularly Black people, were enraged. The images drew many to the streets to gather and protest and mourn. Here, the act of perhaps singularly viewing a video of trauma and death led collective direct action with people holding up signs saying "I can't breathe." I want to reestablish again, the concept of sousveillance as a useful analytic and defensive tactic of the two films that showed Garner's behavior leading up to his death and the lack of action afterward. I argue that Garner's death, among others' can be attributed to what Simone Browne's "unfinished emancipation" which:

> Suggests that slavery matters in the archive of transatlantic slavery must be engaged if we are to create a surveillance studies that grapples with its

> constitutive genealogies, where the archive of slavery is taken up in a way that does not replicate the racial schema that spawned it and that it reproduced, but at the same time does not erase its violence. (13)

It is in this way that Garner's murder signals an entire history of prior assaults orchestrated to discipline the Black body, whether it was errant or not. When the two individuals who witnessed Garner being choked began to film, they emerged as participators in sousveillance. Whereas "anti-Black surveillance" was used to target Garner's body, sousveillance was utilized at attempt to save him, and when that failed, became a site of state criticism and a call for justice. Browne usefully maintains that dark sousveillance operates as "tactics employed to render one's self out of sight" (21). In one video, officers demand that the videographer move back; he relegates his body to his stoop, which he accounts for as a place of fugitivity. Though, it should also be pointed out that shortly after Garner's death, the person who filmed, like multiple other videographers of domestic terror, found himself imprisoned while the murderers walked free[11]. Despite the fact that autopsies revealed Garner's death to be a direct result of the chokehold inflicted on him, the police officer that murdered him was not indicted[12]. Consequently, I would like to analyze the postmodern implications of the idea of Black bodies and their performance as spectacles in life and death.

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[11] In an article published on The Verge, Chloé Cooper points out that sousveillance was not rare for Ramsey Orta, Garner's friend who was filming. She specifically says that the tactic had "become a form of self-defense to film the police" ("Fearing for His Life).

[12] On August 14, 2019, a judge recommended the police officer who held Garner in a chokehold, Daniel Pantaleo, be fired (Fitz-Gibbon).

With this analysis in mind, I want to argue that the surveillance of Black bodies in the United States by police and other state institutions is an object of postmodern palimpsest with it being "permeable to time past, time present, and time future (Hassan 277). Garner's body then is not just read as his own but as all the bodies that have been surveilled and lynched before him for perceived infractions of the law. I also offer that Garner's Black body was and is a postmodern entity. "Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs then subverts, the very concept it challenges," argues Linda Hutcheon. Black bodies are by their phenomenological nature are "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political," a description that according to Hutcheon also encapsulates the postmodern condition (Hutcheon 243). In the context of the unjustifiable killing of Eric Garner, it is worth noting that arguments like those formulated by Hutcheon have found an important resonance in the work of writers like bell hooks. hooks argues, for example, that Black people and Black experience should be foregrounded in discussions of postmodernism. She summarizes the Black postmodern condition saying, "for African-Americans our collective condition prior to the advent of postmodernism and perhaps more tragically expressed under current postmodern conditions has been and is characterized by continued displacement, profound alienation and despair" (514). She goes on to add that as a result of postmodernism, non-Black people are beginning to feel similarly. Comparably, this could be seen with the election of Trump and the overflowing white liberal tears that accompanied it; most of these tears, I imagine, were not flowing when Eric Garner was murdered. Unfortunately, what this also means is that in Garner's death and the subsequent

protests along with others, we can see reverberations, repetitions with difference, and the attempt at corporate recuperation.

In 2017, Pepsi launched an ad featuring a celebrity, Kendall Jenner, joining an ambiguous utopian protest/march featuring happy, cheering, multicultural folks. When they come up against the police line, Kendall emerges from the group, faces a police officer and then hands him a can of Pepsi. Immediately, the public picked up on the almost parodic nature by Pepsi of the photograph of a Black Baton Rouge woman standing in front of SWAT team members at a protest of Alton Sterling's murder and the ad was removed (Bogart). I put forth this somewhat tangential information to point out how postmodernity manifests in murdered Black bodies and the ways in which institutions capitalize on the corresponding imagery of protesting, grieving, angry, and brave Black women putting themselves and their bodies on the frontline when directly confronted by violent, trigger-happy police. Ultimately, this repeating, echoing image, I think, is one of grave importance in that it demonstrates the efficacy of circulating spectacular images of Black death for the purposes of self-defense and solidarity. This further draws our critical eye to the ridiculous juxtaposition between Jenner's white body marching for literally nothing and Black women marching to save their lives.

hooks finds postmodern impulses questionable stating, "Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the "subject" when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time" (hooks 515). At best, this theoretical movement is suspect and at worst

insidious. Applied to my contemporary examples, this parallels the emergence of "All Lives Matter" "coinciding" with the phrase and hashtag "Black Lives Matter."

When watching the multitude of videos that surrounded Eric Garner's untimely death in 2014, in the hypervisibility of the Black body, it is possible to lose focus on the fact that a man is being killed not only by assumed protectors, but it has been witnessed and captured on tape. Garner's last words became a coalescing force for protestors in New York and across the United States as people chant and hold up signs declaring, "I can't breathe." This kind of post-event performance highlights the implications of living in a state of terror while also appropriating a victim's words to signal a kind a shared trauma or pain. The aftermath of Garner's death and circulating video includes images and words indicting the injustices enacted on Garner's body, which subsequently became abstracted from the event and utilized to craft a counter-narrative to the myth of equal protection and justice. In this respect, there is a clear parallel between the way that Garner's death made his private body into a public spectacle and the way that, according to Rustom Bharucha, complicity unfolds in the aftermath of global states of terror. Bharucha argues for the affective potential of terror while deconstructing it as an abstract object that functions almost as meme (11). Bharucha offers:

> Part of the seduction of images of terror could lie in the fact that, once exposed in our electronic and digital visual culture, they spread like a virus, stimulating a torrent of interpretations, which, in the final analysis, would seem to take us farther and farther away from the actual political content of the images. (Bharucha 17)

Here Bharucha aptly deconstructs the circulation of images as meme, viral and often nonverbal images that are capable of infiltrating corners of the mind and social media. Due to its diffuse sharing online—through social media and news organizations— it is almost impossible to ascertain the impact of or obtain quantitative information about the number of viewers who have watched Eric Garner's death. Furthermore, utilizing Bharucha's argument, it is easy to see how images of Garner's large body facilitated a white supremacist narrative that though unarmed and choked, his imposing physique constituted a threat to the officers apprehending him. One could argue that even as the video incited a community who recognized a similar threat to their corporeality, one could also say that showing the body of Garner struggling to survive also satiated the trolls searching for deviance, defiance, or any non-compliant gesture on Garner's part. These ideas are not mutually exclusive of each other. As exhibited in the commentary surrounding the deaths of Black men and women who have been publicly assaulted, the white supremacist imagination will consistently find ways to justify the use of lethal force against Black bodies. Clearly, what is reinscribed is the lack of value of Black lives, with a loose cigarette being of greater worth than a Black man's life.

Despite the above mentioned parallels, I would like to problematize Bharucha's claim by also asserting that in his pathologization of shared media however, he does not necessarily allow room for the virility of images to be potentially constructive. Harry Elam, discussing "reality checks," validates my oppositional claim in his reading of the 1992 video of Rodney King's police beating by stating that, "shown repeatedly on the evening news, the raw footage functioned as

a reality check testifying to and validating the actual experiences of other Black men victimized by the police" (176).

What is more relevant, perhaps, are the ways in which these videos as reality checks "reconstitute the spectators as a collective; they potentially racialize and colonize black audiences members in collective blackness" (Elam 175). One can simultaneously consider the reinscription of trauma and possibility of replaying epistemic violence that accompanies mediated performances of domestic terror as instrumental in racial division and unrest. Counter to this, one might also consider the radical potential for liberation and racial uplift as a byproduct of surveillance and sousveillance.

Embedded in the distribution of performances of terror is the idea of enacting pain while also circulating it in a way that is legible to those subjected to sanctioned terror. For example, the circulation of lynching photographs forced Black people to bear witness to the ways and means by which their body could be mutilated or revoked from their possession. Central to the threat of suspended agency and autonomy is the reality that those responsible often go unidentified, unnamed, and unmasked, perpetuating a distinctly white supremacist narrative. Elizabeth Alexander in "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Videos" summarizes a history of Black embodiment and its relationship to legal and cultural subjugation saying:

> If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories that our bodies know. There have always been

> narratives to justify the barbaric practices of slavery and lynching. African Americans have always existed in a countercitizen relationship to the law; how else to contend with knowing oneself as a whole human being when the constitution defined one as three-fifths? (80)

Taking a cue from Alexander, one might position lynching postcards as one narrative, summarily performing its investment in enacting and distributing domestic terror, while the evidences of the brutal murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner may each be positioned as essential narratives and counter-mechanisms to terror. As Elam elaborates, these counter-narratives are capable of capturing public attention and galvanizing communities. Documentation and the widespread sharing of police brutality has certainly shifted public perceptions of how police "serve and protect." Who is subject to and worthy of protection is always already informed by Black pathologization and the concept of policing. The dark irony, of course, lies in the fact that as a Black body, the threat remains that your body can be policed to death.

Who Shows the Body? Disturbing Terror and Trauma and its Reactions

This ability to be policed to death is thoroughly exemplified in the case of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy whose tortured, disfigured body was found in a river in 1955. Till was deemed guilty and murdered by two white vigilantes (later found "not guilty" of abduction and murder) who took the "law" into their own hands. After his death, Mamie Till, Till's mother, insisted upon an open casket, wherein funeral goers and the outside world were forced to see what had been done to her child's body. In August of 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was killed

in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown, suspected of stealing cigarillos from a local store, was unarmed when he was shot by a local police officer. The officer who shot Brown was eventually acquitted of the murder.

I would also like to position the murder of Brown alongside Till. I contend that though these murders happened almost 60 years apart, they resonate in similar ways. Both bodies were perceived as threatening, rehearsing a Black body politic that extends beyond either of their lifespans. Both were subject to applications of justice for perceived crimes; Till allegedly whistled at or flirted with a white woman and Brown was accused of aggressively rushing the officer who shot him. Finally, both narratives demonstrate the kinds of performances of habeas corpus I would like to further explore. While habeas corpus refers legally to the safeguard against unlawful detention, I employ the phrase literally as it means "to show the body." In showing the mutilated body of Emmett Till (and allowing it to be photographed), Till's mother offers up a counter-narrative to white supremacy. In contrast, the showing of Brown's body, left in the street by the police uncovered to be photographed hours after his death, sent a clear message to the local and national Black community.

I would like to point out a few things in this analysis. First, it must be noted that there is the display and then the reading of the display, each of which exist with their own ethics. The display of Till's body riveted the nation because it performed outside of an established visual economy (which in some ways makes it difficult to contemporarily understand). The act of displaying a body is dialectical in that it can work on people in such a way that they become outraged, and consequently change the course of their actions. It is also possible that it reinforces narratives of state

sanctioned terror. I want to also insist that Mamie Till's actions do not stand alone; others such as Diamond Reynolds have followed in her footsteps, displaying the dying body of her boyfriend, Philando Castile, in 2016 on Facebook Live. Is it possible that this performance of terror, that is the displaying of trauma enacted on Castile's body, also acts outside of an established visual economy of social media, particularly Facebook?

Unfortunately, these things that have such amazing, motivating political resonances are subject to cooption. Such is the case with the aforementioned example of Kendall Jenner's Pepsi ad in relation to protests after Eric Garner's death. In March of 2017, Dana Schutz's controversial painting premiered at the Whitney Biennial prompting a series of open letters and protests. The work, called "Open Casket," draws its inspiration from the mutilated body of Emmett Till. With Black deaths being the consequence of hundreds of years of non-normative oppression, it is not unfathomable that the reaction of Black people would also be deviant. Thus, it becomes more likely that showing the body, sharing pictures of violences, which can be easily projected onto my own Black body, results in a crafting solidarity and a distinct counter-narrative to white supremacy. Central to this argument, is the idea in order to bear witness to this image and be interpellated as a part of a subjugated collective, there must first be a recognition of one's own corporeal and psychic vulnerability. That being said, this is not a way of diffusing or defusing terror but rather recuperating and subverting its diffuseness through hope for healing. That is to say, you must see yourself as subject to the same harm, something that is outside of the purview of Schutz's white imagination.

I am deeply curious about role of the audience in this scenario. Contrary to some beliefs, I contend audiences are asked to rehearse a trauma of terrorized Black bodies in gazing at a abstracted replication of the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till. Critics agreed and many Black audience members and artists called for the removal and destruction of the painting. In her open letter, artist Hannah Black states:

> In brief: the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time. (Black qtd. In Greensberger)

She goes on to argue that Schutz's presentation of spectacular Blackpain is unacceptable insisting: "non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material." This also speaks to the work of someone like Brett Bailey, whose treatment of Black and brown bodies in his pieces is symptomatic of the pervasiveness of white artists attempting to "teach" white audiences at the expense of minoritarian subjects, their pain, and experiences[13].

Bioethics theorist Karla F.C. Holloway alleges, "narratives--socializing stories--that are attached to all women and to blacks of both genders have an inordinate control over the potential for private personhood" (6). She goes on to maintain that the ways that Black bodies are raced and gendered profoundly affects their trajectory from private bodies to public spectacles. End the end, this public

[13] See South African artist Brett Bailey's works "Sanctuary" and "Exhibit B" which both feature people of color literally in cages and in museum-like displays.

spectacle that was "Open Casket," incited audience members after the work travelled to other venues, prompting protests and more open letters.

The essential difference between Till and Castile, versus Brown, was who showed the body. We are activated by the display of the bodies that were authorized by people that cared deeply for them. This exhibition, one might argue to be a site of voyeurism, also indicates their love for their family as well as their love for their community. It is both a site at which we pay our respects and we collectively mourn. Scholar Cornel West has often repeated, "Justice is what love looks like in public.[14]" In their disavowal of a lack of equity and indictments in the American legal system, Mamie Till and Diamond Reynolds endeavored to enact their own example of justice in showing what had been done to their loved ones. Perhaps, Mamie Till didn't anticipate the diffusing of her son's body when she held an open casket, but it is entirely possible that she recognized the threat to white power embedded in its distribution. In this pervasive and relentless state of terror, Black bodies are constantly threatened as to be in line with white supremacist logic. To us, what has been revealed is something that was made plain to Emmett Till's mother; there is no non-threatening Black body. The only way those bodies are in line is if they're dead.

Such is the case of many victims of police brutality and homicide, which with the advent of more complicated surveillance technology are subject to have their victimization played outside the context of a local audience and are to an infinite number of people made available for the documentation of the event embodying a public narrative. Judith Butler, in her book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning*

[14] I first heard him state this at a talk at Queens University of Charlotte in 2012.

and Violence, puts forth that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at ones assertive and exposed" (Butler 20). Butler, like bioethics and cultural theorist Karla Holloway draws us to how consider private bodies that due to their vulnerable status are subject to public narrative. This is thoroughly manipulated in the distribution of images of terror, using the violated bodies to perform a specific kind of vulnerability to harm. Butler views death and mourning as political events, which signal relationships that constitute identity, community, and culture (23). Regardless, I am not interested in a performance of death; I am provoked by the possibility that mediated imagery performs and moves us toward a collective identity and spectacle in a state of domestic terror.

As I have carried out the research for this project, I went on a political and intellectual journey. That journey started on Twitter and Facebook. I have found myself pouring over academic texts, some of which directly mentioned figures such as Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and questions of access arose for me. I have, for a while, operated under the assumption that if something is not accessible, then it is not radical. As my library searches brought me to articles stored behind paywalls in JSTOR and Project Muse, I wondered about my non-academic peers who did not have access to these academic theory driven meditations on Black death and pain and was curious about their thoughts. This is not necessarily an indictment of academia and the ivory tower; I, of course am active member of the academic sphere, and while I am deeply suspicious of the "master's tools[15]," I am hopeful that access to

[15] Audre Lorde's quote, frequently taken out of context states that "…Those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning

knowledge produced in the academy ultimately serves the communities surrounding it. When looking at Facebook and Twitter, I found that while some commented shortly after the murders, many more were driven to their keyboards by failed indictments. One friend lamented the death of Eric Garner:

> This is about more than individuals with malicious intent. This is about more than body cameras on police. This is about more than one man who could not breathe because a police officer was choking him. This is about the intentional suffocation of an entire community. Every day, every breath is hard fought. I am outraged and disgusted. Outrage and disgust is a privilege. It means I still have breath to shout. If you are not suffocating you'd better be shouting. (Gruner)

Another friend posted on July 6th, 2016:

> Alton Sterling was murdered, and his killing, and so many other killings, destroys all of our humanity as it becomes normal for black people to be murdered by police. The lynchings of 2016 are just as heinous and barbaric as the lynchings in our country's past. This must end. #blacklivesmatter. (Reyes)

I was particularly drawn in by these thoughtful comments and calls to action as they were being issued by (in my opinion) progressive white folks. These comments felt somewhat comforting compared to the hard theoretical analysis carried out by some of the articles that I had read; I felt seen. But this was short-lived as I broadened my search terms; I began to stumble upon mentioning of those left out of the #BlackLivesMatter narratives, those whose names we do not say. My journey pressed

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how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (26-27).

me to look into their stories, how their performances of everyday life had also been cut short by way of this terrorism I have discussed. In this space, I pivot toward what I could find of them, compelled to have them included and honored. Who were these lives also extinguished by police, often with a similar relationship to surveillance, that inevitably presupposed the embarrassing excuse of "They were outside the scope of my project?"

Miriam Carey

In order to shift to these Black subjects who are often forgotten, I will begin by addressing a case in which no known examples of clear sousveillance exists[16]. This lack stands in glaring contrast to the hypersurveillance of Miriam Carey before, during, and after being shot by police. On October 3rd, 2013, less than a month after the Navy Yard shooting occurred in Washington D.C., Carey drove down from Connecticut with her 13 month-old daughter in the backseat. In her car, she approached the White House gate, refused to comply with Secret Service agents' commands. She made a U-turn from the gate and proceeded down Constitution Avenue to Pennsylvania. She continued to the West Lawn of the Capitol building. Seemingly attempting to leave this area as well, Carey backed up into a police car before officers opened fire on her vehicle. She was killed and at least 26 bullets were found in her car (Montgomery). Her daughter was found safe and uninjured.

[16] There exist on YouTube multiple videos surrounding the incident. One seems to show Carey leaving the White House gate and departing toward the Capitol building. However, there is only audio available documenting the gunshots once she reached the area. I am not recognizing the materials as sousveillance as they do not seem to be intended to capture the actions of the police for the purposes of protection.

In a lengthy, exhaustive article, *The Washington Post* details a minute-by-minute take on her last movements in the city leading up to her death. It calls into question Carey's motivations to drive to D.C. to accomplish something we will likely never understand. Montgomery poses a series of questions including "Was Miriam Carey mentally ill (and is that relevant)" (Montgomery)? The author cites three incidents wherein Carey exhibited unusual behavior; she claimed to be stalked and taped, she locked her and her daughter in a bathroom refusing to come out, and finally refused to go inside citing a "lockdown" and "surveillance" from President Obama. She was at least twice taken to a local hospital, likely for psychiatric evaluation. The family also revealed that after the birth of her daughter she had experienced post-partum psychosis for which she had received treatment.

I draw attention to this information from the article not to detract from what happened on October 3rd; Carey should not have been killed. She was treated as a hostile intruder when the family can offer no plausible reason that would be so. In the shadow of the Navy Yard shooter, it is easy to see how officers would have been on edge and ensuing narratives suggested that the situation necessitated their reactions. Why officers would respond to "reckless driving" with deadly force on a woman with a child in her car is somewhat confounding. Regardless of the reason Carey drove to Washington, I do want to concentrate on a larger pattern many activists and I have noticed. That is in the intersection of Blackness, policing, and disability.

I want to offer a caveat that this section enters into some potentially tricky and problematic territory regarding Black people and disability particularly as it pertains to state sanctioned terror. Some sense of the complexity of that territory can be seen

in studies examining the fate of other women like Miriam Carey. In their article on Korryn Gaines, a Black woman who was murdered by the police after a standoff in her home caused by a warrant for traffic court, Zoe Spencer and Olivia N. Perlow, for example, begin by situating the deaths of Sandra Bland and Gaines as neo-lynchings that are directly related to traumatic reactions to undermining or questioning the perpetuation of white supremacy by white men. They comment that positioning these stories historically potentially highlights them in a way that separates them from mere "conspiracy theories" (Spencer and Perlow 168). They call out claims that Gaines might be labeled as "crazy" or "mentally ill" particularly by "the white press," specifically turning to her behavior deemed verbally abusive and physically resisting the police. I am reaffirming the notion that disability and resistance are not necessarily mutually exclusive of each other; Miriam Carey could have had a psychiatric disability and simultaneously consciously resisted the police's orders. That is to say, I, in this intervention, do not wish to revoke agency or power from the Black women and men that I discuss in this chapter. Furthermore, I recognize the similarly fungible language of disability, impairment, and Blackness. Earlier in the previous chapter, I mentioned Josh Lukin's assertion that Black people, including scholars, are oftentimes resistant to or suspicious of analogies relating to Blackness and disability. This is not a baseless assertion.

I want to briefly revisit the claim that videos of police surveillance can serve as self-defense. First, I want to point out that it is not known whether Gaines had a disability; some sources maintain that she was possibly exposed to lead poisoning, a

kind of disabling that is done by environmental racism.[17] That being said, throughout the standoff, Gaines posted videos of the police armed at her door and recorded conversations that were then posted on Facebook and Instagram. After her murder, police asked that the videos be taken down from both platforms, an order with which the social media platforms complied. It is unclear what potential impact the videos would have had other than showcasing Gaines' lack of compliance and performance of respect for those invading her home. What was so threatening about that? Furthermore, what would sousveillance have illuminated about the murder of Carey? I want to move forward, contemplating the possibilities for movement toward the concept of justice that comes out of sousveillance, noticing how sousveillance is often made impossible in circumstances surrounding Black bodies and disablement.

Sandra Bland, Jamycheal Mitchell, and the Subtle Redaction of Surveillance

I first want to explore the idea of subtle redactions of surveillance and sousveillance in cases where disability is present in Black bodies. In these case studies, I focus on the ways the police and legal system subtly display their corruption by purposefully invoking absence. These actions are done to protect their institutions and sometimes to further indict dead persons, who can no longer attest to their maltreatment or conditions of their demise. I have demonstrated and will continue to underscore how these bodies are simultaneously hypersurveilled and then are made invisible. In July of 2016, police dashcam footage emerged of a Black woman named

[17] See Flint, Michigan and the ongoing crisis of poisoned water supplies that disproportionately affect people of color.

Sandra Bland was pulled over and Tasered by an officer, Brian Encinia. After 72 hours in a local jail cell, Bland was found dead in her cell. Her death was ruled a suicide by hanging. Immediately, the public was suspicious of and inflamed by her handling by the police department in Texas. What began as a simple traffic stop quickly escalated and ended with Bland's death.

While I am not attempting argue that Bland was assaulted outside of the dashcam footage or killed by police, I would like to briefly concentrate on the role that the surveillance of Bland played in this case study. Initially, dash cam footage of Bland's stop and arrest showed an increasingly agitated woman, attempting to smoke a cigarette inside her car after being instructed to put it out and step out of her car. After exercising her right to continue to hold and smoke the cigarette, violence was inflicted upon her body and she was Tasered.

Footage reveals a performance of everyday life that became unfeasible as Bland was assaulted. The release of the police archive came in waves, beginning with the altered video of Bland's arrest. What followed was the unedited dashcam footage featuring more of the altercation between Bland and the officer. After she is removed from her car, Bland and most of the officer's body move out of the purview of the camera. However, she is still being audibly surveilled and her increasing distress at pulled over a "for a failure to signal" is repeated, revised, and reiterated.

After her partial forceful removal from her car, it seems that Bland makes an attempt at her own sousveillance. Her phone in hand, the officers insist that she "get off" her phone. Bland responds adamantly: "I'm not on the phone. I have a right to record. It's my property." The officer continues to demand that she put down her

phone until within thirty seconds, she places it on the trunk of her car. Interestingly, it wasn't until 2019 that the evidence of Bland's sousveillance was released to the public showing the officer clearly pointing a Taser at her and yelling commands. Instead of this being released right away, for three years we were left without the evidence of Bland's act of sousveillance before her arrest, presumably setting out to prove mistreatment in court or to save her own life (Associated Press).

Instead, we are left we the evidence of the dashcam and the voice of Bland narrating her own arrest and mistreatment. Outside of the view of the camera, she can be heard repeatedly responding to the officer's demands and after being told not to move disputes the command: "I can't go nowhere with your fucking knee on my back." She broadcasts the sounds of her subjection, her body being violently, verbally and physically, policed into compliance. At another point, she recognizes her own surveillance or perhaps a moment of sousveillance saying: "Thank you for recording. Thank you. All this for a traffic signal. Slammed me into the ground and everything." While the officer can be heard telling someone to leave, it is unclear whether Bland refers to a bystander or to the officer's dashcam. Regardless, the knowledge of such prompts her to more specifically detail what was happening to her at the time, much in the same way that Reynolds is heard narrating Castile's death.

Though the recording features the officer audibly threatening her, no charges were filed against him. It was only after people began to speculate about Bland's suicide (including, but not limited to, the social media rumor that she was deceased in her mugshot) were another set of recordings released from inside the jail. This also included clearly edited footage showed Bland being booked into the facility and her

entrance into the cell. What was absent from the footage was the discovery of her body and the time preceding it.

I would like to consider the hypothesis that the videos and images of Bland, along with their circulation, acted as a post-dramatic spectacle of terror and trauma. These unscripted performances, brought to us by non-actors, made Bland's abuse and death legible on a national stage. Ultimately, Bland's videos and body serve as open texts upon which narratives of excessive force and domestic terror can be written. As I detailed before, this a narrative that Mamie Till and Diamond Reynolds contributed to through the display of two unjustifiably murdered Black bodies. Though I do not wish to posit the death Bland or any other person as any kind of theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann is useful in his observations about spectatorship. Lehmann characterizes the features open texts. "The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning" (Lehmann 6). This being so, the viewers of videos of Bland are not just spectators; they become visual and auditory witnesses to the violence that can be enacted on Black bodies. Lehmann describes the post-dramatic as brought about by the "omnipresence of the media in everyday life since the 1970s" (22). Bland's death could have likely gone unnoticed had it not been for the revelation of edited and then unedited dashcam footage. While her death provoked much speculation, it also prompted necessary inquiry into the actions of police officers booking prisoners who express suicidality. Lehmann concludes, "While the dramatic body was the carrier of the agon, the postdramatic body shows us the image of its

agony. This prevents all representation, illustration and interpretation with the help of the body as a mere medium" (163). Because of this, I reason that Bland's imprisoned body became a site of meaning, making and her death in her cell, a narrative to be interrogated. Bland in those moments represented nothing but herself, and her own journey to a new job. It is in our consideration of the postdramatic that Bland's body resists being a metaphor or stand in. Joao Vargas rightly points out that, "Police brutality is just one aspect of a constellation of unendingly generating anti-black forces" (Vargas). It is impossible to plot or reduce that constellation to a stage. Though ultimately, I contend that it is problematic and ethically ambiguous to consider the videos of Bland and her body as performances; I argue that it is the language of performance and spectacularity that are useful in pointing us to how her death produced a script of legislation. As I will show, this is necessary when considering the number of Black lives that have been ended to police action or neglect.

Five dollars. That is the reason why 24-year-old Jamychael Mitchell was arrested in April 15, 2015. I want to reiterate this fact; he was arrested for stealing approximately five dollars' worth of snacks from a local convenience store in Portsmouth, Virginia. I stress this as a reminder that, like Brown, Mitchell's life was devalued in lieu of items that could be purchased at a convenience store. After a mental health screening, he was twice ordered to go to a separate mental health facility in Virginia, orders that were never properly followed up on. Instead, he was housed at the Hampton Roads Regional Jail. Over the course of his time there, the man, diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder deteriorated mentally and

physically. His speech and thought processes were at times unintelligible and he suffered from an impairment related to his leg. Mitchell lost around 36 pounds from the time he was imprisoned in April, to the time that his body was found lifeless in his cell. He suffered and died as his jailors, social workers, and medical professionals looked on callously. There are inmates that attested to the horror of his treatment and at one point there was video that would have likely back up their claims. It was, of course, conveniently destroyed before a lawsuit could be filed. The lawsuit found fault in multiple parties: the jail, the medical professionals, and many others they deemed complicit in his untimely death. It suggested that Mitchell was treated horribly, starved, and medically neglected. While officers insisted that he declined food and medicine, other inmates contested with a contrary narrative, stating that Mitchell was not regularly given food because he would not return his tray. According to them, he was frequently stripped of his clothing after trying to flush them down the toilet and uttered pleas for help in his moments of lucidity.

I argue that Bland and Mitchell's murders was ones of neglect. Mitchell's body was destroyed over time as his jailers failed to attend to him and his needs. As a disabled man, it does not seem that he was able to truly advocate for himself in his moments of psychosis and paradoxically, he was alienated from family members who could have served as advocates as he was not capable of putting them on his visitor's list. Accordingly, they were not able to witness Mitchell's deterioration that was glaringly apparent to officers and other inmates. Similarly, Bland's intake information suggests that she disclosed her own suicidality and was not placed on a watch. However, for many, her death is a contested territory with some believing that it was

highly unlikely that she killed herself on the way to a new job and new opportunities[18]. Despite the difference between the case studies though, I would like to draw attention again to the similar, repetitious, subtle redactions of information. We know that both Bland and Mitchell's bodies were hypersurveilled during their time in custody. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both police departments failed to produce unedited evidence of the victim's time in custody. Surveillance of Mitchell's decline was destroyed prior to the lawsuit being filed by his estate and against his family's insistence. If one needs any more evidence that this is the rule and not the exception, one would need not look any further than Bland's jail cell in 2019. In an incident that was only a small blip on the news radar, it was reported that a man was found hanging the same cell as Bland.

These gaps in surveillance only serve to highlight the incongruity of policing Blackness. These bodies are hypersurveilled until their untimely death when they are not. It is a convenient truth that there was no video (and in Bland's case altered video) of the events leading to these people's deaths. For Bland, these alterations and absences for some people activated a vigilante spirit, calling into question the smallest details of her arrest: the tape, her clothing, and the way her hair rested in her mugshot. These redactions assured the unlikelihood that police would be held accountable for their actions before a trial could ever occur. These censorship or distortion of surveillance when Black bodies are so often unnecessarily surveilled demonstrates the state of exception Black people in the United States inhabit. If we are simultaneously visible and invisible, what does it mean to bear witness to our

[18] See Brittany Cooper's article 'If I Die in Police Custody': Why Sandra Bland's Death Is Just the Latest Evidence That Black America Is under Attack."

bodies, our lives, so easily being taken from us? What these videos expose, especially sousveillance is the festering wound of white supremacy and our ability as Black people to reclaim a larger narrative of how our bodies are shown and treated in this world.

Recordings, Testimony, and Bearing Witness (Mediated Impact)

I would like to demonstrate the complexity of how images and filming work on the body and further suss out the ethics of filming dead or dying bodies. If the videos disperse terror then that would mean those that chose to capture Black lives at their most vulnerable moments, were accomplices to terrorism. Should they be held accountable as such? To some extent, such questions have been raised by other writers in seemingly different contexts, which with some reflection do not seem so far removed at all. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, for example, Susan Sontag considers the relationship between images and wars waged on international battlefields. Given that my argument that a war continues to be waged against Black bodies, I will draw upon some of her arguments. She states that:

> There is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it–say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken– or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be. (Sontag 42)

That brings up the question, is it inherently wrong to be a voyeur? Following the definition of a sexual voyeur, Merriam-Webster defines a voyeur as "a prying

observer who is usually seeking the sordid or the scandalous" ("Voyeur"). Sontag indicts many agents as she suggests that the voyeur should experience shame in looking, seeking to look at or create such images. I argue that this offering is predicated on ableist and racist assumptions about who is capable of doing what in such situations. One might believe that there is, of course, a responsibility to your community to help those in need along with a sometimes competing responsibility to keep one's self to keep safe.

Furthermore, I believe wholeheartedly that these videos' existence does not demand watching but rather requests it. The premise of these videos is that we exist in an overwhelmingly visual world. Visual narratives are most effectively countered by other visual narratives. In a white supremacist society that insists that people are not dying or being murdered with indemnity, then how do we signal a problem if you can't show it? Consequently, the question becomes if you employ the traumatic visual language of the oppressor (re: lynching photographs), or the master's tools, to what degree are you complicit in the terrorism being perpetuated?

I don't think that this is the case or are the questions that would lead us toward liberation. It has become evident that folks that find themselves more caught up in the fact that the video exists almost completely overlook the fact that people are being murdered, indicating a much larger problem. Indeed, people who film videos are not so much an accomplice, but are included in a larger story of state sanctioned terror. Do we then create an ethics of filming and sharing or should the ethics be on the viewer? I believe that it is important to reiterate the various differences in videos and how they are shared. In the same way that Till's mother opened his casket so that his

image could be shared, one could also argue that Diamond Reynolds acted in a similar way. In an interview not long after the murder of Castile she stated:

> So I chose to allow the video to go live 10 seconds before my phone died because I wanted everybody in the world to see what the police do and how they roll, and it's not right. It's not acceptable. I didn't do it for pity. I didn't do it for fame. I did it so that the world knows that these police are not here to protect and serve us. They are here to assassinate us. ("'They Are Here to Kill Us Because We Are Black': Girlfriend of Philando Castile On Police Shootings")

What then does it mean to bear witness to these events, whether in real time or through mediated repetition? Is there a way of creating an ethic of engagement with these cultural products? On July 7, 2016, a Facebook group titled, "The Body is Not an Apology," posted a photo in response to police murders with the caption:

> We will not share the videos of Black death. We refuse to re-traumatize Black folks and make a spectacle of Black death. Please be mindful of how the circulation of these videos might further hurt Black people. ("The Body")

This statement was accompanied by the names of Alton Sterling and Castile among others. This statement issued by a progressive body-positive group is clearly juxtaposed but not necessarily contradicted by Reynold's statement. As a witness in real time, Reynolds decided to show her testimony of her boyfriend's death so that others could bear witness and know that it had happened. She purposefully performed as a narrator for Facebook Live, commenting on what was happening in the car even with her and her daughter's life still in danger. The group on the other hand insisted

on acknowledging the deaths, pain, and outrage with words rather than circulating the videos, many of which had been seen already by the time of the post. I am not suggesting that either one of these was the best choice or the most effective but rather suggesting that they served different purposes for those who viewed them. Viewing death, while painful, is to view the abject material that white supremacy creates as it purposefully targets Black bodies. With these videos, it is made explicitly clear exactly how Black people are denied their rights as citizens and their suffering made negligible. Thus, I have come to the conclusion that to view Blackpain, that has always already been a spectacularized performance of trauma and terror, purposefully and ethically is key to launching oneself forward toward Black healing.

Sharing Blackpain and the Hope of Healing: A Conclusion

In this era, treating the U.S. like a war-torn country, other nations issue pertinent warnings to their Black and brown citizens, encouraging them to cooperate respectfully with the American police if they visit. They have warned them that their bodies could be subject to the same pain that American Black people historically and contemporarily experience.

If as King and Scarry suggest, pain becomes the destroyer of language, it is also valuable to think through how the pain of living in a state of terror can be shared without also being destroyed. While the video of brutal murders can easily be positioned as exploitative and needless re-inscriptions of trauma, it is also possible that the sharing of images can be an act of solidarity and movement towards healing. King discusses the idea that the Black church is central to the sharing of Black pain in

the way that suffering is articulated through public shouting that bypasses language. Hopefully, this does not draw a false (and extremely problematic) equivalency between the Black church and the virtual space of the Internet, but rather emphasizes the need for sites of sharing. I argue that it is possible that these videos, along with their allotted commentary boxes on Facebook, hold a kind of space for processing the cultural and psychological impact of harm. Clearly, the act of distilling Blackpain into a fixed 140-character medium is an impossible task and consequently attention must be focused on the affective potential of the act of sharing, mourning, and the hope of naming and expelling pain.

Agostinho, Antz, and Ferreira also examine how people mourn and work through grief while positioning the act of mourning as always already political. "When mourning is not successful, when the subject hangs onto the lost object, melancholia emerges as a pathological and unhealthy condition" (2). That is to say that the mediated performance of brutality and death becomes the lost object to which Black subjects hold on to and share. However, to posit this holding on as pathology reinforces conceptions of the divergent Black body that are not necessarily productive frameworks. Consequently, the authors in dialogue with Freud also point to the ways in which cherishing the "lost object" can be an act of resistance. They go on to say holding on to artifact becomes a way of "keeping the memory of the deceased alive and encouraging a critical and unsettling remembrance that does not comply with the conventionalized acceptation of loss and the containment of anxiety or the suppression of problematic memories in society" (2).

Recording videos of death and violence and sharing them is not normative behavior. However, with Black deaths being the consequence of hundreds of years of non-normative oppression, it is not unfathomable that the reaction of Black people would be deviant. Thus, it becomes more likely that sharing videos of violences, many of which can be easily projected on your body, results in a crafting solidarity and a distinct counter-narrative to white supremacy. Central to this argument is the idea that in order to bear witness to these videos and be interpellated as a part of a subjugated collective, there must first be a recognition of one's own corporeal and psychic vulnerability.

I open these brief lines of interrogation into mediated performances of private bodies subjected to terror in order to draw attention to the other Black bodies that are currently at stake. Simply put, the stakes are too high not to. I realize the potential of my body, or my brother's, or my sister's to be featured not as a profile picture but as a replayed viral spectacle of domestic terror. As it circulates, the images attempt to organize—as scholars such as Susan Buck Morss draws our attention to—the conscious and active dissent from oppression. Contrary to Bharucha's claim, I contend that when a video or image is shared via social media, it often seems that the viewer attempts to draw attention to the original incident and the associated state of terror.

Prolific Black author Toni Morrison perhaps most concisely illustrates the ways in which Black bodies never quite belong to those that inhabit them. She claims that a character's response was "Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (*Beloved* 225). In

response, this paper has explored the ways in which mediated images are circulated as a way of reclaiming the narrative of one's own subjugation, becoming a way of eschewing the schoolteacher and gathering together other students to recuperate how their bodies our defined. These videos have emerged as a way of bearing witness and performing solidarity in a state of domestic terror. Furthermore, the sharing has a potentially unique wordless ability to signal to a process of healing and hope that is consistently deferred as justice is denied. Consequently, I would hope that it would not be in vain.

Chapter 4: The Resistant Slow Drag: Black Depression, the Erotic, and the Threat of Hope.

> Slow drag was popular in Southern jook joints and occurred late at night by dancers exhausted from hours of fast paced dancing. Couples would hold each other tight and slow grind to the slow, erotic music. When moving in any direction, the first foot stepped and the second dragged to join it, illustrating a slow delayed sensuality. The couple might move away from each other slightly and then come back in and grind until the end of the evening, sometimes barely moving. (George-Graves 58-9)

In this chapter, I employ a methodology of non-linear theoretical association speaking of blues dancing historically (late 19th and early 20th century) and contemporarily. This is not to say that there are not distinct differences, many of which I will point out in interrogating the ways in which Black bodies move, but rather I investigate bodies' movement through time and space, socially, politically, culturally, and physically. Terror, oppression, and trauma operate across limits of time rather than according to it. Trauma's pervasiveness in the lives of Black folks means that a neat, linear categorization of Black lives and bodies is disingenuous in that it illustrates a progression of oppression rather than addressing the ways in which violence operates transhistorically. Provided this is true, I will inspect blues dancing and music to reveal its relationship to terror and oppression. Following this, I will look at how it also accompanies the concepts of resistance and solidarity, how it is constituted by the erotic, as well as the white and queer legacies of blues dancing in this contemporary moment.

For this project, I draw heavily on Black feminist thought along with Black feminist auto-ethnography[19]. In this way, I am thinking through my own body, not as a way of generalizing or constructing a larger narrative about blues dancing. Rather, I employ Black feminist auto-ethnography in order to highlight a performance of Black visibility in a world that frequently asserts anti-Black sentiment. Robin Boylorn theorizes that Black feminist auto-ethnography is significant in that it begs the question, how do my experiences "represent other blackgirl realities?" Boylorn and other auto-ethnographers are indebted to scholars such as Deborah Reed-Danahay who defines auto-ethnography as "self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (qtd. in Boylorn). The self-narrative that I attempt to construct is one that foregrounds my dancing Black body while working to understand its relationship to Black sexualities and the social contexts of blues partner dancing.

I was particularly activated by an article authored by multiple Black feminist ethnographers working as a collective. One ethnographer aptly summarizes my own feelings of a need for auto-ethnography saying:

> Writing alone is not enough to display the complexity of blackness as lived experience. We understand the body as a vested site of cultural negotiation. Cultural practices are an enacted politics of citizenship. What people 'do' connects them to specific communities of belonging. Therefore, simply to write is to ignore other modes of communication through which bodies make meaning. ("Quilt" 70-1)

[19] Boylorn, Robin M. "Blackgirl Blogs, Auto/Ethnography, and Crunk Feminism." *Liminalities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2 Apr. 2013, pp. 73–82.

In other words, the work of constructing this partially auto-ethnographic project is only a portion of the activist labor that others and I are invested in doing. In dancing and writing about my own Black body, I also hope to demonstrate how I participate in "communities of belonging" and in doing so assert that my life, like other Black and brown lives, does matter and has a place in this world. This project is consequently indebted to Black feminist work and a "story of survival" (78). Following an established logic of belonging and homeplaces, I also incorporate into this body of work theories of home building found in the contributions of scholars such as bell hooks and D. Soyini Madison. I would like to also connect discourses to show that this description of Blackgirl auto-ethnography making is not dissimilar to Audre Lorde's imagined uses of the erotic. Lorde makes a case for the erotic power of doing autoethnography in concluding that it counters mistrust of embodied ways of knowing. "As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge" (53). For this reason, I will frequently return to my own body and experiences alongside theory to contemplate the phenomena of blues.

Oppression and the "Real" History of Blues

When I asked a Prague dancer about the history of blues dancing, she described it as kind of like an alphabet where one could draw from it to form a vocabulary to make larger sentences. She gathered that we perhaps did grounded movements based upon slave movement. Another dancer commented, "American people went dancing after work to these, you know, small bars to relax after hard

work. And they had fun and it was beautiful. And they were creating something unique, something that didn't exist before." Other Europeans I spoke with, summarizing the history of blues music and dancing, talk about how it “evolved” over time. In their version of the Black cultural product, movement from person-to-person up until the point that it reaches Europe is a progress narrative rather than a site of rhizomatic choreography that moves non-linearly.

Diasporic Black people have always needed mechanisms for survival in an anti-Black world. I along with historians such as LeRoi Jones (also known as Amiri Baraka), Danielle Robinson, Albert Murray, and Jacqui Malone, put forth in various ways that blues dancing has always served as such. First, however, I would like to point to LeRoi Jones’ articulation of blues music as an entry point into talking about its relationship to blues dancing. I assert that blues music and blues movement are intrinsically linked, with one gesturing toward the other. If blues music serves as an archive of oppression, then blues dancing becomes the repertoire of trauma.

Here, I define oppression in this particular section as systemic violence enacted on minoritarian, in this case Black bodies. Jones states that blues is “a native American music, the product of the black man in this country: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (Jones 17). It is in this way that blues is directly tied to the enslavement of African peoples. While it is reductive to say that “slavery created blues,” Jones contends that, “Blues did begin in slavery, and it is from that ‘peculiar institution,’ as it was known euphemistically, that blues did find its particular form” (50). Consequently, although it is not accurate to say that blues

was born out of slavery, it is fair to say that slavery crafted it and its trajectory. In his book, *Blues People*, Jones plots out the origins of blues music connecting it to Black bodies. With these enslaved and freed Black bodies came suffering that traveled with them as they migrated after emancipation.

Jones notes, as other scholars do, that the newly freed "struck out to find themselves new places to live, or at least safer places" (51). This ties in directly to Robinson's argument that oppression led directly to blues people (musicians and dancers) moving from the rural South to the urban North, taking their music and movement with them. With the failed project of reconstruction behind them and the threat of Jim Crow ahead, many Black folks migrated from the South to the North. Despite the oppression and hardships Black people continued to endure, Robinson explains, "Nonetheless, dancing was a powerful symbol that forged connections that had been strained and broken. Such linkages were essential to migrants for building a greater sense of belonging in a new city" (Robinson 48). According to her, dancing became a way for Black people, in spite of the harm perpetuated against their bodies, to make home with each other in their communities. She, like Malone, highlights such sites as the juke joint, where Black folks were allowed to come together, dance, and drink. Robinson continues Jones' line of thought that African captives begot American cultural producers as she says that these new Americans:

> …were perfecting an amalgamation of rural and urban African American dance history and by extension culture-- at a time when black men and women were widely assumed to have been stripped of all connection to their history

and African-based culture by the slave trade and centuries of forced illiteracy. (Robinson 49)

What blues dancing shows ultimately, was that this stripping of culture and identity, a push toward ensuring social death, was a failed project of white supremacy. I would like to underscore how exactly the acts of oppression that forced enslavement and regulated the bodies of Black people resulted in the production of blues music and dancing alongside the production of trauma.

Trauma and Blues

I argue that in blues dancing, the dancer "becomes an involuntary rehearsal-machine, performing variations of a lost event that is not so much distorted as *unavailable*" (Sofer 121). This gives us an compelling entry point into the relationship between oppression, trauma, and blues dancing in that it highlights the ways in which oppressive action becomes removed from the performed cultural product. In this section, I put forward that one can utilize a similar dialectic between trauma and oppression and Diana Taylor's archive and repertoire. They are distinct separate ideas on the surface that are also capable of collapsing and feeding into each other. In effect, my contention is that trauma acts as the social, cultural, political, and physical kinesthetic residue of violence; it is in no way static. Directly tied to this movement residue, is the music that produces it.

Discourses of trauma are an integral way of exploring the life-altering effects of white supremacy and also necessary to consider processes of healing. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* is a feminist take on trauma studies. I would like to

remind us of her insistence that trauma is predominantly characterized by "its power to inspire helplessness and terror" (34). This, I argue, makes evident a clear connection to the range of post-traumatic feelings that enacted and legislated white supremacy elicits as can be found in blues dancing.

Scholars such as Harvey Young argue that the Black body constitutes an archive in that it acts as a keeper of Black cultural memory. I would like to briefly focus on the Black body as archive in blues dancing. In her book, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich advocates for an "archive of feelings" or "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception." Cvetkovich aptly applies similar language as Young speaking to the "repository" that encapsulates trauma. She acknowledges the fact that "trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and disassociation, it often seems to leave behind no record at all" (7). Somewhat contrary to this belief however, I contend that trauma itself is the record of oppression despite its elusive and imprecise nature. Perhaps most importantly what we can draw from Cvetkovich is her assertion that:

> Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression such as testimony, and new forms of monument, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an

> unusual archive, whose materials in pointing to trauma's ephemerality are themselves frequently ephemeral. (7)

It is in this way, Cvetkovich provides a direct connection between trauma and archive, deepening the dialectical relationship between Taylor's proposed archive and repertoire by illuminating the ways in which an ephemeral repertoire of traumatic actions produces an archive of traumatic residue that produces traumatic subjects. I argue that this is the case with blues dancing and the Slow Drag, itself constituting an "archive of feelings' with traumatic residue embedded in it.

Thinking back to Patterson and Sexton's response, I am recycling the notion that out of the phenomena of social death is produced social life such as that found in blues dancing. I add that blues is a productive process that has helped and continues to help people through centuries of continued trauma. As a dance, blues is a collective endeavor, a performed thing that surfaces trauma while reducing the chances of atomization. The effects of trauma, I argue, are both performed in blues music and in blues vernacular movement.

As I stated earlier, there is much slippage between blues music and blues movement. However, for the purposes of interrogating trauma I would like to briefly differentiate them with the hopes of exposing their relationship as a means by which Black people can perform "coming home." In her analysis, Robinson emphasizes connections between feelings of home, memory, nostalgia, and bodies for Black people saying, "To them it did not matter that the dance was actually and Afro-Euro-American hybrid dance form, only that it felt like home" (Robinson 56). What she is pointing to here is a history of dance hybridity in that European tradition helped blues

dancing through the imposition of partnered dance; African movement historically did not involve partnered coupling. Regardless, the nostalgia for home is somewhat false. Black dancers longed for a safe home that never quite existed and can never quite exist as long as terrorizing anti-Black sentiment is pervasive.

Albert Murray illustrates a complicated and traumatic history of blues music and movement in *Stomping the Blues*. Blues music is often characterized by its sense of depression, longing, and love lost. However, Murray argues, "with all its so-called blue notes and overtones of sadness, blues music in its very nature and function is nothing if not a form of diversion" (Murray 45). That is to say, blues music is as much fun as it is depressing. The relationship to trauma is clear. Blues music signals the traumas of slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching among other horrors. The lyrics indicate violences played out on Black bodies while at the same time creating a space of levity. Murray ties this directly to movement saying, "But blues music regardless of its lyrics almost always induces dance movements that is the direct opposite of resignation, retreat, or defeat" (45). For Murray, the movement was informed by and a reaction to the music that emerged from trauma. Despite this, blues dancing was a way of lifting people's spirits. The diversionary tactics of blues, I deduce, were political in that they actively mitigated the residue of traumatic material.

Grey, a blues dancer from Denver, and I talk about the relationship between grief, mourning, and the collective spirit of blues dancers. He tells me:

> Grief is experiencing a feeling, sadness, a loss by yourself. But mourning is doing that with a group of people. I think about that a lot as a dancer and about that experience. I think that's in a lot of ways what we're all searching

> for is a way to mourn our losses. A way to really feel our feelings as a community. Our sadness. Our grief. And instead of it weighing us all down individually, being able to support each other through that. I think that's what ultimately drives people to come back to blues dancing more so than anything else.

My mind quickly goes back to August of 2015 when I found out a blues dancing friend had been murdered. I still had unpacked boxes that he'd helped move, a bike he'd helped to take apart. I still had the memory of his breath inhaling and exhaling as we danced in Oregon. He was one of the last dances I'd had there. In November, I was able to return to Eugene and it felt like something had distinctly changed. The loss felt pervasive with bodies feeling heavier and steps more weighted. There was a kind of care executed on the dance floor that was unprecedented and I couldn't help but to connect these changes back to the absence of my friend. This absence became manifested in the realized traumatic material that is blues dancing. Though these dances were layered with grief, they were also a celebration of being united with those I had made home with.

Anytime Black people use their bodies to do anything, there is a performative politic involved. Murray, in response to music argues there was also a political reaction to "the elemental facts of the everyday struggle for existence." He goes on to show:

> The political implication is inherent in the attitude toward experience that generates the blues-music counterstatement in the first place. It is the disposition to persevere (based on tragic, or, better still, an epic sense of life)

> that blues music at its best not only embodies but stylizes, extends, elaborates, and refines into art. (Murray 51, 68)

For Murray, the mere "attitude" of blues music is resistant. Consequently, the cultural product that is blues dancing was and continues to be a way to invoke joy through the moving Black body. To me, this is an act of resistance.

An Oregon dancer responds to my question about what makes a good connection:

> And then in close embrace, a really good connection with someone, it's like all of the good parts of making love without the sex. It's that feeling of trust and intimacy. The feeling of being with another person physically and connected in a way that both of you want to be connected. It's this feeling of surrender but at the same time strength. (Richard)

He, like I and other dancers, considers connecting to another person as an act of refusal to accept a lack of intimacy and alienation prevalent in the larger world. I argue that historically and contemporary, blues dancing and the Slow Drag can be viewed as resistant.

Resistance and Blues

In examining the potential for resistance in blues dancing, I feel that it is necessary to explicitly state the resistant qualities of blues vernacular movement and position it alongside the potential for joy and pleasure. First, I claim that blues dancing performs a resistant repertoire of knowledge. Reaffirming the legibility of social dance, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz notes:

> The black body in America has long been legislated and controlled by political systems both legal and customary. In social dance, the black body achieves a freedom from traditional American structures defining legitimate corporeality. The dancing black body, responding to and provoking the drumbeat, acts performatively against the common American law of black abjection. (DeFrantz 71)

If this is so, then we must recognize the resistant affective potential that is found in sharing the gestures of blues vernacular movement, which is legible and motivates action as much as it instructs. While Malone builds upon preexisting scholarship arguing that an embodied knowledge embedded in dance gesture can be and has been historically transferred in social dance forums, I argue that this transferal activates a multivalent education that is resistant to oppression. In blues traditions, the dancer responding to the music is instructive. What can be read as simple step and collect can also make legible acts of continuous movement through times of ruptured rhythm. This does not have just physical value, but it provides the Black body with a certain knowledge of how to survive in the United States. In order to live and to resist, you must literally keep it moving.

I am cautious in the analysis in that I fear that space has not been held for the positive affect that is central to blues dancing and a means by which it has survived. For this reason, I would like to briefly look at the ways in which blues dancing is resistant in forms of happiness, joy, and pleasure.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, like justice, are constantly denied and deferred for Black folks in United States. Articulating a relationship between the

Black body and the music, Murray argues that blues dancers move and play not "to do so in self commiseration than because it helps them get rid of the blues." He goes on to say, "and they were just as likely to listen and dance to it when they already feel very good, because it always makes them feel even better" (54). This pursuit of happiness, to feel good, is a force that drives Black people from institutional trauma to dance.

"We are moved by things. In being moved, we make things," Sara Ahmed contends in her book *The Promise of Happiness*. In blues, what is made by the cultural object is joy and that joy is resistant to oppression. Ahmed goes on to say, "To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to what is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival" (Ahmed 25). As I have argued for blues dancing, "the condition of its arrival" is the trauma that has emerged out of acts of violence and oppression over the course of hundreds of years; blues cannot be danced without this. However, Ahmed signals a way that we might be able to reconcile these seemingly oppositional forces. Blues dancing, articulated by the Black body, becomes what Ahmed calls a "happiness pointer" in that it directs us toward joy. It is in this way, blues dancing is predicated on the trauma of blues music and its affective potential is transmitted through bodies by way of gestures and movement. Along with joy, another kind of resistance can also be found when thinking through how the originators of blues dancing spent their time.

I want to think through the spatio-temporal lives of Black people in the United States. I propose that there is a distinct relationship with blues dancing and labor or

production. This relationship is a dancing contradiction. Black folks as early as the 1920's began to move from the South to the North to work. They labored in the city, working tirelessly in factories for minimum wages. Examining the use of their time during the nights and weekends for rent parties in their homes, more formal dance venues, and other spaces where the Slow Drag was likely to take place, a portrait of the time of Black people spent becomes clearer. Blues becomes not only a site of resistance but also a site of possible respite from the daily war of difficult labor and the constant threat of racial violence that their bodies were subject to.

I want to now turn our lens to the Slow Drag and its contradictory, but still directly related, position in regards to Black production. Since the advent of slavery, Black labor has been prized in this country, with institutions working Black bodies far past the limits of what is humane and acceptable. Consequently, it is crucial to understand that blues not only served as a site of respite from the war waged on Black bodies, but it acts as a contrary space where Black people could control their spatio-temporal lives in a way that did not occur when working as well. While in the fields and factories, Black people were forced to be hyperproductive, yielding material for product at a high and efficient rate.

One can turn to Adorno and Horkheimer to understand social dance as an act of resistance. They point out that:

> Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. But at the same time mechanization has such power over man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly

> determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself. The ostensible content is merely a faded foreground; what sinks in is the automatic succession of standardized operations. What happens at work in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by the approximation it in one's leisure time. (137)

Adorno and Horkheimer insist that fun, such as the Slow Drag, always already maintains an attachment to work. In response to this, I argue that the Slow Drag offered a resistant escape from the wars waged on Black bodies, whether it was on their time or their livelihood. Black American work history has been predicated on the idea that Black people are machine or object like, specifically built to work and to be worked hard. They were expected to produce things quickly and were steadily alienated from their community. The Slow Drag counters this demand with the act of leisure becoming one of resistance. In blues, that slowness is an embodied opposing reactive force to moving too quickly enough for production. Slow weighted movement becomes a counterbalanced response to the workday. It successfully combines performance and the gaze of performance in terms productivity. The act of not working on the dance floor is starkly contrasted with the work done in the factory. Black dancing bodies ask each other not for efficiency, demanding the most for time, but rather plead to slow down, to even wait.

Dancing the Erotic

Home-making/community-making are essential in how they take place through blues. This brings up the question: how can minoritarian subjects make home

in community and in their bodies? What are the ways in which folks perform intimacy within blues dancing and is there an emancipatory potential of dance culture? If depression and sexual longing that are articulated in blues music and dancing, then can weight sharing, waiting/pulsing sexual subjects generate an erotic vocabulary of movement and a way of connecting to other people while often being viewed as queer or deviant? What constitutes queer blues? To answer these questions, I will examine the Black erotic dancing body, the desiring/intimate dancing body, alongside the queer dancing body. I argue that blues as epistemology provides insight into the lifeworlds of Black people in the United States who out of states of terror have made home and found a means of survival. It is my hope that I can use the present material reality of blues social dancers to interrogate the past and serve liberatory futures.

In Poland, I went to an event called Hummingbird Blues, a blues dancing exchange in Krakow. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, dances went from 9:00pm to 4:00 am. The first night, I felt every movement was tentative and connecting to partners was difficult. I discovered, as I did a bit too late in Berlin, it was customary to dance two dances with a partner. Someone explained to me, "The first dance is just getting to know your partner. The second is actually dancing with them." I felt like I was dancing this way with the European Union; the first night was getting to know them. Saturday and Sunday would be about actually being embodied and present, truly dancing with them. Usually by 3, I found myself tired and began my trek back to my hotel. I had to make my peace with FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and listen to my body's need for rest and recharging.

Due to a significant lack of scholarship on blues and social dance, I will draw heavily from scholarship that is focused on blues music, particularly that of Black women. I am deeply invested in the idea that as products of the erotic, blues music and dancing serve similar purposes and work in and on Black people in comparable ways. While I want to preemptively lay out some of the historical and technical details of the dance, I also hope to unfold important elements in the ways in which the dance performs the erotic, sensual/sexual, and queer. For these reasons, I am resisting an explicit chronology that neatly ties a genealogy of Black vernacular dances and instead embrace a rhizomatic structure of kinship between bodies and gestures across time and space.

In her book, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Vernacular Dance,* Jacqui Malone tells us, "African American vernacular dance embodies African American Values. It reaffirms a way of looking at the world and provides means of survival" (7). Throughout the book, Malone delineates institutional Black vernacular dance styles and rituals as culturally important, undervalued, and under-theorized. The Slow Drag and blues, like other Black social dance forms, has many roots, drawing heavily from traditional African movement. While blues arguably did not emerge as a form until the 19th century, elements of blues and its dance vocabulary can be found in slavery and its archives. Blues dance can be most simply defined as any dance done to blues music. However, this definition quickly becomes complicated and a site of contention with claims of appropriation following its resurgence in the 21st century.

In order to answer the questions posed earlier, I want to carefully position the technical scaffolding of blues to possibly understand the work that it does. Blues dancing is characterized by its use of asymmetrical movement, a balanced or grounded athletic posture, lagging slightly behind the beat, the use of everyday movement vocabulary, pulsing, polyrhythms, and finally a couple that is comprised of a lead and a follow. Honing in on specific aspects of early Black dance, Juretta Jordan Heckscher argues that polyrhythms allow "the dancer to emphasize the independence of different body parts and therefore serve the articulation of simultaneous multiple body rhythms" and are an important part of the blues idiom dances (23). I specifically have highlighted and will continue to think through an idiom dance housed under the umbrella of blues dancing, the Slow Drag.

Malone continues the line of thought by building upon pre-existing scholarship arguing that an embodied knowledge embedded in dance gestures can be and has been historically transferred in social dance forums. As I gestured to earlier, scholars argue that in blues traditions, the dancer offers a response to the music but the way in which they respond is an act of crucial knowledge sharing for the dancers and on lookers. Consequently, I want to reiterate that these are profoundly performative acts, with the continuance of moving in spite of forces of oppression serving as an indictment of the exceptional state that we live in and also a guide to moving forward and surviving this material reality. The repercussions of the traumas of systemic oppression, institutional brutality, and slavery are apparent and visible in the everyday lived experiences of Black Americans and in blues music. As activists and dancers look for ways to negotiate and respond to these events and parts of

cultural memory, this project seeks to make more visible the ways in which we perform, as erotic dancing bodies, a series of interconnected gestures that serve as survival strategies. For the purposes of this project, with the support of the Slow Drag, an idiomatic blues dance, I speak to its historical and contemporary contexts with the goal of formulating a transhistorical analysis of a dance that has always already contained the erotic residue of Black sexualities.

Saturday night. A DJ played blues music until the band arrived and the frontman said, "I see you guys dancing all slow and we're going to speed it up. We know you can take it." We could not take it. They proceed to play face paced rock-n-roll music and the majority of dancers abandon their partnerships and clear the dance floor. The intimacy and connections established on the dance floor are almost completely evaporated. Later, I'm told that the band was asked to slow things down after their first set. A request with which they first complied... until they didn't, once again leaving the floor bare except a few excited Lindy Hoppers who welcomed the exhaustive pace. The following DJ commented to me that that was "the easiest set I've ever played after that," as dancers were happy to have their slower pace blues music back. In Krakow, I was asked to dance for slower Slow Drag micro dances toward the beginning of the morning. These were the most sensual, grounded dances, tapping into what I propose to be the erotic in blues dancing.

Dancing on the edge of the floor to myself, a fellow (though much more advanced) dancer comments that she wishes she could move like me, attempting to replicate some of the isolations I was doing in response to the music I heard. It was a moment where I realized my relationship to music as a Black person from the South,

versed in some hip-hop movement, offered a markedly different and somewhat foreign response to music they heard. I argue that the everyday choreographies of the city and our teachers greatly affect movement through dance space, as was made apparent in my dances with Europeans. Dance seems, in many ways, to be a revolutionary response to the space that I am frequently asked not to occupy with my body. It also offers a site in which I can perform an erotic visibility, a need called for as I walk down the street and am thrown off my weight by mostly masculine presenting people who do not "see" me.

I have found that blues instructors often attempt to encourage a certain physicality by positioning a posture historically. The dance is contextualized as "the dance that swing dancers did when they got tired," a piece of apocryphal information that has yet to be completely verified by my research of blues and swing. When a famed instructor visited Eugene, one dancer was thrilled, inviting me to take private lessons with the teacher while gushing about how much the instructor had added to her dance after just one session. In her unsolicited advertisement, the dancer told me about how the instructor had frequently ordered dancers to move "like you are a 250 pound Black woman in a jook joint." This contextualization of blues movement and posture through the imagined embodiment of a Black woman were deeply perplexing to me. I realized the space would be the only thing I would be asked to imagine if that instruction were given to me. I decided not to take a private lesson.

This body that the instructor projected onto herself and her students was one powered by the erotic, a sexual and sensual Black entity. In her white imagination, she saw the full-bodied women that made blues what it is, however misguided and

racist her proclamation. Perhaps, what she wanted to access was the erotic performed by Black bodies. Thus, I am curious about the ways in which one might dance the erotic without erotic dancing.

Following the weekend in Krakow was Berlin's blues exchange called Bear Blues. The Thursday night prior to the actual event, the organizers held a fundraiser at a Jockel Biergarten in Kruezberg to purchase a new dance floor. A Black man comes up to me and asks, "Are you Caribbean?" and I say no, puzzled. He says, "OH! You are American!" and I nod. He asks me if I am a dancer and I tell him yes. He says hesitating a little bit but looking at me directly, "You need to...You just need to show'em." He continues saying that he has been watching the Berlin dancers for weeks now and he can tell that they "do what feels good," but insists that they need someone to "show them," and that these all white dancers "need something melanated up in here." In this place of exposed marginality, I feel somewhat robbed in that my four years of training are made invisible by an assumed innate ability to move as a Black person who is capable of dancing on the appropriate historical and aesthetic registers. Almost contradictorily, this illuminates the moments where I have felt inept as a Black dancer who allegedly has inherited this dance.

Karen Hubbard argues that Slow Drag was a "marginally acceptable" dance at the renowned dance space, the Savoy. "Based on a very close hold technique and writhing hip movements, in a private party setting it tended to be practiced with the girl's arms around the boy's neck and the boy's arms placed around her waist, sometimes sliding onto her buttocks." She goes on to say that "The dance was otherwise known as Dancing-on-a-dime, or more recently as the Grind, and Savoy

bouncers insisted that the couples keep moving" (130). For me, this points to two things. One being the historiographical issue of tracking an idiomatic dance that has had multiple names, practiced over time to various kinds of blues music. The next part interestingly suggests the ways in which this particular kind of intimacy was policed in the space of the notable Savoy as opposed to a jook joint or rent party, with bodies only allowed to be close when they were perceptibly in motion. Here the erotic Black body is made discernable in its close embrace and slow motion.

In order to identify what is erotic about the blues dancing body, one must interrogate the blues body itself. In her essay, Kelly Brown Douglas defines the blues body set against the background of the Black church. Speaking of what she calls the blues body, she points out that historically:

> The blues body is not ashamed of itself. Black people who have blues bodies are not embarrassed by their bodies and what their bodies feel. They celebrate the individuality of their bodies in terms of size, color, shape, and other characteristics. They affirm the various sensations of their own bodies—the pain, disappointment, pleasure, and desire. And they respond to the call of their body by satisfying that call, whether that satisfaction is physical, emotional, or sexual. (Douglas 240)

Rather than focusing on the pain inherent in blues, what I would like to meditate here on the ways in which the blues body performs what is pleasurable to the Black body. With its emphasis on blatant, unrepentant deviant or excess sexuality, blues and the dancing Black body fearlessly perform the erotic.

Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" provides us a useful theoretical framework for situating the erotic dancing Black body. Lorde argues, "the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" (Lorde 54). This falls in line with Douglas' unabashed blues body that lacks fear of one's sexual and sensual self. Lorde warns that we have been conditioned to think of the erotic as suspect, and that it is "vilified, abused, and devalued within western society" (Lorde 53). Consequently, I surmise that blues dancers actively resist these constraints, allowing their bodies through their sensuality to move in ways that disrupt white supremacist imposed social order.

This history of disruption is one that is well documented by blues historians and theorists. Clyde Woods posits a blues epistemology to reveal blues' functions over time grounded in the Mississippi Delta. He notes:

> The blues bloc consists of working-class African American communities in the rural South and their diaspora. The ontology or worldview, embedded in these communities has provided a sense of collective self and a tectonic footing from which to oppose and dismantle the American intellectual, cultural, and socioeconomic traditions constructed from the raw material of African American exploitation and labor. (Woods 29)

This figurative footing becomes literal footing as the blues body is grounded, dancing in space. Thus, Woods submits to us blues as epistemology to serve as a mode of interrogating the ways that blues conjured up a "transcendent social agenda" (Woods 208). Woods' assertions are somewhat restrictive in that he only considers one

geographical area in the United States over time. How then can this blues epistemology of resistance be applied to trans-temperal and trans-geographical analysis? Again, I return our gaze to the erotic blues performing resistance.

Of note is how historians have shown that Black singers and dancers resistantly performed their sexuality and sensuality in blues. Hazel Carby notes, "The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere" (481). Carby consequently divulges that blues women were unrestricted in their ability to physically assert themselves outside of their homes, finding way of making homes in their communities and in their own bodies. What these folks also resisted were claims of excess and deviance placed on their bodies. Not unlike dancers, musicians have used and continue to use blues as a way of externalizing sensuality and sexuality while working counter to a white supremacist gaze. In their music, Douglas states, "they transcended the white sexualized caricatures of Blackness and crafted a new Black identity, denying the white cultural narrative any claims over their sexual selves." In these acts of trans-ing they also brought about shifts from private to public, and "sexuality from a place of shame to a place of ultimacy" (254). It is in this way Black people have and continue to transgress and evade imposed notions of deviance that are prescribed by the white hegemonic spectator.

According to Douglas, "Blues is often depicted as highly sexualized, if not lewd, music." However, she goes on to say that "the sexiness of the blues is about more than bawdiness. Rather, it points to the essential sensuous character of the blues.

Blues is intrinsically a sensuous music." I contend that if this is true, the Slow Drag is a means by which Black people have historically performed the erotic by broadcasting publicly their personal sensuality. Douglas claims that the state of being sensuous is also a state in which one is "in touch with one's feelings" (239-40). I argue that this sensuousness that is inherent to blues dancing and music is a place of profound desire and intimacy, whether it be a desire to be in touch with the music or the desire to touch another's skin. Lorde ultimately points out that to be in tune with the erotic means "to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense" (Lorde 58) or as I believe, to be intimately at home with oneself and to live in our bodies.

Pulse is often considered to be at the heart of blues. I have heard this frequently repeated by blues instructors. It is the vertical movement that occurs between weight shifts. I listen as the instructor verbally signals the class, "Step. Pulse. Collect." Almost any dance feels like a blues dance to my body as long as a viable pulse accompanies the dancer's movements. In intermediate lessons, as we add to our shared vocabulary of movement, the pulse seems to be the first thing to fall by the wayside. I dance with a friend, Dan, who in his quest to make our dance into a larger spectacle, sweeps across the floor. At times, I feel him leave me behind as he proceeds to his next move. He is undoubtedly on beat, but something feels off. He steps. I step. I pulse and he is collecting his feet together. I feel off balance, as if I have moved on the wrong foot. Without a pulse accessorizing the steps, a turn feels technical. I know what foot I should land on but don't have the between-information. As a follow, it seems like ballroom dancers most frequently excise pulses from their dances. Without the small vertical or horizontal movements, I watch as my partner

becomes more and more upright, almost all the bend leaving his knees. He erratically becomes mindful of his posture (as we all often do) and he squats a bit more. Though with the lack of pulse, his body begins slowly creeping back into a straight-legged, gliding ballroom posture with each weight shift. A pulse keeps me and my energy down and feeling disconnected from my non-pulsing partner. For me, the pulse feels natural to my corporeal grammar, a small comma in a sentence that seems to extend through my entire body. There is a lack of connection and therefore a significant lack of intimacy.

Intimacy in a blues dance is a coalescing coalitioning force. In this section, I present the idea that blues dancing is a display of Black intimacy and is that which has purposefully been made into a spectacle via a white supremacist gaze that is then turned around to be externalized as a way for Black folks to publically share their own sexuality and sensuality. Rather than attempting to define the nebulous concept that is intimacy, Karen Prager puts forth perimeters that can encompass it. She separates intimate relationships from experiences. In doing so, she posits, "Intimate interactions and intimate relationships, then, may serve researches well as basic intimacy concepts because they each refer to a different and clearly distinguishable notion of *space and time.*" She goes on to further separate intimacy into intimate "behaviors" and intimate "interactions" (20). What I am interested in is the intimate interaction that is a dance and the multiplicity of intimate behaviors such as touch that comprise the dance.

Prager defines intimate interactions as "dyadic behavior that exists within a clearly designated space-and-time framework. Once that particular set of dyadic

behavior has ceased, the interaction is over" (19). In this case the dyadic behavior is the dance shared between two parties, a lead and a follow. I will later illuminate the sometimes queer connections between lead and follow, but for now I would like to focus on the intimacy that is cultivated between them. In her discussion of blues bodies and their relationship to the music, Douglas also encapsulates the relationship between lead and follow, "Blues listens to the call of the body and responds by conveying what the body is communicating" (Douglas 240). It is in the same way, intimate behaviors initiate a call to another body to connect in Slow Drag.

Prager argues that intimate interactions often involve some sort of sharing which includes "affectionate touch," whether it is reciprocated or not (21). I contend that the micro-negotiations that occur within a dance are reciprocal gestures shared in a particular moment. Blues dancing requires at times, that you literally share each other's weight, an act of closeness, trust, and intimacy. What Prager's scholarship offers is that, "intimate interactions, however, are best defined not by the kinds of behavior that characterize them but by the intimate experiences of the partners during or as a result of the interaction" (22). What she advocates for is an analysis of not the behaviors as necessary factors but in the affective potential of the moment. This is a tricky territory in blues dancing; an intimate dance is usually a good one and a good one is hard to define.

I contend that a blues dance performs a moment of Black erotic cohesiveness or "the togetherness, sharing of time, and sharing of activities in a relationship" (Prager 25). Dance then becomes an application of what Lorde deems integral for human survival or the notion that "The need for sharing deep feeling is a human

need." This is one that is satiated, Lorde argues, by "erotic comings-together" (Lorde 58). For me and many others, dance is frequently an "erotic comings-together" in the ways that it holds space for performances of intimate behaviors and allows for a (however brief) relationship building intimate interaction.

If discourses on intimacy primarily focuses on an interaction that is shared, meaningful, and mutual which is evident with dancing bodies, I want to also give attention to touch or the haptic its process of becoming a site of meaning making (Prager 47). Rizvana Bradley corroborates, "the haptic can be understood as the viscera that ruptures the apparent surface of any work, or the material surplus that remains the condition of possibility for performance" (130). As I have shown, blues is a music and dance of rupture that disrupts the narrative of white supremacy and oppression; its metaphorical touch is widely felt. To this end, I believe that Slow Drag is a way of performing what I will call intimate hapticality.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe the touching of skin in the slave ship in a way that captures the transhistorical touch of minoritarian subjects. They say:

> Hapticality, the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality, the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem. (98)

The touch of blues collapses an intimate distance between oppressed and oppressor and between two dancing bodies intertwined as they move through time and space. In both moments of intimate hapticality, the couples have some sense of each other that

is not made available to them in any other sphere. The impossibility of defining intimacy is only matched here by the inability of language to signal what *happens* when two dancers touch each other. The steps that are taken in time with each other. The breaths that are exhaled simultaneously. The micromovements that can be felt across shared torsos. These are the tangible intangible intimate moments that evade real description as they produce a collective effervescence that is only possible through connection with another human's skin. In conclusion, I additionally comment that this moment of connection, this intimate hapticality, can also be a place of resistance, where closeness can be considered a force of alienation from oppression.

Legacy of Blues and Whiteness

In Berlin, I exit the U-Bahn at Mehringdamm and begin walking south a few minutes to reach the venue Freudenzimmer (which translates to Joy Room). I pass by the famous Mustafa's Gemüse Kebap, which is the longest line for a food cart that I have ever seen in my entire life. According to Tripadvisor, folks wait in lines around 2 hours long to get döner there. I did not. By this point, I knew or shared a dance with many folks in the room, receiving hugs and greetings from people as they arrived. After the DJ played for a while, Four Corners, the full band, makes its reappearance after playing the week before in Krakow. I begin to listen more closely to this woman crooning the "blues." I quickly begin to realize that there was little "blusieness" about it as they played The Jackson 5's " I Want You Back," as if any Black performance is blues. Taking the B in R&B at its word as if it didn't constitute a different genre. This concept is solidified by a sultry cover of Britney Spears'

"Toxic." Around 3:15, I attempt to make my way out. One of the organizers I've befriended urges me to stay, letting me know that two awesome Spanish DJ's, Los Ramones, are playing at 4. I stay. The Blues room becomes a fusion room and the fusion room becomes blues. He was right to get me to stay; I had fun dancing one last time with folks. But it was definitely no longer a blues exchange. I walk back to the U-Bahn station as the sun comes up.

I would like to touch upon the legacy of blues dancing. In this essay, I have attempted to resist historicizing blues dancing and relegating it to the early 19th century as a Black cultural artifact as it continues to be danced, in some form or another, to this day. Black vernacular movement has become a cultural commodity, one that is exported all over the world. Though if one were to superficially survey the contemporary landscape of blues, one would almost exclusively find white dancers. These critical arguments surrounding Blackness, whiteness and blues are ones that are particularly difficult to make as it precisely interrogates a relationship to the Other, which I feel implicated in. However, I make these cases with an affinity for the white dancers that join me on the dance floor. This is a critique out of care.

Of course, "bringing back" a dance breeds issues of appropriation and authenticity. What archive of Black movements is circulating in this new white repertoire? To answer this question, I will position E. Patrick Johnson's argument in relationship with a racial repertoire. Perhaps most succinctly Johnson states, "Authenticity, then, is yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital" (3). Blues dancing proves no exception to this as white dancers, instructors, and musicians manipulate and profit from historically Black vernacular movement. Often, they

operate with the aim of doing the most authentic movement or dancing to the most genuine blues music. Johnson claims, “Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” (Johnson 9). This is exhibited when white bodies attempt to articulate the gestures that they project onto historic Black bodies made evident to me as a white instructor asks students to “imagine you are 250 pound Black woman in a juke joint.” The white imaginary as it is reproduced in blues dancing is always already mapped out across Black bodies. This is a different, albeit not new, kind of violence. As effective gentrifiers of dance, white folks have by and large attempted to respect the legacy of the dance and its history. Though, it is hard to reconcile this alleged respect with the social fact that Black dancers have been pushed out of a scene that they created. Ahmed concedes that cultural “objects become saturated with affects as sites of personal and social tension. The passing of happy objects may generate forms of antagonism even when we share an orientation toward those objects as being good” (Ahmed 44). This is the case in contemporary blues dancing scenes. The pursuit of a space that brings people together and fosters intimacy in a world characterized by alienation also perpetuates the alienation of Black people from the art. That being said, I have dedicated this small space to interrogate whiteness in relationship to the legacy blues. But, honestly, white people only serve as a footnote in this larger narrative of Black cultural production and excellence.

In an extensive and somewhat bizarre dinner conversation with Polish and European dancers in Krakow, slavery made its appearance as a conversational topic. I was on edge as the only American in the room and obviously the only Black person.

A woman and I got into a somewhat bewildering and heated argument about the history of slavery; she vehemently insisted that presumably slaves were treated *better* after the ceasing of the importation of slaves into America. I was a bit dumbfounded by the argument for multiple reasons. One, I did not believe this to be true. She thought that slave owners must have felt the need to keep their slaves in good shape as no new ones were arriving. Secondly, I argued that while new slaves were not coming directly from Africa, Black people in the U.S. were still being bred like animals to become labor, which then could be traded domestically. She doubled down on her argument, I am guessing while she was also endeavoring to articulate the economic rationale of it. I finally explained that she was attempting to apply logic to white supremacy and that this was faulty because white supremacy has no logic. White people will do and have done what they want to serve themselves at the expense of Black and brown bodies regardless of any other factor. I excused myself to recompose in the bathroom. When I returned, the conversation was decidedly more civil[20]. Admitting to their ignorance, the other dancers discussed how it was difficult for them in some ways to understand slavery and its history because of the simple fact that as non-participants in the slave trade, the concept of slavery was "muted" for them. While blues was not outside their purview, the events that shaped them decidedly were.

I have argued that the factory/field and the floor maintain a dialectical relationship with one another with the factory giving just enough leisure time to be

[20] I am deeply in awe of and grateful to the host who proposed delicately over dinner, "This meal is so heavy and so maybe our conversation should be a bit lighter?" Unfortunately, he was overruled by my fellow conversationalist who, in response, declared that we needed to talk about these things lest we repeat history. Of course, the obvious transition was to discuss the Holocaust.

productive again. Thus, Black vernacular movement such as the Slow Drag is defined by the factory or the field. Following this, one might question what happens to blues dancing when there is no factory to define it and no war to seek respite from. This, I believe is an interesting intersection for the insertion of whiteness into blues dancing. Contemporary white dancers are ostensibly not exposed to the same-pressured life factors that were afforded to Black people in the United States. Consequently, I posit that there is a there *there* that is fundamentally missing from the contemporary white iteration of the dance. A white European dancer in 2018 does not need the dance in the same way that a Black woman in the United States might have in 1920. While it may be a foundational site of community for many of the folks dancing, in most spaces is not the site of respite that it once was. However, I want to argue that blues dancing as respite site is not extinct rather it has been in some ways manipulated to serve new and different liberatory futures.

Queer Blues

Blues has fairly flexible roles. You are taught that any gender can lead or follow. My friend and I playfully switch roles; we are visibly not taking ourselves, or the dance, very seriously, alternating between open and closed positions. Clearly, people watch and I am asked a few times to lead, a role that I am not extremely comfortable with. A social fact becomes drawn to my attention in travelling to a different dance scene. My body is gendered and read as female and consequently those that are read and gendered similarly often decline to dance with me until they

see me dancing with another person they assume to be same-gendered. That is to say, one dance with a woman opens up a floodgate of me dancing with other women.

A short friendly blonde femme-presenting person asks me to dance. “Would you like to lead, follow or switch?” I tell her that I would be more comfortable with following. She jokes that she is a bad lead but she will try. I assure that is fine as I am a bad follow but will also be trying. She goes through the movement vocabulary that she feels comfortable executing as a lead, simple turns and traveling. She does not play with the rhythm of the dance much at all. She warns me that it might be a boring dance. I tell her I am comfortable with this as it is later in the evening and I am dancing with injuries. She asks empathetically, “Is there anything that I can do to make this dance comfortable for you?” I let her know that I have issues with my hip and so long steps, covering a lot of floor, and intense turns are not as pleasant for me. Again, my pain seems to be informing the dance but not quite dictating it. She is receptive and appreciative of my honesty. I decide to add this moment to my mental list of best practices going forward. I also let her know that I am kind of rusty so if she feels like I am not following through on something she is leading, it isn’t necessarily a reflection of her leadership. We have an uneventful, but pleasant connected dance; I will take a queer connected dance over a complicated one anytime.

How can we begin to unlock the lifeworld of the erotic queer blues body? One answer is to trace blues epistemology through labor. Kelly Brown Douglas argues that Black folks were and are constantly “trying to create a life worth living in a world that devalues their life and exploits their bodies” (Douglas 238). She examines

the ways in which working class "hand to mouth poor black people" that were connected to their bodies and alienated from the commodities they produced attempted to sustain themselves with blues in contexts designed to ensure their social death. Following this logic, I would like to briefly explore what it means to queer the Slow Drag and/or perform its queerness as a kind of work.

Jacqui Malone contends, "through rituals involving dance, music, song, and language, African Americans continue to find celebratory ways to 'evoke the spirit' and at the same time perpetuate common values, reaffirm community, and reorder society" (5). This is particularly relevant when it comes to queer coupling with non-heterogeneous or non-traditional couplings occurring in blues dance. If dance is a ritual to "reaffirm community," then it is important to make note of the ways queer communities participate and function. One of the ways blues can be queered is in the ways that dancers pair. Some dancers consciously choose to dance with people whose gender aligns with their own. Other dancers who are assigned-female-at-birth choose to buck traditions that they should be the passive recipients of a dance by asking others to dance, particularly men. I have one friend who asserts her body as queer politic by predominantly asking to lead, even if this is a socially unexpected thing to do. I have found that these queer dance politics vary by location. In my experience on the west coast, men were more likely to dance with men than anywhere else. It is not that queer dances are unacceptable but rather it is likely a byproduct of how the dance is initiated.

When you first learn to blues dance, you are instructed to obtain verbal consent before proceeding to dance. For most, "Would you like to lead, follow, or

switch?" is the question that is posed if they are fluid in their dancing roles. However, if one is not as flexible, they might only ask to lead or follow or assume their default "traditional" role. I want to however queer this idea of the traditional that is generally accepted as part of a historically Black vernacular movement. Juretta Jordan Heckscher points to a history of citation and creolization of dance arguing that a heterosexual coupling dynamic was a feature adopted from European counterparts saying that, "it brought individual men and women together as partners whose stylized coupling was the literal center and subject of the dance" (26). This leads her to the provocative claim that the introduction of these dance partnerships was not just about adopting European aesthetic traditions. They were also indeed "a means of expressing perhaps the greatest change in social ideals that marked the transition from Africa to America: the passage from a polygynous to a monogamous paradigm of marriage that had taken place by the late eighteenth century" (26). In other words, early Black dance, like contemporary Black dance, is not just about the technical and the aesthetic but instead can reflect information about the roles of people during this time. It is this way that "traditional" heterosexual coupling in the dance sense and in life, is made strange. That being said, there are few things that gesture toward what is traditional about the male-female coupling in larger history of Black vernacular dance.

One of my friends, who identifies as a queer woman, recognized a lack in the D.C. blues/fusion-dancing scene and opted to create a space that privileged the needs of queer dancers. In many ways, she queers the dance scene, veering sharply away from simple male/female dynamics which are encouraged at larger dance events that

include things such as “Jack and Jill” dancing competitions. Instead, the space that she has created was made for those who could not compete in such dances due to their orientation, gender identity, or simply the dance role that they enjoyed. My first time dancing at one of the events, I was overjoyed at the plethora of people that joined me in the space, most of them queer, some gender-nonconforming or trans. In this time of precarity for many of these bodies, the act of coming together to dance and form community is very much a radical act. Veta Goler invites us to understand that, “Blues music is one of a number of creative forms through which Black people transform difficulty and negativity into beauty as they maneuver through and around life’s obstacles” (Goler 205). Larry Neal compliments this idea and asserts despite its melancholic sound, “the blues are basically defiant in their attitude toward life. They are about survival on the meanest, most gut level” (Neal qtd. in Woods 19). What both scholars and many others have offered is that blues is inherently resistant. I add that with queering the dance, that is, making it strange and or having it danced “non-traditionally” or by queer bodies, the dance offers a more radical epistemology that differs from the one that Woods puts forth.

In conclusion, Malone explores how vernacular dance “mirrors the value and worldview of its creators. Even in the face of tremendous adversity, it evinces an affirmation and celebration of life” (23). She uses the similarities in cultural processes to examine how dance shows a response and potential for psychic and physical healing. Similarly, in highlighting these processes, Malone underscores the under-recognized potential for dance to transmit knowledge, support or authorize change, whether it is to create home or a means of survival. It is my hope that I have provided

some insight into the dancing lifeworld of Black and queer dancers, who for us, to dance is to thrive and proudly announce one's ability to exist, to survive, and to dance the erotic, in the face of those that would rather render your body and history invisible.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to illuminate the lifeworlds of Black people in the United States through the lenses of cultural production, performance, trauma, and terror. Throughout this project, I have continually emphasized the means by which Black people have found coping mechanisms and means to survive in a nation established on stolen land built by stolen people. This machine, this generator of our shared cultural history, is one powered by white supremacy. I have directed our attention to the insidious nature of this concept while also revealing the ways that it can be resisted and undermined explicitly or implicitly.

The question I immediately posed at the beginning of this project was a simple one; "How do we survive?" Over the course of these chapters, I have used as examples framed and unframed performances to illustrate the ways that Black people have complicated the meaning of a war waged on our bodies, taking time to point to the ways we have gone to war, fought war, and found respite in the midst of war. I have underscored the want and need to create home in our communities and in our bodies as we continue to be violently pushed away and perpetually alienated from these places.

I have thought through each of these chapters theorizing the significance of what I propose to be rhizomatic choreography. I have pointed to Suzan-Lori Parks's engagement with Black folks and their stories as she allows characters to dance in between and throughout history creating transhistorical epic narratives. Deploying a theory of rhizomatic choreography, this project has meditated on how Black bodies

dance through and between the horizontal kinship that is inevitably an outcome of and response to shared traumas. Though this project hones in on an interrelationship between trauma, terror, and Black people in the United States, it has always maintained a trajectory toward liberatory futures for us.

In the second chapter, I held up for consideration Parks's relationship to historical riffing, revisionism, and often anachronistic queering in *Father Comes Home From The Wars Parts I, II, and III*. I articulated how her writing underscores the nature of traumatic "markedness" in a slave narrative that is constructed in such a way as to make explicit the function of white supremacy and the presence of its subsequent effects seen in marked histories, marked words, and marked bodies. I came to the conclusion that what Parks ultimately does is pose questions of what it means to own one's own self in times of terror by making visible Black markedness throughout the Great Hole of History.

I began the next chapter by continuing our adventure through the Great Hole of History and closing the spatio-temporal distance between Parks's imaged Hero and the very real Michael Brown, who was killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. By establishing the need for us to expand our use of terror to include the domestic or state sanctioned terror that is enacted on Black people, I was able to go on to examine defining performances of what Deborah Walker King calls "Blackpain." I reported on the particularly applicable spectacularized images in this post-9/11 moment where repetitious suffering occurs ad nauseum in its function in our visual culture. Next, I continued the project of spatio-temporal distance collapsing by investigating the difference between diffusing and defusing state terror through the

circulation of video images of Black death. I thought through how we might consider shared performances of spectacular pain in a way that centers its potential for healing and solidarity rather than simply a dispersal of terror and possible site of perpetuating more trauma. To do this, I looked at the ways in which hypersurveillance can be countered by sousveillance, a way of asserting self-defense by Black people. As a site of departure from the dominant narrative of precarious mostly able-bodied men in danger, I focused our gaze on the ways that men and women, disability, and over-policing intersect as a call to further demand attention to the inherent worth and dignity of those whose names often go unremembered or even unknown.

The last contribution I offered is my addition to the history and theorization of blues dancing, specifically the Slow Drag and how they have operated through time and space. I began by laying out its historical circumstances and popularization. I theorized about the relation between Black bodies, work, and leisure highlighting the constant assaults and demands on their time and from their bodies. With the support of research, I deduced that this was one of many ways that Black people found a way to find some relief from the war on their livelihood while also establishing a way to create and engage community. Through my own praxis, I engaged in and wrote about my auto-ethnographic experiences as a dancer in multiple cities in the United States and internationally. I grappled with the complexity of dancing Black vernacular movements with predominately white bodies. Despite the constant pulls in my conversations (particularly with white Europeans) to engage in a dialogue about cultural appropriation and what it means to do the dance respectfully, I instead choose to focus on a shared quest for authenticity and how dancers conceive of their bodies

in relation to the historical Black "authentic" ones they imagined in juke joints and rent parties. I centered my body in this investigation, attempting to understand intellectually and corporeally (as if those are two distinctly different things) how Black and white bodies function when they come together and touch, dancing on a history that may or may not feel accessible. My analysis circles back to what I believe the point of Slow Drag to be, a dance to slow down even when your larger circumstances are frequently telling you that your body is not safe. Consequently, I end by contending that the growth of queer blues spaces reflects the liberatory potential of the dance and lends itself to understanding how rhizomatic choreographies might serve minororitarian subjects in the creation of chosen families and self-crafted homes.

There are a multitude of conclusions that this project has directed me towards. I began by adding to the legitimization of relationships between Black cultural production and objects and their distinct connection to pain and long-term suffering. Over the course of the project, I found moments of work-seizing pain; I was essentially pushed forward to the overarching theme that where there is Black suffering, there also exists the potential for Black joy and healing. It is my belief that in these states of hypersurveillance and hyperpolicing that have been generated and supported by white supremacy, Black people have crafted and utilized their own publics, so that in states of exception, they have and continue to be able to create pockets of respite and mobilize themselves by imagining a Black future where their actions can possibly move us toward justice and healing. As evidenced by the protests in cities such as Ferguson and Baltimore, sometimes the expulsion of Blackpain is not

as pretty as the hymns sung as part of the Civil Rights movement (my favorite not excluded). Black action has recently been propelled by the spectacularization of Black bodies in public spaces. Private Blackpain is made public by these videos that bear witness and serve as a site of testimony. Similarly, blues music has given us an outlet for Blackpain and longing. That longing is sometimes for a lost love or a safe community. What playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks do is open us up to the ways that we are marked, while also directing us toward the tools of survival and the creation of horizontal kinship that has existed since slavery. In the same way that white people dance a dance is not *theirs*, Parks purposefully engages a form of epic storytelling that many do not assume to be *her's*. Parks skillfully shows us how in impossible circumstances, Black people have held each other accountable and created family where a genealogical legacy does not necessarily exist or has been exterminated.

I admit, that depending on your subject position, some of this is not particularly revelatory. But I think it is worth noting Black performance and cultural production that are worthy lenses through which we can view Blackpain. What I have come to understand is that because of my exposure to trauma and terror from the day that I entered this world, the object lessons that I have been drawn to in order to illustrate the following conclusions have not been accidental. When I first started dancing, it never felt foreign. Despite the fact that I was not exposed to it in my childhood, when I heard lyrics mentioning themes of "freedom" and "chains," it was easy to infer that I was meant to inherit this as my own personal coping mechanism. While the spatio-temporal contexts are certainly different for iterations of Slow Drag,

it has helped us survive the social death it seems we are so frequently pushed toward. This project demonstrates my whole-hearted belief and investment in Sharpe's "woke work," which asks us to consider the emancipatory power of these cultural products as we move towards surviving (but perhaps completing) the unfinished project of Black emancipation.

In addition to the work of Black cultural theorists such as Sharpe, Spillers, and hooks, I also have built on the work of performance studies and theatre historians and theorists. My work also has engaged other areas of study such as surveillance, trauma, and disability studies. It is my hope that this project will help lay the groundwork for further interrogation of cultural object lessons that are oriented to Black joy and liberation, acknowledging the pain we have been and continue to be mercilessly subjected to. In the same way, I believe that my life, my history, and my future matter. I believe that this project matters.

My investment in academia, since I began graduate school, has always been oriented to the people that we are writing about, who we believe we are speaking to. As I have hopefully shown, I do not take the question, "Who does this serve?" to be a rhetorical one. It should be clear. As this project is "submitted in partial fulfillment" of my degree, I am also aware of by virtue of its inaccessibility it is not submitted in neither partial nor full fulfillment to serve the people I would want it to benefit. That I need it to serve. Consequently, I, in acknowledging this lack a full radical potential, shift from "Black people" to "Us" and "Our," as my project is also to serve a less traumatic future for myself, my friends, and family. I open up this project to be engaged and made to complete the "woke work" that I have worked in earnest for it

to do. I have written this to ask, “How do we, as Black people, in the United States survive?” acknowledging the multiplicity of histories that have laid the groundwork for our survival and successes. I would not be dancing if not for my dad’s work in retail, my mother’s work as a nurse, my grandmother’s work as a nurse, my great-grandmother’s work as a housing advocate. I know that in doing these labors for themselves and their family’s survival, in spite of being repeatedly subjected to horrific acts of terror, they also found ways to survive and places of respite. The purpose of this project is not for the purposes of pessimistic historical revisionism, but rather to acknowledge those sites of joy that have been purposefully collectively crafted and used by our ancestors, honor them, and move forward.

Epilogue: A Trauma Response

In the summer of 2017, I flew across the world to attend an academic conference in Hamburg, Germany. For my presentation, I offered up pieces of what would become parts of this project, exploring trauma, mediation, and the overflow of Blackpain. It was difficult to work on and to present, with constant reminders embedded in the talk that my body was constantly occupying a precarious state. Following the talk, an almost overwhelming number of folks came up to me and thanked me and cited the necessity of these kinds of conversations to happen in our field. It was edifying. While I was speaking with a friend, a German white female scholar approached me. We had met at another conference and she remembered me. She briefly asked about my presentation before launching into a conversation that she had obviously A. pre-planned, B. Had before and C. Clearly had sought me out to have it again. This speech (I don't one could actually call it a true dialogue) was centered on a white cultural producer, Dana Schutz, who had made a piece of art showcasing Black trauma. Reception of the piece was mixed with a vocal group of Black folks calling for the work to be taken down. Schutz's "Open Casket" was a work that I considered earlier in this project; the painting was at that time unknown to me, but would unfortunately trigger an impetus for some of my writing.

I felt weak. I was tired. And that's probably why the conversation transpired the way that it did.

The scholar asked my opinion regarding the piece and the reactions to it and I briefly stated that I didn't know much about the situation, but I did know that when Black people are hurting, you should listen to them. She responded by launching into her rehearsed narrative of why they were wrong and the merits of freedom of speech when it comes to artistry. At one point, the scholar literally alluded to the Black contrarians being like the Nazis in their position on censorship. This was deeply confusing to me as it seemed like she was drawing connections between Black people in the United States and the followers of Hitler that carried out a genocide; these two things did not feel comparable or as if they should be in conversation with each other in this particular moment. She asked another question and looked at me expectantly. I said something along the lines of, "I am sorry. I have done a lot of emotional and intellectual labor for white people today and I can't really do anymore." She pressed. I responded that it was an interesting premise but I could not engage it. She kept on. Pleading with me as if together we could solve Racism™ that very day. Alas, I could not and I redirected her to my email where I was willing to continue the conversation on my terms.

Depending on your subject position and disposition to the matter, one could interpret this anecdote in many ways. One could side with me. One could side with her. One could hold these things with a critical ambivalence[21]. You might be wondering what kind of person would be dumb enough to interact with a senior scholar in such a way. However, I am not really asking you to do or consider any of

[21] I am eternally grateful for Dr. La Marr Bruce for sharing with me this often-necessary phrase when discussing the rich complexity of matters such of these.

these things right now. Instead, I would like to provide some context. No less than a month prior, I was hospitalized for a disability that seemingly attacked everything within me. I felt like I was living "in the wake" in an urgent and completely disarming way I had never felt before. My body was at was at war with me and for the most part, it was invisible. I emerged from the hospital stay depleted, but ready to step on a plane to share that tiny bit of my truth I was in the midst of working on.

In retrospect, what I see now is a series of activated trauma responses and my attempts to counter them. As a junior-scholar and person operating with a disability, I felt weak and vulnerable, as Black people often feel existing in this world. I countered this by choosing what I wanted to engage with and then asserting my ability to not engage. This was my equivalent of self-defense. This was my moment of pulling out a verbal camera to show her that her policing, pulling me into a fraught, unsolicited conversation about race, was not going to play out in the way she was demanding. Where at other times, as the sole Black person in the space, I would respond to trauma with dissociation, leaving my body to intellectualize everything being thrown at me without acknowledging the truths of my body, its physical and psychic pain. I would allow other people to gaslight me into believing that I was going crazy, that my reactions to trauma being signaled were inappropriate when in reality the context was what was inappropriate. If anything, this life and this education have taught me that Black bodies were not meant to survive in these kinds of forceful, denigrating white supremacist spaces that insidiously undermine the knowledges that I know in my bones, my body, my mind.

Leaving the conference in Hamburg, I want to briefly bring us home, to the home that I have made in Washington D.C. The National Museum of African American History and Culture which opened in September of 2015 has been informally dubbed the "Blacksonian" by visitors who have long awaited its opening. The museum, with its eight floors, offers a way of navigating black trauma, oppression, and excellence in the United States over the last 600+ years. Entering the building, I began the process of inhabiting a temporary domestic space, checking-in, orienting myself, dwelling as long as I could and leaving. The museum offers a stark visual contrast to other Smithsonian buildings along the National Mall with its architecture inspired by a Yoruba crown. The texture of the museum is something I didn't truly begin to appreciate until I was looking from the inside out. The intricacy of the Southern black inspired ironwork was striking as I inhabited this space, which has perhaps quietly suggested with its architecture that I enter a Black woman's head. This museum is an archive and repertoire of bodies and stories. It serves as a permanent home for the memories of Black struggles and transitions, where those that have continued to "Make a way out of no way" (a theme that is present and repeated in the museum's third floor) can be acknowledged and made visible.

My friend and I decided to tackle the history galleries on the bottom floor last of all. As we wait for the oversized elevator that would take us, along with thirty of our new closest friends, three more levels underground, I listened to a museum worker. "Welcome to your museum. That's right, I said *your* museum," she proclaimed making eye contact with each person in line. She informs us of some of the logistics of the gallery; the lack of bathrooms, the one-mile length and perhaps

most intimidating, the dark, claustrophobia inducing feel of the Middle Passage gallery. She tells us that this is an intentional design choice that makes people uncomfortable, but if we press forward, freedom awaits us. What lies between us and that ability to find permanent dwelling in freedom is implicit. As I walked through the galleries, I quickly realized that it performed the paradoxes of freedom, self-ownership, and equality that I have discussed over the course of this project. The thought that entered my mind as I stepped off the elevator was "What if I need to turn back on this mile-long journey to the end of the concourse?" A thought that immediately felt like a cheapening of Black experience. In some ways, there was an implied recognition that some people would not or could not make it through this small trial, signaling to me the many that were lost on a journey to and through emancipation. Though, I felt like I had to move forward, no matter how uncomfortable it was, as so many had paved the way for me to be able to embark. My discomfort was a transitional state. Besides, where would I return to? This archive was becoming my new home, a place that I felt myself longing for as soon as I left. Here, I saw that all men might be created equal, but they aren't necessarily treated or represented as such.

There were many places that drew my attention and navigating the lower concourse was a process of uncertain discoveries. As it had just opened less than a month prior, the museum was still crowded, mostly with Black folks, many of whom had traveled far to visit this place of recognition. I distinctly remember the areas that were devoted to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and a long history of vigilante justice seeking in the form of public lynching. Photos and ephemera of terror were

signposted with content warnings. However, there was a space near that needed no trigger warning.

I knew what room I was walking into. A small, slowly meandering line formed leading into a space. The room demanded a specific corporeal sequence leading you forward, across, and then back. It was the choreography of a funeral; you approach the casket, walk alongside and back down the aisle. When I arrived at the front of the room, there was Emmett Till's casket. The walls around me told the story of his brief life, his murder, and his funeral. It spoke about Mamie Till, her activism and how the showing of her son's disfigured body was regarded as one of the impetuses launching forward the Civil Rights Movement. Before Martin or Malcolm or Claudette, there was Emmett, whose body and identity was volunteered to become a coalescing force. In the museum, there was no public spectacle of a body that suffered so greatly to be seen. This moment in some ways resurrected and also countered a historical fact. When you approached the casket, there was a sign that forbade photographs with an employee standing nearby to see that this was enforced. The casket was elevated, open, and lit. Till's full name was writ in large letters on the wall behind it. There was a quiet, burdened air about the space, a shared grief suspended around me. I remember hearing the distinct sniffling that so often accompanies tears. The pain of that loss was inescapable. This was a place where you were forced to confront the reality of the situation. A fourteen-year-old boy had been killed for whistling. It was an innocent act that according to some sources was taught to him by his mother to help him with a vocal disability[22].

[22] An anecdote regarding this possibility is found in Chris Bell's introduction to *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*.

I offer up my own phenomenological experience and encounter with the material remains of Till's murder to say this; I fundamentally cannot understand why anyone would want to reproduce the image of him that has circulated for more than sixty years in our cultural imagination or try to self-righteously and vehemently defend that as art to a American Black person. Knowing what I know now, I have a lot of questions. If the German scholar who approached me in Hamburg were to step into that space, would she not be able to feel a little of that grief I felt? Would even a little bit of that solemnity haunt her? How would she counter that small ask in a quest for dignity? Would it embarrass her that in her taking on the task of soldiering on in the frontlines for free speech, she stood there as an advocate of Schutz's abstracted painting of Till's body? A painting constituting a rehearsal of terror and trauma, spectacularizing Black death for the purposes of controversial art? It should.

In the NMAAHC, I (in my Black body) had to, literally and figuratively, navigate a long and complex history of trauma and oppression to move towards Black joy and excellence. In this way, the museum serves as a transient home for a progressing narrative enabled through Black bodies, their traumas and losses. It reflects, in some ways, an afro-pessimist aesthetic; while there isn't a lot of hope everywhere, there is a distinct lack of total despair.

By virtue of the fact that she did not attend my presentation, what the senior scholar didn't know was that the presentation I had done was also about Black healing and the preservation of Black joy.

As I have presented, I have danced and continue to dance the rhizomatic choreography of my ancestors. I form bonds and kinships where trauma has destroyed them. I create and hold spaces for empathy for Blackpain. I do a lot of work not just to survive, but also to make this world a little more survivable for people that look like me. That need to hear stories about people like me. That need to dance like me. That are disabled like me. And in that way, this project is simultaneously selfish and altruistic. In sharing my truth through these performing object lessons, I have endeavored to cultivate a space of shared meaning, empathy, and edifying kinships. Because perhaps naively, I believe that theatre and performance can support that work. In this way, I have offered up the idea that healing and pleasure can be intrinsic counters to trauma and terror.

I have laid out and examined specific contemporary and historical contexts in which Black cultural products are generated from trauma and terror.

I told you at the beginning that this was not the Truth but rather my truth as it exists in this context of traumatized and terrorized Black subjects living in the constant aftermath of blackpain and suffering. But there is also active resistance, healing and joy and survival. It is my hope that this project has productively centered all of these things in a way that shows how Black cultural production and narratives matter. How Black deaths and lives matter. How Black joy matters.

Finally, this project is always, already deeply connected to the idea of home. I have examined sites where home is a place of return, where home can be a place of

activating community, and where home is a place that is destroyed with the loss of a member. Home, I argue, is ultimately the place that you attempt to live in. Trauma and terror often force us from our homes, whether a home is a physical built structure or the bodies we inhabit. I think, for the most part, this project considers the Black home/body as a site of traumatic spectacularization. It seems we are on a constant quest to find home despite being perpetually severed from the idea.

Despite the despair and grief that surround and often form a merciless occupation of this disabled Black body I live in, I will always want to return home.

And that is my truth.

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