

The Unquiet Dead: Race and Violence in the “Post-Racial” United States

J.E. Jed Murr

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Reading Committee:

Dr. Eva Cherniavsky, Chair

Dr. Habiba Ibrahim

Dr. Chandan Reddy

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J.E. Jed Murr

University of Washington

Abstract

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J.E. Jed Murr

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor Eva Cherniavksy
English

This dissertation project investigates some of the ways histories of racial violence work to (de)form dominant and oppositional forms of common sense in the allegedly “post-racial” United States. Centering “culture” as a terrain of contestation over common sense racial meaning, *The Unquiet Dead* focuses in particular on popular cultural repertoires of narrative, visual, and sonic enunciation to read how histories of racialized and gendered violence circulate, (dis)appear, and congeal in and as “common sense” in a period in which the uneven dispensation of value and violence afforded different bodies is purported to no longer break down along the same old racial lines. Much of the project is grounded in particular in the emergent cultural politics of race of the early to mid-1990s, a period I understand as the beginnings of the US “post-racial moment.” The ongoing, though deeply and contested and contradictory, “post-racial moment” is one in which the socio-cultural valorization of racial categories in their articulations to other modalities of difference and oppression is alleged to have undergone significant transformation such that, among other things, processes of racialization are understood as decisively delinked from racial violence. The project demonstrates how antiblack and related

forms of racialized and gendered violences are crucial to the production of “post-racial” forms of common sense and the relations of value they help to govern. These formations of common sense work to crowd out and subsume subaltern and other common senses of race and value, even as they draw upon and transmute radical and decolonial histories in complex ways.

Following work by Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Kara Keeling and others, common sense is understood here as a site of struggle over the possible. It lends the present its moments of seeming coherence, but it is also where the past asserts itself in the service of potential futures that call out to the present in partially occluded and potentially redemptive ways. Engaging with scholarship in US American studies, Ethnic Studies, and related fields, the project turns to a wide range of cultural sites and forms.

Chapter One turns to Paul Beatty's novel *The White Boy Shuffle* to build the theoretical and historical scaffolding for the project's approach to the “post-racial moment.” My reading attempts to think through the way the novel invokes different forms and histories of antiblack violence to apprehend the racial present and to imagine how social lives and landscapes survive, surreptitiously, (in)visibly, and sonically. Chapter Two takes up mainstream film to think through the development of common sense(s) of white anti-racism, with a particular focus on how white male heteromascularity remakes itself in popular culture through an intimacy with racialized suffering and both critiques and renewals of US state power. Chapter Three extends in another direction the theorization of whiteness as a structure of racialized and gendered violence by turning to the purportedly oppositional common senses of race, rebellion, and exchange that circulate in rock music cultures. In attempting to sketch anew a series of (im)possible connections between presumptively white indie rock music cultures and racial blackness, my focus is on opening ground for investigating how material histories of race, gender and sexuality

are embodied, animated, reworked and lived in writing, performance, and sound. Chapter Four reads visual artist Nick Cave's soundsuits as interventions into the dominant logics of the post-racial moment. Cave's mobile assemblages or ensembles of discarded objects cite and embody and sound out whole histories of fabrication, collective acts of world-making, moving and looking. The immersive, enveloping quality of the soundsuits in exhibition and performance take in their viewers, sometimes literally, and if they flirt with exoticized and authentic otherness and with fantasies of alternative embodiment, but they also enunciate other grammars of embodiment and disallow the willed forgetting of ongoing histories of racial and colonial encounter and violence.

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practice most often meant “guerilla pickets,” office takeovers, massive protests, and all forms of collective celebration. Yasser Munif, Elsa Wiehe, Taki Manolacos, Sirisha Naidu, Swati Birla, Darren Griffis, Todd Evans, Chris Vials, Anthony Ratcliff, Jeff Napolitano, Srinivas Lankala, Mishy Leiblum, Mark Nelson, Marc Rodrigues, Krishna Melnattur, Cruz Bueno, Juan Ramos, Aaron Winslow, Erika Marquez, Ibrahim Dahlstrom-Hakki, Antonia Carcelen, Tee Williams, and so many others showed me what collective political struggle could be. Along with my daily community of support, including especially Megan Tady, Lesley Yalen, Brian Baldi, Thomas Burke, and Joshua Bolton, they made western Massachusetts a home in a way that no other place in my itinerant existence had been.

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INTRODUCTION

Unquiet Circulations

“[. . .] they create a new public ritual whose aim is to allow the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead to flow into the public sphere, empower individuals, and challenge the would-be guardians of the Nation-State, guardians of its dead as well as its living, of its meaning and destiny.” – Michael Taussig¹

The year is 1992. Visual artist and cultural worker Nick Cave sits in a Chicago park, thinking through the narrative depictions and visual images of Rodney King's body as they circulate in state discourse and popular media. King's body, in its myriad representations, seems to Cave “larger than life,” “mammoth-like,” super- or supra-human, massive, dense and yet rendered thoroughly disposable and degraded.² It is how “the police [. . .] brought identity to [him]” that most immediately demands Cave's attention.³ The phrase speaks to the retrospective attempts to narrate King's black and male body—immobile, kneeling, handcuffed at the moment when the infamous beating begins—as a threat, eminently lethal and animalistic. It also connotes powerfully how the police officers' bodies and their instruments—metal batons, tasers, feet, fists—unleashed on King, work to describe, to outline, to elaborate, to *produce*, even, his body as they set out to destroy or nullify it. That is, their violence against him paradoxically produced King as an object of knowledge and a suffering body-under-representation, precisely as it sought to reduce him to something less than a subject, to merely flesh.⁴ This objectification would be

1 Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (Routledge, 2012), 48.

2 Recorded materials featured as part of the Seattle Art Museum 2011 exhibition of Cave's work, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*.

3 Ibid.

4 This emphasis on flesh is indebted, of course, to the work of Hortense Spillers, particularly her well-known essay “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” which I draw on in multiple chapters of the project. See Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,” reprinted in *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (Rutgers University Press, 2009), 443-464.

redoubled in the legal deliberation over King's body in proceedings that did not include King himself as a speaking, witnessing subject of the court (as he was not called to testify) and turned, ultimately, upon the white officers' innocence vis-a-vis King's "Hulk-like," "bear"-like being and the "threat" posed by his outstretched, open-palmed hand.⁵

The (re)production of that scene, the endless loops of its circulations, and its core components—hypervisible black suffering, white innocence-under-threat, the body as a site of violence—index myriad other scenes which demand attention to the "complementarities of race, value, and violence."⁶ It is an eerily familiar scene of the (re)production of race and value, in other words, by way of violence. According to Lindon Barrett, *race* and *value* should be understood as isomorphic within modern social formations, and both depend crucially on violence, its representations, movements and cultural (il)logics. The "beating of Rodney King," as it floats through the ashes of the LA Uprisings, reveals much about the post-apartheid United States—if the "post" has any significance in this discussion—including some of the ways in which whiteness continues to function as (synonymous with) value itself while blackness—often discursively synonymous with "race"—is marked and devalued, violently, by its perceived distance from—and, paradoxically, nearness to—whiteness. In Nick Cave's hands, it also points to the capacity of (representations of) racial, sexual, and gender violence to reinforce or potentially cut and transfigure common sense racial meaning. His response to this moment was to gather twigs from the ground around him, discarded and devalued things that would form the first intertwined fragments of his "soundsuits," massive, elaborately-constructed, mobile,

5 See George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). I repeat this reading, with differing emphases, to open the final chapter of the project.

6 Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26.

sculptural suits whose multiplicity of sights, surfaces, and sounds continue to appear in varying configurations in installations, performances, and “invasions.”

“We live within the history of a double violation,” remarks Fred Moten: “the denigration of things and the coincident devaluation of people that is carried out by what is supposed to be their reduction to things.”⁷ Cave's “soundsuits,” understood as an extended meditation on and intervention into this double violation, might be figured as a rich, multivalent archive of the imbrications of racialized and gendered embodiment, valuation, and violence as they move across the spatial and temporal scales of racial capitalist modernity that operate (through) that violation. Cave's work situates those imbrications as effects of unfinished histories of colonial and racial domination and, simultaneously, as the peculiar and particular conditions that mark a period of contestation over common sense racial meaning, when the alleged obsolescence of the logics and effects of racism is asserted alongside reinvigorated instantiations of racism's violence. Cave's soundsuits valorize what is not supposed to be valued, what was formerly or never valued, what appeared lost; they value in ways that are out of time, out of sync, out of joint with the dominant regimes of race and value to which they so clearly refer. They invite in their viewers a sense of play—the lure of otherness, the promise of the malleability of gendered and racial embodiment, even the possibility of surrogation or the total inhabitation of racialized difference, or the otherworldly and fantastic erasure of racialized and gendered embodiment altogether—all features of dominant formations of common sense in the “post-racial moment.” Each of these invitations suggest histories of violence: the violence of settler-colonial encounters with and constructions of otherness; the subjective violence of material bodies colliding in space,

⁷ Fred Moten, “Ecology of Eloquent Things.” Lecture, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN, April 8, 2011.

such as the LAPD officers' bodies with King's; the ghostly violence outlined in the suits' striking forms and frames that sometimes resemble the instruments of slave coffles (including iron masks, barbed headcages, and other devices supposed to make impossible human intimacy and sociality); the silence and stillness of death as an effect of violence; the epistemological violence of "post-racial" discourses; and the saturating, objective violence suggested in that paradigmatic scene of value, the production and movement of the commodity within a regime of proprietary relation that extends to and engulfs human being. Within the "double violation" by way of which New World (re)production operates, these violences condense in the figure of the captive black female as an index of unfreedom who guarantees "freedom" in its social, political, and economic senses.⁸ The black body, from slavery forward, captive or free, is a locus of racial capitalism's violence. As Barrett writes, in the "post-Enlightenment Western thought [that undergirds racial slavery], the African body signifies an existence entirely or virtually within the bodily half of the [mind/body] antithesis."⁹ "Reason, rationalism, and enlightenment," continues Barrett, "sanction a hostility toward African Americans endemic to the U.S. [. . .]. The black body stands as the point of 'certainty' underwriting New World hostility."¹⁰ In Cave's work, "the black body" is an *uncertain, never-quite-disappeared* figure upon which the meanings of other "things"—buttons,

8 This is a line of thought that can be traced through the work of Hortense Spillers and Angela Y. Davis, with recent elaborations by Kara Keeling and Katherine McKittrick, among others. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (Rutgers, 2009), 443-464; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (Random House LLC, 2011); Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review*, 1972, 81-100; Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006). See also Andrew Apter, "The Blood of Mothers: Women, Money, and Markets in Yoruba-Atlantic Perspective," *Journal of African American History* 98, no. 1 (2013): 72-98.

9 Barrett, "Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom," *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (1997): 318.

10 Ibid, 318.

sequins, thread, cotton, toys, instruments—might be arrayed and allocated, valorized and confounded. Read in this way, Cave's work constitutes an insurgent, immanent commentary on both dominant and oppositional formations of racial common sense in the contemporary US. His (dis)ordered productions call upon histories of racial and colonial violence and in the process reveal how those histories shape common sense in the “post-racial moment.” His work also speaks through counter-histories and traditions within and underneath histories of violence in order to imagine other ways of valuing in common that those violences sought and failed to fully contain.

Common Sense(s) and Violence in Black and White

Following Cave's lead, this dissertation project investigates some of the ways histories of racial violence work to (de)form dominant and oppositional forms of common sense in the so-called “post-racial moment.” The project began as an attempt to investigate the politics of memory and forgetting on the shifting grounds of US racial formation, state transformation and “neoliberal” governance. Specifically, it sought to interrogate “memory” as a potential site of recovery, redress or resistance in the context of transformations of the cultural logics of race and the “security practices” of the post-warfare/welfare state.¹¹ In the course of examining mainstream film's production of white heteromascularity as normatively anti-racist in the 1990s and early 2000s, I began to track the ways in which histories of racial violence in their different guises, instantiations and elusive movements—colonial and genocidal, spectacular and quotidian,

11 Here I'm following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, as I elaborate in the first two chapters of the project in different ways. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2006); and Gilmore, “Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism,” *Race & Class* 40, no.2–3 (March 1, 1999): 171–88.

subjective and structural—were constitutive of the films' imaginaries in ways that went beyond the apparent narratological scope of the films themselves. I began to understand the films as a site for reading the production of a formation of common sense—ascendent especially in the 1990s—through which whiteness, masculinity, and state power were newly interrogated but ultimately (re)valorized. That valorization, I argue, depends crucially on histories of contestation over racial violence in quite complex and sometimes surprising ways. The films consistently draw on or cite the narrative and visual rhetorics of whiteness, male heteromascularity, and antiblack violence that were central to white supremacist public cultures, even as they position themselves as the definitive overcoming of white supremacy and the development of genuinely antiracist white subjectivities. They also recall the iconographies and grammars of critique that grew out of decolonial and antiracist struggle—including the positioning of representations of suffering black and brown bodies as flash points for condensing and galvanizing the aims of social movement—even as they invest, ultimately, in the forces of state and extralegal power those struggles set out either to capture or destroy. This encouraged me to investigate further the ways in which both dominant and oppositional formations of common sense—and the entanglements of race and value they sanction—rely upon, cite, and powerfully (re)animate histories of racial violence.

Centering “culture” as a terrain of contestation over common sense racial meaning, *The Unquiet Dead* focuses in particular on pop cultural repertoires of narrative, visual, and sonic enunciation to read how histories of racialized and gendered violence circulate, (dis)appear, and congeal in and as common sense in a period in which the uneven dispensation of value and violence afforded different bodies is purported to no longer break down along the same old racial

lines.¹² Much of the project is grounded in particular in the emergent cultural politics of race of the early to mid-1990s, a period I understand as the beginnings of the US “post-racial moment.”¹³ The ongoing, though deeply and contested and contradictory, “post-racial moment” is one in which the socio-cultural valorization of racial categories in their articulations to other modalities of difference and oppression is alleged to have undergone significant transformation such that, among other things, processes of racialization are understood as decisively delinked from racial violence and *blackness* and *whiteness* are said to be of diminishing—and, often, overemphasized—significance within the multitudinous spectrum of racial and ethnic classification, experience, and meaning. That this emergence occurs coterminously with the significant expansion of structures and spaces of racialized state violence—from a resurgent US imperialism to the increasing rise of the carceral state and the dismantling of welfare state provisions to the evisceration or privatization of public education and other public services—and the concomitant increases in vulnerability of racialized “surplus populations” at “home” and “abroad” is a matter of intense deliberation for critical race and ethnic studies scholars.¹⁴ My own attempts to address

12 I borrow the phrase “repertoires of enunciation” from Stuart Hall. See Stuart Hall, “The formation of a diasporic intellectual,” interview by Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, (Routledge, 2006).

13 Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 361–85. See also Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Duke University Press, 2010); and Maisha L. Wester, “Forgetting to Re-member: ‘Post-racial’ Amnesia and Racial History,” *Reconstruction* 9, no. 3 (2009).

14 See, among others, Joy James, *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Duke University Press, 2007); Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido, eds., *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (University of California Press, 2012); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Temple University Press, 2011); Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (South End Press, 2011).

this emergence, which is also a continuation of previous dynamics and processes, assert that antiblack and related forms of racialized and gendered violences are crucial to the production of “post-racial” forms of common sense and the relations of value they help to govern. These formations of common sense—including as expressed in prominent iterations of multiculturalism and colorblindness—work to crowd out and subsume subaltern and other common senses of race and value, even as they draw upon and transmute radical and decolonial histories (and the attitudes toward racial difference, state power, capitalism, and whiteness they produced).

My deployment of the category of “common sense” is indebted to Kara Keeling's reading of the work of Antonio Gramsci that informs her book *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Keeling “insist[s] on thinking about common sense not as a moment in the teleology of Reason, but as the condition of possibility for the emergence of alternate knowledges that are capable of organizing social life and existence in a variety of ways, some of which might constitute a counter-hegemonic force.”¹⁵ But Keeling, like Gramsci, doesn't cast common sense as a necessarily radical or resistant force (just as she does not dismiss it as a base or lower form of rationality). She investigates what she calls “white bourgeoisie North American common sense” as an “official common sense,” one which seeks and sometimes “garners the spontaneous consent of subaltern groups.”¹⁶ “Like subaltern common sense,” writes Keeling, “official common sense' contains elements 'borrowed' (or, more likely, stolen or appropriated) from other groups, particularly those exploited by the dominant

15 Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007), 19. See also Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (Penn State Press, 2011); and Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

16 Keeling, 21.

group. These 'appropriated' elements provide a record of concessions made in the struggle for hegemony [. . .].”¹⁷ Keeling's work enables an inquiry into the thorniness of common sense in the uneven historical and political terrain of the post-Keynesian, “post-Civil Rights” US landscape. This includes the concern raised above about whether and how racial violence remains central to the production of common sense racial meaning, but it also opens a broad set of questions regarding the lingering effects of racism “after” white supremacy, the survival and deployment of “counter-memories,” and the potential for reanimating histories of violence in the service of critiques of and movement against state power and global capitalism. What modes of representation and critique might be mobilized against “post-racial” discourses? How might attention to what Stuart Hall refers to as the “necessarily fragmentary contradictory nature of common sense” enable understandings of counter-hegemonic possibilities embedded within dominant or “official” common senses? Are contemporary “racial liberal” common senses that are at times openly counterposed to state power potentially counter-hegemonic, or do they merely vacillate between nostalgia for previous state forms and easy accommodation to neoliberal governance? Do “post-racial” formations of common sense undermine or significantly reconfigure “race” as a set of symbolic and material bodily designations to which value and violence accrue? Do “public spectacle[s] of black suffering and anguish,” in particular, remain constitutive of common sense and shore up “racial hierarchy with blackness permanently relegated to a subordinate status”?¹⁸ Might cultural production produce memories of violence that do not merely (re)spectacularize black suffering and whose trajectories do not reach toward

17 Ibid.

18 See Marable in Joy James, *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Duke University Press, 2007).

state recognition and protection or the maintenance of “post-racial” white subjectivities?

Common sense, then, is understood here a site of struggle over the possible. It lends the present its moments of seeming coherence, but it is also where the past asserts itself in “fragmentary contradictory” form in the service of potential futures that call out to the present in partially occluded and potentially redemptive ways. *The Unquiet Dead* seeks to glimpse—and hear—some of the ways that histories of violence are (re)animated in a variety of cultural sites as part of the production of and struggle over common senses of race and value. As explored here, the line of inquiry enabled by Keeling's work dovetails with a related set of questions regarding the (re)constructions of whiteness and the specificities of antiblack racist violence in a period in which racial violence in a systemic or structural sense seems to lose its key referents, in which acts of racial violence are widely presumed to be matters of individual animus or pathology, and in which mainstream racial discourse and the “facts on the ground” would seem to render the so-called “black/white binary” anachronistic at best.¹⁹ If we follow complementary lines of thought developed primarily in Black Studies and related fields which suggest that, within the matrices of New World racialization and the series of “peculiar institutions”²⁰ that come in the wake of the “nonevent of emancipation”²¹ that was the (supposed) end of racial slavery, black bodies are those which “magnetize bullets,”²² and if we understand that, within modern US racial cultures,

19 See, for instance, the discussion provided in Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction,” *Qui Parle* 64, no. 2 (2005): 62–77.

20 See Loic Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration,” *New Left Review* II, no. 13 (February 2002): 41–60.

21 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 139.

22 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010), 82.

“black” and “white” designate distinctive poles on the scale of (in)human valuation that are irreducible to other positions,²³ we must attempt to think the particular configurations and potential transformations of these features of US modernity specifically and comparatively in the context of the “post-racial moment” taken to be the aftermath of formal white supremacy and the legacy of Civil Rights Era achievements.²⁴ As Nikhil Pal Singh succinctly describes, echoing Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism, one of the salient features of this moment, as evidenced in the work of critical race studies scholars over the past two decades, has been “a shift [. . .] in which the expansion of the domains of application of state violence in the production of forms of group-differentiated spatial confinement, bodily dispossession, denial of civic honor and recognition, and vulnerability to violence, injury, and ill health (up to and including premature death) now proceeds largely without the requirement of an explicit codification of, or reference to, preexisting forms of group differentiation.”²⁵ Singh goes on to name this as “a form of power that produces disparate consequences in the absence of prior

23 See Neferti XM Tadiar, “In the Face of Whiteness as Value: Fall-Outs of Metropolitan Humanness,” *Qui Parle*, 2003, 143–82; Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Random House LLC, 2012); Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2010); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (Rutgers University Press, 2009); Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Duke University Press, 2000); Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010).

24 I don't take up at length in this study comparative racialization “beyond black and white”; nor do I deal with debates over the possibility for thinking New World Black experiences in relation to other histories of racialization and violence. I find useful a formulation made by poet, writer, and theorist Dionne Brand, who writes, in the context of an extended meditation on Black life and history and antiblack violence, “There are other bodies in the world which are brutalized. These examples are not a case for exclusivity [. . .] only for a certain particularity. A particularity which has its resonances against those other brutalized bodies.” See Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Random House LLC, 2012).

25 See Singh, “Racial Formation in an Age of Permanent War” in Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido, eds., *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (University of California Press, 2012), 299.

ideological rationalization or explicit group targeting: indeed, the express absence of particularistic, or 'racial,' intent (often in the form of disavowal) in part constitutes the 'legitimacy' of such violence."²⁶

As the expansion of these modalities of violence proceeds apace alongside the supposed markers of “post-racial” possibility—the elections of Barak Obama being the paradigmatic example—those moments and acts that *do* appear in public discourses as (potential) instantiations of “racial violence”—from the beating of Rodney King to the torture of Abner Louima to the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin—circulate (outside of certain activist groups, alternative websites, and black radio) without prompting questions about the linkages between these moments and the social, political, and economic structures in which they emerge. “Post-racial” formations of common sense typically and selectively “forget” the manner in which twentieth-century antiracist and decolonial movements argued that “the relationship between [ideological and structural] racism and violence [is] inextricable” and, in the process, they forgo the work of naming the articulations between “subjective” acts of racial violence and “systemic” or “structural” productions of racial violence.²⁷ I use “subjective violence” throughout the project to indicate what some scholars call “personal violence.”²⁸ Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, for instance, in his work on Frantz Fanon, describes personal violence as the “easiest [level of violence] to discern and control”: it “involves direct actions and means (like a fist or a bullet) and is restricted to place as well as time.”²⁹ He counterposes personal violence to “institutional or structural

26 Ibid.

27 Nikhil Pal Singh, “The Black Panthers and The 'undeveloped Country' of the Left,” *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, edited by Charles Johnson (Black Classic Press, 2005), 1998, 57–105.

28 See also Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (Profile, 2010).

29 Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (Springer, 2004), 136.

violence,” “higher order phenomena that subsume and supersede personal violence.”³⁰ *The Unquiet Dead* suggests that the notion of “personal” or subjective violence as restricted in time and place (and separable from institutional or structural violence) is a limited one, as acts of violence continually overflow their own temporal and spatial boundaries in ways that are difficult to name and perpetually haunting to those who experience them out of time or in other spaces than they are supposed to exist. The project thus works against the impulse to capture and contain acts of violence temporally—an impulse that mimics the law's attempts to enumerate and delimit particular acts of violence in space and time and in individual bodies and wills of perpetrators and victims rather than, say, as aspects of affective and collective economies of exchange, valuation, and experience or as effects of processes of capital accumulation, crisis, and state practice. Attention (exclusively) to subjective or personal violence, I'm suggesting, tends to obscure attention to the structures of violence that are their conditions of possibility and from which they cannot be neatly discerned. Nor does the project assume the neatly instrumental character of violence. In his book *The Nervous System*—which, like Cave's first soundsuits, emerged in 1992—anthropologist Michael Taussig cautions that, in repeating Weber's famous “emphasis on violence as what define[s] the modern State, we cannot forget how decidedly flat, how instrumental, his notion of violence generally seems to be; how decidedly reified it is, as if violence were a substance [. . .],” measurable and contained.³¹ Taussig emphasizes instead the “intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting, plain scary, mythical, and arcane cultural properties and power of violence.”³² It is these characteristics that make violence's role in the

30 Ibid.

31 Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (Routledge, 2012), 116.

32 Ibid.

production of common sense perceptions of the world so pervasive and so difficult to keep in our grasps.

For these and related reasons, *The Unquiet Dead* does not take up the important work of “reading” particular acts of racialized state and state-sanctioned violence—such as the Rodney King beating—in large part because, as the different chapters of the project suggest, the hypervisibility of black bodies within popular cultural formations, and the spectacularity of black suffering through which that hypervisibility often operates, often obscures or erases the very systems and structures that produce that violence. That is, I don't focus on the incidents of antiblack and related violences “in themselves” but rather on the now visible, now disappeared ways in which they emerge within different popular cultural scenes: in filmic and other narrative and visual rhetorics that seek to construct a normatively antiracist white (heteromasculine) subject; in the apparently oppositional spaces and sounds of indie rock as it situates itself within and against and apart from histories of white theft and colonization of black life and cultural forms; in works of black visual art and performance that seem to figure and imagine “post-racial” or non-racial forms of (not quite) human embodiment. These cultural scenes are positioned here as sites of convergence, crossing, and transfer where antiblack violence, white reconstruction, and state power in their articulations to and through one another are both set to work and worked on, where formations of common sense racial meaning are revealed and confounded.

Theorizing the “Post-Racial” Moment

Many of the central concerns and questions of the project are laid out in another cultural

text that grew out of the LA uprisings, Paul Beatty's novel *The White Boy Shuffle*, which is the focus of Chapter One.³³ Published in 1996, it indexes the growing dominance of “post-racial” common senses—including colorblindness and multiculturalism—in the context of the uprisings, the era of the Street Terrorism and Prevention (STEP) Act and the war on black and Latino/a populations under the cover of various “moral panics,” and the coterminous “unfixing” of black and Latino/a urban space and life that attended industrial decline, global restructurings of capitalism, and the further “securitization” of the state form under conditions of neoliberal governance and violence. Through the experiences of thinker-tinker protagonist-turned-suicidal-messiah Gunnar Kaufman, the novel powerfully situates this period within the complex aftermath of formal, legal white supremacy *and* the legacies of antiracist, decolonial, anti-capitalist struggle that are in many ways the conditions of possibility of the racial present's multi-sited terrain of contestation. *The White Boy Shuffle* does so by thematizing (and skewering) many of the mechanisms through which the racialized poor are made subject to what Gilmore refers to as the “state-sanctioned and extralegal production of group vulnerability to premature death”³⁴ under the cover of the “post-racial” moment whose dominant formations of common sense operate (in the novel) to grease the smooth functioning of global capital's new rounds of accumulation and to subsume, subvert, and drown the proliferation of counter-narrative strategies that developed during the Long Civil Rights Era and in Black nationalist struggle.

Gunnar and his best friend Scoby find that the political landscape of early 1990s LA does not offer any clear revolutionary or counter-hegemonic possibilities, and the novel

33 Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle: A Novel* (Macmillan, 1996).

34 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2006).

simultaneously parodies and laments the seeming disconnection between the common sense(s) of Black nationalism that black people in LA inherit and its apparent inability to effectively counter emergent modalities of state power and violence.³⁵ Intramural and infra-political activity, here, happen in a zone of enclosure under a securitized, carceral state power that cannot be targeted for appeal or capture (or even directly addressed), and the limited domains of black publicity and mobility—those indexes of “freedom” said to be manifest most concretely in the hypervisible sports and entertainment complexes of global(izing) capital³⁶—displace freedom dreams with compelled performances for white audiences or obscurity and relegation to the bottom rungs of the service sector. The LA uprisings are a flashpoint for this thinking. Figured in *The White Boy Shuffle* as neither the “irrational” violence³⁷ of popular media myth-making nor the strategic insurrectionary violence of a subaltern bloc, Gunnar experiences the uprisings as part of a long history of day-to-day response to racial violence—stretching back through the undocumented “I’m-tired-of-the-white-man-fucking-with-us-and-what-not” riots to Watts to rural Mississippi. Gunnar's own participation in the “riots” involve he and Scoby “beating” a truck driver with puffy bags of Wonder Bread. The scene dramatizes the seeming irrelevance of oppositional practices of memory, redemptive violence, and alternative formations of common sense in a world saturated by unaccountable corporate power and state practice perpetually indifferent to the production of national subjects or any notion of “public good” much less any version of liberation beyond that dictated by the market.³⁸

35 See Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*.

36 See Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic : Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

37 See Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (Verso, 2002), xiv.

38 See Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (University of

However, on the day of the uprisings Gunnar realizes the necessity of being a “soon-to-be-revolutionary.” Here and elsewhere the novel seems to figure a potential counter-hegemonic possibilities whose forms can't be discerned in the present. Yet, at every turn *The White Boy Shuffle* grates against attempts to solidify “resistance” and the dual tendency to equate blackness with suffering and to reduce blackness to the inevitable (though always deferred) overcoming of that suffering. Thus, counter-narrative deployments of histories of black life and invocations of antiblack violence in the novel are deftly (re)incorporated and assimilated to dominant forms of common sense which circulate under the literal and metaphorical shadow of state violence—most dramatically in the form of the LAPD helicopter that hovers over Gunnar's head 24 hours a day by novel's end. In this context, the novel's staging of particular histories that can only be smuggled forward in poetics, humor, and music is decidedly ambivalent. Gunnar's mother is central here: her character at once invokes and undermines what Keeling refers to—following Hortense Spillers and Angela Y. Davis—as “the-black-woman-as-matriarch-responsible-for-the-Black-community's-pathology” whose “common-sense reification” was instantiated most famously in the 20th century by the Moynihan Report and then in a series of related discursive figures, including the “Welfare Queen” of the 1980s and 90s.³⁹ She appears “publicly” in the novel as “the world's loudest griot,” entering the commodified landscape of disposable celebrity via the late-night talk show circuit to emit non-linguistic sounds at incredible levels.⁴⁰ And she passes on the family genealogy centered on the male Kaufmans, whose absurdist stories upend

Minnesota Press, 2006).

39 Keeling, *Witch's Flight*. See also Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992): 332–33.

40 Beatty, 7.

the tradition of “race men” and militate against any attempt to fold the family into the noble legacy of Black Freedom struggle that is so quickly appropriated by 1990s multicultural discourse. Yet she tells Gunnar that poetry is his vehicle for hearing “echoes [. . .] from [the] past” and his “ancestors talking to and through [him].”⁴¹ So, while *The White Boy Shuffle* ruminates on the limitations of mobilizing counter-memories, narratives and histories of struggle against racial violence, and on the concomitant limitations of the injunction to produce such counter-memories, narratives, and histories, the novel figures counter-hegemonic possibilities only as unknown futures whose possible shapes might be glimpsed, if at all, in pieces, through humor, music, performance, and poetics.

(Dis)ordering Histories of Violence

Beatty's novel, like Cave's work, marks the 1990s and early 2000s as a period in which black cultural workers articulated and interrogated oppositional forms of sociality, movement and being amidst proliferating forms of both systemic and spectacularized subjective racial violence whose (dis)appearances and (in)visibility were always highly contested, even as dominant forms of common sense sought to conjure histories of antiblack violence precisely to erase or disfigure their potentially radical significance for the present. Chapter One, “The Politics of Race in the 'Post-Racial' Moment,” turns to Beatty's novel to build the theoretical and historical scaffolding for the project's approach to emergent and dominant formations of common sense in the “post-racial” moment. *The White Boy Shuffle* suggests that the strategies of counter-narrative and counter-memory that helped to produce and sustain transformative anti-racist and

41 Ibid, 79.

decolonial movement do not hold the same purchase on the racial present as they did on mid- to late-twentieth century social orders. My reading attempts to think through the way the novel invokes different forms and histories of antiblack violence to apprehend the racial present and to imagine how social lives and landscapes survive, surreptitiously, (in)visibly, and sonically.

Chapter Two, “Spaces of (Black) Death, Fantasies of (White) Renewal: On the Common Senses of White Anti-Racism,” turns to mainstream film to think through the development of common sense(s) of white anti-racism, with a particular focus on how white male heteromascularity remakes itself in popular culture through an intimacy with “racialized suffering.” The “post-racial” order promised by the refurbishment of white heteromascularity requires a mostly unspoken derogation of black life and the potential return of an ethical racial state that the films seem, at first, to reject. The chapter's aim is not simply to illustrate the ways in which the counter-insurgent force of white reconstruction—propelled inexorably by the sense of being perpetually besieged—simply reproduces itself and antiblack racism in the aftermath of formal, legal and state-sanctioned white supremacy.⁴² Rather, it highlights the way in which white anti-racism tends to situate itself in relation to the state and should be understood as a mode of contestation over state power and the multivalent, multidirectional forces of global(izing) capital apparently partially untethered from the nation-state. In so doing, common senses of white anti-racism depend on and draw upon the memory-images of earlier moments of antiracist, anti-fascist and decolonial struggle to re-valorize whiteness, heteromascularity, and state power. Far from simply producing “official,” state-sanctioned forms of “racial liberal” common sense or exhibiting a revanchist, “angry white male” desire for a return to the white

⁴² I borrow the term “white reconstruction” from Dylan Rodriguez. On whiteness and the sense of being besieged, see Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Temple University Press, 2010).

supremacist past, then, these iterations index the complicated and contradictory ways in which white subjectivities are re-imagined in popular culture in the “post-racial moment.”

Chapter Three, “All Your History's Ablaze: (White) Rock, Violence, Blackness,” extends in another direction the theorization of whiteness as a structure of racialized and gendered violence by turning to the purportedly oppositional common senses of race, rebellion, and exchange that circulate in indie rock music. In attempting to sketch anew a series of (im)possible connections between presumptively white indie rock music cultures and racial blackness, my focus is on opening ground for investigating how material histories of race, gender and sexuality are embodied, animated, reworked and lived in writing, performance, and sound. The chapter furthers recent critical interventions in American studies regarding “cross-racial” homosocial desire in rock by theorizing how common senses of “white rock” invest in and enact multiple problematic modes of “reaching out for blackness” in its attempts at what Fred Moten terms cultural production on “the other side of impossible imitation and sheer thievery.”⁴³ Positioning singer-songwriter's Gillian Welch's “Elvis Presley Blues” as a rich site for reading the histories of these modes of “reaching out” from the vantage of the “post-racial moment,” the chapter argues for a consideration of the ways in which racialized and gendered violence condition US popular music's various cultures of enunciation, reception, and circulation (and the categories of race, gender, and personhood they both assume and reinscribe). In the process, the chapter discerns multiple articulations of white rock's failed reaching for blackness in how it at once evinces and elides its own reliance on those violences—how it variously transmits and transmutes them, desires them and forgets them.

43 See Moten, *B Jenkins* (Duke University Press, 2009), 105.

The fourth and final chapter of the project turns to the work of Nick Cave by first moving against a couple of critical tendencies common to critical appraisal of his work: first, the tendency to identify Cave as a black artist and to note the importance of the Rodney King experience to the development of the soundsuits project, only to then discuss the soundsuits themselves and their deployments of bodily form, movement, and sound without reference to the racial logics that structure both the impulse to name Cave's blackness and the imperative to recognize King's; and second, the related tendency to take up the otherworldly and fantastic nature of the soundsuits as an incitement to childlike wonder, play, and enjoyment and as a purely open-ended address whose implications are readily accessible to all. Against but in light of these tendencies, the chapter reads Cave's "armor for the soul" as it turns inward against the skin, against the common sense notion or possibility of self-possession. Cave's mobile assemblages or ensembles of discarded objects cite and embody and sound out whole histories of fabrication, collective acts of world-making, moving and looking that cannot be trusted to stick to the script of racial and gendered embodiment they inherit. If the immersive, enveloping quality of the soundsuits in exhibition and performance take in their viewers, sometimes literally, and if they flirt with exoticized and "authentic" otherness and with fantasies of alternative embodiment, they also enunciate other grammars of embodiment—before and after that violation Moten speaks of—and disallow the willed forgetting of those ongoing histories of racial and colonial encounter that are the conditions of possibility of the entanglements of race, value and violence of our present.

In moving across a wide range of forms, genres, and mediums, the four chapters of the project might be said to skeptically recapitulate a series of now-familiar critical maneuvers

within cultural studies scholarship: from the limits of the textual to the visual; from the fraught terrain of the visual to the sonic; from narrative to poetics. Rather than privileging one of these maneuvers, the wager is that moving between cultural forms and locations offers an important vantage on how histories of racialized and gendered violence (and the unquiet dead through which they are reanimated) produce and trouble formations of common sense in a “post-racial” present—a moment saturated by the ongoing material traces of pasts with which those formations can neither reckon nor dispense.

CHAPTER ONE

The Politics of Race in the “Post-Racial” Moment

“Race is mercurial—deadly and slick.”
- Cedric Robinson¹

2012 was a year of black death. But to begin to put it this way already risks marking this fact as exceptional. Indeed, it is precisely the liberal discourse of exceptionality, the performance of shock, concern and even outrage over the murder of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin that belies the banality of his death. Yet how would one counter the liberal multiculturalist “post-racial” imaginaries of race that produce white innocence by way of white shock and knowing concern over black suffering and death—to say nothing of the openly racist imaginaries that had Florida gun owners buying paper targets designed to look like Martin?² More broadly, how does the momentary furor over Martin's murder and, later, the George Zimmerman verdict, serve to further dominant formations of “post-racial” common sense rather than upend them? What forms of representation, memory, and performance might constitute an effective intervention into the common senses that “post-racial” imaginaries instantiate and encourage, common senses that, at best, seem to foreclose meaningful analyses of the articulation of spectacularized black suffering with the systemic violence that dispenses uneven life chances, vulnerability, and premature death across the terrain of social and political life in the US and globally? To simply catalogue the deaths within mere days of Martin's—for instance, the murders of 68 year-old veteran Kenneth Chamberlain, Sr., and 22 year-old Rekia Boyd, to name just two of dozens of known cases that

1 Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4.

2 See also Robin D. G. Kelley, “The U.S. v. Trayvon Martin: How the System Worked,” *Huffington Post*, July 15, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robin-d-g-kelley/nra-stand-your-ground-trayvon-martin_b_3599843.html.

emerged in the first months of 2012³—and to begin to situate those deaths alongside and through memories of the interminable list of stories like them, would be to assign to the racial present a logic of representation and trajectory of justice that cannot hold. A logic of representation in the sense of an assumption that to represent or “remember” a moment or a history “otherwise” necessarily engenders a critical capacity and potential effectivity—the suggestion that challenging dominant discursive frameworks through counter-representational strategies will lead to a shift in the modalities of antiblack racial violence that such discourses have already consigned to the past. A trajectory of justice in the sense of the promise of democratic and juridical procedure as the means through which racism, figured as first and foremost individual and residual in the always-almost-“post-racial” US of President Barak Obama, will be overcome.

Instead, the momentary hypervisibility of Trayvon Martin might be understood in the first instance as a nodal point in the “global traffic in hypervisible blackness”⁴ that characterizes the political economic order of globalization just as thoroughly as it animates the remnants of racial liberalism that frame dominant common senses of race in the contemporary United States. Martin's narrative and bodily image—if not his body itself—circulate as consumable objects for the commodified circuits of corporate media—and, here, scholarly discourse—and for the broader discursive terrain of “post-racial” common senses. That circulation and the enormous outpouring of anger, grief, resentment, and protest that it occasioned recall in many ways the historic upheaval that attended the public circulation—insisted upon and made possible by his

3 A brief, incomplete report, compiled by Kali Akuno and Arlene Eisen working on behalf of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Black Left Unity Network, and US Human Rights Network was published online. See Hip Hop and Politics, April 6, 2012, <http://hiphopandpolitics.wordpress.com/2012/04/06/29-black-people-have-been-killed-by-policesecurity-since-jan-2012-16-since-trayvon>.

4 Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 233.

mother—of the image and narrative of Emmett Till's lynching, yet Martin's murder seems to work less to galvanize and cohere widespread social movement that might effectively address the systemic character of the violence that took material shape in his death than to individualize and spectacularize his narrative and image as delinked from the systemic and structural violence of earlier historical moments.

Investigating how “the story and image” of Till “profoundly shaped African American political consciousness in its own time and in subsequent generations,” Valerie Smith asserts that Mamie Bradley, Till's mother, gave her son's death “a meaning that transcended the significance of his individual life” by creating a mode of publicity directed at African Americans that “invited [. . .] them to join her in an act of public witness to the irrefutable evidence of white racist depravity.”⁵ This publicity helped to shape the “indelible” impact of Till on US “cultural imaginari[es].”⁶ In this light, it is significant that Trayvon Martin's murder—whose impact on US “cultural imaginari[es],” like Till's, is still in flux—occurred less than a decade after the United States Senate apologized, in 2005, for having failed to address lynching during the decades understood to have been the peak of the lynch regime in spite of consistent and widespread pressure to do so on the part of black activists, organizations, and leaders. The (not uncontested) performative act of “remembering” the Senate enacted required the public testimony of ninety-one-year-old James Cameron, “the only known survivor of an attempted lynching.”⁷ Having heard Cameron's narrative of suffering and redemption, which came only when a white man

5 Valerie Smith, “Emmett Till's Ring,” *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 151–61.

6 Ibid.

7 Manning Marable, “Katrina's Unnatural Disaster: A Tragedy of Black Suffering and White Denial,” in Joy James, ed., *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, 2007.

emerged from the crowd to assert Cameron's innocence, the Senate acted to recognize and remember the centrality of white supremacist violence (including that which took Till's life) in a public performance which works, I suggest, to manage and contain the disruptive potential of the “phantom memory” (to use Smith's phrase) that Till's image and narrative carry. That is, by calling forward and recording the unspeakable violence of lynching, the Senate wrote into the annals of US statecraft a form of official recognition that figures the “spectacular secret” of the “networked, systemic phenomenon” of lynching as firmly knowable (in part via empirical data drawn from formerly inadmissible testimony) and firmly in the past, as though what Jacqueline Goldsby refers to as the “cultural logic” of antiblack racialized and gendered violence no longer has material life and effects in the present—and as though the enormity of the violence and its temporal and spatial dimensions can be apprehended in the first place.⁸ This sense of the *pastness* and *containability* of antiblack violence was widely affirmed in the backlash to Oprah Winfrey's suggestion that the murders of Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till are in many respects “the same thing.”⁹

Considering the Senate's apology in relation to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, Manning Marable finds in the “steadfast refusal” on the part of some senators to sign the apology characteristics of a larger climate of exclusion that denies or fails to consider the “destructive consequences of modern structural racism” even as “the racial chasm in America continues to grow wider.”¹⁰ The key features of this climate, for Marable, are failures or ruses of public and

8 See Jacqueline Goldsby's use of “cultural logic” in *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

9 See “Oprah: Trayvon Martin the 'Same Thing' as Emmett Till, Huffington Post, April 5, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/05/oprah-trayvon-martin-emmett-till_n_3707096.html.

10 Marable, “Katrina's Unnatural Disaster,” 312.

collective memory: “the suppression of evidence of black resistance, and the obscuring of any records of white crimes and exploitation committed against blacks as an oppressed group.”¹¹ But, as I’ve begun to suggest, might it be possible that the apology—ostensibly meant to recognize and remember “white crimes and exploitation committed against blacks as an oppressed group”¹²—itself is as pernicious as the refusal of apology on the part of a number of neoconservative Senators? To answer this question requires attention to the peculiar contemporary circumstances in which remembering “crimes and exploitation” and even “black resistance” so often work to obscure ongoing violence and in the service of individualizing black suffering and either excoriating black people for their “failures” to “achieve” or, alternatively, accrediting the incorporative and progressive powers of American democracy and global capitalism wherever black people are said to have “achieved.” It requires, further, that we consider the way that the enduring presence, representation, and movement, ghostly or explicit, of the history of lynching and related violences does not often serve to encourage a critique of structural racism and its relation to state power and capital. I’m suggesting that this moment is emblematic of the ways in which histories of racialized and gendered violence work to make possible and legible “post-racial” formations of common sense. This occurs most pointedly in the moments when such violences are officially remembered and visibilized, but it also happens in popular sites and scenes when the presence of the unquiet dead is not or cannot be properly acknowledged.

By the “post-racial” or the “US post-racial moment,” as Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva term it, I mean to indicate the concatenation of often-contradictory discourses

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

and material conditions that help to organize, regulate, and condense the range of social and political possibilities in the contemporary US in a global context. Chakravartty and da Silva explain:

During President Bill Clinton's two terms, the U.S. postracial moment was established with the systematic and effective dismantling of welfare provisions, investments in the carceral system, the growing precarity in labor markets, and the attacks on affirmative action and other race-conscious policies. Clearly, this was not because the goals of the civil rights movement had been achieved. Rather, the few existing mechanisms for redress had been eliminated, and it was time to announce that they were officially obsolete.¹³

My investigation of the “post-racial moment” works to apprehend the complicated formations of *common sense* that the “post-racial” requires, instantiates, and reproduces. This involves attending to a “racial architecture in which postracial discourse and neoliberal practices combine to exact even more profit from the very penury resulting from the expropriation unleashed in previous moments and modalities of racial and colonial subjugation”¹⁴ in the US and elsewhere, but it also means focusing on the discursive and representational strategies through which “post-racial” common senses are lived, expressed, and challenged. To the extent that the post-racial signals a desire or promise to go “beyond” race, it is always-already embedded in the “race concept” itself, and must therefore not be considered as a distinctive break from earlier common senses of race.¹⁵ In this respect, the “post-racial moment,” as a contradictory set of effects of earlier and unfinished contestation, bears out tendencies inherent in US political and popular

13 Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (September 2012): 361-85.

14 Ibid.

15 As Tavia Nyong'o writes, “If race is an evasion and a fiction, it is an eminently political one; that is, it is collectively experienced and enacted. We must do far more than expose race's lack of scientific basis to interrupt its efficacy. And we must attend to the ways in which the dream of getting beyond race is, ironically, embedded in the genealogy of the race concept in ways that are not always immediately apparent.” See *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*, page 6.

culture. (This fact goes some way to explain why there are so many interminglings, coincidences, and crossings among and between contemporary neoconservative and neoliberal discourses of race, as well as between colorblindness and iterations of multiculturalism.)¹⁶ Turning first to Paul Beatty's 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, as a theorization of the emergence and challenge of post-racial common senses, the larger project explores the post-racial moment and post-racial formations of common sense not to fix or stabilize them but to explore their contradictions and the unevenness of their histories and productions in the service of asking new questions of the racial present.¹⁷ *The White Boy Shuffle*, like so many cultural texts that take up the “post-racial moment” as an emergent problematic, encourages that we not assume a totalizing or consistent logic for the post-racial but instead puzzle through its different threads.

***The White Boy Shuffle* and the Theorization of Post-Racial Common Sense**

The LA Uprisings occur roughly at the midpoint of *The White Boy Shuffle*, but it might be said that the text labors painstakingly to undo the centrality of the “riots” and their aftermath as a trope of black and heteromasculine political struggle and a potentially-galvanizing flashpoint for transformative social movement and political futurity, whether in the form of meaningful incorporation within the US nation, effective appeal to the state for redress, or revolutionary possibilities beyond juridical and formal relations to the state. Indeed, when thinker-tinker

16 Brandi Wilkins Catanese argues that 1990s “color blindness and a strictly quantitative multiculturalism [are] far more ideologically linked than they are oppositional [as] responses to the politics of racialized representation.” See Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2011). As figured here, colorblindness and liberal multiculturalism are different but not incommensurable valences of the post-racial moment.

17 Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle: A Novel* (Macmillan, 1996). All subsequent references in text.

protagonist Gunnar Kaufman and his best friend Scoby take to the streets after the instantly-mediatized uprisings drift toward them via local news coverage, their primary moment of insurrectionary activity involves “beating” a Wonder Bread truck driver “with pillows of white bread until it snow[s] breadcrumbs” (132). The soundtrack for the scene is Eric Dolphy's saxophone, blasting from their car speakers, and Gunnar cannot “decide whether the music sound[s] like a death knell or the calvary charge of a ragtag army” (132). The ambivalence of Dolphy's horn, in Gunnar's ears, is characteristic of the novel's insistence on sifting through the histories and contradictions of black publicity, sociality, and social movement and its simultaneous skepticism—even playful disdain for—attempts to marshal and re-member those histories in the service of progressive narratives of overcoming or redemptive relationships to the US state. The “beating” described here provocatively reenacts and mis-remembers histories of effective insurrection against white supremacy, state violence, and racial capitalism as ineffectual, even absurd. That the instruments of uprising here are the bland, undernourishing, white and mass-produced symbols of unchecked corporate power remarks less on the histories of movement they seem to parody than on the apparent impossibility of transporting certain common senses of struggle and representation from previous historical moments into the text's present—even as the contestations over life, belonging, liberation, and violence such movements embody perpetually resurface and circulate in myriad forms.

In what follows, I trace some of the ways *The White Boy Shuffle* suggests that histories of racial capitalism's violence materially shape the “US post-racial moment” as a horizon of possibility for contemporary popular and political discourses and a condensation of formations of common sense, even as the novel questions at every turn invocations of those histories and the

supposedly redemptive power of memory work for imagining political transformation in the late-twentieth century United States. The novel figures the 1990s as a period of emergence and transformation that is not simply about the loss of the language, tactics, and emancipatory vision of the Long Civil Rights Era but the seeming dissolution of the effectivity of the broad formations of common sense that black liberation and related decolonial struggles animated.¹⁸ My use of “common sense” as a way of investigating late 20th and early 21st century US racial formation and state power is indebted to Kara Keeling's elaboration of the Gramscian concept of common sense in *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Keeling “insist[s] on thinking about common sense not as a moment in the teleology of Reason, but as the condition of possibility for the emergence of alternate knowledges that are capable of organizing social life and existence in a variety of ways, some of which might constitute a counter-hegemonic force.”¹⁹ But Keeling, like Gramsci, doesn't cast common sense as a necessarily radical force (just as she does not dismiss it as a base or lower form of rationality). She also focuses on what she calls “white bourgeoisie North American common sense” as an “official common sense,” one which seeks and sometimes “garners the spontaneous consent of subaltern groups.”²⁰ “Like subaltern common sense,” Keeling writes, “official common sense' contains elements 'borrowed' (or, more likely, stolen or appropriated) from other groups, particularly those exploited by the dominant group. These 'appropriated' elements provide a record of concessions made in the struggle for hegemony [. . .].”²¹ While I

18 See Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007).

19 Ibid, 19.

20 Ibid, 20.

21 Ibid, 21.

track different “moments” and iterations of post-racial common sense as dominant forms of common sense throughout the project, here I focus on how *The White Boy Shuffle* contributes to a theorization of the vexed terrain of dominant “post-racial” common senses (as they unevenly supplant and absorb earlier formations) and the limitations of remembering and representing histories of contestation over the meaning of race and racial violence in US modernity as a means of producing or mobilizing oppositional common senses and social movement.

The Problematic of Black Memory

Because my reading is focused, in part, on *The White Boy Shuffle* as a text that invokes, problematically, histories of the experience of race and the forms of black sociality, expression, and movement that exist within and in excess of the violent terms of order of racialized and gendered life and governance in the US, I begin by briefly situating the novel in relation to discourses of memory and the problematic of black memory in particular, before turning to discussions of its deployment of sound, silence, performance, poetics, and humor.²² My purpose will not be to remove *The White Boy Shuffle* entirely from the discursive deployment of and debate over “post-Civil Rights” memory and forgetting in which it undoubtedly participates, nor from the (inter)disciplinary academic sites in which studies of memory have been prominent since the 1990s especially. Rather, I attempt to visit the novel's satirical (un)concern and (dis)regard for memory in order to glimpse how it sets into relief some of the salient features of

²² My phrasing here is drawn from the call-for-papers for the Archeologies of Black Memory Conference (U. of Miami, 2007). Saidiya Hartman, in a related essay, discusses the “messy entanglements of memory and commodification and terror.” She writes, “Usually the injunction to remember insists that memory can prevent atrocity, redeem the dead, and cultivate an understanding of ourselves as both individuals and collective subjects. Yet, too often, the injunction to remember assumes the ease of grappling with terror [. . .].” See Hartman, “The Time of Slavery,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 757–77.

the racial present. In part this means investigating—as I do in different ways throughout the project—how histories of antiblack racism, whiteness, and violence are (re)animated and mobilized in contemporary “post-racial” discourses and cultural logics. It means, as well, attending to how these histories of *submerged violence* abut and intermingle with alternative, submerged forms of sociality and belonging that inhabit and shape the same cultural sites and forms.²³ This inquiry suggests that the issues thematized here through Beatty's text become more prominent and pervasive as the post-racial moment comes into its apparent fullness, a fullness which is nevertheless ceaselessly eroded at its edges by race's forceful reappearances and articulations.

David Scott, in citing the far-reaching influence of Pierre Nora's work, describes “the emergence in the humanities, since around the late 1980s, of a concerted preoccupation with 'memory' as a key concept marking an attitude toward the past connected to, perhaps, but nevertheless distinct from and in tension with, 'history,' in its modes of apprehension, understanding, and representation.” Scott continues:

For many, memory connotes a sense of immediacy, imagination, and authenticity, an auratic sense of the past's presence beyond the temporal constraints of secular-rationalist historical consciousness. The virtue of memory, so it is sometimes said, is that unlike history, it is openly partial, selective, fragmentary, allusive, nonlinear. If history commemorates the achievements of dominant powers, the prerogatives and interests of states and empires, for example, memory recalls, often in the minor key of pathos, the stories of those who have been excluded and marginalized by those powers: the dispossessed, the disregarded, the disempowered.²⁴

As the above quotation indicates, many of the most compelling of the recent works on memory

23 My usage of “submerged” here borrows from blues musician and scholar Adam Gussow, who speaks of the ways in which blues traditions consistently carry forward and engage with “submerged histor[ies] of racial violence.” See his remarkable book, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

24 David Scott, “Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): v–xvi.

in relation to US racial formation and New World black experience, including Scott's, figure the “collective” or “cultural” memory of particular historical groups as sites in which unofficial, allegedly “pre-political” or otherwise subjugated knowledges are produced, expressed and maintained in immanent and contestatory relation to modernity's key formations and discourses, particularly the nation-state. Acts of cultural memory, here, are practices with “material effects on the social ordering of relations of power”²⁵—acts which are always oriented toward securing particular futures. In much of this work, memories of racialized violences, most often expressed through cultural texts like narrative fiction, poetry, and music, are crucial potential sites for apprehending and contesting the violence of the nation-state and capital in the contemporary moment.

My reading of *The White Boy Shuffle* understands it as approaching and veering away from the problematic of black memory in a manner that works against certain tendencies that characterize the wide critical turn to and deployment of memory in many Humanities and Social Science fields, namely: the easy connection often made between the levels of subjective, collective and national memory; the sense of a potentially cohesive or coherent (black) collectivity which shares a common memory (or the equally problematic assertion of the radical impossibility of such a collectivity); the sense that a clear, “critical memory” might be accessible without the fetters of nostalgia; and the assumption of the progressive trajectory and redressive effectivity of memory vis-a-vis US state power.

To begin to open up these questions as they emerge in the novel, I turn first to a key scene of memory in the text. Soon after the novel's poet-basketball-player-thinker-tinker-turned-

25 Sarah Lamble, “Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence: The Politics of Interlocking Oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 5, no. 1 (March, 2008), 25.

suicidal-black-messiah narrator, Gunnar Kaufman, moves from mostly-white and affluent Santa Monica to the mostly-black and poor Hillside neighborhood of L.A., he visits the barbershop for his first “proper” haircut. There he strains to hear the narratives of the old men, “Indios and Africans,” who spend their time “play[ing] electronic poker games and swapp[ing] migration stories” (91). One man, Mr. Tillis Everett, whose name recalls both Emmett Till and Medger Evers, describes the “day in Biloxi [when] his father came home with blood on his shirtsleeve” (91). Having fought—and possibly killed—a white man, his family knew he had to escape immediately, which meant “rub[bing] handfuls of chicken shit on your shoes” to evade the hound dogs leading the lynch mob (91). Everett concludes, “My daddy arrived in Los Angeles smelling like a henhouse toilet. [Folks] out here is out of luck [. . .]. Couldn't run away from Los Angeles if you wanted to” (91). To be “out of luck” in this instance is to inherit this tale of migration, what we might think of as mobility from under or within terror—a constitutive trope of black diasporic experience, from marronage onward—to be trained as a mechanic, to grow old in the alleged aftermath of racial apartheid, and to find oneself an underpaid attendant at “Zoom Zoom Gas,” as does Mr. Everett. More broadly, to be “out of luck” is to be black and reside in Hillside, a walled-in zone of late modern immobility where violence, legal and extralegal, ideological and material, still works to situate and regulate black bodies even as the dominant discourses for apprehending race cannot account for those violences, and in which one's best hope of “success” is, as Gunnar intuits early on, to join the “reinforcement brigades of minimum-wage foot soldiers [marching] to their capitalistic battle stations” (30) in the service sector remnants of what was once the largest manufacturing county in the largest manufacturing nation on earth. This vision of late modern immobility and circumscribed life chances in Hillside indexes what Ruth Wilson

Gilmore describes as the ongoing proliferation of spaces “‘unfixed’ by capital flight and state restructuring”: “what’s left behind is not just industrial residue—devalued labor, land made toxic, shuttered retail businesses, the neighborhood or small city urban form—but, by extension, entire ways of life that, having been made surplus, unfix people.”²⁶

On one reading, Mr. Everett's narrative of contemporary immobility might be figured as evoking or proceeding from nostalgia for a prior moment of constrained mobility produced within the interlocking histories of military Keynesianism, racial liberalism, and the historic challenges to racial apartheid that shaped the mid-20th century—or at least a nostalgia or longing for the futures that were to have been embedded in such mobility. Many scholars of black migratory experience argue that “economic opportunity [in the West and particularly in California] and racial liberalism [burgeoning during the war years] combined to provide definite economic and social mobility for black southerners,”²⁷ a mobility which is harbinger of and catalyst for more than two decades of mid-century struggle and reform. On this reading, Everett's perspective would work to periodize the “now” of black immobility in the context of neoliberal globalization (or post-Keynesian militarism, to borrow Gilmore's usage) against a prior moment of possibility, thus providing the grounds for a critique of the circumscribed life chances of the racial present set against the early hopes and promises of the Long Civil Rights Era.²⁸ But it's

26 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2007).

27 See Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South During World War II*, (University of Georgia Press, 2003), 98. Chamberlain summarizes a good deal of the relevant research.

28 This is a gesture which animates much of the critical scholarship on race in American studies and related fields; see, for instance, Scot Brown's review of Singh's *Black is a Country* in *The Journal of American History*, which begins with a meditation on Hurricane Katrina. Brown, “Review: *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 285.

significant that Everett's father's migration—a story first and foremost of mobility-within-terror rather than of economic and social opportunity—might have occurred *prior to* or *in the midst of* what Nikhil Pal Singh describes as the “nationwide reform of society that began under the New Deal,” was solidified during the war years, and was then “augmented by the American rise to globalism after World War II.”²⁹ That is, a certain undecidability of Everett's narrative—that it might reference the great interwar period migrations,³⁰ the decisive movement of black populations during the war,³¹ or a later moment of strife and struggle, closer to the period of his eponym's historic lynching—cuts subtly against an attempt to figure it as a tale of lost possibility narrated firmly within and against the history of the Civil Rights movement along the now-familiar lines of “post-Civil Rights” lament (and here I refer to particularly narrow readings of the Civil Rights Movement): the foreclosed-upon promises of racial liberalism; the lost horizon of the state as targetable for redress and reform; the incomplete project of formal equality and “anti-discrimination” legal reform; or the ongoing erosion of welfare state protections as undercutting the gains of African American incorporation into American democracy.

Rather than positing a neatly discernible discontinuity between the racial politics and promises of what we take to be distinct eras—before and after the “racial break” theorized by Howard Winant, for instance³²—the novel references instead the production of antiblack violence and its persistence at and across a range of historical moments. The spatial, juridical and

29 See Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*, (Harvard University Press, 2005).

30 Ibid.

31 See Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (University Of Chicago Press, 2006).

32 See especially Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (Basic Books, 2009).

economic logics of the different moments are dissimilar—may indeed in some ways be *worse* or declining, as they are in Everett's contemporary L.A. as compared to the L.A. described in some of the scholarship on mid-century black migratory experience—but the reiterative production of antiblack violence obtains as a material presence, experience, and question. The novel thus militates against notions of a substantive transition from “racial dictatorship” to something approximating “racial democracy”³³—to borrow again from the language of Winant and Michael Omi—and begins to deterritorialize the logic of the Jim Crow system just as it undoes (or explodes) the temporality and teleology of black liberation so commonly narrated in and as Jim Crow's overcoming as a narrative of national healing. What is undone or exploded, ultimately, is simultaneously the false narrative of black freedom as synonymous with the highest achievements of American democracy *and* the temptation to assume toward that narrative a posture of critique whose other side, or end point, would be the realization—albeit forced, reluctant and belated—of actual black inclusion and full social and political recognition and representation.

Thinking this perspective, through Everett's narrative, in relation to a US state formation that invests itself unevenly in the production of national subjects, furthers a line of questioning regarding representation and political transformation that are present in *The White Boy Shuffle* from the outset, as Gunnar presents his narrative in the Prologue as “the battlefield remains of frightened deserter in the eternal war for civility” (2). The nature of that war and the meaning of deserting from it are the subtext of the novel's satirical rendering of 1990s as the narrative unfolds under the specter of mass death, “The Emancipation Disintegration.” “In the quest for

33 This language is drawn, of course, from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (Psychology Press, 1994).

equality,” Gunnar suggests, “black folks have tried everything. We've begged, revolted, entertained, intermarried, and are still treated like shit. Nothing works [. . .]” (2). As a reluctant messiah figure, Gunnar “unveils [for the black masses] the oblivion that is black America's existence and the hopelessness of the struggle” (1), encouraging the entire “iconographic array” of black America to converge on Hillside to wait for the state to drop an atomic bomb (2). In the novel's Epilogue, Gunnar reflects on the status of black people as paradoxically neither internal nor external to the terms of order of the United States. As Gunnar puts it, “I'm the horse pulling the stagecoach, the donkey in the levee who's stumbled and come up lame. You may love me, but I'm tired of thrashing around in the muck” (22). *The White Boy Shuffle* thus posits blackness not only through the rubric of “identity”³⁴ but what we might term, following Bryan Wagner, as fundamentally “indicat[ing] [. . .] existence without standing in the modern world system.”³⁵ *The White Boy Shuffle* frames its own concern with “existence without standing” by layering histories

34 To read *The White Boy Shuffle* only through identity discourse would not be at odds with some of Beatty's own concerns. In a provocative and often hilarious essay published in the collection *Next: Young American Writers on the New Generation* in 1994, Beatty appropriates the discursive gestures of the 1990s moral panic over gangs to address late 20th century (black) identity formation. As his core assertion would have it, “the world is gang related.” We all “roll with a multiplicity of identity poses,” and “the gangs that hold down our neighborhoods shape our identities by establishing boundaries, behavioral and psychic.” *The White Boy Shuffle* lifts particular scenes, phrases and styles employed in the semi-autobiographical essay. In this vein, one might elaborate a reading of *White Boy Shuffle* which focuses primarily on its upending of essentialist claims about black identity, its refusal (or sending up) of certain generic conventions taken to characterize the history of African American literary production, its portrayal of a mobile, transgressive “cultural mulatto” figure in protagonist Gunnar Kaufman, and its postmodern appropriation of a dizzying array of cultural referents. While I find these readings productive, this chapter attempts to explore the novel's dense contextualization of its concerns with (and critique of) identity within a larger rumination on the limitations of representational and textual strategies that would seek to work against racial despotism and violence, especially through appeals to the state or a (white) public. See Eric Liu, *Next: Young American Writers on the New Generation* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1994).

35 In his work on “the black tradition,” Wagner puts it thusly: “To be black is to exist in exchange without being a party to exchange. Being black means belonging to a state that is organized in part by its ignorance of your perspective [. . .].” Conceptualizing blackness as “being without standing,” as a “condition of statelessness,” Wagner's inquiry turns to the assumptive logic of the law, the natural rights lineage and “to the symbolic scene where the enemy combatant is made into the slave” to consider in new ways “the predicament of the ex-slave, without recourse to the consolation of transcendence.” See his *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

of state and extralegal violence within and alongside the allegedly liberatory representational logics of the racial present.

In Everett's eponyms are historical visions of two particular notions of black political representation. We inherit the narrative of Emmett Till as an historically decisive moment in a variegated regime of violence that can be understood as the work of the state, even as its immediate perpetrators were only sometimes formally deputized by the state.³⁶ The circulation of the representation (or commodity-image) of Till's dead body catalyzed mid-century social movement that, for some, culminates in what are now understood in state narrative and post-racial common sense as the crowning achievements of the Civil Rights Era. The story of Medgar Evers is the story of political representation—in the sense of the representative figure that might speak for a collectivity—denied by an illiberal act of terrorism (assassination). In this case, the State becomes guarantor of formal representation and recognition retrospectively, as a reformed legal apparatus brings his killer to justice in 1994 (and in the process individualizes the wide range of state and non-state counter-insurgent forces whose war on black social movement outlasts the officially white supremacist state form). Both memories, both senses of representation, would seem—in their common sense articulations—to signal possible avenues of black subjects' relations to US social order. Mr. Everett's narrative in *The White Boy Shuffle*, though, is not rendered as an appeal for redress, a desire for national inclusion, or a call for state intervention; nor does it position Emmett Till or Medgar Evers as retrievable memories that might be easily put to work in the present.³⁷ In other words, it does not bespeak a faith in the

36 Angela Y. Davis makes this point succinctly in *Abolition Democracy*, among other places. We should note, too, that “race” here is inseparable from sexuality and the sexual “threat” of black masculinity. See Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (Seven Stories Press, 2011).

37 Mr. Everett's father might be said to achieve a kind of fugitivity that neither Emmett Till or Medgar Evers

promise of memory as a redemptive or countervailing force to the “racial despotism” that continues to characterize US social life in the post-racial moment.

To summarize, my point is not that the novel is *not* motivated by the desire (or the necessity) to remember particular histories and the formations of racial violence that have sought to constrain black life. Indeed, the entire text might be read as emerging from the ashes of the LA uprisings as they float back through the material histories of “race” and “gender” that produce the New World. But, in its theorization of the limitations of representing those histories, *The White Boy Shuffle* pushes against the widespread faith in memory as a resistant or alternative site for opposing “the diffuse violence and the everyday routines of domination [. . .] which continue to characterize black life but are obscured by their everydayness”³⁸—a faith that marks both scholarly and popular discourses on race since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period out of which Beatty's novel emerged. But *The White Boy Shuffle* also seeks out forms of fugitive memory by asking what it means to remember from within the exilic space of a past that is not past and a future that was never possible or desirable. It is a question that necessarily militates against practices of national memory which would conjure in narrative form (and in the temporal assurance narrative is thought to offer) particular histories of grievous wrongs (legal and extralegal violation) that cannot be redressed in themselves—precisely because they are

could access, both in his “actual” status as fugitive from white supremacist violence in Mississippi—the place where both Evers and Till were murdered—and in that his narrative circulates in excess of—or just slips away from—the dominant forms of common sense that would appropriate it as an emblematic story of individual achievement or national overcoming.

38 See Hartman, “The Time of Slavery, 772. Hartman's engagement with the problematic of Black memory and the skepticism about the “redressive capacities of memory” help to inspire some of the consideration of memory here. Along with Scott, Michael Hanchard, and others, Saidiya's own reflections make possible and necessary a wealth of questions regarding “the political and ethical valence of collective memory, and the relation between historical responsibility and the contemporary crisis, whether understood in terms of a masochistic attachment to the past, the intransigence of racism, or the intractable and enduring legacy of slavery.”

understood to be firmly in the past, experienced by subjects who are lost or whose claim to loss cannot be accounted for or ameliorated in the conditions of the present—in order to produce a form of “healing” or rectification for a (national) public. At stake here are how and whether fugitive forms of expression, subjectivity, collectivity and movement might be called into being from within this exilic space.³⁹

“Post-Civil Rights” Silence and Sound

This reading places the novel both within and apart from “civil rights fiction” as delineated powerfully by Erica R. Edwards. Rather than positing a neat break between “civil rights” and “post-civil rights” black literary production, Edwards reads a range of black cultural productions as “a counterarchive of the post-World War II freedom struggle, composing scenes of disappearance that confront the official story of the civil rights movement as it was constructed, first by televisual and print media in the 1950s and 1960s and by popular history in the years that followed.”⁴⁰ Drawing attention to the way these fictions “[linger] at the vanishing point, in the offstage pockets of black collective resistance where people remake their social reality,” Edwards asserts that “silence”—in these texts and in social movements—“marks a radical withdrawal, an anarchic exit, a refusal to consent to the terms of [US social and political] order.”⁴¹ Insofar as it too performs an “anarchic exit” and “a refusal to consent to the terms of order,” *The White Boy*

39 My use of fugitivity is indebted to though not neatly coterminous with the various theorizations of the term offered by Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Nathaniel Mackey, Saidiya Hartman, and Stephen Best, among others. See Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” *Representations* 92, No. 1 (Fall 2005); Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, (Minor Compositions, 2013).

40 See Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (University of Minnesota, 2012), 108.

41 *Ibid.*, 109.

Shuffle might be said to not only “disappear the public declarations of the movement,”⁴² in the manner suggested by Edwards, but to disappear—to refuse to sight or picture or visibilize—the very possibility of “black political agents [directly] confronting vicious white supremacy”⁴³ and the formations of state and extra-legal power through which racism takes contemporary shape. Edwards's own incisive reading of *The White Boy Shuffle* highlights ways in which it “restage[s] the civil rights/Black Power memorial precisely through a formal repositioning of the black cultural text from mimetic representation toward playful revision”—a repositioning that serves to explode the “ordering principles of race, charisma, and realism” that are the objects of her study.⁴⁴ My reading embraces and furthers this reading by considering the novel's “playful revision” in, through, and in apposition to the histories of racialized and gendered violence it invokes and the formations of common sense it reveals.

While Gunnar and Scoby's “beating” of the truck driver, mentioned above, dramatizes the apparent irrelevance of oppositional practices of memory, redemptive violence, and alternative formations of common sense in a world saturated by the unaccountable machinations of global capital and US state violence, the day of the uprisings is also the day when Gunnar realizes the necessity of being a “soon-to-be-revolutionary” (132). Here and elsewhere the novel figures the potential for counter-hegemonic movement as a question whose shape and enunciation can't be discerned in the present. At every turn *The White Boy Shuffle* grates against attempts to solidify “resistance” and the dual tendency to equate blackness with suffering and to reduce blackness to

42 Ibid, 107.

43 Ibid, 108.

44 Ibid, 158.

the inevitable (though always deferred) overcoming of that suffering.⁴⁵ Thus, counter-narrative deployments of histories of black life and invocations of antiblack violence in the novel seem immediately and deftly (re)incorporated and assimilated to dominant forms of common sense which circulate under the literal and metaphorical shadow of state violence—most dramatically in the form of the LAPD helicopter that hovers over Gunnar's head 24 hours a day by novel's end. In this context, the novel's staging of particular histories that might be smuggled forward in poetics, humor, performance, and sound is decidedly ambivalent.

While *The White Boy Shuffle* has been read productively as a novel concerned with querying and queering (representations of) black masculinity, it's important to recognize that the novel begins its satirical interrogation of the (im)possibilities of black publicity via Gunnar's mother, Brenda Kaufman.⁴⁶ At the narrative's beginning, in which Gunnar attempts to separate himself from the narrative of the “race man” in its different iterations stretching back to DuBois, whom he references in the opening lines of the text, he turns immediately to his mother.⁴⁷ She is a story-teller, and it is from her that Gunnar learns the family history that bookends Gunnar's narrative. But, while her status as a “griot” points to a range of possibilities whose implications I attempt to sketch below, she first achieves a peculiar kind of publicity by setting the world record for the loudest recorded swallow, which she performs on a late-night talk show.

That her pop cultural notoriety takes the form of sub- or non-linguistic sound emitted in the

45 Tavia Nyong'o made a similar suggestion in a talk delivered at the Critical Ethnic Studies Association conference in Chicago, September 2014. Some of his forthcoming work deals with the staging of this dynamic in contemporary black cultural production.

46 On the novel's exploration of black masculinities, see L. H. Stallings, “Punked for Life: Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* and Radical Black Masculinities,” *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (2009): 99–116.

47 See Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Marlon Bryan Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (NYU Press, 2004), Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (U of Minnesota Press, 2009).

bodily act of ingestion opens onto a dense field of reference within prominent strains of black cultural production and cultural theory. Lindon Barrett argues that what Fred Moten refers to as “phonic materiality,”⁴⁸ especially instantiated by the black singing voice, threatens the disruption of the systems of meaning-, sense-, and value-making through which African Americans have been figured as “onerously [over-]em-bodied.”⁴⁹ The singing voice is here counterposed to dominant “signing” performances and their textualizations which call into possibility and being particular self-present (white) subjects whose claim to self-possession and futurity is embedded in and coterminous with the self-possession and futurity of a “US landscape [that] does not acknowledge but, rather, refuses its past”⁵⁰—refuses it precisely by disappearing the “cultural violence” by which blackness is expended and exchanged in the service of white wholeness and presence.⁵¹ Here the relationship between “black noise”⁵² and white enunciation bears a more-than-analogical relation to the violence of racial signification and the field of valuation it maintains. It is within that field that the “self-proclaimed, self-evident value of 'white' skin” is announced, though it turns out that whiteness is a “highly valued but [finally] deficient presence

48 Moten introduces this phrase at the beginning of *In the Break* in a critical extension and revision of Saidiya Hartman's work. Like Barrett, Moten is interested in the disruptive and “dispossessive force” of sound. Moten writes later that the “primal overhearing of phonic materiality [is] always tied to the ongoing loss or impossible recovery of the maternal,” a formulation that takes up the work of Hortense Spillers to suggest that a trace of the maternal is the non-foundational foundation of black expressive culture. See Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (U of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1, 38, and 197.

49 Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 114.

50 Ibid, 115.

51 Ibid, 95. “[. . .] the New World arena of value,” writes Barrett, “in both its materialist and idealist transactions, depends upon the expenditure of blackness. To expend the 'humanity' of Africans in the profitable cultivation of staple crops (or other commodities) as well as the political and psychological contours of a privileged whiteness [. . .] remains a fundamental element and an enduring legacy of the New World arena of value.” See Barrett, 56.

52 See Tricia Rose's influential book on hip hop, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

because its value is maintained only through an inexorable mediation of the Other through *signs* of lordship.”⁵³

A range of scholars—many of whom make possible claims that Barrett's work substantiates and revises—identify vocality, the phonic, and, often, sub- or extra-linguistic (or surreptitiously linguistic) sound as central to the creation and differential disclosure of New World black expression. Angela Y. Davis, for instance, traces the earliest formations of black cultural traditions under racial slavery in the “musicalization of speech” as “both aesthetic impulse and political impulse” amongst slaves: “they created a language whose meanings were indecipherable to everyone who was not privy to the required codes.”⁵⁴ Davis's argument can be situated as an affirmation and rich complication of longstanding conversations in and about black expressive cultures, stretching back to and preceding Frederick Douglass's famous meditation on the (apparently) “unmeaning jargon” that “nevertheless” has “full meaning” to the community cohered, at least momentarily, through its performance. This status of vocality, of musicalized speech, of sound cannot be delinked, according to Barrett, from “the paramount position, the unquestionable centrality, of visual evidence in assigning hostile meaning and rank to African Americans in the New World.”⁵⁵ The “sense-making activity of vision” from which African Americans are “disbarred,” is linked fundamentally to the “signing voice,” which “attains the scopie as a position of value in its paramount instantiation as script.”⁵⁶ This “sense-making activity” and its centrality accounts, in part, for “African American populations' turning

53 Ibid, 85.

54 Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (Random House LLC, 1999), 167.

55 Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 216.

56 Ibid, 216.

earnestly, ingeniously, and with marked success to the less privileged sense-making of sound”—whose “paramount [but certainly not only] instantiation” is in the singing voice—in so much of the history and present of black cultural expression.⁵⁷ “Sound,” summarizes Barrett, “gains especial importance for those who remain visibly [and textually] outside the designation of most fully human.”⁵⁸

In relation to this figuration of vocality and the phonic, Gunnar's mother's momentary publicity sits uneasily. While her performance of an “underprivileged” sound clearly acknowledges, playfully, the indispensability of the phonic and sonic to black expressive cultures and, like the forms referenced above, might be said to “undo voice as speech per se,” it would not seem to provide a moment of “unmeaning jargon” that “nevertheless” has “full meaning” to a particularly-situated community.⁵⁹ Rather, it would seem to be “unmeaning jargon” whose very *senselessness* corroborates the public representation of her as thoroughly within the body half of the mind/body dichotomy so central to post-Enlightenment Western thought⁶⁰ (and to the specific late twentieth century discursive production of black women as “Welfare Queens,” which I explore below). I suggest, though, that the performance can be read in the first instance as a deadly satire not simply of the potentially subversive deployments of black vocality but rather of the mechanisms through which African Americans—and black women in particular—continue to be (subject to the threat of being) disbarred from the dominant sense-making activity of speech

57 Ibid, 217.

58 Ibid, 215-6.

59 Ibid, 216.

60 See Barrett, “Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,” *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (June 1997), 318. As Barrett puts it, the “African American body signifies an existence entirely or virtually within the bodily half of the antithesis.” Ibid.

(and its textual correlates) and the forms of (disembodied) subjectivity it is to guarantee.

The novel's satirical staging of this moment of vocality—specifically an “unmeaning,” recorded, “scientifically-measured” yet disposable utterance—indexes multiple, interrelated histories of violation, among them: the display of black women's bodies as curiosities, “scientific,” “primitive,” “exotic,” “grotesque,” or otherwise, and commodities, and the ways in which performance, display, exchange, and disposal have been key modalities for ensuring that, as Kara Keeling writes, “the Black designates an identity that is always already predicated within public view.”⁶¹ Specifically, writes Keeling, this is a “public view that relies upon 'black' to collect whatever is evil, bestial, ugly, and irrational.”⁶² Gunnar's mother's swallowing, I'm suggesting, positions her within these ongoing histories and in so doing dramatizes the presumed attachment of the Black (woman) to (over)embodiment and to the less-than-human. Barrett's work is again instructive here: “The grotesque body [. . .] is most readily understood in the United States as the lurid, negligible, and, above all, *unthinkable* African American body.”⁶³ The “grotesque” embodiment and embodied sound of Brenda Kaufman's swallow is, in this sense, necessarily *without value* except insofar as its circulation as a commodified soundbite serves to reproduce and re-fix her black female body as *outside* dominant regimes of value and sense-making—that is, as a negative value that produces value.

The satirical rendering of Brenda Kaufman's performances, embodiment, and momentary celebrity, as rendered here, announces the novel's complex skepticism toward the proliferating modes of black publicity and representation available in the late 20th century US. By swallowing

61 Keeling, *Witch's Flight*, 83.

62 Ibid, 83.

63 Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 144.

“New York City tap water,” Ms. Kaufman plays with the figuration of black women as “welfare queens” and drains on public resources that were so central to US political and popular discourses of the 1980s and 1990s (and beyond). Her “origins” are “misbegotten,” and the multiple significations of “misbegotten” as “poorly conceived” or “illegitimate” are telling: her “origins” are mystified so thoroughly that they might be “poorly conceived” by her *or* by the dominant symbolic and discursive registers that determine her modes of publicity; and they are “illegitimate” both in the literal sense that she has never seen the “legitimizing” and performative documents that would prove her or her parents' births *and* because blackness and “legitimacy” are typically disallowed from occupying the same discursive space (or, to put it otherwise, because blackness and illegitimate are produced as near-cognates in dominant Western discourses). She is, in short, a black single mother alienated from her own familial and maternal legacy and overdetermined within a nexus of dominant discursive frameworks. She at once invokes and undermines what Kara Keeling refers to—following Hortense Spillers and Angela Y. Davis—as “the-black-woman-as-matriarch-responsible-for-the-Black-community's-pathology” whose “common-sense reification” was instantiated most famously in the 20th century by the Moynihan Report and in a series of related discursive figures (such as the “welfare queen”).⁶⁴ In the context of this form of hypervisibility, Brenda Kaufman's mediated sonic publicity might be read as a distraction or deferral, an act of withholding or refusal so that she may perform “privately” or “intramurally”⁶⁵ her role as a “griot,” a memory-keeper or carrier of stories. By this I mean that, if the novel is here skeptical of what Barrett and others identify as

64 Keeling, *Witch's Flight*, 82.

65 On the intramural, see Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

the power of black vocality to disturb or disrupt, it might be that her “extramural” performance and publicity works as a feint so that she may do another kind of cultural work as a story-teller.

Immediately, however, we find that she passes on only the family genealogy of the male Kaufmans, whose absurd(ist) stories militate against any attempt to fold the family into the noble legacy of Black liberation struggle or particular “authentic” iterations of blackness and masculinity. In the context of emergent post-racial common senses in which *blackness* becomes at once the preeminent symbol of national democratic achievement and overcoming and as the residual or pathological roadblock to precisely that achievement and overcoming, her complicated rendering of this genealogy might also be seen as a complex mode of withholding. But while Gunnar and his sisters learn to recite and perform only a patrilineal legacy, from the Boston Massacre to their LAPD officer father's Vietnam experience (during which he chastises black soldiers who fraternize with the Viet Cong), they spend their summers at Brenda's feet, “tracing [their] bloodlines by running [their] fingers over the bulging veins that tunneled in her ashy legs” (6). So, their “ancestral investigation” involves, too, the material tracing of her maternal body, and this further establishes the concern with sound, voice, and embodied performance that runs throughout the WBS, including the question and possibility of a kind of fugitive transmission or passing forward beyond the narrative and the textual, as we'll see. And here the novel's skepticism regarding representation and the possibilities for black publicity work against not only the dominant national discursive figurations of black women (such as those mentioned above) but also many received common sense articulations of black women's roles in black community, aesthetic practice, and liberation struggle.

Drawing from a series of important interventions, Keeling summarizes, “Within the

common sense forming in and informing the Black Power era, the effort to reverse the feminization, both discursive and corporeal, of black males in order to further the argument for their humanity involved a strict repudiation of any connection between femininity and the emergent understanding of blackness.”⁶⁶ Organizations such as the Black Panther Party labored to “resignif[y] blackness as a 'masculine' [. . .] threat on par with other efforts toward national liberation.”⁶⁷ The Black Arts Movement, as it was elaborated by Black feminist writers in particular, both participated in and complicated this approach, including in its figuration of the poet as “griot,” or African community storyteller.⁶⁸ In this context, Brenda Kaufman's rendering of the masculine history of the Kaufmans could be said at once to recapitulate and undermine the masculinization of black aesthetic practice while satirizing the liberatory potential of storytelling—at least as it applies to the emergent conditions of the “post-racial” 1990s. Yet the fact that Gunnar and his sisters attach themselves to her body to take up “ancestral investigation” might invoke what Katherine McKittrick refers to as “Bodymemory.”⁶⁹ McKittrick writes, in her reading of M. Nourbese Philip's work, “The geography of the body touches elsewhere—it moves between the local (the inner space between the legs), the outside (the place of oppression, the plantation), the New World, and circles back again to reinvent black (female/New World)

66 Keeling, 84.

67 Ibid.

68 See Eleanor W. Traylor, “Women Writers of the Black Arts Movement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*, eds. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 50–70. See also James Edward Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2006); Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (University of Missouri Press, 2001), and Keeling, *Witch's Flight*. Keeling writes, “It cannot be assumed that 'black females' entry into the feminine is marked over time by struggles to 'reconstruct womanhood' in a way that could accommodate visibly black and female bodies.” See 83.

69 See *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (University of Minnesota 2006).

diaspora histories.”⁷⁰ *The White Boy Shuffle* either fails to or refuses to name the potential implications of “sites of bodily memory”⁷¹ in a context in which black expressive cultures are widely appropriated and mobilized by post-racial common senses. The “sites of [Brenda Kaufman's] bodily memory,” and the violences, movements, and worlds they might hold or disclose, in other words, cannot be (fully) spoken, yet she passes on to Gunnar not just stories but the sense that *poetics* offer an alternative to narrative history.

At first, though, Gunnar utilizes the stories she *does* tell, the memories she does pass on, to establish himself amongst his classmates at Santa Monica's “all-white Mestizo Mulatto Multicultural school” (28). He focuses in particular on Sven Kaufman, the first person ever to run away into slavery. Sven, born free, migrates south and performs his way out of the clutches of “lynch mobs, hound dogs, and defenseless parasol-toting Southern belles” to make his way into chattel slavery (12). Sven's story, his basic movement from nominal freedom to the very definition of unfreedom, satirizes and upends the arc of the narrative of emancipation just as it undoes the assumed cartography of Black Freedom—from South to North, from bondage to freedom—that together animate what is now the foundational narrative of US national achievement and provide the conditions of possibility and promise of post-racial discourse. The story thus pushes against the desire to narrate histories of resistance to degradation and violence, but it also suggests a means of carrying forth a violent history that cannot be adequately appropriated by the dominant discourses of the racial present. Thus, even Sven's ridiculous story has a complicated double edge: once enslaved, he choreographs a “glorious swirling production” that incorporates the entire plantation in a magisterial performance witnessed by an approving

70 Ibid, 50.

71 Ibid.

audience of whites, slave-owning women who nevertheless do not apprehend the implications of the production (15). Importantly, the performers in Sven's production “tightroped the tops of fences many had never even dared look at, much less touch” (15). His performance thus thematizes the malleability of the border between slavery and liberation but also the dense intertwining, complementarity, and mutual imbrication of slavery and liberation, captivity and freedom that the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and others accentuates and interrogates. In so doing it positions black mobility/immobility in the territorial US as part of a fluctuating centuries-long Atlantic World history of valuation, commodification and terror in which both Sven and Gunnar are unevenly implicated. (Gunnar, too, performs for white audiences, for whom even his “resistant” and transgressive performances do not seem to effectively “flip the script” of racialized and gendered hierarchy and logics.) Rather than contributing to celebratory narratives of emancipation, then, Sven's absurdist adventure unseats the temporal coherence of slavery and satirically situates counter-hegemonic possibility and fugitive movement securely within the frame of racial inequality and violence.

Representational (Im)Possibilities

Gunnar's performance of the family tree is arrayed alongside and against the educative discourses through which race is figured and contained and contradictory “post-racial” common senses are produced. As a student in Santa Monica and then Hillside, Gunnar encounters the remnants of racial liberalism that saturate the 1990s US. He is enjoined to be colorblind by his teacher and by a doctor who visits the school; when Gunnar asks how that might be achieved if one can, indeed, see color, the doctor remarks, “So just pretend that you don't see color. Don't say

thinks like 'Black people are lecherous, violent, natural-born criminals' (30). Meanwhile, "Everything was multicultural, but nothing was multicultural" (29). His teacher, Ms. Cegeny, wears a shirt in which "Human" replaces Black, White, Red, Yellow, and Brown, all of which are crossed out but still visible, and she explains, defensively, during a multicultural appreciation lesson that the postwar US "gave" technology to Japan to allow them to advance. In the face of these emergent post-racial discourses—discourse in which race is either visibilized or invisibilized in the service of *leaving behind* the substantive claims that visibilizing race mobilized in earlier moments—Gunnar moves through a range of representational possibilities beginning with the "cool black guy" in Santa Monica (28-9). If the character of Brenda Kaufman provides *The White Boy Shuffle* with a theoretical scaffolding for its skepticism toward particular kinds of memory work (and the "redressive capacities" often assumed to attend that work),⁷² she also sketches the novel's critiques of and ambivalent dismissal of the representational possibilities available to black subjects in the context of emergent "post-racial" common sense and related racial liberal discursive formations. Much of the rest of the text might be seen as a series of playful but deadly meditations on the limitations of those possibilities. Each new position that Gunnar takes up is at once stretched, upended, re-visioned and re-fixed; as a performer, student, athlete, "gangster," leader, and poet, he flips the script again and again but cannot fully change the game.

When Gunnar's mother moves the family from Santa Monica to West Los Angeles, Gunnar's life abruptly changes as his "magical mystery tour gr[inds] to a halt in a [. . .] neighborhood the locals call Hillside," which is "less a community than a quarry of homes built

72 See Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 757–77.

directly into the foothills of the San Borrachos Mountains” (45). Hillside was created in the late 1960s,

after the bloody and little known I’m-Tired-of-the-White-Man-Fuckin’-with-Us-and-Whatnot riots, [when] the city decided to pave over the neighboring mountainside, surrounding the community with a great concrete wall that spans its entire curved perimeter [. . .]. At the summit of this cement precipice wealthy families live in an upper-middle-class hamlet [. . .]. At the bottom of this great wall live hordes of impoverished American Mongols. Hardrock niggers, Latinos, and Asians [. . .]. (45)

The articulations of race with place are once again determining factors in Gunnar's life and how he is read, from the multi-racial “community” shaped syncretically and unevenly by histories of violence, capital flight, state restructuring, gentrification, cultural appropriation, and migration to the LAPD “Welcome Wagon” who greet him at his new home to interview him about his (automatically presumed) gang affiliation. Unlike in Santa Monica, discourses of multiculturalism and colorblindness no longer figure prominently, but we quickly discover that Gunnar and his classmates are still crucial to the imaginaries of the anglo Los Angelinos outside of Hillside’s wall. In a school in which “kind liberal guidance counselors” advise black males to take Metal Shop instead of Graphic Design because the former will be useful when they begin the inevitable prison sentences prescribed for them, Gunnar begins to develop a fuller understanding of the deeply circumscribed subject positions available to black people in the “post-racial” US (65).

Soon after enrolling, he and Scoby compete in the city-wide Shakespeare soliloquy finals against L.A.’s wealthy white schools. As well-prepared as they are for the competition, they aren’t “prepared for [. . .] the lily-white cocksureness” of the Valley students, whose “parents and housekeepers st[and] and applaud” even when they butcher their lines (70). Realizing they are

consigned to compete in a game whose results have already been decided, the Hillside students freeze and stumble over their lines, to the smug pleasure of the judges and the knowing condescension of the audience, for whom the black students' performance is meant to tell them a story they already know—the poor black students are not equipped for Shakespeare and the erudition and progress of their wealthy white counterparts, so the white liberal audience cheers them as though they are “kids stricken with cystic fibrosis [. . .] on a telethon at two o'clock in the morning” (70). The script is disrupted, however, when Gunnar grows “allergic to the powdery mask of Elizabethan whiteface” and spontaneously breaks into an improvised version of a scene from *King Lear*. After offering a theoretical introduction to the scene, he turns to the judges, “grab[s] his dick and rip[s] into a makeshift monologue”: “What dost thou know me for? A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, [. . .] hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking whoreson . . . one trunk-inheriting slave . . . beggar, Nigger . . . I will beat you into clamorous whining if thou deny'st the least syllable of thy addition” (71). He leaves the “stunned auditorium of dazed crash dummies adrift in post-car-accident silence,” the white audience momentarily incapable of reading his performance because it confounds the condescending liberal “tolerance” with which they approached the show. But it remains an open question whether even Gunnar's performative flouting of white bourgeois norm isn't quickly enfolded back into the logics of post-racial common sense, with Gunnar figured as the angry and potentially violent black youth rather than the object of liberal (self-)concern.

The primary form of mass appeal for white audiences in West L.A. is basketball, for which both Gunnar and Scoby have prodigious talents. Their lives of high school basketball stardom offer little for Gunnar and Scoby, however: Scoby, because he fulfills the promise of

athletic perfection demanded by basketball audiences by literally never missing a shot, is quickly loathed and suspected of performing obscure African tribal rituals to improve his game. When Scoby steps out of the limelight, Gunnar becomes the star and is sent to camp as one of the hundred best high school basketball players in the country, where he finds that the camp has as much to do with white coaches' obsessions with young black male bodies as it does with improving his basketball skills (77). Meanwhile, other possibilities for presumably-disruptive or liberatory performance are presented by corporate-sponsored hip-hop. Hillside is the production site for rap videos which revolve around imaginative geographies in which the "ghetto" is equated with a kind of Orientalized Third World site of the exotic and the dangerous.⁷³ Gunnar watches as the aptly-named Moribund Videoworks sets out on a "safari through the L.A. jungle" to shoot a violence-laced video for "the newest rap phenoms, the Stoic Undertakers" (76). When Gunnar approaches the casting director, his response is, "Too studious. Next! I told you I want menacing or despondent and you send me these bookworm junior high larvae" (76). During the shoot, the director calls out, "You got 'em pissing their pants in Peoria. Now one more take, and this time make sure they defecate their dungarees in Dubuque" (77). When the cameras stop rolling—when the fantasy of authentic ghetto life is captured/created for white audiences—the crew packs up and moves on. The video shoot comically reflects the now-commonplace narrative of white corporate executives reducing diverse forms of hip-hop culture and selling that reduction to white youth. But it also indexes a much longer history of white liberal "adventures" in black urban space. Robin Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* outlines the history of liberal ethnographers and sociologists—"foot soldiers in

⁷³ For a related intervention, see the discussion in Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (Psychology Press, 2002).

the [. . .] ethnographic army”—who have long ventured into the “urban jungles” of the U.S. and returned with the “essential” or “authentic” representation of the ghetto in tow, replete with knowing condescension about the pathological dysfunctionality of black America.⁷⁴ Combining Kelley’s insights with Gunnar’s usefully connects liberal social science’s “revelations” of hidden black life to the long and ongoing history of the commodification and circulation of forms of black expression.

In his landmark 1994 essay, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” Ronald Judy opens this terrain from a different perspective, suggesting that the figure of the “nigga” produced in and projected onto rap culture keenly reflects the shifting ground of neoliberalism.⁷⁵ The “nigga” is “he who is destroying the fabric of society, who has spread across the country like an infestation, bringing an epidemic of death and despair to Black America.”⁷⁶ For Judy, rap’s deployment of the “nigga” is an “attempt to think an African American identity at the end of political economy,” part of the project of hip hop, understood as a form of “utterance” that aims to think “about *being* in a hypercommodified world.”⁷⁷ (emphasis mine) This is a mode of thinking “which does not work according to the purpose of liberal knowledge,” which asks how rap and hip hop function *for* African American community and aims, always, to produce “subjects of knowledge” out of “subjects of experience.”⁷⁸ Yet as Gunnar encounters hip hop as the scene in which experience is “abstracted and processed by the formulaic functions of transnational capitalism,” where

74 Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Beacon Press, 1997), 20. See also Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*.

75 See R. A. T. Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (1994).

76 *Ibid*, 213.

77 *Ibid*, 214. Emphasis mine.

78 *Ibid*, 216.

commodified authenticity is manufactured out of certain moments of black expressive cultures, he finds that its sights and (sited or visualized) sounds are made to do the work of containment.⁷⁹ It is an encounter that marks the limitations of (certain kinds of) performance and publicity in the context of post-racial common senses that rely upon and exchange the (visual) figure of the “nigga” as scourge, emblem, and alluring and dangerous outsider. Gunnar's turn to poetics—figured as expansive but perhaps not expansive enough to include corporate hip hop—is inspired partially by this experience, not unlike Scoby's turn to jazz.

MiseryFests, Death, and the Impossible

I've thus far attempted to position *The White Boy Shuffle* in terms of its adept interrogation of both the (im)possibilities of mobilizing histories of contestation over and the experience of race, racism, and racial violence and the existing representational (im)possibilities for black subjects in the context of an emergent post-racial moment and its dominant formations of common sense. Framed in this way, *The White Boy Shuffle* is symptomatic of both the enduring desire for representation and a growing sense that “the post-racial moment” and the ascendancy and hegemony of neoliberalism render received strategies centered on recognition, representation, access, or incorporation obsolete. As sociologist Herman Gray describes, “aggrieved, injured, and excluded groups continue to wage claims [. . .] The wager is that access to the means and meaning of representation will ensure some marked increase in media visibility. This increased visibility might in turn effect some measure of cultural justice, including empathy and sensitivity on the part of the powerful and the dominant groups to lives of poor, marginal,

⁷⁹ Ibid, 28.

and dominated people.”⁸⁰ Gray suggests, however, that, “just as often, this increased visibility and access to representation can engender new forms of subjection and marginalization.”⁸¹ *The White Boy Shuffle* anticipates this problematic, even as it does, at moments, explore what it would mean to carry forward forms of life and sociality through satire, humor, poetics, and performance in ways that, like Brenda Kaufman's narrative of Sven Kaufman, do not seem immediately appropriable by post-racial discourse.⁸²

In his work on African American satire, Darryl Dickson-Carr argues that “the griot and ancient satirist are appropriate metaphors for recently published African American satirists.”⁸³ He places satirical texts like *The White Boy Shuffle* as part of an ongoing “war of position” in which “African Americans are [. . . forced] continuously to negotiate and renegotiate their social and economic status.”⁸⁴ For Dickson-Carr, *The White Boy Shuffle* “revises and parodies the classic *Künstlerroman*” primarily in order to “interrogate the rise and prominence of Black Nationalist leaders since the Black Power movement.”⁸⁵ The “essential argument” of the novel, on Dickson-Carr's reading, is that “African American leadership has become alienated from its power base precisely because it has been most concerned with broad wars of maneuver rather than the present war of position.”⁸⁶ Stepping aside from Dickson-Carr's approach, I argue that the

80 Herman Gray, “Subject(ed) to Recognition,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2013): 771–98.

81 Ibid, 772.

82 Nick Mitchell, now at UC Riverside, encouraged me to think about humor's different and differential “carrying forward” of the past during conversations at the 2012 Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth University. I am indebted to his insights as well as those offered by other seminar participants, including Rizvana Bradley, Kate Boyd, Jack Hamilton, and the seminar director, Professor Soyica Diggs Colbert.

83 See Dickson-Carr, 165.

84 Ibid, 166.

85 Ibid, 202.

86 Ibid, 206.

novel is less concerned with the missteps or dearth of black leadership than with the basic viability and desirability of “wars of position” in the context of the post-racial US. The alignment of the satirist and the griot is instructive: it might be said that Beatty's task, like the novel's griot, is to straddle, cross and recross the line between abandoning the “war of position” altogether and taking up modes of humor, poetics and performance that might do the work of that carrying forward experience, sociality, and belonging in surreptitious ways. And here the significance of Gunnar's turn to forms of cultural production as potential sites of fugitive expression and representation (beyond or underneath the imaginaries that define him for white publics and for US state power) is paramount, but not in the name of cohering social movement or coalitional forces that might then address white publics or state power.

In her groundbreaking work on black humor, Glenda Carpio discusses the way in which contemporary African American fictions often “intertwine the traumatic repetition of the past with a tentatively progressive movement: by repeating the past, by revisiting it imaginatively and dialogically, they sketch a possible future that might help their characters to break out of . . . the after-effects of the past of slavery.”⁸⁷ *The White Boy Shuffle* puzzles over whether the “public” enunciation of such pasts, their narrativization within discursive gestures that call out to and thus momentarily cohere a particular public, tends to enact a new inscription of the force of antiblack racism within and in excess of the law, precisely in the space or in the name of redress. In this sense, the novel doesn't undercut or work against other attempts to re-member the history of slavery and its afterlives as they haunt US social order; it works from within the space such articulations would open but moves in another direction, hoping for a kind of (fugitive)

87 See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2008), xxix. Carpio is quoting Ulfried Reichardt, “Time and the African American Experience: The Problem of Chronocentrism,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 465-84.

enunciation that might speak through its contamination and frailty and impossibility. If narrative representation in general cannot be trusted to enable emancipatory potential for black people, both because the state is not targetable for redress or incorporation and because racial liberal common sense requires representations of black suffering to shore up white subjective wholeness, *The White Boy Shuffle* turns to the overlapping terrains of poetics, music, and performance as sites through which memories might be mobilized and other imaginaries might operate.

It is Brenda Kaufman who first encourages Gunnar to develop his poetry after his short-lived encounter with corporate hip hop culture. “It’s corny,” she says, “but I think poems are the echoes of the voices in your head and from your past. Your sisters, your fathers, your ancestors talking to you and through you” (79). Here and elsewhere *The White Boy* shuffle invokes different ways of re-membering histories, as they are secreted forward in bodies, movement, music, humor, and performance—in poems temporarily scribbled or sprayed on walls, and in the fragments of surreptitiously shared subjective experience. Yet when Gunnar becomes nationally renowned as an authentic “street poet” for the work he stencils and paints onto the massive wall around Hillside, the limitations of poetry are revealed as well. His poetic reputation and his high SAT scores earn him a full-ride to Boston University, where he finds a white liberal obsession with his “ghetto” poetry and his presumed authenticity as the voice of the street. If poetry, particularly in ephemeral form or performance, potentially threatens what Barrett identifies as the *signing voice* and its “paramount instantiation as script,”⁸⁸ it can just as easily be made to revivify and reflect the signing voice (and its sense- and meaning-making and value-producing

88 See Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 216.

protocols) as it is set to work by white audiences and the neoliberal university (and its fetishizing consumption and incorporation of difference). Scoby reflects this back to Gunnar as a distinction between the “finite,” constricted, and appropriable world of the page and the potentially “infinite,” untranslatable, and uncontainable temporality of musical performance (204-5). Gunnar's experience of listening to Scoby's Sarah Vaughn recordings affirms the disruptive fugitivity of sound: “The sound was inside out, between my ears instead of outside them. Nothing made sense” (205).

It is Gunnar's experiments with poetry and poetics—and Scoby's with jazz and temporality—as well as his meditations on the stakes of black social movement that lead Gunnar to imagine the “Emancipation Disintegration.” He learns on the day of the LA uprisings “that it meant nothing to be a poet”: “One had to be a poet and a farmer, a poet and a roustabout, a poet and a soon-to-be-revolutionary” (132). But he recognizes that being a poet and “soon-to-be-revolutionary” means being ready to die, and in the post-racial US (as opposed to, for instance, Apartheid South Africa) death by suicide seems to be the only revolutionary act available to Black Americans and the other surplus populations who inhabit Hillside. Scoby, like many of the Black Americans Gunnar inspires through his poetry and public performances, follows this path. Reflecting on the Japanese dramatist Chikamatsu's writings for puppet theater, Gunnar describes beginning to “see the black strings attached to my joints and stretching to the skies” (194). Scoby “sees the strings,” decides Gunnar, “but he spends all his time looking for a pair of scissors”: “Every now and then the puppet-master hands him a pair of wooden scissors—Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Sarah Vaughan, an open jump shot—and Scoby thinks he's free, thinks he's clipped his strings” (194). Gunnar, on the other hand, gives up on searching for scissors, and

instead brings together poetics, performance, and humor in “MiseryFests,” where suicide is deferred in favor a strangely public, interminable performance and sociality.

Lit by the hovering LAPD helicopter that follows Gunnar day and night, the MiseryFests are all-night, disorderly scenes for collective, dissonant performance, storytelling, complaining, comedy, nonsense, and reflection. They pose collectivity as a question, or a set of questions, about the meaning of suffering, about the specificity of black political experience in relation to other histories, about the uneven distribution of loss and premature death, and about what it means to be willing to die, collectively or otherwise. They are not spaces of permanent refuge; they are not open to everyone who wishes to enter; and they depend on poetry, performance, and comedy as expressions of life and memory—not as somehow pure, non-complicit, or revolutionary, but as what carries that questioning and its troubled sociality forward. They offer possibilities, in other words, for a kind of uncommon, “undercommon” sociality, one that does not directly address the state except to demand that the US government drop a bomb on Hillside.⁸⁹ Like Gunnar's poetry that figures prominently in them, the events bear submerged forms of expression, experience, and history in partially-secreted form. Humor, here and in the novel generally, in its dizzying, fuck-it-all impropriety, in its refusal and satirizing of the generic conventions said to characterize the history of African American literary production and social movement, in its absurd and insistent refusal to be straight-faced about the deadly bleakness of the racial present, becomes the vehicle through which past suffering is both rendered unavailable for certain kinds of appropriation and at once is bodied forth and traced materially in bodies

⁸⁹ My use of “undercommon” cites the important collaborative work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. Their dense theorization of the “undercommons” (as against the commons), positions it not as a location or a particular program but as “a kind of comportment or ongoing experiment with and as the general antagonism, a kind of way of being with others,” against the violence of institutional arrangement and statecraft. See their *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013).

themselves. The MiseryFests do not offer a programmatic or shape for what counter-hegemonic struggle might or should look like, nor do they suggest an outside or alternative to the common senses of race and value that emerge in and saturate the post-racial moment. Instead, if they hold out the possibility of other common senses of race and value—and the posing of the kinds of questions that would be required to begin to (re)build such common senses—it is precisely in their refusal to participate in a “war of position” or “war of maneuver.” This amounts to both a refusal give up on enacting modes of sociality, expression and performance or to give in to the representational impossibilities of the racial present.

CHAPTER TWO

Spaces of (Black) Death, Fantasies of (White) Renewal: On the Common Senses of White Anti-Racism

“How is it that the attempt to know, to analyze and not to forget fascism and racism should end up unwittingly repeating the logics of both in its plea for antiracist tolerance?”
– David Marriott¹

“The process of re-inventing whiteness and white supremacy has always involved the state, and the state has always involved the utmost paranoia.”
– Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton²

“I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unfailingly and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives.”
– James Baldwin³

In the introduction to his influential book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, George Lipsitz laments the “difficulty of imagining an antiracist white subject” and “how rarely our society produces or even imagines genuinely antiracist white people.”⁴ I want to begin this chapter by juxtaposing Lipsitz's concern with a brief narrative from contemporary US cultural politics: When George W. Bush made his belated sojourn to the gulf coast in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, his brief, mediated presence was anchored by footage of his embrace of two young black women, both weeping.⁵ Perhaps he

1 David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (Rutgers University Press, 2007), 183.

2 Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 169–81, 179.

3 James Baldwin, “Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” (1961), in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (Macmillan, 1985), 216-41.

4 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Temple University Press, 2009). See also Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Temple University Press, 2011).

5 See, for instance, “Bush Surveys Katrina Damage,” *ABC News*, September 2, 2005, <<http://abcnews.go.com/Archives/video/sept-2005-bush-surveys-katrina-damage-10984520>>.

recalled this visual archive of paternalistic affect when he reflected, in November of 2010, on his “strong” record on “race relations” and proclaimed that the worst moment of his presidency had nothing to do with September 11th, Guantanamo, Iraq, Afghanistan, or the state's disastrous and even murderous response to Katrina; the “all-time low” came when Kanye West declared that Bush “doesn't care about black people.”⁶ My purpose in recounting this absurd theater of white heteromasculine male performance is not to revisit the violences and hypocrisies of Bush's presidency but to point out that Bush's sense of his own anti- or post-racism—and the possibility that his *intimate affiliation* with (the iconography of) black suffering, constructed as a visual rhetoric of white concern and black vulnerability, might authenticate his distance from white supremacy and racialized violence—reiterates, albeit in rarefied form, one scene of what has become a dominant form of common sense for the articulation of white (heteromasculine) subjectivity in the cultural politics of the “post-civil rights” and “post-racial” US.⁷ While Lipsitz would rightly argue that Bush's claims and actions are not “genuinely antiracist,” my point is that we must contend not with the dearth but the ubiquity of representations of white anti- and post-racism that appear across the social and political landscape of the emergent “post-racial moment,” particularly since the early 1990s.⁸ Understanding the common sense articulations

6 See “Bush NBC Interview: Being Called A Racist By Kanye West The Worst Moment Of My Presidency,” *Huffington Post*, November 2, 2010 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/02/george-bush-kanye-racist_n_777967.html>.

7 As it does throughout this dissertation project, my use of “common sense” here follows Antonio Gramsci's theorizations of common sense, particularly as they have been filtered through and furthered by the work of Kara Keeling and Stuart Hall. See Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007); Hall, “Gramsci and Us,” *Marxism Today*, June 1987, 16–21. See also Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, Eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2006).

8 At times in what follows I use “anti-racist” and “post-racist” almost interchangeably. While the distinction between the two concepts is crucial, the archive of cultural texts taken up here tends to contain a slippage between them such that the movement toward (and possibility for) a post-racist positionality or post-racial social order appear to come immediately on the heels of white conversion to “anti-racist” identification. By “post-racial

described here as taking shape in the peculiar interplay of the legacies of decolonial and antiracist struggle, a contemporary “recrudescence of [antiblack]” racism,⁹ and ongoing transformations in US state power and practice, the purpose of this chapter is to explore popular cinematic representations of white heteromale anti-racism to investigate what histories such articulations remember and forget, what modalities of power they legitimate or ruse, what futures they anticipate and seek to foreclose or make possible, and on what logics of racial suffering they rely.

For many scholars, the popular proliferation of representations of anti-racist or post-racist white (heteromale) subjects marks a contemporary shift in US racial formation with transformative political potential. Reflecting on “the whiteness question” in its scholarly and activist valences, Linda Martín Alcoff looks back to the 1991 film *Dances with Wolves* to locate an early moment of what she identifies as “a collective, semiconscious undercurrent of psychic and political struggle occurring now in the United States among significant numbers of white Anglos.”¹⁰ Although “politically flawed,” the film's narrative of white heteromale

moment,” as I explain below, I refer to the particular social and political landscapes and structures of feeling described by Paula Chakravartty & Denise Ferreira da Silva. See Chakravartty & Ferreira da Silva, “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (September 2012).

9 Jared Sexton uses the phrase “recrudescence of antiblackness” in his discussion of “the growing clamor about 'blacks in officialdom' that both liberal and conservative variants of multiculturalism have amplified over the last several decades” (39). See Sexton, “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 39-63. See also Sexton's consideration of antiblackness in the context of multi-racial politics in his *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (University Of Minnesota Press, 2008).

10 Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005). Martín Alcoff's assertion resonates not only with the 1990s works from the disciplinary formations of “whiteness studies,” which she is in fact largely critiquing, but also with contemporary work in American studies, including by thinkers such as Lipsitz, Mike Hill and Jeb Middlebrook. See especially Jeb Aram Middlebrook, “The Ballot Box and Beyond: The (Im)Possibilities of White Antiracist Organizing,” *American Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2010): 233-252. See also Linda Martín Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 6-26; Mike Hill, *After Whiteness: Unmaking an American Majority* (NYU Press, 2004); and Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment and How Racism Takes Place*.

conversion to anti-racism nevertheless signals for Martín Alcoff a “changing white consciousness” in the late 20th and early 21st century US.¹¹ This chapter adopts the same starting point in popular film as does Martín Alcoff in order to trace a rather different trajectory of this “undercurrent” as it develops in popular expressions of white anti- or post-racism, from Kevin Costner's portrayal of “race traitor” John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* to George Bush's performances of “post-racial” empathy. In turning to quotidian articulations of white anti- or post-racism, what follows interrogates claims such as Martín Alcoff's about the possibilities for “collective transformation toward a nonracist white identity”¹² that appear on the horizon when white heteromascularity is at pains to know (or represent) itself as anti- or post-racist; this chapter thus contributes to but also reconfigures overlapping scholarly conversations on racial formation, whiteness, (hetero)masculinity and (the desire for) white anti-racism in the contemporary United States.

Engaging the racial present as a landscape haunted by ongoing formations of white supremacist violence and terror and by the unfinished longings of decolonial and liberatory movements and ways of being in the world, I take up cultural texts as sites which (inevitably) reproduce and yet fail neatly to contain the ghosts and specters of those discontinuous and unquiet histories. This chapter focuses on mainstream film of the 1990s and early 2000s in particular to read the remaking of normative white heteromascularity male subjectivity *as* anti-racist within and alongside the emergence of the US “post-racial moment” and the transition from a warfare-welfare state form to what many scholars refer to as a neoliberal or “anti-state state” form. Popular film and its narrative and visual logics are understood here as sites in which

11 Ibid, 224-5.

12 Ibid.

the rearticulations of and contestations over dominant and oppositional formations of common sense occur. Unlike popular iterations of white heteromascularity that can be read as neatly reinvigorating (and remasculinizing) the national community and the bourgeois family—which US American studies and film studies scholars have shown to constitute hallmarks of mainstream cinema of the 1980s—the formations of common sense described here operate through visions of white anti-racist heteromascularity subjects positioned explicitly *against* racialized US state violence and in intimate proximity to suffering racialized bodies. Understood as forms of social pedagogy¹³ which re-function different genres in the post-racial moment—here, the Western, the war drama, and dystopian science fiction—these common sense representations work, in their very “anti-racism” to position white men as no-longer perpetrators of racial violence and to consign vulnerable black and brown bodies to spaces of death in which white vulnerability to violence is contingent and temporary.¹⁴ The horizon of possibility of these interventions, ultimately, is a “multi-racial” or “post-racial” social order cohered through the refurbishing of white heteromascularity, the (mostly) unspoken erasure or derogation of racial blackness, and the promise of the return or resurgence of a violent ethical racial state.¹⁵ In

13 My use of “social pedagogy” is drawn from an important intervention by Robyn Wiegman's on “white paternity's sentimental romance with multiraciality.” Building on her theorization of “liberal whiteness,” which I discuss below, Wiegman focuses on contemporary film to apprehend how “discourses of multiracial kinship function as a social pedagogy to redefine the affective dimensions of normative white masculinity at the beginning of the twenty-first century.” My own critique deploys “social pedagogy” in similar fashion to name a different strain of normative white masculinity. See Wiegman, “Intimate Publics: Race, Property, and Personhood,” *American Literature* 74, no. 4 (2002): 859-885.

14 In invoking “spaces of death” in this chapter I follow Michael Taussig's influential theorization in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1991). See also Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Duke University Press, 2000).

15 My use of “racial state” here references the work of David Theo Goldberg. As he writes, “The modern state [. . .] is nothing less than a racial state. It is a state or set of conditions that assumes varied racially conceived characters in different sociospecific milieus. So, in one sense, there is no singular totalized phenomenon we can name *the* racial state; more precisely, there are racial states and racist states. Yet it is possible at the same time to

pursuing these imaginaries I argue that the popular—and, perhaps, scholarly—desire for and representation of white anti-racist or post-racist subjects, and of a “multi-racial” or “post-racial” United States, that emerge so forcefully in the 1990s and early 2000s can best be understood as reaffirmations of the value of whiteness—or whiteness *as* value—which require the devaluation of black life and are, in the last instance, often indistinguishable from common expressions of white rage, backlash and resentment.¹⁶ Simultaneously mediating contemporary “crises” of the US state form and white heteromascularity, these common sense representations help affectively to legitimate a certain kind of state, an interventionist anti-state state (whose service to transnational capital does not, ideally, infringe on its service to white life), even as they remake white heteromascularity subjectivity supposedly at a remove from—or as a critique of—state power and histories of white supremacist violence.¹⁷

insist that there are generalizable conditions in virtue of which the modern state is to be conceived as racial, as racially exclusionary or racist. The history of the modern state and racial definition are intimately related.” See Goldberg, “Racial States,” *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, Eds. David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos. See also Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001); Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form” in Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (Verso, 1991); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1983); and Mahmoud Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Random House LLC, 2005).

16 Neferti Tadiar theorizes, in the context of postcolonial Manila, how whiteness comes to signify “the quality of humanness that can be found and developed in each and every person”; this value form, argues Tadiar is “the product of a particular universalist claim to humanness that is made in the experiential effort to liberate oneself from the contradictory conditions of the everyday devaluation and debasement underwriting the expansion of global capital.” In this schema, “race begins to stand in for that which must be eschewed in order to approach value, and in this way retroactively determines the meaning of value as that which is not raced. [. . .] Since race comes to signify precisely this appropriable corporeal nature as a consequence of the histories of slavery and colonization, value itself, as the invisible content of an object or person distinguishable from its outward form, becomes aligned with that which is not raced.” Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland point out that “blackness and whiteness signify most firmly these respectively reified positions of raced/not-raced or corporeal/incorporeal.” See Neferti X.M. Tadiar, “In the Face of Whiteness as Value: Fall-Outs of Metropolitan Humanness,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 143-182; and Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 53-62.

17 On the violent (re)production and maintenance of “white life,” see Dylan Rodriguez, *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010), particularly his discussion of Hurricane Katrina.

Whose Crises?

Since at least the early 1990s, scholars from an enormous range of fields have addressed widely-perceived crises of whiteness and white masculinity thought to characterize the late 20th century US, often focusing on popular representations—primarily in visual culture and popular film—of white male heteromascularity in the wake of Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and feminist insurgency, and in the midst of the Reagan Revolution, the end of the Cold War, and other social upheavals understood to threaten or remake dominant or normative white and male subjectivity. A number of critical interventions have focused on the re-particularization and revamping of white masculinity via neo-paternalisms, a renewed homology between white men and the nation-state, strategies of self-sacrifice and masochism, and through the colonization of previously “feminized” domains of affect and domesticity.¹⁸ These reconfigurations have been buttressed by the (re)emergence of a range of “race-focused” genres that have attended the renewed hyper-visibility of black and brown cinematic bodies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including the interracial buddy film, “magical negro” films, white savior narratives, and black police/policing dramas, all of which have been shown to reproduce the very racial logics their surfaces disavow and to reinvest in white masculinity even (or especially) where it seems to have been undermined.¹⁹ Many of the best accounts, by feminist scholars of race,

18 Paradigmatic here is the work of Susan Jeffords, including *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Indiana University Press, 1989) and *Hard bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (Rutgers University Press, 1994), which I discuss below. See also: Robyn Wiegman, “Black Bodies, American Commodities: Gender, Race and the Bourgeois Ideal in Contemporary Film,” in Lester D. Friedman, *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (University of Illinois Press, 1991): 308-28; Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Routledge, 2000); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (Psychology Press, 1992); Sally Robinson, *Marked men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (Columbia University Press, 2000); Fred Pfeil, *White guys: studies in postmodern Domination and Difference* (Verso, 1995); Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (Psychology Press, 1993).

19 See Matthew W. Hughey, “Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in “Magical Negro” Films,” *Social Problems* 56, No. 3 (August 2009): 543-577; Bell Hooks, *Reel to real: race, sex, and class*

racism, and racial formation, have sought to articulate such reconfigurations of whiteness and white masculinity within the broad terrain of post-apartheid racial formation, the remaking of white supremacy, and transformations in the imagined community of the nation (and the shifting technologies of (re)production and excision through which that community is policed).²⁰ They situate the strategies named above in terms of what Robyn Wiegman has termed the white “occupation of injury.”²¹ For Wiegman, this entails, in part, the popular deployment of the “language of civil rights” to “protect whiteness, which is cast not only as a minority identity but as one injured by the denial of public representation.”²² This can be linked to the formation of “white victimage” described by Aimee Carrillo Rowe, which “thrives through the cultural production of white anxiety at the perceived dissolution of historically centered white identity,” a discourse that “predates and justifies” the ongoing “campaign of terror both within the national body and around the globe” begun (in part) by President Bush and continued under President Obama.²³

Wiegman's theorization of white injury leverages her broader reading of post-apartheid

at the movies (Psychology Press, 1996); Sean Brayton, “The Racial Politics of Disaster and Dystopia in *I Am Legend*,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 67, no. 1 (2011): 66-76; Jared Sexton, “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 39-63; Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen saviors: Hollywood fictions of whiteness* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); and Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Duke University Press Books, 1995). See also Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (Routledge, 2012).

20 In addition to the Wiegman and Carrillo Rowe texts discussed below, see Sherene Razack, “How Is White Supremacy Embodied? Sexualized Racial Violence at Abu Ghraib,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 17, no. 2 (2005): 341-363. See also Alys Eve Weinbaum, “Nation,” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*.

21 Robyn Wiegman, “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 115-150, pg. 127.

22 *Ibid*, 116.

23 Aimee Marie Carrillo Rowe, “Whose “America”? The Politics of Rhetoric and Space in the Formation of U.S. Nationalism,” *Radical History Review* 89 (2004): 115-134. See also Aimee Marie Carrillo Rowe, “Feeling in the Dark: Empathy, Whiteness, and Miscegenation in *Monster's Ball*,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 2 (2007): 122-142.

“liberal whiteness.” Founded on the “disaffiliation from white supremacy,” “contemporary white identity formation,” for Wiegman, deploys that alleged disaffiliation to “multiple and contradictory political purposes,” taking its most cogent and influential shape in popular narratives as a hegemonic “liberal whiteness,” “a color-blind moral sameness whose reinvestment in 'America' rehabilitates the national narrative of democratic progress”:

Simultaneously evoking a postracist society and a newly innocent whiteness, representations of liberal whiteness put a seemingly benign touch on those material transformations that have accompanied this century’s long and complicated transition from Jim Crow to official integration to the new multiculturalism. Indeed, we might say that even as liberal whiteness has overseen the rise of “diversity” in the popular public sphere, the nation-state’s capitulation to capitalism [. . .] has extended the material scope of white privilege. While the histories of these issues are complicated, it is nonetheless significant how seemingly “benign” is the popular cultural rhetoric of whiteness today and how self-empowering are its consequences.²⁴

The intervention offered here adds to these critiques but also departs from them. The popular common senses of white anti-racism I'm describing are deeply ambivalent about “the national narrative of democratic progress.”²⁵ The texts under consideration could be said to confront the state's alleged abrogation of its historical relation to (white, male, propertied) national subjects. Far from being easily linked to majoritarian nationalist narratives in which protagonists reinvigorate the national community, the white heteromale figures at their centers discover themselves as anti-racist subjects precisely through a critique of racialized state violence and abandonment, of which they paradoxically (if only momentarily) become the most pitiable and prominent victims. In this sense, the films considered here seem particularly responsive to contemporary transformations in state power and practice, and they are motivated

24 Wiegman, “Whiteness Studies,” 121.

25 Ibid.

by a contradictory assemblage of critiques of US state power and violence that emanated first from radical anti-racist and decolonial struggles—and by a deep-seated anxiety not only about the incoherence of historically-centered white identity but by how that incoherence seems to hinge on the retreat of the state in the name of globalizing capital and the contradictory yet decisive effects of the very radical insurgencies named above.

Central to the intervention of this chapter is an insistence on opening ground for tracing emergent relations between common sense visual and narrative representations of white heteromascularity and state transformation as part of the project of tracking the logics of the “post-racial moment”—relations that are perhaps more apparent in our moment than during the 1990s and early 2000s debates on the changing character of whiteness and masculinity. I begin, then, with a discussion of what we might understand, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, as a dual crisis of the US state form. In her work on the mass expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex, Gilmore argues that part of the architecture of that expansion must be seen as rooted in the epochal challenge to the state effected by the social and material “disorder” successfully produced by anti-racist and liberatory social movements and the non-normative cultural subjectivities that were mobilized by them and that they mobilized.²⁶ Their successes produced a crisis of legitimation for the US state and its form of racial rule for which vastly expanded military and carceral networks were a partial response. In the sweep of what Gilmore describes as the undoing of the Fordist-Keynesian contract of the warfare-welfare state, a series of moral panics around crime and criminality helped to justify the largest prison building project in human history, to further concretize the pathologization of black poverty circulating in state narratives

26 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism,” *Race & Class* 40, no. 2–3 (March 1, 1999): 171–88.

since 1965, and to deflect attention from problems such as unemployment and inflation that marked capital's "tax revolts" and the recessions of the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the depression of real wages occurring from the early 1970s onward. Seeking to contain the "disorder" successfully created by social movements, the US state increasingly diffused insurgency and militant activist movement through neo-colonial war and proxy wars abroad and multi-front "domestic" warfare concentrated in urban spaces at home, most visibly in the so-called "War on Drugs."²⁷ The wholesale expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex and the increased militarization of social life—understood here as, in part, state re-legitimation projects designed to authorize forms of domination whose effects are highly racially differentiated—emerge concomitantly, if unevenly and somewhat paradoxically, with the state's own self-delegitimization.

The neoliberal or "anti-state state," as Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore have termed it, can be understood as a multi-scalar transformation and rebuilding (not shrinking) project that involves, in part, the evisceration of social welfare and state capacity to act as guarantor of an allegedly-universalizable social safety net for national subjects.²⁸ Since at least the ascendancy of Thatcherism and Reaganism, the state's performative de-legitimation of itself positions the state as "the villainous anti-capital," enemy of market freedom (to which all other

27 See, for instance, Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, 1st ed. (University Of Minnesota Press, 2006); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Globalization and U.S. Prison Growth: from Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian militarism" 40 (1998); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2007); Joy James, *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Duke University Press, 2007); Loïc Wacquant, "The Advent of the Penal State Is Not a Destiny," *Social Justice* 28, no. 3 (85) (October 1, 2001): 81-87; Dan Berger, *The Struggle Within: Prisons, Political Prisoners, and Mass Movements in the United States* (PM Press, 2014); and Dylan Rodriguez, "Asian-American Studies in the Age of the Prison Industrial Complex: Departures and Re-Narrations," *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (July, 2005): 241-263.

28 Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, "Restating the Obvious," in Michael Sorkin, *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State* (Routledge, 2007).

freedoms are reduced) and economic growth (assumed to be potentially limitless), even as “private capitalist enterprises [. . .] gorge on state largesse” and the state becomes “more ingrained than ever in the technics of capital accumulation.”²⁹ This interplay of legitimation and delegitimation, of dismantling and rebuilding, produces new and racially-uneven forms of insecurity and vulnerability at the very moment that post-apartheid discourses and policies are alleged to have rendered state action and social space colorblind or race-neutral.³⁰

I argue that popular representations of whiteness and white heteromascularity as anti-racist or post-racist and ambivalently positioned vis-a-vis state power should be understood as arising within this political landscape, which I name in terms of an emergent post-racial moment. In attending here to the ways that popular films work to surface, cohere and potentially unsettle visual and narrative grammars of common sense in the post-racial moment, I follow, in a manner, Kara Keeling's ongoing interventions on visual culture and film in particular. In her theorizations of common sense and the affective labors of our common sense engagements with cultural texts and other phenomena, Keeling describes how “our efforts to assimilate that which moves us [in cinematic and popular texts and in social exchanges] are [. . .] [made] available to capital and its normative structures of command, as well as to the related yet distinct operations we know as

29 Neil Smith, “Introduction: Altered States,” in Heather Gautney, ed., *Democracy, States, and the Struggle for Global Justice* (Taylor & Francis, 2009).

30 Jodi Melamed further unearths the racial logic of these transformations by examining the “unevenness of neoliberal racialization,” in which “‘multicultural’ signifies as antiracist even as it becomes a way of ascribing racialized privilege to some forms of humanity.” Under these conditions, “the category of whiteness and its privileges are displaced into the category of multiculturalism,” such that whiteness obtains as structure of valuation and domination even as “some white people are left behind or left unprotected as government shifts from service to (its historically favored white) citizens to capital maximization within globalization, which requires and produces a multiracial, multilingual, multicultural elite.” See “Reading Tehran in *Lolita*: Making Racialized and Gendered Difference work for Neoliberal Multiculturalism” in Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Duke University Press, 2011). See also Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Duke University Press, 2011).

racism, homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia, among others.”³¹ However, in attending to the open-endedness of affective labor, understood as a bodily, emotional, and “mental activity required to make sense of the world,” Keeling seeks out that which “escapes recognition”—that which “escapes meaning and valuation”—as what “exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality.”³² Culture, here, is a site in which “impossible possibilities” emerge and “[threaten] to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses on which [our shared] reality relies for its coherence as such.”³³ Taking Keeling's insights in another direction, I pay attention in this chapter to how popular cultural texts construct anticipatory and anxious visions of dominant or official common senses in transformation. If, as Keeling argues, “even official common sense[s] [are] multivalent and responsive to challenges posed to [them] and innovations arising within [them],”³⁴ the films considered here can be read as attempts to shape the future in a moment which dominant common senses of racial meaning, whiteness and masculinity within and in relation to state power and political community seem to be under threat of disarticulation. Because these films work to reconstruct dominant visual fields in which whiteness is the central figure of value and in which the (in)visibility of blackness is always—to follow Nicole Fleetwood as she follows Fanon and others—*troubling*, I pay particular attention how they visually construct white bodies and white futures and expend black and brown bodies and

31 See Keeling, “Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 565-582, pg. 566.. See also Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*.

32 Keeling, “Looking for M—,” 566.

33 Ibid, 567.

34 *Witch's Flight*, 98.

futures.³⁵

A range of popular films of the 1990s and early 2000s, driven by a large number of leading Hollywood males, including Kevin Costner, Ray Liotta, James Woods, Ewen McGregor, Josh Hartnett, Clint Eastwood, and Bruce Willis, offer novel articulations of white male heteromasculine anti- or post-racist subjectivities that come into being as critiques of US state power, which is figured as a purveyor of racialized violence, and in intimate proximity or even identity with racialized suffering.³⁶ In this sense, the films emerge, paradoxically, as, on the one hand, haunted legacies of radical social movements, whose critiques make possible the visual and rhetorical logics of resistance through which their white protagonists come to know and combat racialized state violence; and, on the other, as expressions of widely-felt anxieties engendered by the operations of a state form for which national subject-formation appears superfluous (and the (white) benefits it has historically afforded some thus seem anything but secure) and by the threat to white male heteromasculine power represented by the achievements

35 Common sense, this reading will remind us again and again, is both a repository of the past—of memory-images, embodied experiences, and fragmentary yet decisive affective and sensory modes of being and seeing—and an archive of possible futures or futures-as-they-push-into-and-pressure the present. See Keeling, “Looking for M—” and Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*. On the construction of visual fields, see Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality* (New Press, 1999).

36 I have in mind here films such as: *Unforgiven* (1992), in which a brutal and brutalized gunfighter-turned-single father who must avenge the mutilation of women and the lynching-like public whipping and murder of his black sidekick in an act of purifying violence against the state that allows him to reclaim his (white) masculinity and pave the way for a peaceful, entrepreneurial future; *True Believer* (1989) in which a radical, “race traitor” attorney uses the law to save brown people from white supremacists and the state in a contemporary racial landscape in which Black people are either stooges of the corrupt state or non-existent; *Thunderheart* (1992), in which a white “Indian” FBI agent becomes the American Indian Movement's greatest anti-state hero and writes himself back into history as a victim of Wounded Knee; *Unbreakable* (2000), in which an ex-athlete whose superhuman strength, intuition and wise paternity—that which allow him to do the work of the absent state—is most inspired not by his quietly suffering wife but by the bitterness, weakness and criminality of his Black counterpart;. Other films that fit the conventions described here (with some variations) include *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *A Time to Kill* (1996), *American History X* (1998), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), and *Monster's Ball* (2001). Over the last decade, a range of films that feature white female protagonists but evince similar racial politics include films such as *The Blind Side* (2009) and *The Help* (2011).

of those social movements and their unfinished longings.³⁷ Any investment in “America” is thus under question in these modalities of common sense, as it is no longer guaranteed to describe a coherent entity (a body politic) that might make claims on state power. The three films dealt with at length below—*Dances with Wolves* (1991), *No Escape* (1994), and *Tears of the Sun* (2003)—have as their protagonists white men who are or have been soldiers, making their marked distance from anything like a coherent national community and their resistance to the racial state all the more pronounced, given the slippage between the categories of citizen, subject and soldier within modernity in general, and, perhaps more importantly, given a certain contemporary historical split between civilian citizen—for whom social “need” has become stigmatized as dependency—and the citizen soldier—commonly understood, particularly since the Gulf War, “to be deserving of social rights.”³⁸ In short, the (white heteromasculine) soldier is commonly figured in contemporary discourse as uniquely positioned to make claims on the state, yet the protagonists of these films are made through an explicit rejection of the state. However, as my readings make clear, the state often (re)appears where it is supposed to be absent, or where it seems to be resisted or rejected. The critiques of racialized state violence and the anxieties over (potential) state abandonment that each of these films mobilize find resolution in a reinvestment in a white heteromascularity capable of doing the work of the state—a reinvestment whose trajectory curves toward the return or resurgence of an interventionist state form—and a covert antiblack racism that achieves the wholeness of white subjectivity via the valuation/devaluation

37 On the potential ends of the incorporative project of bourgeois nationalism, see Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006). See also Michael Hanchard's description of the “nationalizing projects” performed by the modern state in his “Black Memory versus State Memory: Notes toward a Method,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 45-62.

38 Deborah E. Cowen, “The Soldier and Social Citizenship,” in Engin Isin, ed., *Recasting the Social in Citizenship* (University of Toronto Press, 2008).

of black life.

Remaking Whiteness, Refiguring the State

In January of 2011, Fox Home Entertainment released an Extended Anniversary Edition of *Dances with Wolves*, which had recently been selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry. Twenty years earlier the film was first released to widespread critical acclaim and went on to earn more than \$424 million and seven Academy Awards. The film helped return mainstream Hollywood cinema to one of its originary staples, the Western or “frontier” narrative, a central representational genre of US modernity,³⁹ and to reestablish the mythicized 19th century frontier as a proper scene of struggle and white masculine identifications in a moment in which borderlands seemed to acquire renewed significance in the US: the “frontier” of the Persian Gulf War in all its violent techno-real splendor came along to purge the emasculating ghosts of Vietnam; the War on Drugs had thoroughly replaced the War on Poverty under Reagan, figuring all lands South as potentially dangerous to “normal” American life; the end of the Cold War helped to concretize (or create) several “internal” and “external” threats to the nation under the rubric of “security,” from Latin American drug lords to Sandinistas to Middle Eastern terrorists to black “welfare queens” and “super predators.” In following but also seeming to question or exceed the genre's conventional boundaries, the film participated in larger representational battles over the politics of memory and forgetting that marked the political and popular discourses of the US in the 1980s and '90s. *Dances with Wolves* not only returned the Western to commercial viability, it re-scripted and re-popularized the

39 See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1973); and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

“going native” narrative, updated for the “post-Civil Rights” era.⁴⁰ In the footsteps of *Dances with Wolves*, the success of “going native” films—with similar if not identical racial politics—continues unabated, with international (*The Last Samurai*) and intergalactic (*Avatar*) versions together collecting more than 100 award nominations and grossing more than \$2 billion in total over the last decade.

Widely read as a “revisionist” Western that sought to set the record straight on Hollywood's history of misrepresentation of Native America, *Dances with Wolves* was said, in popular critical accounts, to offer a humane and principled (if sentimental) account of Lakota life. Mainstream reviews and scholarly accounts in film studies and Native American studies praised the film for addressing “important spiritual, social, and environmental issues vital to all Americans at the beginning of a new millennium” and for “captur[ing] the imagination of Americans from a variety of social, economic, and racial backgrounds.”⁴¹ Director Kevin Costner “counted coup [. . .] on all Hollywood Indian movies,” as one scholar put it. The cinematic locus of this apparent cross-cultural appeal and multivalent intervention in decidedly national issues is the film's white male protagonist, John J. Dunbar, portrayed by Costner himself, who becomes, over the course of the film, “*Dances with Wolves*,” a culturally Lakota but racially white hero. Mainstream pundits praised the character as, for instance, “an almost too perfect example of the new American male,” the product of “recent feminist fantasies and the failure of certain old-fashioned masculine dreams.”⁴² Several Native American studies and cultural studies scholars

40 A “cherished American tradition,” going native “articulates and attempts to resolve widespread ambivalence about modernity as well as anxieties about the terrible violence marking the nation's origins.” See Shari Michelle Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

41 Edward D. Castillo, “*Dances with Wolves*,” in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (Rutgers University Press, 2003): 63-76, pg. 63.

42 See Richard Schickel, “Cinema: Riding To Redemption Ridge,” *Time*, Monday, Nov. 12, 1990 <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,971664,00.html#ixzz2xItkTSrx>>

have shown well how the multiculturalist patina of the film is undercut (or reversed entirely) by its repetition of certain familiar genres and gestures—the romanticization of Indian life, the “white savior” trope, the captivity narrative, the rote vilification of the “bad Indians” (in this case, the Pawnee), and the use of “authentic” Indian culture as the vehicle for “escaping a degenerate and corrupt white world.”⁴³ What follows here confirms such critiques but also offers a new reading of the film's racial and gendered logics that brings its “new American male” into starker relief in terms of the particular social landscape of 1990s racial formation and state transformation in the emergent “post-racial moment.” What is remarkable is that the film understands itself as antiracist and as critical of (racialized) state violence, that it attempts to construct white heteromale subjectivity as preeminently capable of conversion to authentic anti-racism, yet it produces a set of racial logics that require black and Native death as a precondition for white anti-racism and that desire the return of an ethical racial state as a precondition for interracial sociality.

The primary reason for much of the popular and critical acclaim for the film—including among many Native American audiences—was its purported historical accuracy in its depiction of Lakota life. As a film that offers an alternative “memory” of its historical subject, it was taken to be giving voice to certain misrepresented or subjugated pasts whose potential “healing” power was arrayed firmly under the sign of the nation.⁴⁴ Remarkably, though, few observers have lingered over the most significant slippages in the narrative's much-touted historical pedigree. The first has to do with the shuffling of detail in the translation from novel to screenplay. The

43 Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 5.

44 I take this gesture to be characteristic of the broader popular and scholarly discourses on “memory” that emerged in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Comanches of Michael Blake's novel *Dances with Wolves* are replaced with the Sioux of the film, yet all the pieces of the storyline remain intact. (Thus, Ten Bears, one of the film's central Lakota characters, was in fact a “real” Yapparika Comanche chief. At one point during the film, Ten Bears produces the helmet of a Spanish conquistador and explains how his ancestors defeated the Spanish, the Mexicans and the Texans before this newest influx of whites represented by Dunbar's lone arrival, though the Northern Plains Sioux could not have “encountered this assemblage of Southern colonists.”)⁴⁵ Explaining his motivations for writing the narrative to begin with, Blake describes “discover[ing] so much spirituality in the lives [. . .] of Indian people.”⁴⁶ Thus, when logistical concerns prompted the shift from one tribe to another, the differences between the two were immaterial, since “the spirituality of it [*sic*] is pretty much the same.”⁴⁷ One way of glossing this would be to suggest that what underlies the film's painstaking attention to historical detail—and the desire on the part of its white screenwriter, director and audience for an exoticized “spirituality”—is a logic of racial substitutability. Within the film's version of “multiculturalism,” then, whiteness occupies a fixed position against which a number of modes of racial difference can be brought into relief, enjoyed, and consumed by white subjects (which is doubly true, of course, in the sense that both its white protagonist and white audience experience this process coterminously). Or, rather, whiteness can abide different differences, which turn out to be qualitatively substitutable for one another in their usefulness for white transformation and self-fulfillment. Whiteness itself is perforated and malleable enough to subsume or sublimate racial otherness—but it is not, in the last instance, substitutable in quite the

45 See Castillo, “*Dances with Wolves*,” 67.

46 See Syd Field, *Four Screenplays: Studies in the American Screenplay* (Random House, 2009), 253.

47 Ibid.

same way, as we'll see. So, it turns out not to matter whether the Comanches are Lakota. And this defense of whiteness that conflates non-white racial differences also serves to ruse other histories of resistance to US state violence, since the Comancheria represented an alternative order of power that the imperial US state form of the 19th century struggled for the better part of a century to overrun.⁴⁸

Pushing the logic of racial substitutability further, nor does it matter, by film's end, whether the Lakota are Lakota or Pawnee. The passing into historical oblivion of the Lakota is an event that has already happened, once-and-for-all, according to the film's closing credits: thirteen years after the narrative's end, the last of the Lakota “submitted to white authority,” their culture “gone.” Relegating Native peoples to a kind of “ahistorical zone”⁴⁹ and erasing nearly a century and a half of Lakota life and struggle, the film signals that the only properly historical figure in this drama is the white protagonist, Dunbar, riding off to escape the fate of the tribe. Thus, just as the sentimentalized Lakota nurture Dunbar's transformation and manage to affirm his essential, fraternal, racialized goodness in their last (historical) breath, the marauding villains, the Pawnee, serve as fodder for his transformation, each of their nameless deaths binding Dunbar further to his new (vanishing) community and ensuring the possibility of *some* legitimate forms of white violence on the frontier. It is significant that the narrative justification for Pawnee death is racialized: it is not just that the Pawnee have “been hard on” the Sioux, as Dunbar intuits; we, the audience, know that they have murdered and scalped the grotesque but unthreatening white

48 See, for instance, Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (Yale University Press, 2008). See also Curtis Marez, “Signifying Spain, Becoming Comanche, Making Mexicans: Indian Captivity and the History of Chicana/o Popular Performance,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2001): 267–306.

49 Armando José Prats makes this point well in *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

trader, Timmons, and, more importantly, that they have massacred an unassuming white family. This detail of treachery we learn visually, in the film's one and only flashback scene—which is surprising for a film that relies so heavily on plodding and pedantic voice-over narration. Stands with a Fist, the white/Sioux woman who will become Dunbar's wife, remembers the childhood trauma, the camera following her blond child self as she runs and looks back to witness, in slow motion, her family's murder. The terror on the frontier, then, is primarily that experienced and witnessed by white domesticity—and made most poignant not through Indian-on-white violence itself but in the white child's eyes as she watches that violence—and in fact we get little outside of a general foreboding and some individual characters' racist expressions to indicate the totalizing spaces of death and terror produced by militarized white encroachment throughout Native lands. My argument here is that the film's claim to represent the Lakota was offered in bad faith from the outset, and that its racial imagination is organized around the articulation of a renewed white heteromascularity surviving in landscapes of death. It is significant, as we'll see in the readings that follow, that antiracist white heteromascularity emerges in the very borderlands, colonial spaces and death zones where earlier forms of white heteromascularity were to have been made.

If one limit to the film's logic of racial substitutability is whiteness, since whiteness can subsume difference without being itself subsumed, the other limit is blackness—and here we arrive at the second of the film's historical slippages that has been deemed unremarkable by both its supporters and detractors: that the *other* historical backdrop of the film is the Civil War. The film opens, after all, in the midst of a Civil War battle, with Dunbar moaning in pain as exhausted field surgeons plan to saw off his mangled leg. The performance of masculine injury

and suffering that constitute the film's first sights and sounds, prior to our view of the victim's face, say much about the heteromasculine figure it seeks to (re)present—this is a hero, we're to understand, capable of expressing pain and acting on it—and about the utter inadmissibility of racial slavery and black suffering within the film's political agenda. If the centrality of Dunbar's pain signifies what Wiegman has called the white (male) “occupation of injury” characteristic of the “liberal whiteness” of the post-segregationist US, it is a space of injury, of trauma, that he will overcome, unscathed.⁵⁰ The images of blood-soaked limbs and the threat to his mobility represented by the doctors' crude instruments provide a visual scaffolding for the narrative arc of the film: racial slavery and settler-colonial genocide are enframed and subsumed, narratologically, temporally, and visually, within an image of white male injury and the unthinkable possibility of his loss of mobility.⁵¹ Sonically, the grunts and moans of white heteromasculine pain, underwritten by John Barry's elegiac score, mark the Civil War as a threat to white male bodies and a problem of enunciation: the voice of Dunbar, who will narrate the film in diary-entry voiceover, can only utter non-linguistic cries of pain.

When the doctors take a break, Dunbar steals a horse and attempts suicide by riding toward the Confederate lines, ultimately making two passes within a few meters of the enemy and somehow avoiding dozens of bullets, his arms outstretched in a Christlike gesture of sacrifice. The distraction proves enough for a Union sneak attack and victory, which earns Dunbar the care of a benevolent General and the choice of whichever post he'd like. Shifting seamlessly from suicidal carelessness to remarkable earnestness, Dunbar heads for the frontier, to “see it before it's gone,” leaving the “senseless slaughter in the East” firmly behind him. The

50 See Wiegman, “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity.”

51 See Wiegman's discussion of mobility and whiteness, *Ibid.*

Civil War is thus figured in this enlightened, antiracist historical corrective as, once again, a site of white male suffering, a purposeless struggle that fractures the fraternity of white men.

This historical detail says much about the racial and sexual politics of the film. As Dunbar builds his new life at an abandoned outpost in a nameless territory on the frontier, he slowly becomes integrated into the life of his Lakota neighbors, recognizing the dignity of the “savages” in a familiar storyline. Yet, somehow, amidst the revelations about the humanity of the “wild Indian[s]” he encounters, within his transmutation from white soldier to racialized enemy of the state, he fails to once mention or puzzle over racial slavery. That is, coming face-to-face with genocide and, in fact, becoming one of its victims rather than merely its perpetrator, inspires much in Dunbar, but it does not inspire a moment's reflection on chattel slavery, abolition, the meaning of the war in the east, or the centrality of white supremacy and anti-black racism and violence to the US as whole. This might seem a mere oversight, but the film's quiet anti-black racism goes quite a bit deeper.

Dunbar's litany of admiration for his Lakota counterparts reveals an “authentic” Indian cultural world ordered on the proprietary logic and social values of bourgeois norms. The Lakota, recognizes Dunbar, are “honest,” “very direct”; they are “patient,” “inquisitive,” “eager,” “polite,” they have “a familiar humor [he] enjoy[s].” He is overawed by the “efficiency and the speed at which they [move]”—“enough to impress any military commander.” They are decidedly not “beggars” or “thieves.” Dunbar has never encountered a people “so eager to laugh” or “so devoted to family.” The unspoken Other of these characterizations is either the Black slave (within the colonial imaginary)—apparently unrepresentable within the scope of Dunbar's own “anti-racist” political imaginary—or, perhaps more accurately, the pathologized Black ghetto

inhabitant/prisoner of the late 20th century, the much maligned object of so much of the national discourse on race at the moment of the film's creation, on the eve of the Rodney King verdict and the LA uprisings.⁵² Within the scope of a series of moral panics over crime and criminality in the 1980s and 1990s, blackness is produced, precariously, as the precise sign of the overcoming of race at the level of the nation *and* the marker of a residual, deviant and regressive array of individual failures to access the progressive promises of national belonging—all of which, narrativized through figures such as the “welfare queen” and the “super-predator,” can be mobilized as indices and focal points of all perceived threats facing the “American way of life.”⁵³ The Lakota of the film are the mirror opposite of this fantasized composition, a racialized other who affirms not only white familial and social life but the white heteromasculine figure who is their purest expression. Thus, Dunbar quickly becomes a person of “genuine standing” among them; he is “greeted with open smiles and looks of appreciation.” He is “a celebrity.” This remarkable reversal—from the white man as perpetrator of racism and genocide to the recognized “celebrity” among minority communities—aids the discursive and pedagogical project evident in other popular texts (such as *Lean on Me*) and scholarly interventions (such as *The Scar of Race*) of the 1990s that not only position individual black people as responsible for structural inequality and urban blight but insist that white people no longer bear any

52 See Loic Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis : When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 95 (2001); and “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘race question’ in the US,” *New Left Review* 13 (Jan/Feb 2002). See also Min Hyung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Duke University Press, 2005).

53 See Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* 323 (1992): 332–33; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Psychology Press, 2000); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Taylor & Francis, 2011); Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Elaine Brown, *The Condemnation of Little B.* (Beacon Press, 2003).

responsibility for racial strife.⁵⁴

In *Dances with Wolves*, however, the presumably-representative white male does not become reconciled to the state but in fact becomes the victim of the racial state that has quite literally abandoned him on the frontier. Rather than standing in for the coherent national whole that must be defended against its (black and Native) enemies, the nativized Dunbar becomes the target of racialized state violence, hunted by the army for which he once fought. Yet the purity that preserves whiteness from the contamination of racial blackness—so central to social and juridical constructions of race—is never threatened, as Dunbar's marriage to Stands with a First (Mary McDonnell), the white woman raised as a Lakota, demonstrates. If the Lakota as a whole are the desired (and welcoming) object of Costner's masculine embrace, Stands with a Fist is the particular female with whom that desire can be consummated. The Lakota people themselves proclaim the dissolution of Dunbar's whiteness—with Ten Bears telling him that John Dunbar the white soldier no longer exists, replaced by “Dances with Wolves”—they also recognize the sanctity and purity of whiteness in the realm of sexuality: when Dunbar courts Stands with a Fist we learn that the tribe approves because they are “both white.” The sexual politics of the film, then, preserve the anti-miscegenation so central to white supremacy and white racial formation while racializing and exoticizing whiteness in the figure of Stands with a Fist.⁵⁵ And although she (presumably) took part in racial “mixture” by partnering with a Lakota man—who has conveniently died just before Dunbar's arrival—she has not produced children, thus ensuring that

54 See Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, And Crime News in US Culture* (Routledge, 2006).

55 See Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (U of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Temple University Press, 2010).

whiteness cannot be biologically diluted even as the film's white protagonists “become” Lakota. As the only woman in the film with a significant role, Stands with a Fist affirms the role of (white) women as transmitters of cultural knowledge and mediators (if not actors) between men as they make important political decisions. She is capable of resisting overbearing Indian women (hence her given name) and marrying a white man and leaving behind her community to follow him at the film's end. The “multicultural” or “post-racial” horizon of possibility of the film, then, which the white protagonists ride off into a nameless future to achieve, is one in which whiteness has been supplemented by spiritual, social and ethical (but not biological) racial otherness (but not blackness) in order to regain its value *apart* from the state.

The corrupted white world that Dunbar and Stands with a Fist must contend with is not primarily one of heteropatriarchal violence and white supremacist terror; it is expressed, instead, through an economy of waste and wastefulness produced by the state. The greatest crime of whites in the film—at least until the state targets Dunbar himself—is not systematic genocide but the mass slaughter of plains buffalo. As Dunbar and his new friends prepare for the buffalo hunt, they discover hundreds of rotting carcasses killed only for their tongues and their hides, part of the burgeoning commodity trade on the frontier (which includes, of course, the collection of Indian scalps). Dunbar, the voiceover narration tells us, finds the scene abhorrent, since it could only be the work of “white hunters,” although he holds out hope, apparently, that it was not. Fortunately, the Lakota do not so much as glance in Dunbar's direction—there are “no looks, no blame,” the film once again assuring the audience that responsibility for systemic racial violence does not bleed on to or stain the white individual. It is important to remember here that the Reagan Revolution instituted “waste” as a nexus for reading the different forms of corruption

and degradation said to be infecting the nation, from “welfare cheats” to the bloated bureaucracy of the state and its needless spending on social programs. Following a similar logic, the film understands wastefulness as the key sin that Dunbar must work against, and this is the background of Dunbar's rejection of the state. From the film's first moments, with Dunbar's concern over the “senseless[ness]” of the Civil War and its wasting of white fraternity, the state is figured as slovenly rather than malicious: the hapless officers overseeing the war, the fat and thoughtless civilian Timmons, who ferries supplies for the government, the absent soldiers who've abandoned their fort, the mumbling, drunken Sergeant who assigns Dunbar his post, urinates himself, and promptly commits suicide, the careless, illiterate soldiers who throw away Dunbar's diary, kill his wolf, and die crying for their mothers. Dunbar, efficient and earnest, questions the legitimacy of the state through this economy of waste, not because of white supremacy and its constitutive violences.

From this vantage, *Dances with Wolves* participates in the rhetorical project of the anti-state state as a means to (re)discover white heteromascularity *as* anti- or post-racist. If the state's apparent abandonment of its historical relation to white national subjects inspires the politics of the film, as I'm suggesting, as least as much as do the debates over multiculturalism as a contested effect of anti-racist struggle, it's worth noting that the potential breakdown of that relation raises in the film the necessity of an encounter with the non-modern. That is, the non-modern or “pre-modern” Lakota, here presumed to have retained some sort of pure tradition after centuries of violent contact with Europeans and other whites, emerges as a kind of supplement for white identity formation precisely at the moment when the modern nation's unwritten contract with whiteness is alleged to be under threat. The non-modern as supplement acts as the

means through which whiteness as value can reinstate itself. The revalued white heteromascularity embodied by Dunbar at film's end—confirmed melodramatically by the fierce warrior, Wind in His Hair, proclaiming their eternal brotherhood from the side of a mountain—is what makes possible the nostalgia for the return of an ethical state form. Dunbar and Stands with a Fist ride off to “tell whoever will listen” of the plight of the Lakota. The fantasy here, improbably, is the fantasy of civil society, of an addressable state form that would not overthrow the modern white racial order but would secure it “peacefully” in relation to non-modern social formations. That is, the desire of *Dances with Wolves* is for an incorporative, activist state capable of producing and securing some sort of “post-racial” order in which the good Natives and the Dunbars of the world can co-exist.

Near Futures and the Possible Ends of Whiteness

If *Dances with Wolves* serves as a paradigmatic example of the formations of common sense I'm describing, the two very different films I turn to in the remainder of the chapter elucidate the incredible anxieties that underlie the white desire for an anti-racist or post-racist heteromasculine male subject and a “post-racial” social order. While *Dances with Wolves* presents as a revisionist account of settler-colonial violence and lost multi-racial possibilities (for white subjects), the reading above suggests that it is anticipatory in the sense that it can be read as a response to the shifting terrain of US racial formation and the contradictory emergence of “the post-racial moment” in which it participates. The two films I take up briefly in this section are anticipatory and deeply anxious in somewhat more pronounced but equally complex ways. The first, *No Escape* (1994), is a dystopian sci-fi parable that evinces a growing unease over the

rise of the Prison Industrial Complex in conjunction with the seemingly unfettered growth of corporate power and the perceived betrayal of white men by the state that is so prominent in the 1990s, even as the relatively modest gains of the Long Civil Rights Era were being firmly undercut and rolled back. The second, *Tears of the Sun* (2003)— the only film of the three considered in this chapter directed by a black director—is a near-future war/action drama that portrays a white heteromale subject as at once the embittered and embattled representative of the US state and the potential enemy of the state who must survive landscapes of Black death in order to re-suture whiteness to US state “security” practice in a post-September 11th, pre-Iraq War world. Both films, like *Dances with Wolves*, generate a visual rhetoric of black and brown suffering that serves, ultimately, as a mechanism for the production of anti-racist white subjectivity and its claims on futurity. Together they suggest that common sense articulations and representations of white (heterosexual male) anti-racism, so ubiquitous in popular cultural forms, should be understood as a mode of contestation over (the futures of) state power and the relative and precarious status of racialized and gendered life in the late 20th and early-21st century US.

No Escape takes place in a near-future (2022) world in which the Prison Industrial Complex is run entirely by the para-state apparatuses of corporate power. Ray Liotta plays Robbins, a highly-trained military officer who, in the film's opening scene, steps out of a marching line of soldiers to shoot his commanding officer at point-blank range. The scene occurs, eerily, in 2011 in Benghazi, Libya, and we learn through flashbacks that Robbins' rejection of the state is rooted in his sense of betrayal at being forced to burn women and children—the betrayal, in other words, of being instrumentalized as a tool of interventionist

racialized state violence. Convicted of murder, Robbins is sent to a series of maximum security prisons from which he repeatedly tries to escape. When he is sent to the highest-security “domestic” prison, he is singled out for abuse by the overweight, sadistic corporate bureaucrat (played by Michael Lerner) who acts as CEO of the carceral network. When he refuses to use an electric whip on a fellow inmate in an arranged spectacle of torture and cruelty, Robbins is sent to Absolom, an inescapable island hundreds of miles from the mainland, a Guantanamo-like (non)place of exception from which no one ever returns.

Dropped from a helicopter and covered in rats, Robbins is plunged into a colonial nightmare/fantasy *par excellence*: the subject of the metropole finds himself in a clearing deep in the jungle of the colony, faceless black bodies lurking in the trees around him, animal-like screams emanating from nowhere. He begins to flee, but is soon overrun by dozens of bow and spear-carrying tribesmen, their loin-clothed skin black, their faces masked and their hair matted in dreadlocks. They take him back to their village, tribal drums pounding out their arrival, and hundreds of filthy tribesmen—replete with sharpened teeth and tattooed, pierced and painted faces—clamor over one another to get a look at the new catch. But one detail separates this scene from its colonial predecessors: the tribesmen are “white.” Some are painted in full-body blackface and many are covered in masks and other markers of tribal otherness, but all are white.

Their leader is Walter Marek, an erudite and eloquent yet brutal master. He welcomes Robbins with the easy and false sincerity of mid-level management; in fact, he introduces himself as “Resident Manager,” pretending as though Robbins is a tourist arriving for vacation, then offering a deluxe position on his “staff” once Robbins proves himself by surviving a death match with one of Marek's thugs. We later learn that Marek's operation essentially works as a

renegade arm of the para-state corporation that oversees the island, a kind of unleashed occupying force intent on destroying the utopian community created by the island's other faction of prisoners (and dependent on supply drops from the corporate bosses). In this sense, *No Escape* describes a dystopian near-future modality of power that is both properly colonial and corporate-capitalist: the Prison Industrial Complex has grown exponentially yet imprisons white men almost exclusively, and the “natives”—called the “Outsiders”—whose repression is required for “civilization” to thrive, are white men-turned-savages under the sway of corporate power. In Marek we find both of the banality of a late capitalist managerial class and the (fantasized) wanton viciousness of the racialized colonial other, forcing his “staff” to bend to his will and sacrifice themselves in increasingly sadistic death games. At the heart of the para-state corporate system, then, is the twinned figure of the bureaucrat and the cannibal. Put otherwise, *No Escape* diagnoses as the corrupt core of the corporate-capitalist order precisely the threat of what was fantasized to be at the periphery (and the historical antecedent) of the colonial-capitalist order—the black subhuman, the primitive, the savage.⁵⁶

At a historical moment when corporate power seems unbounded and when white men perceive themselves to have been abandoned by the state in the service of capital, *No Escape* thus reanimates colonial racial fantasies to name the threats facing white masculine identity and authority. Racial signification is everywhere yet race is never mentioned; dystopia is whiteness trapped in the colonial space of death.⁵⁷ Yet the utopian alternative to this dystopian nightmare is a post-racial “civilization” founded by another group of prisoners on the island. When Robbins

⁵⁶ See Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1986); Sven Lindqvist and Joan Tate, *Exterminate All the Brutes* (New Press, 1996) and Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing* (Granta, 2001).

⁵⁷ See Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*.

nearly dies escaping Marek and his gang, he is rescued and taken to the Insider's camp. He awakes to find an idyllic scene of white men at work; touring his new surroundings, Robbins finds white men collectively laboring at all manor of crafts. The camp is overseen by The Father, a wise old white man who defends the community from the Outsiders. The only ostensibly non-white characters in the film are Hawkins (played by Ernie Hudson), The Father's angry black sidekick, with whom Robbins is immediately at odds, and Skull (played by Cheuk-Fai Chan), his stoic Asian body guard, who does not utter a line throughout the film as he dutifully deploys martial arts and sacrifices himself in the service of The Father. The film thus positions white men as the primary victims of the racialized violence of the Prison Industrial Complex, and their struggle is to regain their dignity through homosocial white kinship, collectivist, unalienated labor, and submission to paternal authority. Black men's anger and distrust, meanwhile, must be subordinated to white authority so that they may be granted social responsibility, while Asians are rightfully submissive and thus have secured their place in the new social order.

The Father expresses well the ethos of this new imagined community in a speech: “[. . .] we all share something, something that cannot be taken away from us. We have proved to ourselves that we cannot be written off, that our lives mean something. [. . .] We are human beings [. . .] that is our freedom.” White heteromascline claims to universality, then, become the means to articulate an injured but resurgent white identity after white supremacy and in the face of abandonment by the state. Robbins, however, initially rejects this new authority, reminding the community to remember “all [their] victims.” The Father responds that Robbins, like all of them, must learn to forgive themselves their past violences in order to create a livable future, and Robbins task throughout the film is to learn to love himself and the new social order. Once he

does so, he is able to repel the Outsiders' terror and to discover that the community has been betrayed by the effeminate, queer(ed) germaphobe, King. Only then does the possibility to escape the island become reality, and Robbins leaves at film's end to “get the word out” so that an ethical state might reemerge to rescue stranded white masculinity.

Whiteness, Transnational Black Suffering/Humanity, and the Globalized State Form

We are disoriented, out of place from the first shot, in which both the camera and the black bodies it seeks to capture are in chaotic motion. The grainy image and the shaky, handheld camera reveal for us urban “unrest” in the global South—fire, disorganized movement, a “mob” of black bodies on the move, first away from the camera then, in the next shot, toward the camera—before the familiar cadence and trained, composed performance of concern of the Western newscaster's voice breaks in to contain and organize the images and our orientation to them. We learn that the scenes are unfolding in Nigeria, in the thrall of a “swift and violent” military coup—we watch, then, as a soldier executes a partially-dressed teen—and we come to understand that the overthrow of the “democratically-elected government” follows a “longstanding history of ethnic enmity, particularly between the Fulani muslims in the north and the Christian Igbo in the south.” Within the visual and sonic economy of the film, the specific location (Nigeria) and its particular, global, regional, national, colonial, and postcolonial histories matter far less than the presumed familiarity of a series of images and terms meant to hail the (presumptively American) audience: *coup*, *ethnic cleansing*, *Africa*, collated with the sights and sounds of gunshots, smoke, large-scale protests, a wailing black woman abused by a black man in uniform, burned and abandoned vehicles, military police dogs attacking civilians in

the streets. The music that surrounds us corroborates this hailing before the opening credits begin; the score is credited to Hans Zimmer, but the opening sounds of the film include the voice of Lebo M., the South African singer and composer made famous in the US for his prominent work on the *Lion King* soundtrack. It matters not that he is South African rather than Nigerian—just as it matters not that the filmmakers elected not to draw on the rich musical cultures and performance traditions of Nigeria—since the “African” vocals and foreboding drums indicate all that matters. These are common sense sights and sounds that indicate and invoke what is off-screen, meant to tap into a reservoir of associations that are nearly as old as Euro-American imaginaries of Africa even as they are profoundly a-historical in their forgetting of anything but the matter-of-fact *nowness* of the entry-into-existence effected by the newscaster's voice.

The film described here is *Tears of the Sun*, a Bruce Willis war / action drama directed by Antoine Fuqua—one of the most prominent Black filmmakers in Hollywood—and released just before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The film's first stable image, after the scenes of chaos in Nigeria, is a longview, sweeping aerial shot of a US Navy aircraft carrier as helicopters approach in the foreground. The words “Somewhere off the coast of Africa” appear on the screen, and the soundtrack shifts away from insistent drums to a familiar orchestral composition. It is on the deck of the aircraft carrier where we will be introduced to the the first proper characters in the film, Navy SEAL Lieutenant Waters (Willis) and his commanding officer (Tom Skerritt), as we know already that none of the Nigerians in the opening, newsreel-style footage will appear again. What unfolds over the next two hours is a dramatic spectacle of Black suffering and white achievement, the latter requiring the former, again and again and again; in the process, the (mostly silent or non-linguistic) approbation and love of Black Nigerians and Black Americans is

extracted, repeatedly, to affirm the wholeness and futurity of white life, belonging, and essential goodness. As my reading elaborates, for all the spectacularization of Black suffering and death on which the narrative arc of the film moves, and despite the nods toward a possible Black “humanity,” the film is emphatically not *about* Black suffering and death. It is, instead, that Black suffering and death are the mechanisms through which white heteromale subjectivity might be renewed in its relationship to the state.

In a scathing critique of another of director Antoine Fuqua's films, the widely-acclaimed (and award-winning) *Training Day*, Jared Sexton points out that, within the particular “racialized political economy” of Hollywood film, “to have a black director behind the camera makes no substantive difference to the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, whether at the level of narrative structure, plot, characterization, or film form. Directors may call the shots, but film studios and financial underwriters [. . .] have the first and final word.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Sexton finds that what is distinctive about Fuqua's early films, including *Tears of the Sun*, is that “images of absolute dereliction” are “coded throughout [. . .] as the hallmark of blackness.”⁵⁹ My reading complements and complicates this assertion in a number of ways, and I attend in particular to the variegated histories the film cites in its productions of Black pain alongside white risk, concern, and futurity. I argue that the film's (un)concern for—but compulsive repetition of—Black suffering and death is performed visually, narratively, and sonically and works, in part, to disappear racial slavery, colonization and decolonization, structural adjustment, proxy wars over oil and other resources, and neocolonial corporate-capitalist and NGO-driven projects, all as it makes possible white wholeness on and beyond the Dark Continent. It is

58 Sexton, “Ruse of Engagement,” 48.

59 Ibid.

particularly pernicious that it is the very visibility and presence of Black American characters that helps secure that series of disappearances most effectively. In attending to how the commodification of Black suffering supplements and produces whiteness as value, I pay particular attention to the film's construction of a homology between interventionist state projects and a post-racial whiteness. It is a homology that operates, somewhat paradoxically, as a critique and revision of dominant logics of race and the nation-state in the early-21st century US.

Tears of the Sun is a film in motion. Or, rather, the entire film consists of characters in motion, sometimes by air and sea but mostly on foot. But, as the opening sequences disclose, the dispensation of mobility will be stratified, arranged, and rigidly policed. For Americans, “Africa” is a place that one can move into and out of; for Africans and, to a lesser extent, African Americans, Africa, is a bordered zone of hyper-insecurity, mutilation, and death, punctuated at times by singing and weeping. Lt. Waters and his men have just left the interior of the continent by airship when the film begins; they learn immediately that they will have to return for yet another mission. Their orders, delivered “somewhere off the coast of Africa,” are to rescue—kidnap, if necessary—an Italian-born American doctor working in an endangered Christian Mission in the Nigerian jungle. If that basic premise—a white man leading an expedition to rescue/kidnap someone from the dark interior jungle—inevitably invokes so many other narratives of conquest, kidnap, “rescue,” and “extraction” that typify white men's “adventures” into the continent, what follows eerily recalls and confounds those basic tropes. The danger, we find, comes from a military commanded by Fulani Muslims who are simply “killing anyone who goes to a different church.” We learn, too, that the US has been “supplying them for far too many years.” The sordid details of that geo-political arrangement do not enter the narrow scope of the

film, nor do any of the Nigerians who are slaughtered, tortured, or raped along the way seem to place any blame on the US.

Under the cover of night, a paint-blackened Lt. Waters and his men emerge from underwater and fall upon a Nigerian woman—Patience, played by the Ghanaian-born Akosua Busia—as she gathers water. Waters, painted in what resembles blackface to camouflage himself, covers her mouth instantly, so that she emits something less than a cry, while he controls her body and her movements, demanding that she answer questions by nodding or shaking her head. Although she is barred from self-expression—her role being to deliver the SEAL team to the white woman (Dr. Lena Kendricks, played by Monica Bellucci) who is the target of their mission—she is the only Nigerian character who emerges in the first three quarters of the film, besides the Fulani general and his scowling henchman, who speak primarily with machetes, bullets, and barked orders. And as a “character,” she will work, over the first few minutes of the film, to establish her ambitions and possibilities: to weep, to mournfully say goodbye to Dr. Kendricks, whom she appears to love above all others, and to thank, profusely, Lt. Waters, for reversing his decision to abandon everyone being housed at the Mission and instead to take 28 of the able-bodied with him on a march through the jungle toward a squalid refuge camp in Cameroon.

What interests me about this familiar Hollywood trope of Darkest Africa as a backdrop for white drama and self-discovery is that Lt. Waters is presented not just as brave adventurer or savior—in rescuing white and Black women, children, and men from the unspeakable cruelty of Black Muslim militiamen—but as the soldier who repeatedly defies order (i.e., refuses his supposedly-sacrosanct relationship to state power) to enact his begrudging but growing commitment to Black survival. In a post-September 11th context, that he does so without any

reference to US national interests is striking, both because it would seem to undermine the nationalist ethos of the period between 9/11 and the first months of the occupation of Iraq but also because it could be said to imagine US state “security” practice in ways that anticipate the potential trajectory of the “War on Terror” in novel ways. So, after he coldly abandons his coffer of would-be refugees in the jungle (and betrays Dr. Kendricks in the process), he insists on returning for them and risking his team's lives to shepherd them to their displacement in Cameroon. His decision to turn back occurs not when he witnesses, from the fleeing helicopter, the burned and bloody remains of the Christian Mission they had left behind, but when he exchanges knowing looks with the one Black American soldier who speaks in the film, the stoic Zee (played by the Black British actor Eamonn Walker). His concern and outrage is consummated, in other words, in the eyes of his Black comrade, and variations on this structure of (white) defiance and (Black) affirmation is repeated throughout the film.

The Lieutenant's defiance reaches one of its first climaxes when his entourage stumbles upon a village under attack from militiamen. Flouting the rules of engagement, he orders his men to sweep through the village, where they find Muslim soldiers screaming at villagers as they torture and kill them (no subtitles or translations provided, since it does not matter what they are saying, just as no subtitles accompany conversations among Igbo in the film). Amidst incessant wailing, the shocked soldiers come across scene after scene of degradation and violence: children's' skulls crushed, piles of bodies, burning huts, ongoing rapes, and games of humiliation and execution. Back in the jungle, the mostly silent group of Igbo (non)characters listen to the sounds of death in the village, weeping to themselves. The soundtrack shifts back to the voice of Lebo M. that played over the opening credits, his words sounding at once mournful and resigned.

The wailing and burning continue as the battle-hardened soldiers rescue as many as they can until finally they find militiamen raping a woman and mutilating her breasts. In disgust, Zee uses his knife to cut deep into one of the perpetrators. Even the hardest of soldiers then weeps and asks, “How can they do this?” As the victim dies, Patience appears over her mutilated flesh to intone, “This is what they do. They cut off the breasts of nursing mothers, so that they'll never again feed their own babies. This is what *they* do.” The “they” in this scenario or the particular histories and ideologies *they* are meant to enact matter less than the fact of their Africanness and their distance from anything like the measured, deadly-yet-necessary actions of US soldiers. Patience here acts as native informant, authenticating what the audience is supposed to expect from the first scene missions, when the camera lingered over the dimly-lit, bloodied bodies of dozens of patients, the sounds of their coughing and muddled moans audible under an contemplative operatic vocal score. That scene of anguished Black faces, sweat- and blood-soaked backs, mutilated ears, blank-faced babies, twisted and broken limbs, offered up for the audience the viewpoint of the white Mission Priest as he walked among the fallen. Taken together, the scenes affirm Lt. Waters' early declaration, “God already left Africa.”

The major plot twist follows this tableau of carnage—a tableau whose primary effect is to refigure Africa as a non-place of inexplicable Black-on-Black violence and inscrutable “ethnic enmity” toward which the Western subject, including Black Americans, can only look on in horror and disgust. We discover that, among the party of mostly-unspeaking, occasionally-singing, often-tearful Igbo refugees/wards, there happens to be the one surviving member of the just-assassinated Presidential family, Arthur Azuka, the son of the slain President and, more importantly, the “heir to the Igbo nation,” the rightful “tribal king.” This explains the enormous

and growing army of militiamen trailing the party, and Lt. Waters immediately suspects that an informant in the group is transmitting their whereabouts to the Fulani. The potential informant attempts to flee, only to be shot and then tortured by Waters as he dies, proclaiming that he does that acted only to save his family under threat of death. The stakes of the mission now shift dramatically, as Waters and his comrades must now ensure the safety of a tribal order they do not explain and a national culture and conflict they have shown no interest in understanding. The film's culmination, then, is the unfolding of a double rescue: Waters must defy orders, again and again, to ensure that his charges, those under his protection and control, are admitted to the Cameroonian refugee camp and that the peoples' leader is delivered safely to some place beyond the reach of the Fulani Muslim militia's barbarism. He does, of course, at tremendous cost, most significantly—as we're made to feel—to his fellow SEALs.

Along the way, he must assert the humanity of Azuka against the inhumanity of those who would see him killed or abandoned: when his commanding officer refers to Azuka as a “major liability” and “excess cargo”—using language of risk and exchange that invokes both the contemporary dominance of finance capital and the histories of racial slavery and earlier conquests and civilizing missions⁶⁰—Waters responds, “You mean he's not human, sir?” The film's closing moments that will follow this exchange are the stock and trade of Hollywood war / action dramas: an endless firefight; explosion after explosion; soldiers carrying their fallen comrades or holding them as they die; and an improbable “victory” and escape to safety. But it is here, also, that *Tears of the Sun* charts new and peculiar territory. Lt. Waters, despite having defied his commanding officer repeatedly, demands and receives massive air support from Naval

60 See Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Duke University Press, 2005) and Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Macmillan, 2008).

jets. Having somehow saved most of the Igbo men, women, and children under his care against incredible odds (while losing several of his men in the process), he then limps toward the Cameroonian border and the refugee camp, blackened and bloodied by battle. He is greeted, tearfully, by Dr. Kendricks and Arthur Azuka, who run to greet him and carry him across the border. As he moves through the crowd, Patience—whose home has just been burned and whose entire community has been killed or displaced—calls out to him; he turns to her, squinting through blood, and she repeats, “Lieutenant.” And then, weeping and smiling, “I’m sorry about your men. I will never forget you. God will never forget you.” And we glimpse silent Nigerians standing in awe around her, nodding their approval. Her future and the future of her family and friends in the refugee camp is dim, but her concern is for him and for the fallen American soldiers. Waters can only utter, “take care,” as he continues toward the border. Next Patience repeats her weeping performance of recognition and affirmation, this time silently, as she exchanges glances with the maimed-but-alive Black American, Zee. The border is opened only on the orders of the American Captain, who has personally made the trip through dangerous airspace to greet his men. He pushes through the throng of faceless refugees, greets Waters, and then personally helps to carry Zee across the border in his own act of affirmation: the white commanding officer ensuring the safety of the Black soldier. After all of this Patience’s work is not done: surrounded by women and children in the camp, still weeping and still smiling, she tells Dr. Kendricks, “We love you, Lena. All of us love you.” Her weeping increases as Lena and Lt. Waters fly away. The refugees, meanwhile, sing and dance with joy as they suddenly surround their “tribal king,” who raises a fist and shouts, “Freedom!”

The function of this melodramatic denouement is to secure for white heteromascularity a

relationship to Black Americans and Africans that is nothing if not affirmative and exonerating—and in the process to figure the potential renewal of white heteromascularity's proper relationship to US state power. It is obvious that the argument for Black humanity in Waters' exchange with the Captain—the only time in the film the term “human” is uttered—is contingent and particular to both Azuka's tribal stature and his adornment with the accoutrements of Western democracy—his father, after all, was “democratically elected.” And it is a humanity that is contingent on Azuka's performance of masculinity: on the battlefield Waters tells a crying Azuka to “cowboy up” and take part in the final push. Humanity, here, is proper to white heteromascularity, and its condition requires particular conditions: it is extended to African men who are exceptional in both “tribal” and Western-bureaucratic senses; it is extended to African women partially and only insofar as they can serve as walking, weeping, smiling, and embracing affirmations of the essential blessed goodness of whiteness; and it is extended to Black Americans when and if they can become instruments of US state power—sacrificing their bodies in the process—and affirm both the value of whiteness and the wretchedness of Africa. There is an extraordinary coalescence, here, of the argument for (contingent, partial, and maldistributed) Black humanity, the argument for US military interventionism, and the argument for white heteromascularity as guarantors and bearers of both. The quaint, anachronistic forms of colonial “humanitarian intervention,” as represented by the Christian Mission, are revealed to be weak, vulnerable, and ultimately unsustainable. Only the robust and noble interventionism that takes place when heteromascularity white men take the reins of state power can renew whiteness, blackness, and US state power.

Coda

In May of 2010, it came to light that US soldiers in a Stryker infantry unit in Afghanistan had independently formed a “kill team” to target Afghan civilians “for fun.” The number of soldiers involved is still disputed, as are the number of victims, but it is clear that many of the civilians killed were mutilated—the soldiers often cutting off victims fingers and ears and removing their teeth as souvenirs—and that, as in the case of the Abu Ghraib “scandal,” the killings were well documented, with at least 4,000 known photos circulating widely among military personnel. The already-scripted narratives produced within journalistic, legal and military accounts of the killings, of course, displace or elide the sheer banality and ubiquity of civilian death in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor are these moments—and their unremarkability—sequestered to the neo-colonial theaters of US war. Their “domestic” analog are the spaces of policing, border “security” and incarceration in which racialized bodies are rendered disposable in orchestrated (non)spectacles of violence, death, recrimination and national “closure.” Aime Carrillo Rowe describes these seemingly-ruptural moments—her immediate example is the torture of Abner Louima by the NYPD—as times when “Western codes of civility so essential to the hegemony of whiteness” appear to be undone: “In such moments,” she writes, “the brutality of white hegemony leaks, and the humanitarian basis of white supremacy, on which the U.S. national body is founded, is momentarily called into question.”

The reading above, however, encourages a broader consideration of how easily the emerging common sense articulations of white anti-racism conjure and (re)produce white (heteromascuine) subjectivities in intimate proximity to racialized suffering. That is, it is worth investigating the peculiar simultaneity of, on the one hand, the ongoing proliferation of state

terror (and its modes of persistent documentation on the part of its perpetrators), and, on the other hand, the proliferation of popular imaginaries so rife with narratives of white men projected into spaces of death such that they become not simply witnesses to racialized suffering but its preeminent victims and staunchest critics. The potentially-dominant common sense articulations of white anti-racist subjectivity described actually share with spectacles of racialized violence such as the “kill team” case share a set of gestures and (visual and narrative) rhetorics, even as they work to consign such spectacles to the past or to spaces and times no longer consonant with white heteromasculine and US state power and practice. Common sense, in this project, is at once a contradictory repository of the past—of memory-images, embodied experiences, and fragmentary yet decisive affective and sensory modes of being and seeing—and an archive of possible futures or futures-as-they-push-into-and pressure the present. The anxious and anticipatory productions of white heteromasculine wholeness, Black suffering, and errant but reparable trajectories of racialized state power represented in these films encourage us to consider the possible futures that the emergence of white anti-racism augur—and how they might be undone.

CHAPTER THREE

All Your History's Ablaze: (White) Rock, Violence, Blackness

“Suddenly, all your history's ablaze / Try to sleep, but your world disintegrates”
– TV on the Radio, “Province”¹

This chapter attempts to sketch anew a series of (im)possible connections between presumptively white rock music cultures and racial blackness. My argument proceeds from a consideration of the nexus of revolutionary and homoerotic desire, revulsion and violence, imitation and authenticity through which “white rock” music cultures (imagine themselves to) operate.² Much of what follows is routed through a “conversation” between hip-hop artist, actor, and cultural worker Mos Def (now Yassin Bey) and indie folk, rock and alt-country writer and singer Gillian Welch. First, however, I ground this conversation in one of the most well-known and controversial debates over contemporary (white) indie rock music's relationship to blackness and black performance and cultural production to have emerged in the past decade, both because it provides a context for the Mos Def / Welch conversation and because it speaks to much older and deeper imaginaries that have been formative of rock's cultures of criticism and expression. The task is not to surface a universal account of white rock cultures' relationships to blackness but to think critically, from the vantage of the “US post-racial moment,” about some of the ways material histories of race, gender and sexuality are embodied, animated, coded, reworked and

1 TV on the Radio, *Return to Cookie Mountain*, Interscope Records, 2006.

2 To refer to “presumptively white rock” or “white rock,” as I do several times in what follows, is to note both the common assumption that rock music is paradigmatically white and male and heteromasculine (in spite of the presence of myriad non-white, non-male and non-heteromasculine artists and the misrepresented presence of cultural forms that can't be said to be “white”) and to assert that, particularly in the domain of mainstream and indie rock journalism and criticism, rock music is often treated as simply racially unmarked but predominantly and properly white and male. I also consistently align (indie) rock music's cultures of writing and criticism with rock music and performance itself.

lived in performance, writing and recording. Much of the chapter is focused in particular on a single song by Welch entitled “Elvis Presley Blues,” which I understand as a kaleidoscopic index of multiple, overlapping moments or flashpoints for apprehending the conditions of racialized, gendered, and sexual violence that shape rock's cultures of enunciation, writing and performance. The aim will be to open up terrain for asking new questions about particular pop cultural forms and how particular histories are materialized and mobilized in performing bodies and sounds. I argue that Welch's troubled and troubling, allusive and elusive rehearsal of many of the common origin myths of rock and the histories they at once vivify and elide offer new routes for thinking about the common senses of rock cultures as they are (re)constructed in allegedly “post-racial” conditions.

Homosocial Desire, “Miscegenation,” and the (Non)Reproductive Capacities of Rock

As Roshanak Kheshti describes, the upheaval began (again) with the 2007 publication, in *The New Yorker*, of a piece entitled “A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost its Soul” by Sasha Frere-Jones.³ Frere-Jones's core assertion, as rendered by Kheshti, goes something like this: rock music from the 1950s through the 1980s was deeply and productively “miscegenated,” meaning that blackness, understood broadly (and problematically), was everywhere audible *and* visible in the music and embodied performances of white male artists. The evolving dominance of certain forms of indie rock since about 1990, according to Frere-Jones, has rendered rock music effectively too white. This hollow whiteness can be identified, in his account, “by the lack

³ See Kheshti, “Musical Miscegenation and the Logic of Rock and Roll: Homosocial Desire and Racial Productivity in 'A Paler Shade of White,'" *American Quarterly*, Volume 60, Number 4, December 2008, pp. 1037-1055. See also Sasha Frere-Jones, “A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost Its Soul,” *New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, and John Cook, “Blacklisted: Is Stephin Merritt a Racist Because He Doesn't Like Hip-Hop?” *Slate*, May 9, 2006.

of overt references to the blues, 'African' rhythms, and the performative charisma that characterizes African American musical traditions,” the cumulative loss of which has rendered indie rock “formally limp,” in Frere-Jones's suggestive terms.⁴ And, in what we might read as a further identification of blackness not only with the body, genitalia and sexual potency but with illicit sex and potential debasement, it is white musicians' failure to “linger” in “the lower registers” of sound that signals their non-blackness. The “argument rhetorically hinges,” writes Kheshti, “on a double negative: [Frere-Jones's] reader cannot not want miscegenation in rock music even though wanting this is tied, like colonialism, to a history of sexual violence, fetishism, and appropriation. And not wanting it would presume a desire for racial and ethnic purity and, in this case, musical white supremacy.” Kheshti nevertheless finds within Frere-Jones's fraught terrain “a logic [. . .] that lays bear the building blocks of the rock music genre,” an argument I extend below.

Although not discussed by Frere-Jones, a related line of argumentation with different but comparable sexual and racial logics was developed, more than a decade earlier, by Martha Bayles, whose 1994 treatise *Hole in our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* laments the loss of “the tough, affirmative spirit of the blues [and other authentically black expressive traditions] in contemporary forms,” especially rock and hip hop, which are rife, in her account, with “antimusical, antisocial antics that would be laughable if they weren't so offensive.”⁵ Rather strikingly, Bayles' essentially conservative invective against “the anarchistic, nihilistic impulses of perverse modernism [that] have been grafted onto popular

4 Quoted in Kheshti, 1038.

5 Bayles, Martha, *Hole in our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

music” is presented as a trenchant protective gesture toward “the Afro-American tradition.”⁶ Bayles, a white critic, defends what she claims “is the best of the living Afro-American tradition,” one whose “prehistory reaches back four centuries” but whose “fullest development began at the beginning of the twentieth.”⁷ Emphasizing African-derived rhythms and “the human eroticism expressed in [. . .] the blues,” Bayles marshals certain iterations of Black cultural production against “the dehumanized obscenity that is the perpetual, infantile preoccupation of perverse modernism.”⁸ If blackness for Frere-Jones is a sound, style and substance that penetrates the best of white male artists' work and bodies (even as Black and female artists cannot seem to penetrate the imaginaries of rock criticism or rock's economies of exchange), it is, for Bayles, an at once thoroughly modern and centuries-old supplement to Euro-American modernity that, properly deployed, will revivify and recuperate the best of the “civilized values” that modernity produces.⁹

In the domain of rock music, the Rolling Stones represent for Bayles the originary perversion of black cultural forms, infusing (and polluting) their version of Chicago blues forms with the “stale perverse modernism” that the band “picked up in British art colleges.”¹⁰ That is, for Bayles, a certain purity of Black cultural expression—preserved in the earliest forms of white rock 'n' roll—is corrupted, beginning in the fateful years of the late 1960s, by insolent white upstarts and “cultural radicals.”¹¹ This is an inversion of Frere-Jones's argument *for*

6 Ibid, 12.

7 Ibid, 13.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, 166.

11 Ibid.

miscegenation as the (re)productive unsettling of presumably preexisting (and, in the case of whiteness, potentially flaccid, sterile) racial, cultural and expressive purity. It is also strangely reminiscent of white supremacist arguments *against* miscegenation as a perpetual threat to racial purity, and it is unsurprising that Bayles resorts to language that is biological and sexual, referring to white and black relations as a “blood knot.”¹² In a chapter entitled “The Obstacle of Race,” Bayles takes on the long history of white writers' and audiences' hyper-sexualizing and eroticizing of Black bodies and Black cultural forms precisely to guard a corruptible purity that black music risks in its encounter with (white) Euro-American forms. She stakes out her position by drawing a hard distinction between eroticism and obscenity: “Afro-American music is sometimes erotic, but it is never obscene, because there is always a larger whole—whether spiritual ecstasy, physical exuberance, or emotional catharsis—to which erotic qualities are joined.”¹³ Following this line of argumentation, much contemporary rock and hip hop, which, for Bayles, are contaminated by all manner of obscenity, could not or no longer be considered “Afro-American music” at all.

Robin D.G. Kelley points out that this narrative of corrupted purity often circulates in leftist discourses critical of hip hop; here it is set to work as a defense of “genuine art,” aesthetic and racial/cultural purity finding themselves coterminous and in need of protection.¹⁴ It is,

12 Ibid, 68.

13 Ibid, 72.

14 With Kelley, we might ask how, for instance, Jelly Roll Morton's 1938 recording of the standard “Make me a pallet on the Floor” fits into Bayles's obscenity/eroticism schema, including as it does lines like, “Come here you sweet bitch, give me that pussy [. . .]”; similarly, Louis Armstrong's description of “grind[ing] up in that cunt” when talking about his extramarital relationships would seem to align him with the contemporary artists Bayles effectively writes out of the black tradition. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Beacon Press, 1997) and Fred Moten, “Jazz,” *Callaloo* 25, no. 1 (2002): 94–94.

paradoxically, a purity that can only be preserved via its commodification and consumption by largely white audiences and its valuation by white critics. It is also a purity that appears through its “imprint” on a huge range of (white) cultural forms: the “country's culturally and ethnically diverse”—read, non-Black—“musics become distinctive only when they acquire the imprint, however light or heavy, of the black idiom.”¹⁵ Blackness, here, is eminently knowable: it is anti-mechanical and anti-technical if not animalistic; it nearly “eludes verbal definition”; it is sanctified but erotic; it is authentic and robust but also fragile and pliable, potentially degradable; it is available for acquisition and “imprinting,” for circulation horizontally within a field of exchange that is both economic and extra-economic. Blackness is, to use a metaphor Bayles takes from William Bell's famous (and widely appropriated) song, a well that might run dry if it is not preserved, an exhaustible substantive resource. Ultimately, then, her defense of “the Afro-American tradition”—her anti-miscegenation stance, to put it in Frere-Jones's terms—turns out to be indistinguishable from the desire to recognize and feel that pure, black “imprint” across the domain of popular culture.

Like Bayles, Frere-Jones wants the “imprint” of blackness to show up everywhere, except that his privileged site is indie rock and his version of the “imprint” is more about the transgressive, authentic, heteromale, and even revolutionary possibilities in blackness (played out in white bodies) than it is about preserving and transmitting a morally upright racial and cultural purity. In this respect, he is the inheritor of a dominant “ideology of rock criticism” that, since the late 1960s, “valorises [*sic*] serious, masculine ‘authentic’ rock and dismisses trivial, feminine ‘prefabricated’ pop music.”¹⁶ And his work is particularly revealing of the logics

15 Bayles, 17.

16 See Kembrew McLeod, “One and a Half Stars: A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America,”

at work in that common sense valorization as it is constructed between and among (mostly) white male critics and artists. It is striking that, although its initial publication touched off a wide-ranging and contentious conversation among journalists, rock writers and feminist critics, virtually no one paused over Frere-Jones's use of "miscegenation" as a governing and valued rubric for thinking about cultural and racial formations. The crux of Kheshti's labor is to interrogate this usage in "A Paler Shade of White" and in so doing to trace the "homoerotic genealogy" of the miscegenation metaphor.¹⁷ She argues persuasively that "rock music constantly reproduces itself through the origin story of miscegenation," and she elaborates what she refers to as the "queer form of reproduction"¹⁸ that rock seeks out in its modes of homoerotic attachment and in its violent "insert[ion of] female reproduction into the narrative of homosociality" (which is preserved, in part, through the exclusion of women's bodies from the commercial scenes of rock's (re)production).¹⁹

Popular Music, Volume 20.1 (2001), Cambridge University Press, pp. 47–60. McLeod elaborates, "I do not believe there is simply one uniform ideology of rock criticism, with a capital 'I', and I make no claims that every critic, or even most critics, are interpolated into this ideologically charged interpretive framework. Its hegemony is not so powerful that we can see it within the writings of all critics, but this ideology nevertheless exists, and traces of it – its discursive residue – are readily apparent in the relatively consistent types of artists who are singled out for praise by critics over the past twenty-five to thirty years." I encountered McLeod's text and the above quotation in Eric David Johnson, *Crossover narratives: intersections of race, genre and authenticity in unpopular popular music*. McLeod is building on the work of Simon Frith. See Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007).

17 Kheshti's work is part of a recent and growing body of work work in American studies and related fields that takes up popular music and sound from perspectives derived from Critical Race Theory and the study of racial formations, Ethnic Studies, queer theory, feminist theory, and performance studies. This includes work by Josh Kun, Daphne Brooks, Judith Halberstam, Gayle Wald, Adam Gussow, and other contributors to the *American Quarterly* issue on "Sounding American Studies," among many others.

18 Kheshti explains, following Eve Sedgwick's seminal work, that this form of symbolic reproduction is queer "not because the participants in these homosocial acts are identifiable as queer subjects but because the movement from hetero-to-homo reproduction hinges on the move from homosocial to homosexual on Sedgwick's continuum." See 1039-40.

19 Kheshti writes, "The gendered nature of the [miscegenation trope attaches itself to bodies that then get reassigned gender roles depending on how they are positioned vis-à-vis power and agency in rock music production, and this may or may not correspond to the biological sex of these bodies. The absence of women (save for a handful of exceptions) points to the systematic homosociality of rock music production, a carefully

Kheshti explains:

The term queer functions here not as a marker of identity but a signifier of the structure of this seemingly oxymoronic form of desire: it is a desire to reproduce blackness by white male musicians, a desire that cites the productive capacity of female reproduction through the racialized motif of miscegenation. Miscegenation, therefore, takes place between men through an idealized homosocial reproductivity that enables the proliferation of the institution of rock and roll. This form of miscegenation describes the process by which white musicians “sound black”; it is a performative miscegenation in which white bodies cite black performativity.²⁰

To reproduce blackness is to “mimetically enact racialized authenticity,” a form of imitation that, at its best, paradoxically produces utter originality. To be an “original,” for Frere-Jones, is to be a product of miscegenation.²¹ Kheshti indexes the extent to which white heteromale rock performance relies on notions of black authenticity that it both attempts to enact and surpass. The “the fundamental paradox of musical miscegenation” is that “it is a racialized and heteronormative origin story that is articulated through queer, same-sex relationality and is further consummated in the listener’s ear.”²²

Kheshti's incisive theorization encourages an interrogation of the centrality of miscegenation as a *structuring metaphor* for imag(in)ing and enacting race and racial “mixture”

policed homosociality that results in a queer scene of miscegenation between men.” See 1041.

20 Kheshti, 1041.

21 Kheshti elaborates: “His primary example is Mick Jagger, who exceeds his early attempts at mere imitation when he is able to sing 'with weird menace and charm, and with an accent that placed him in an unidentifiable neighborhood (with more than one bar) somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. Jagger’s knock-kneed dancing may have begun as an homage to Little Richard’s exuberant hamming, but he eventually devised his own style—a bewitching flexion of knees and elbows.’ The heteronormative authority of miscegenation is made most obvious in this juxtaposition: it is Richard whose excessive femininity, articulated through performative bravado, figures as the womb for Jagger’s performative seed, allowing Jagger to go all the way with him, moving past his adolescent aping of Womack. Once the mimicking of Richard developed into 'his own style,' Jagger was able to saunter through the imaginary liquor store and bar-filled Southside ghetto in Frere-Jones’s mind as a true resident, a citizen-subject even, not as some interloper in search of authentic blackness. While the heteronormative authority of miscegenation is overtly offered as an interpretation of Jagger’s and Richard’s relationship, it is undergirded by the 'fact' of Richard’s and Jagger’s biological sex as male.” See 1045.

22 Ibid.

within rock music's cultures of writing, production and performance and a broader consideration of the assumptions about and fantasies of racial, cultural and sexual (im)purity, inheritance and authenticity that govern those cultures' logics—even when *miscegenation* is unnamed, disavowed or discredited and particularly when it comes to white male artists and their relationships, spoken and unspoken, to racial blackness. To do the former requires recognizing that tropes of miscegenation have been central to white writing on US American popular music since at least the moment when the first director of the music division of the Library of Congress, Oscar G.T. Sonneck, asserted in 1916 that the only “real and pure” American music existed in the songs that the “*white* elements of the American people brought with them to these shores.”²³ Sonneck worried over “musical miscegenation,” a term he deployed, according to Khalil Anthony Johnson Jr., “to fix and stabilize the hybridity that is always present in music, recasting cultural mixture in [exclusively] racial terms.”²⁴ To undertake the latter requires that we ask what is articulated to the pervasive imaginary of homosocial reproduction that Kheshti describes, and to question whether it's possible to identify forms of connection and crossing between putatively black and white cultural forms *without* relying on tropes of miscegenation, rightful inheritance, (im)purity, and simple imitation, nor on the imagination of an even, horizontal field of exchange and influence between pre-existing racial types. (The difficulty of this task is evident in rock cultures' continual recourse to violent metaphors of mixture, the easy reproduction of blackness as open, perpetually, for others' consumption and exchange, and the tendency for now-commonplace social constructionist apprehensions of race to forget the violent, material

23 Quoted in Anthony Johnson Jr., “‘Other’ Music: Race, Music, and Assimilation in U.S. History,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (March 2011): 191-202.

24 Ibid.

imposition of racialization.) To follow these threads is to engage in the work of opening critical ground for thinking about both the historical continuities and novelties of (white) rock's relationship to blackness in the context of a US post-racial moment in which popular cultural forms, especially musical cultures, are figured as spaces of openness, cultural mixture, and exchange that exemplify dramatically the obsolescence of the material and symbolic violence of a white supremacist past. The consideration offered here contributes to a reevaluation of white and black expressive cultures, musical productions and performances as sites for apprehending the making and (potential) unmaking of “post-racial” formations of common sense.

Rethinking Rock's Soul

On his now-classic 1999 debut solo album, *Black on Both Sides*, Mos Def begins the track “Rock N Roll,” a by intoning:

My grandmama was raised on a reservation
My great-grandmama was from a plantation
They sang songs for inspiration / They sang songs for relaxation
They sang songs to take their minds up off that fucked up situation
I am / yes I am / the descendant of those folks whose backs got broke
who fell down inside the gun smoke
(Black people!)
[. . .]
I am / rock and roll (rock and roll [. . .] rock'n'roll)
BEEN HERE FOREVER
They just ain't let you know (HA)

I said, Elvis Presley ain't got no soul / Chuck Berry is rock and roll
You may dig on the Rolling Stones
But they ain't come up with that style on they own
Elvis Presley ain't got no SOULLLL

Set against “a cool, midtempo funk groove reminiscent of Sly Stone's 'Family Affair,’” “Rock N Roll” positions New World black experience, plantation slavery, indigenous expression,

and settler-colonial violence as fundamentals of rock music.²⁵ And it situates Mos Def himself within a genealogy of cultural workers and performers whose legacy is forgotten, mishandled or shunted aside within dominant (white) narrativizations of the history of rock, which put at their center figures like Elvis and the Rolling Stones, even as such figures are widely admitted to have appropriated or profitably “inherited” black music and performance.²⁶ His polemic is well-taken and furthers work by a long line of thinking by black artists, musicians and critics who've made related points about rock 'n' roll, often through the rubrics of violence and theft rather than in the celebratory vein of their white rock critic counterparts (not to mention the white artists themselves).²⁷ As a prominent example of the latter, Greil Marcus, in his seminal work of rock criticism, *Mystery Train*, paints this history as a matter of genealogical inheritance, structuring the book with Robert Johnson (who stands in for but apart from a whole range of mostly Black male performers, including Son House, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leadbelly, and Blind Willie McTell) positioned as a primary progenitor of the book's mostly-white subjects.²⁸ The

25 See Daphne Brooks, “Post-Soul Satire and Rock Memory,” in Eric Weisbard, ed., *This Is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

26 Greg Tate writes, “Readers in Black music history are often struck by the egregious turns of public relations puffery whereby Paul Whiteman got crowned the King of Swing in the 1920s, Benny Goodman anointed the King of Jazz in the 1930s, Elvis Presley popped as up the King of Rock and Roll in the 1950s, and Eric Clapton awarded the title of the world's greatest guitar player (ostensibly of the blues) in the 1960s.” See Tate, *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (Random House LLC, 2003).

27 This line of argumentation runs through the work of several of Mos Def's collaborators over the past decade, as well. For instance, Amiri Baraka performed part of a poem entitled “Why is We Americans” on the Mos Def-hosted and Russell Simmons-produced “Def Poetry Jam” on HBO. The poem includes the lines, “We want to be paid, in a central bank, the average worker farmer wage for all those years we gave it free / Plus we want damages, for all the killings, the fraud, the lynchings, the missing justice, the lies and frame-ups [. . .] / For all the music and dances you stole. The styles, the language, the hip clothes you copped, the careers you stopped. / All these are suits, specific litigation [. . .].” More recently, on the Blakroc collaboration between the white rock duo The Black Keys and a range of hip hop artists, including Mos Def, Pharoahe Monch raps, “Rock and roll, I lose control / Fuck the white ones, the black keys got so much soul.” The line is a cutting joke that at once honors The Black Keys and suggests that white rock doesn't have soul.

28 See Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock “N” Roll Music* (Penguin Group Incorporated, 2008).

genealogical metaphor is both telling and troubling, not least because the prohibition against Black familial belonging and inheritance is foundational to New World racialization. Drawing on Kheshti's work, we might point to these sorts of gestures as helping to inscribe a notion of male homosocial reproduction into rock music culture's self-narration—a form of reproduction from which issues properly “miscegenated”-but-still-white male subjects.²⁹ But Marcus shares this metaphorization, perhaps differently, with some key figures in the Chicago blues tradition—a tradition that more clearly overlaps with early rock music than do the folk or country blues lineages his book privileges. Marcus's arguments, in other words, while foundational for contemporary rock criticism, enter a field of contestation and play that was already long-
animated within Black expressive cultures. Mos Def's contribution has as one of its intertexts Muddy Waters's famous “The Blues had a Baby (And They Named it Rock and Roll).”³⁰ In Mos Def's version of this (homosocial) reproduction—in which he names black male performers who know that “Blues got soul,” including Otis Redding, James Brown, Ray Charles, and John Lee Hooker—the “story [has] never been told,” perhaps can't be told. The condition of *knowing*, therefore, is not discursively mediated; it is prior to narration, a condition *for* the knowing performance of soul.³¹ Mos Def references and plays on Waters in his assertion that rock “ain't got no soul,” positioning Redding, Brown and John Lee Hooker—whom he also names explicitly

29 This logic inverts, in a fashion, the “one-drop rule,” allowing for “mixture” that might still produce purity (equated with whiteness).

30 The track appears on Waters's classic 1977 album, *Hard Again*, two years after the publication of *Mystery Train*. The album includes re-recordings of enormously influential tracks like “Mannish Boy” and “I can't be Satisfied,” the latter of which was first recorded for Alan Lomax. Texts like *Rock and Roll: An Introduction* continue to cite Waters's birth metaphor as a suitable summary for the relationship between blues and rock forms.

31 Black expressive cultures, particularly musical cultures, might be thought of here as “archives of oppositional consciousness” that at once transmit particular pasts and make possible or audible possible futures. For discussion relevant to this figuration of “oppositional consciousness,” see George Lipsitz's writing on Black spatial imaginaries in *How Racism Takes Place* (Temple University Press, 2011).

—as those who know what Elvis can't ever know. Rock is paradigmatically Black; white performers' attempts at its “style” finds its profound limits in their inability to *know*. Mos Def furthers this line of thinking by positioning his own genealogy of matrilineal and multiracial and making rock (a rather insignificant) part of a continuum with both the blues and hip hop, one for which blackness might be called paradigmatic and foundational without being originary or neatly locatable temporally or spatially: it's before any known beginning (“been here forever”); it might be on the plantation, the reservation, or just “here.”³² Mos Def reminds us that black expressive cultures often anticipate what is later figured as theft or appropriation such that theft or appropriation might be understood as always failing to keep up with the enunciations they seek to contain, master, and transmit.

Interlude: A Glimpse of Dylan

It is July, 1963. Less than a month after Medgar Evers was shot in the back 100 miles away in Jackson, Bob Dylan stands in front of a group of civil rights activists and community members in Greenwood, Mississippi, singing a song he wrote about Evers's assassin, “Only a Pawn in their Game.” *The New York Times* reports that the “Northern folk singers,” including Dylan and trip-organizer Pete Seeger, “sang in the yard of a Negro farm home on the edge of a cotton patch”; the “song festival, or hootenanny, was sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which has been conducting a voter registration drive among Negroes

32 That Mos Def offers up black expressive cultures as matrilineal and always hybrid is significant, not least because it revises powerfully the “paternity claims” that mark not only popular and critical narratives of jazz, blues, and rock but also the cultures of exchange within the traditions themselves, as in the famous debate between Jelly Roll Morton and W.C. Handy. See Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

in Mississippi delta towns for more than a year.”³³ The enduring iconic image crystallized in that moment is that of a 22 year-old Dylan in plain, workmanlike clothes, standing in front of a Black audience who sit and stand around him on hay bales and on flatbed trucks. The iconic image's emergence is as part of an ongoing, cultural and commercial project—the folk revival—in which the immediacy of the facts on the ground—Evers's murder, the battle over voter registration, and the everydayness of racial apartheid and its modes of contestation—are in some crucial senses incidental, insofar as its participants and those who inherit it will understand themselves as part of a temporal structure and cultural legacy that at once precedes, encompasses, and outlives such parochial and local attachment. The project takes shape in the 1960s but it dates back at least to the 1920s and it will gain new life in iterations of rock music culture that would seem to at times openly contest or supersede the aims and ethic of the revival and its construction of the “folk”—and Dylan, of course, is a central figure here, since his famous “going electric” moment, which took place at the Newport Folk Festival, was seen as a rejection of the revival and its notions of authenticity, community, and purity. While it has no clear or neat origins, the revival's central text—or compendium of texts—is *The Folkways Anthology of American Music*, famously compiled by Harry Smith. Released in the early 1950s but gaining its real prominence in the early 1960s as it was embraced by the Northeast musical establishment³⁴ (including by figures like Seeger), the *Anthology* has been mythologized as a “curriculum in mystical ethnography.”³⁵ Blending rural and urban, North and South, Black and white, sacred and profane, it presents as

33 Quoted in Ian Bell, *Once Upon a Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan* (Open Road Media, 2013).

34 See Robert Cantwell, “Smith’s Memory Theater: The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music,” *New England Review* (1990-) 13, no. 3/4 (1991): 364–97.

35 Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Harvard University Press, 1996). See also Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (Macmillan, 2011).

an argument for cultural hybridity and seeks to exemplify the mixture and crossing and capaciousness of a uniquely American sound (without explicit reference to race).

Dylan, that Dylan we encounter on the edge of a cotton field, survives as icon and carrier of that tradition, even as he set out to upend it. The key feature of this image of Dylan is that it is supposed to be emblematic of a moment of nearly-unmediated connection between a white performer and the space, movement, and sound of the Black folk traditions and performances he is supposed to call up and embody.³⁶ The anti-commercial, politicized, and racialized authenticity supposed to be both bestowed upon and embodied by the white performer via this connection became, ironically, central to the dominant “ideology of rock” that would shape rock criticism and performance in the coming decades.³⁷ This image of Dylan, I'm suggesting, is of paradigmatic and continuing importance for white rock cultures' imaginaries of blackness. It encourages an investigation of how contemporary (indie) rock cultures operate through imaginaries of blackness that are not only manifest in the fetishized markers of blackness that Frere-Jones finds in the grain of the voice, in the use of “African” rhythms and “overt references to the blues,” and in certain modes of dance and movement.³⁸ That is, we should consider how

36 What I'm marking out here as essential to the folk revival's constructions of white performance's necessary relation to racial blackness cannot be separated from what Andrew Ross describes as discourses which equate “commercialized music” with “whitened music,” discourses that figure “the black performance of uncommercialized and therefore undiluted black music [as] constitut[ing] the only truly genuine form of protest or resistance against the white culture industry and its controlling interests” and therefore measure the value of white performance by its nearness to blackness. See Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1989).

37 See McLeod and Frith.

38 Another iconic image of Dylan that resonates much more immediately with the rock lineages Frere-Jones would trace surfaces just a few years after the Mississippi moment and is produced again and again in visual culture, beginning with D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* and, most recently, in the films *No Direction Home* and *I'm Not There*. This Dylan is paradigmatic for the common sense of rock criticism that equates rock expression with a kind of revolutionary authenticity, defiance, and male heterosexuality that are embodied primarily in white male performers precisely as a function of their ability to draw on, transmute, and embody an always-offstage performance of blackness. I'm suggesting that this “dominant ideology of rock” imbibes both

the modes of (re)production Kheshti describes are bound up with other imaginaries of racialized authenticity, sexuality, defiance, and violence through which rock cultures operate under allegedly “post-racial” conditions.³⁹

Toward the Harlem Queen

Gillian Welch's third full-length studio album, *Time (the Revelator)*, was produced with her long-time collaborator David Rawlins and released two years after *Black on Both Sides*. Dylan's own movement toward commercialized rock might be read against a song on the album entitled “I Want to Sing that Rock and Roll.”⁴⁰ In it, the speaker professes her desire for rock music as a kind of baptismal longing, a sense that to “lectrify [one's] soul” is not quite distinguishable from “shak[ing] [the] savior's hand.” It is to allow oneself to be immersed not in the musical or modern Time referenced in the album's title, exactly, but in sonic (im)materiality so “big and loud” that it's always “drowning [even the singer herself] out.” In the context of the song and the album as a whole, the speaker's desire to play rock music is left mostly as a potentiality: *Time, the Revelator* includes sparse, simple instrumentation,

images of Dylan and continues to circulate in rock's most prominent modes of writing and performance.

39 I have in mind here most prominently contemporary iterations of indie rock and “Americana” for which racialized labor, slavery, and fantasies of blackness and racial substitution are central, including indie darlings the Fleet Foxes fantasizing about working in orchards and being a “slave to an age old trade” or the Two Gallants recording “Long Summer Day” (a reworking of a song recorded by Alan Lomax sung by Moses “Clear Water” Platt) in which the singer describes the hardships of being a “nigger” under debt peonage. Seattle musician Grant Olsen has contributed a great deal to my understand of these strands of indie rock and related traditions.

40 The album's title plays on the classic gospel and blues song, “John the Revelator, most famously recorded on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* by Blind Willie Johnson and then by the blues singer Son House, whose influence on rock music is ubiquitous. “John the Revelator” was also one an “ever-growing storehouse of songs, lyrics, tunes, and sermonic lines passed back and forth among musicians and recording preachers and songsters” who, “ignoring race lines,” mixed sacred and profane to record and perform during the interwar period and other decades of Jim Crow. See Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (UNC Press Books, 2005).

incorporating Welch's singing only with guitar and banjo. Yet, in terms of lyrical content and its densely referential unearthing of the musical and historical touchstones of rock cultures, the album might be said to work through precisely the genealogy and ideology of rock this image of Dylan marks (in its relation to that described by Khesthi), and to unearth the violences that undergird their relationships to blackness.

The album as a whole is a quietly apocalyptic one that approaches modern temporality as anything but linear and knowable, especially in “Ruinination Day, Part II,” in which okies suffer the “black blizzards” of sand that caused mass destruction on Black Sunday in 1935 *before* the moment when “The Great Emancipator took a bullet in the head.” The speaker/singer hastens to repeat herself in order to finish the first lines, stretching out the image—“In the he-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e / took a bullet in the back of the head”—in such a way that its impossible to know if she is mourning or mocking. The ambiguity and the possible discontinuity between the lyrics and their enunciation, or between words on the page and their sonic life, continues in the next verse:

It was not December and it was not in May
Was the 14th of April, that is ruination day
That's the da-a-a-a-a-ay
The day that is ruination day

Is the speaker echoing Frederick Douglass condemnation of “the red hand of violence” that took Lincoln “without warning” and, with Douglass, ensuring that his “memory [would] be precious forever,” or is she skewering attempts to fix a single Day when the promise of the Atlantic revolutions and the project of US modernity somehow failed or headed on another course? The potential or, perhaps, prior confusion-turned-anxious-certainty over the Day—“It was not in December and it was not in May”—and the subsequent attempt to fix it as the day of the assassination, April 14th, are suggestive. The song invites its listeners to ask whether Ruination

Day is not one but every day in US modernity, not least because those travelers on the Titanic, who went to their graves on April 14th, sailed on the same seas as others before them:

They were one
they were two
they were three they were four
They were five hundred miles from their home
From their ho-o-o-o-o-ome
They were five hundred miles from their home.

Read through the genealogy of Titanic songs referenced here and in light of the disruptive temporality and historical remixing the song opens, it becomes possible to see that the other conscripts of racial capitalist modernity in the song, those that went below decks, in the hold, or below that, in the bottomless ocean (where “God moves under water”), are the slaves that Welch's song can reference but not name. That is, the great modernizing promise of the Titanic and its epic demise, and the great liberatory promise said to be embodied by the “Great Emancipator,” are always already unfixed or disrupted by the shadow of those who can't be counted (“They were one / They were two”) as modern subjects (only as property, marks in the ledgers) or located (as possessors of themselves and a home that they might then be some measurable distance from) within the historical matrix of modernity—even as they are the ones that a range of thinkers from CLR James to Dubois to Paul Gilroy to David Scott have argued are paradigmatically modern.⁴¹

“Ruinaton Day, Part Two” follows other Titanic-themed songs performed by black gospel and blues singers in the early twentieth-century, perhaps most prominently “God Moves on the Water” as recorded by Blind Willie Johnson, a choral version of which was printed in *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads*, compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax in

41 See Aldon Lynn Nielson, “The Future of an Allusion: The Color of Modernity,” in Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, 2005.

1949.⁴² “God moves under water,” in Welch's version, thus cites the history of racial slavery and the white folklorist recording of and attempts to contain, as national project, black expressive cultures. (This juxtaposition and intermingling of the historical conditions of violence that structure expressive cultures and the complicated violations that attend white folklorists and musicians' relations to black expressive cultures in particular will return again and again on Welch's album in “Elvis Presley Blues.”) And it points to the complicated crossings between secular and religious traditions within black music: the most famous of the secular versions is probably that recorded by Leadbelly, in which the singer happily watches the Titanic's sinking after acknowledging that the boxer Jack Johnson was denied passage (“Jackson Johnson wanted to get on board / Captain he said I ain't haulin' no coal / Fare thee well, Titanic, fare thee well”).⁴³ “Ruination Day, Part II,” in this reading, positions the persistent imposition of racial difference and racial violence as constitutive of modern categories of freedom, property, and mobility and racial slavery as modernity's unnamed or un-narratable condition of possibility that confounds attempts at periodization—say, before or after what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the “nonevent of emancipation.”⁴⁴

I want to suggest, by way of another of the album's tracks, one that offers a different but not quite perpendicular set of tracks to follow than those on which Mos Def works and travels, that we read Welch's album as a potential site of excavation and elaboration for examining white rock's relationships to racial blackness from the vantage of the post-racial moment—

42 See John Avery Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads* (Courier Dover Publications, 1941). See also Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace*.

43 See *Negro Folk Music U.S.A.* (Courier Dover Publications, 1963).

44 See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

relationships that reveal both the reliance on and displacing of histories of racial violence in formations of “post-racial” common sense as they are explored in this project. “Elvis Presley Blues” is situated here as an attempt to name the unnamed (and possibly un-narratable) desires and conditions of violence foundational to (what we take to be) white rock 'n' roll, articulated here as a multivalent *reaching out for blackness*. The song, like much of Welch's indie folk and rock (sometimes in the mold of Dylan's early performances referenced above), might be said, musically, to eschew a particular and familiar trend of “sonically and visually blacking up.”⁴⁵ Instead, it references black musical traditions in more subtle ways and it offers, lyrically, a rich and dense condensation of the different and complex modes of *reaching out* that I understand as central to rock music's cultures of criticism and performance. The theorization offered here aligns Kheshti's argument about the homosocial desires foundational to white rock's reproduction with other commonly circulated conceptions of racial exchange, crossing and mixture that animate rock music's imaginaries—both those that emerge in conventional narratives of rock's origins and meanings and in recording and performance—as they at once evince and elide material histories of racial, sexual and gendered violence. It is rock's very attachment to these histories, the way in which the movement-in-sound of rock performers' bodies and the sound-in-movement of their voices transmits and transmutes those histories, desires them and forgets them, that makes inevitable the failure of its attempts at revolutionary authenticity, the transgression of sexual and racial boundaries, and what I name, via Welch, as a kind of black,

45 Kandia Crazy Horse uses this phrase to name the popular trend among white female singers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries of taking up, more or less explicitly, modes of racial mimicry, “reaping [in the process] the rewards [. . .] from the West's most vital industry: the consumption and export of essential blackness [. . .] enjoying everything but the burden.” Crazy Horse, qtd in Daphne A. Brooks, “‘This Voice Which Is Not One’: Amy Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic Blue (s) Face Culture,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 1 (2010): 37–60.

queer performance underneath rock's reaching out for blackness.

“Elvis Presley Blues” is at turns romantic and haunting, simple and devastatingly complex. Like “I Want to Sing that Rock and Roll,” it begins with a question of temporality, in a line that will be repeated seven more times throughout the song:

I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died
I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died

Just a country boy that combed his hair
Put on a shirt his mother made and he went on the air
And he shook it like a chorus girl
And he shook it like a Harlem queen
He shook it like a midnight Rambler, baby
Like you never seen, never seen, never seen

I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died
I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died

That he took it all out of black and white
Grabbed his wand in the other hand and he held on tight
And he shook it like a hurricane
He shook it like to make it break
And he shook it like a holy roller, baby
With his soul at stake, with his soul at stake, soul at stake

I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died
I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died

He was all alone in a long decline
Thinking how lucky John Henry was that he fell down and died
When he shook it and it rang like silver
He shook it and he shined like gold
He shook it and he beat that steam drill, baby
Well bless my soul, well bless my soul

He shook it and he beat that steam drill, baby
Well bless my soul, what's wrong with me?

I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died
I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died

Just a country boy that combed his hair
Put on a shirt his mother made and he went on the air
And he shook it like a chorus girl
He shook it like a Harlem Queen
He shook it like a midnight Rambler, baby
Like he never seen, never seen, like he never seen, never seen⁴⁶

The speaker's meditation on what it would take to *think* Elvis is figured as a matter of her relation to her own thinking, to the time of her thinking and its remove from the present enunciation, and to the day that he died, all of which are placed at a remove from his living, performing body as a material presence. That is, the speaker and her listeners must cover some distance to get to that foundational moment in which Elvis, "just a country boy," adorns himself with a "shirt his mother made" and goes "on the air," into the whirlwind. And this straining to think (or to know and grasp) Elvis shifts throughout the song, as the speaker attempts to conjure or materialize his body with each verse, from which emerge new readings of Elvis and his "blues."⁴⁷ It is confounding, overwritten and overwrought territory: Elvis is such an impossibly large figure that attempting to rethink the meaning of his early performances, his controversial appropriation and transmission of extant, predominantly-black cultural forms, and his significance for the racial, gendered, and sexual logics of contemporary rock music is to enter

46 Gillian Welch, *Time (The Revelator)* (Acony Records, 2001).

47 In this sense Welch might be read as productively undoing the standard approach to rock music in which the white, heteromale body is always figured as an a-priori presence from which particular notes, styles, sounds and histories emanate or are transmitted.

waters that appear at once perpetually troubled and long ago settled.⁴⁸ Indeed, as Greil Marcus's early writing (cited above) indicates, gestures such as pointing up forms of cross-racial appropriation and mixture, the productive ambiguity of gendered performance and the complex sexualities and subjectivities that intermingle in rock cultures have been commonplace for rock critics and performers themselves for nearly as long as rock is said to have existed. What interests me here is what the song's particular mode of embrace of Elvis offers in terms of thinking white rock cultures' relations to blackness. "Elvis Presley Blues" proposes a series of figures through which we might approach this set of relations—figures which I will suggest we understand as continuing to structure the very ground on which white heteromale and male indie rock music (the very music Frere-Jones decries for its lack of blackness) emerges and lives. While many of the figures seem to recapitulate common tropes about Elvis and the origins of rock, I propose that reading them layered through and alongside one another, in their allusive gaps and discontinuities, makes possible an inquiry beyond the imaginaries exemplified by Frere-Jones and elucidated by Kheshti. In understanding the particular modes of *reaching out for blackness* that Welch's song affixes to the movement of Elvis's hips, the garments on his back, and the timbre of his voice as the conditions of possibility and ongoing elaboration of rock cultures—their various but interconnected modes of production, performance, reception and publicity—this chapter describes in new ways the obstacles to and possibilities for what Fred

48 As Daphne Brooks has recently summarized, "Much maligned by some and (sometimes secretly) adored by others, the phenomenon of "the blue-eyed soul man" refuses to die in pop culture. From Elvis to Justin Timberlake, Norman Mailer's (1957) "white Negro" lives on in the cultural imaginary as a provocative musical conundrum, a mythical social transgressor, a flagrant "racial imposter" and a "cultural interloper" (Neal 2008) whose performative credentials are perpetually called into question by racial authenticity critics." See Brooks, "'This Voice Which Is Not One': Amy Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic Blue (s) Face Culture." See also Mark Anthony Neal, "White Chocolate Soul: Teena Marie and Lewis Taylor," *Popular Music – Cambridge* 24, no. 3 (2005): 369; and Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (City Lights Books San Francisco, CA, 1957).

Moten terms cultural production on “the other side of impossible imitation and sheer thievery.”⁴⁹

A Country Boy

In the song's first verse, the singer suggests that Elvis is “just a country boy.” He is the figure who inhabits Elvis's body before he goes on the air, before “he shook it like” each of the figures the song will go on to name—before, in other words, he begins to inhabit a mode of transgressive, public heteromasculine performance that will revolutionize US American popular music and will be understood to give a kind of proper and commercial life to rock music (as distinct from predominately Black rhythm and blues and predominately white country).⁵⁰ It is ground, thematically and musically, that the song will retread, the simple chord structure remaining the same for each verse. As a figure or type, the “country boy” is supposed to be naïve, rural and untroubled in his sexuality and racial identity. Yet he is (or becomes) that “white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel”⁵¹ for whom Sun Records founder Sam Phillips famously said he was looking when Elvis walked into the studio, the one whose initial recording for the label was of black blues musician Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup's “It's All Right”⁵² before his disruptive, controversial appearances on television would cement his fame for a national public. If being a “country boy” and wearing “a shirt his mother made” would seem to

49 Fred Moten, *B Jenkins* (Duke University Press, 2009).

50 I use “rock music” and “rock” in this piece as broad categories that encompass what are, of course, enormously diverse forms and genres. The period that Elvis helps to inaugurate, for instance, is understood to be the brief period of the dominance of rockabilly. But, both because I'm interested in what Elvis takes from gospel and blues and because I want to think across historical moments, as I think Welch's late-1990s recording asks of us, I've chosen to bracket a conversation about those differences here.

51 Quoted in Nick Bromell, “The Blues and the Veil”: The Cultural Work of Musical Form in Blues and '60s Rock,” *American Music* 18, No. 2 (Summer, 2000): 193-221.

52 Depending on the imprint and recording in question, the song is variously “That's All Right Mama,” or “That's Alright Mama” or just “That's All Right.”

mark Elvis as white, simple and knowable in this context, we should note that by the time he “went on the air,” he had been a city boy, living in Memphis, for years and his movement, sound and style—including his shirt—came from his time on Beale Street, the center of black social life in Memphis. This seemingly simple, introductory moment of “Elvis Presley Blues” thus opens a door to a complex of racial and sexual histories and social forces that will be difficult to close.

For his two initial performances on television—first on the Dorsey Brothers Stage Show then for his first national audience and his incendiary performance of “Hound Dog” on the Milton Berle Show in June of 1956—Elvis wore a black shirt from Lansky Brothers, the shop on Beale Street frequented by black artists like B.B. King and Count Basie. From this vantage, the conventional narrative of Elvis as the untroubled country boy white male performer who is about to produce something utterly new out of an alleged mingling of his own white heteromale body and sound (and his background in country music) with black forms like gospel and rhythm and blues is exploded. That distant Elvis that the singer of “Elvis Presley Blues” and her audience are trying to grasp is elusive, difficult to stabilize. This initial factual incongruity in Welch's song presents the notion of a white purity or wholeness prior to an encounter with blackness as already a fiction, a productive fiction that is a kind of *garment* in itself with which rockers' commentators clothe performers and thereby try to fix race, gender and sexuality as known, stable and antecedent to their disruptions or mixtures.⁵³ On the other hand, it is blackness that he “put on” (over the garment that is his presumably pure whiteness) in the black shirt from Beale Street, in the threatening movement of his hips, and in the grain of his voice taken from

53 My friend Rizvana Bradley, now an Assistant Professor at Emory University, encouraged me to think about garments and ornamentation, worn, imagined, and performed, as thickly linked to and sometimes productive of racialized embodiment and skin.

blues and gospel singers.⁵⁴ Blackness, in this iteration, is also a garment, an ornamentation that white performers seek out and wear but that is always ill-fitting, insofar as white performers' attempts to steal, to wear, and even to celebrate what they take to be blackness is productively (mis)understood by those performers as a transmittable essence or substance that can only be experienced through its manifestation as surface effects or symptoms—embodied movement and dance, sub-linguistic sounds, growls, melismatic phrasing, sexual or even animalistic gesture—the proper, (in)exact performance of which will bespeak an authenticity that transmutes the performer's own racial identity.⁵⁵ This is the beginning—in this theorization—of the promise and threat of white rock's reaching out for blackness.⁵⁶

The “shirt his mother made” but did not make at all furthers this thinking by pointing us in multiple directions in once. The garment that is here figured as blackness—black cloth, black style, black movement and black sound—emerges when race is figured *anxiously* as biological and essential, at the moment of Jim Crow's potential undoing—it is nine days after Brown vs. Board of Education is handed down that Elvis receives a call from Sun Records. The shirt, in Welch's suggestive misreading, is masquerading as what is passed by way of the biological, the matrilineal (from Elvis's white mother). White male rock performers are widely treated as the

54 When Elvis begins his appearance on the Louisiana Hayride Radio show in 1954, the host asks him where how he “arrived at that style, [. . .] that rhythm and blues style.” Elvis responds with a suggestive lie, “Well, to be honest with you, we just stumbled upon it.”

55 In a different register, Fred Moten refers to blackness as a garment in “Black Kant (Pronounced Chant): A Theorizing Lecture at the Kelly Writers House, February 27, 2007,” accessed April 30, 2014, <<http://curate.tumblr.com/post/456804060/black-kant-pronounced-chant-a-theorizing-lecture-at>>.

56 This is a racist (il)logic that plays out in a *Pitchfork* review of Welch's album in which Welch's authentic relationship to traditional musical forms and cultures can be worn as a “mark” even though she is not said to be properly from those traditions whereas the rapper Ice T is figured as initially inauthentic in his relation to hip hop culture only for it to turn how that he has “gangsta” in his “goddamn blood”—so much so that can “mine for black ass gold.” See “Gillian Welch: Time (The Revelator),” *Pitchfork*, accessed April 30, 2014, <<http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/8620-time-the-revelator>>.

inheritors and admirers of black male heteromasculine music and performance traditions—as in Muddy Waters's and Greil Marcus's early inscriptions and in the proclamations of every rock performer from Mick Jagger to The Black Keys—yet here it is Elvis's white mother, the one for whom he records his first record as a gift, that seems to stand in both for black bluesmen and for another, unnamable matriarchal figure, the black female blues singer.⁵⁷

The Black female blues singer so often disappeared from the origin story of rock told within the dominant strains of rock criticism is here also another, specific “mama”: Big Mama Thornton, from whom Elvis takes the song he performs for his first national audience on the Milton Berle Show, “Hound Dog.”⁵⁸ This Elvis has another “mother,” in other words, the one who made the sound and movement and style he is attempting, a bass-voiced black queer blues performer known for cross-dressing, the woman whose own version of “Hound Dog”—replete with growls, moans, and howls—topped the R&B charts in 1953 but for which she only received \$500. J. Halberstam has proposed that we understand Thornton not “as an under-appreciated blues singer who simply never got her due, as is common,” but instead “as part of a sexual, gendered and racialized history that must necessarily be forgotten in order for white male culture [. . .]” to thrive and reproduce itself.⁵⁹ Her status as a “mama” is both enforced—in that it was one of the marketing tactics used to feminize her and cover over her queer and lesbian masculinity and her defiant performativity—and denied—in its erasure in embodied sound and

57 The work of Angela Y. Davis is crucial here. See Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (Random House LLC, 1999).

58 Not insignificantly, it is the sexual transgressiveness of this performance that will prompt outcry, including in the popular press and in letters between concerned citizens and J. Edgar Hoover which will end up in Elvis's extensive FBI file.

59 See Halberstam, “Queer Voices and Musical Genders” in Freya Jarman-Ivens, ed., *Oh Boy!: Masculinities and Popular Music* (Routledge, 2007).

performance of white male rock. The violence of this moment is captured in the lie of the “country boy” and the perhaps more profound lie of a white matriarchal trace in Elvis's black garments.

I will return, via another figure evoked in “Elvis Presley Blues,” to white rock's both obvious and surreptitious reaching out for a black queer performance, but, for now, we might extend this reading further by turning to Kathryn Bond Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer.”* She, too, is interested in the relation between violence and adornment, skin and cloth.⁶⁰ If Elvis here is complicit in the violent erasure of a black, queer “mama,” the threat to normativity she embodies, and a range of other racialized, sexual and gendered histories, we also find that his attempts at blackness are themselves queer or queered. Stockton points to a certain “bourgeois, middlebrow preference for plainstyle” “among [heterosexual] Euro-American men, of largely white and nonethnic cultures” that spans, with remarkable continuity, at least the last century.⁶¹ In this sense, Elvis's much-touted preference for black and pink, his insistence on flamboyant style (such as the gold lame jacket he wore on another of his early TV performances, also from Beale Street), is decidedly queer. At the same time, Stockton pushes us, in her reading of Jean Genet, to think about the “devotion to fabric” as a form of “elegant, self-embracing shame” both because “it resembles women's vanity” and “because it points toward other men's arms.”⁶² Thus, we return again to homosocial and homoerotic desire as foundational to rock, but here it is not simply what reproduces rock (and the

60 See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Duke University Press, 2006).

61 Ibid, 41.

62 Ibid, 58.

white masculine male rock performer) but also what threatens the performer with debasement. Cloth and skin here are twinned as “each is a surface—with intense, complex, and variable codings attached to it—that may be the object of prejudice, violence, attraction, and invective.”⁶³ In this sense, Thornton's famous comment that Elvis “makes a million and all this jive because his face is different from mine”⁶⁴ might be read as a commentary on the skin as what is worn and sold, the layered cloth or bundle of surfaces that becomes monetarily decisive within a thoroughly racialized social formation—one in which property and social relations are built on the reduction of the black female slave's body to flesh.⁶⁵

Stockton also marks the perhaps obvious but also complex divergence of cloth and skin in terms of their perceived degrees of permanence. Popular music cultures, though, as my reading above suggests, are sites in which the presumed permanence of skin adheres differently to differently raced subjects. In this sense, Welch's reading of the simultaneous ephemerality and permanence of racial markings as foundational to rock cultures is profoundly relevant to the “post-racial” US and the purported declension of essentialist and biological notions of racial difference that mark the common senses of the post-racial moment. On the one hand, this reading suggests that rock cultures treat race as a preexisting, ontological or biological difference (which may then be subject, in practice, to all manner of mixture and exchange); on the other hand, race appears for us as a form of malleable ornamentation or adornment or clothing that has no underneath or substrate—that is, it doesn't cover over or cloth something else, some essential

63 Ibid, 40.

64 See Halberstam, “Queer Voices and Musical Genders,” 185.

65 See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2009.

substance. This is an enabling modality of white performance and a reason for its perpetual failure on its own terms, one of the reasons it shores up precisely the categories it would seem to transgress or threaten.

Holy Rollers and “Racial Interchange” under and after Jim Crow

The speaker/singer's assertion that Elvis “shook it like a holy roller,” works, as in “I Wanna Play that Rock N Roll,” to place rock performance in the domain of religious experience and baptismal fire. A “holy roller” is one whose spiritual devotion cannot be separated from embodied fervor, the frenzied and sometimes violent possession one experiences, sensually, as the Spirit does its work. To be a holy roller is to be firmly in one's body and at once to be “beside oneself,” to be without the capacity for self-control, possession, and proper comportment. The “holy roller” thus dangerously intermingles the sacred and the profane, the sensual and the ecclesiastical, the precision of the ritualistic with the spilling over of the ecstatic or un-contained. Unlike religious traditions which would propose an absolute distinction between the soul and the body, the body is here the very manifestation of the Soul in its spiritual labor.⁶⁶ To begin to open the racial, sexual and gender logics at work here, we might say that to shake it like a “holy roller” allows, in the first instance, the white rock performer to play at, to embody, a form of dispossession which is assigned to black bodies.

The full richness of the holy roller reference emerges in relation to the importance of religious communities as oppositional sites during US racial apartheid and to early debates on the

66 On the imaginary of and relation between body and soul, see Eva Cherniavsky, “Body,” in Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (NYU Press, 2007). See also Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), especially xv-xviii.

relation between white and black expressive forms in folk and religious musical traditions. The religious meetings and revivals in which holy rollers were moved by the Spirit were typically scenes of musical performance and collectivities driven and cohered by shared devotional practice.⁶⁷ As Paul Harvey has shown, Southern Pentecostalism in particular was central in producing integrated spaces that “revived notions of spirit possession embraced in southern folk belief.”⁶⁸ Growing out of the nineteenth-century Holiness movement, twentieth-century Pentecostalism found its home in the Jim Crow South amongst black and white practitioners who “embraced a democratic religious community that impelled close bonds, a strict moral code forbidding worldly pleasure, and hypnotic worship practices and music that induced receptivity of bodies to the Spirit.”⁶⁹ The (at least initially) integrated communities represented the combination of the “pessimistic theology common to white southern belief” and “the sanctified faith in the working of the Spirit” that “closely paralleled historic African American practice,” according to Harvey.⁷⁰ They also retained and incorporated ring shouts, trances, visions and a connection to “the world of spirits invoked by conjurers and narrated in popular tales.”⁷¹ In other words, Pentecostalism and its musical collectivities relied on material cultural practices rooted in black southern history from slavery forward rather than simply drawing black worshippers into

67 See Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (UNC Press Books, 2005). Harvey argues that the multi- and cross-racial “mixture” of these collective spaces, the “steamy revival tent[s],” “played a significant role in the [relatively] rapid disintegration of racial hierarchies” that attended the demise of Jim Crow. In doing so, he risks failing to consider the continuities that persist through Jim Crow's end and exceptionalizing the South in a way that obscures the racial determinations that mark life and labor throughout the social formation during and after racial apartheid.

68 Ibid, 126.

69 Ibid, 127.

70 Ibid, 126.

71 Ibid, 123.

an otherwise white religious tradition. They were also sites for resistance to the embourgeoisement of institutional religion on the part of working class whites and blacks.

Harvey points to the “enormous influence” on “twentieth century popular and cultural expression” in these social spaces of “racial interchange” as evidenced by such figures as Al Green, Little Richard, Sam Phillips, and Elvis Presley, all of whom took part in Pentecostal meetings early in life.⁷² Welch's complex reference indexes this history but also fundamentally questions the hierarchies and violences smuggled into its presence in rock cultures. Harvey himself writes, “White secular [. . .] performers learned from—some might suggest they stole—doo-wop [. . .], religious holy-roller dancing, and the melismatic singing that coursed through African American church music.”⁷³ Earlier in his study Harvey cites the example of a white practitioner in the early twentieth century who described a conversion experience rooted in “[doing] what most other white boys did on the weekend”: attending “rural black churches 'to see the holy rollers shake and chant” and to experience the “magic of hypnotic stimulation.”⁷⁴ The practitioner later describes how he moved from spectator to participant in “moaning and crying out the 'praise de Lawd' accents of the panting sermons.”⁷⁵ The possibilities and unevenness of

72 See Harvey, 110, 126, and 133. One of the key innovations of Pentecostalism was its revival of speaking in tongues as a sign of the Spirit. This practice beneath common speech was seen as problematic to the more strict evangelical traditions and established churches from which Pentecostalism would separate. It is this form of sub- or extra-linguistic communication, this “nonsense” or babble or moan that many thinkers, including Cornel West, Angela Y. Davis, Lindon Barrett, and Fred Moten, have connected to Black New World experience and expression. In this sense, Pentecostalism trafficked in expressive cultures that were seen as irreverent and threatening by more orthodox traditions—cultures that Pentecostalism saw as the precise marker of having put one's soul as stake and been cleansed of all sin. It could be argued that rock and roll and other musical traditions of the second half of the 20th century imbibe and invoke precisely this other kind of sonic materiality and sub- or extra-linguistic expression.

73 Ibid, 167.

74 Quoted in Harvey, 114.

75 Ibid.

this arena of exchange and influence, appropriation and imitation, is one explored in the few minutes of “Elvis Presley Blues” in ways that book-length studies like Harvey’s struggle to achieve.

Along these lines, we might also point out that, during the very decades Harvey takes up as the core of his inquiry, early sociologists, folklorists and ethnomusicologists turned to cultural sites like those in which “holy rollers” gathered to argue for the *distinctively white* origins of Black musical traditions. Scholars in the first half of the twentieth century took these scenes as privileged sites for demonstrating the purported white influence and genius behind Black folk musical forms during a period in which folklorists and ethnographers like the Lomax brothers were increasingly recording black cultural workers and incorporating (if also subordinating) them into a developing national canon. These works include texts like *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933), *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island* (1930) and *American Negro Folksongs* (1928).⁷⁶ That is, these scenes of racial mixture provided empirical evidence for these early social scientists of what they assumed must be white inventiveness and [origins] originary genius. More prominently, Cecil Sharp, the figure “who towered over the first generation of American folklorists, explicitly declared that the greatness of the American folk tradition was racial,” believing that (white) “racial inheritance determined a culture’s value.”⁷⁷ Like many

76 Guy B. Johnson’s 1935 review of *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* is emblematic. Citing his own *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island* (1930) and Newman I. White’s *American Negro Folksongs*, Johnson affirms Jackson’s assertions about the white origins of Black songs: “a goodly number of [Negro spiritual tunes] are actually borrowed in toto from the white tunes.” He goes on to claim that Jackson’s work is so “richly documented with examples of Negro borrowing that he can be said to have removed all doubt as to the indebtedness of Negro religious music to white music.” See Johnson, *Social Forces*, 14.1 (Oct. 1935), pp. 157-58.

77 See William G. Roy, “Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music,” *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Fall 2002. Roy describes the first wave of folklorists and folk revivalists for whom race is the defining attribute of and axis for division of the folk. Roy’s account narrates the second wave of folk revivalists, including figures like Charles Seeger, emerging in the 1930s to claim both black and white “folk” for leftist movements.

later rock critics who would invert their arguments, these scholars and early folk revivalists preserved notions of preexisting cultural and racial purity; the rock critics simply value the subsequent “mixture” of these purities—or argued that it was in fact already extant—where their predecessors were often at pains to guard against it.

My point here, in part, is that the emphasis on spaces and practices of racial “mixture” or “interchange” (in Harvey's terms) or “miscegenation” (in the words of Frere-Jones's and earlier touchstone figures in rock criticism like Greil Marcus and Lester Bangs), the positive valuation of which has become normative in post-apartheid and post-racial popular and scholarly discourse, including within rock music cultures, is curious, for at least the following reasons. First, it tends to conflate the substantive and redistributive material aims of the Long Civil Rights Era (from roughly the end of Reconstruction through “the second Reconstruction”)⁷⁸ with formal and social desegregation of public space. That is, it risks replacing the transformative and revolutionary attempts at restructuring the basic architecture of racial capitalism and liberal democracy with a staging of integrated public space as not a lower-order effect of those attempts but their primary focus. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore and others have often said, mid-century and earlier Black social movement was *not* about black people getting to hang out with white people. Second, it selectively forgets the history of such “mixture” that predates Jim Crow segregation. Remember, for instance, that C. Vann Woodward's classic account of Jim Crow cites approvingly C. Wade's work on “racial mixing” in Southern cities under slavery. According to Wade, in the peculiar conditions of early capitalist slave metropolises in the South—including but not exclusively New Orleans—“there thrived 'a world of greater conviviality and equality'” than

78 See Marable Manning, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America*, 3rd Ed. (University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

would come to be in the postbellum decades.⁷⁹ “Under cover of night,” writes Woodward before continuing to quote Wade, “in this nether world blacks and whites mingled freely, [and] the conventions of slavery were discarded.”⁸⁰ He adds, “[. . .] the women of both races joined in.” I don't mean to celebrate this vision of metropolitan conviviality under slavery posited by Wade and Woodward, but I suggest we consider that forms of “mixture”—even those which explicitly move against the conventions of their times—might do little to undermine the worlds of constraint which are their conditions of possibility. Relatedly, if crossings, mixture, and interracial relations are not inherently transgressive or progressive in their effects, they are seldom so in their interpretation absent a conjoining analysis of the articulations between (and inseparability of) racial and political economies. Fourth, the ubiquity of the positive discursive valuation of “mixture” within the post-apartheid, “post-racial” US appears deeply anxious in the face of the hyper-resegregation and heightened material inequality that has attended the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the differential dismantling of the Military Keynesian state form. As George Lipsitz has powerfully argued, the “possessive investment in whiteness” and the differing white and black spatial imaginaries that continue to govern and mediate access to housing, (inheritable) wealth, education, (over)policing, employment, healthcare and other indices of basic life chances in the twenty-first century US involve intense spatial stratification along racial lines—stratification rooted in racial apartheid and redrawn and exacerbated in the context of contemporary financial crisis.⁸¹ Finally, as Jared Sexton has demonstrated at length,

79 Quoted in C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 15. Woodward's reference is to Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860: The South 1820-1860* (Oxford University Press, 1967). See also W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Harvard University Press, 1998), especially the chapter entitled “Finding Jim Crow.”

80 Woodward, 15.

81 See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity*

the logics of “mixture” in the US context are routed necessarily through the rubric of “miscegenation,” which always appears as an event antecedent to racialization but which in fact always precedes it as the condition of possibility of the alleged purity concept anti-miscegenationists would defend.⁸² In sum, the popular and scholarly impulses toward celebrating black-white racial mixture, crossing and integration—which the present project cannot be said to avoid—are cited and contested in Welch's reference to the holy roller and the variously raced, gendered and sexualized figures to which he is articulated.

(Un)containable Female Sexuality and the Costume of Raced Skin

At another glance, from a different vantage, the Elvis of “Elvis Presley Blues” shakes it like a “chorus girl,” a figure which builds on and works somewhat aslant of the “holy roller” and “country boy” references. The “chorus girl” undercuts (or supplants) the space of white male mastery—central to rock and roll—with an image of white femininity and performance that is nevertheless ordered, choreographed, commodified and highly sexualized. In the early 20th Century US, the chorus girl emerged as a condensation of the gendered demands, promises and violent strictures of a burgeoning urban and industrial racial capitalism. “In her varied manifestations,” writes Linda Mizejewski, “the chorus girl played to a vast cultural imagination and to that imagination's confusion and illusions about female sexuality and about women as

Politics, Revised and Expanded Edition (Temple University Press, 2009) and *How Racism Takes Place* (Temple University Press, 2011).

⁸² In Sexton's account, moreover, the discourses and movements which most prominently celebrate miscegenation as an exemplary and progressive modality of racial mixture—namely, formations such as the mixed-race movement and the Marriage Equality campaign—are often bourgeois and antiblack. See Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008). See also Habiba Ibrahim, *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiracialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

workers in a mixed-sex world.”⁸³ The chorus girl was popularized in shows such as the Ziegfeld Follies, marked by its blend of “high” and “low” cultural forms (and “art” with “provocative” content), “its identification of the [feminized] body as a high-priced commodity and its management of sexuality through the values of consumer culture.”⁸⁴ Like the “holy roller,” then, the chorus girl blends “the racy and the respectable” but in a form appropriate to the logics of gender, sex and labor at the turn of the century. A 1909 feature in a New York Hearst newspaper, for instance, announced the opening of a “chorus girl factory”⁸⁵ in the city, where chorus girls could be produced in regimented industrial fashion. Her lineage within American popular culture extends back at least into the mid-nineteenth century as part of traditions which attempt at once to display and “contain the 'social transgressiveness' of the female body on display.”⁸⁶ She thus marks, upholds and sometimes undermines sexual, gender and class hierarchies in popular performance, occupying a liminal position that is celebrated, idolized, deemed worthy of mass production and distribution across varied domains of social life, and yet understood to be “lower-class and only marginally respectable,” “associat[ed] with consumable pleasures and even prostitution.”⁸⁷

The reference in “Elvis Presley Blues” thus opens a range of associations by inscribing in early rock performance a central figure that is both feminized and commodified, identifying both the sexual and gender ambiguity of Elvis's controversial movement and sound and the hyper-

83 See Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Duke University Press, 1999), 16.

84 Ibid, 93.

85 Ibid, 65.

86 Ibid, 69.

87 Ibid, 88-9.

commodification and mass reproduction of musical cultures (and feminized, performing bodies) which he instantiates and helps to inaugurate. It aligns Elvis and rock performance with an emancipatory project that produces “the modern girl”—known through keywords such as liberation, mobility, professionalism, and independence⁸⁸—that is coterminous with white women's expanded entry into wage labor and subjection to the gendered, economic, sexual, racial, and bodily norms and constraints that such a project somewhat paradoxically grounds.

The reference also redoubles the meditation on the relation between the performing body itself as a kind of garment rather than an essence whose outward expression is made manifest by performance. And it makes possible ways of thinking of the performer's garments, broadly conceived, as themselves productive of the performing body as an effect. Mizejewski argues that the Ziegfeld Follies use of materials such as chiffon to give elaborately costumed bodies the appearance of nudity, of bare flesh, was a primary mechanism, a “special effect,” for “its identification of the [feminized] body as a high-priced commodity and its management of sexuality through the values of consumer culture.”⁸⁹ Insofar as the figure of the chorus girl was generalized within pop cultural imaginaries throughout the first decades of the 20th century, including in film and visual cultures, and to the extent that she can be read, according to this interpretation of Welch, as foundational to rock cultures (or part of its never-quite-disappeared pre-history), we can think of the ways in which not or not merely the material of the performer's costume but the skin itself—here inseparable from its imagined presence, through audience projection, suggestive and sexualized dance or movement, and/or elaborate costuming—is

88 See The Modern Girl around the World Research Group et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Duke University Press, 2008).

89 Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 93.

transmuted into a hyper-commodified, mobile and elastic ensemble or collection of collapsed and expandable surfaces available for play, repurposing, and surrogation (as the performer *becomes* someone else). Put another way, what is on display and sold in rock performance is not simply a moving, sounding body but an implied relationship and distinction between the naked skin and the shaking, suggestive silhouette of the performer (the lines drawn by his movements, his garments, his instruments); and this relationship and distinction are perpetually blurred and broken down such that what is being displayed and consumed is in question and might at any given moment be the flesh of the body itself or something apart from the flesh, another's flesh, a new flesh, or what adorns flesh closely (the silhouette) but also at a distant from it, adorning it at a distance from it, alienated.

To approach this manner of thinking is to enter, again and inevitably, the field of New World racialization, to return to the reduction of the black body to flesh that Hortense Spillers identifies as the essential feature of the Middle Passage and the New World to which it gave birth.⁹⁰ As with each of the figures Welch aligns with Elvis and rock performance, this racial dynamic is always already at work in the figure of the chorus girl in her linkages to and competition with the minstrel stage, which their theatrical productions came (partially) to supplant.⁹¹ The Ziegfeld Girls that are an exemplary case, and Mizejewski's work is instructive. "In cafe au lait makeup," she writes, "[the Ziegfeld girls] are perhaps the apotheosis of the circular logic of blackface": "representing 'bad' sexuality, they also remarkably imitated the light-skinned black chorus girl from the competing theatrical tradition, who was in turn the 'bad'

90 See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (Rutgers University Press, 2009): 443.

91 See Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

version of the white chorus girl.”⁹² In occasionally “blacking up,” chorus girls were made (expected) to perform white feminine purity, thereby re-containing the potentially-uncontainable female sexuality that their transgressive bodies-on-display threatened in precisely the same gesture that made of black women's bodies a symbol of absolute derogation and dereliction. Mizejewski reads a certain potentially radical ambiguity in this and other minstrel practices within chorus girl performances, suggesting that these modes of “conjur[ing] up the black chorus girl” is a means of “acknowledging her, not as object to be imitated but as source and ground of identification.”⁹³ My inquiry does not point in the same direction; in fact, it moves in something like the opposite direction. It is precisely the violent interdiction against identification, its impossibility, that New World racial formation continually reproduces and that white performance sometimes seek to cover over through its embrace of (what it takes to be) blackness. Rock performance plays at undermining those lines, it promises that the performer might identify with or become the figures it “conjures,” but in so doing it conceals the constitutive historical unevenness of the racialized and (un)gendered positions it reinscribes.

John Henry, Revolutionary Authenticity and Death

In the third verse, the singer analogizes Elvis's disruptive performances to the John Henry story, thus participating in one of the most widely deployed tropes in US musical cultures. This is the territory charted by Kheshti, in some regard, in that the song connects Elvis, again, to homosocial longing and reproduction. But it also expands that connection by visioning Elvis's desire for a narrative of black masculinity as a desire for both revolutionary authenticity and

92 Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 131.

93 *Ibid*, 131.

revolutionary defiance and death. White heteromale appropriation of the work of black artists is here inseparable from a longing for a masculinity that is understood to be natural, anti-mechanistic and even animalistic. As Fred Moten articulates, “The black is at times the exemplary figure of the animal, the criminal and the human. To be figured as the exemplary human is perhaps the greatest index of racism.”⁹⁴ To shake it like John Henry is to cross between all three categories as they produce one another. That this figure makes it “[ring] like silver” and “shine like gold” aligns the productivity of the black body under racial slavery with the productivity of the black laboring body after slavery and with the productivity of the imaginary of the black body for white musical cultures. The silver and gold—as material substances and indices of value—drive the development of racial capitalist modernity and are here traced to and locatable in the shaking and swinging of black bodies in the plantation economy and then in the forms of labor exploitation that condition black employment in the twentieth century (whether the shaking and swinging of the hammer or the shaking and swinging of the performer).

But this is also the one instance in the song in which the singer thinks about Elvis's thinking: “Thinking how happy John Henry was that he fell down died.” This suggests that the figure of revolutionary black masculine authenticity is the one conscious figure in white rock's reaching out for blackness. This is blackness as it's made to stand in for the plight of the free, individual white worker and his attempts to free himself from alienated labor, which is also and confoundingly always the very condition of his prior emancipation into the category of the worker.⁹⁵ One of the allures of the John Henry story is its depiction of a vision of

94 Fred Moten, “Black Kant (Pronounced Chant): A Theorizing Lecture at the Kelly Writers House, February 27, 2007,” accessed April 30, 2014, <<http://curate.tumblr.com/post/456804060/black-kant-pronounced-chant-a-theorizing-lecture-at>>.

95 The “liberated” category of the worker as indicative of liberal personhood opens in multiple direction:

heteromascuine humanity, authenticity and determination set against that (other) emblematic figure of exploitation, dehumanization, and property embodied by the machine, the steam drill. John Henry is a revolutionary figure, a freedman—one who has known unfreedom--and a workman who sacrifices himself. He is thus also the image of black strength and sacrifice that stands in for and nurtures white wholeness, particularly manifest as a kind of authentic, resistant, white heteromascuine laborer who imagines his own being and self-possession through the revolutionary force and death of John Henry. This may be one of the reasons why John Henry ballads survive and are rooted so deeply in the folk and rock traditions in which they continue to surface; this, too, is why Elvis's white physicality, his revolutionary and transgressive performances are paired with the straining, Herculean movements of John Henry's black body in "Elvis Presley Blues," and it is the means through which Elvis can imagine John Henry as happy to have died. There is a modality of desire here, what I'm calling part of this complex and gestural reaching out for blackness, present so far in this reading as the shadow of the white critic's and performer's desire for simultaneous absence and presence of black "soul," roots or source water of rock music, and, in "Elvis Presley Blues," in the country boy's, holy roller's and chorus girl's trafficking in blackness.

Yet John Henry is in the background of "Elvis Presley Blues" in another manner already, via one of the preeminent country blues singers, Mississippi John Hurt. The structure and sound of "Elvis Presley Blues," including the pacing, chord structure, and finger-picking guitar style, is

"As Saidiya Hartman discusses, the transformation from slavery to contractual personhood that took place in the Reconstruction era (and that has been furthered with the demise of official segregation as a national policy) did not "liberate the former slave from his or her bonds but rather sought to replace the whip with the compulsory contract [. . .]. [L]iberal notions of responsibility modeled on contractual obligation, calculated reciprocity, and most important, indebtedness [. . .] played a central role in the creation of the servile, blame-worthy, and guilty individual." See Robyn Wiegman, "Intimate Publics: Race, Property, and Personhood," *American Literature* 74, no. 4 (2002): 859–85; and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

redolent of Hurt's "Spike Driver Blues," another song about John Henry; and the lyrics of "Elvis Presley Blues" cite "Spike Driver Blues" directly, as Elvis takes the place of John Henry shaking with hammers in both hands.⁹⁶ Hurt's 1928 recording of the song appeared on Harry Smith's *Anthology*. Much later, as one of those figures "discovered," adored and mythologized by the folk revivalists of the early 1960s, Hurt gained a renewed publicity in the period of rock's emergence and early transformations (though as part of what was largely seen as the counter-tradition of the folk revival, as I discussed above). This included a recording for the Library of Congress in 1964 and a performance of "Spike Driver Blues" during a 1966 appearance on Pete Seeger's short-lived TV show, "Rainbow Quest"⁹⁷ In this sense "Elvis Presley Blues" cites the folk revivalists' preference for a particular iteration of black expressive culture and presumed authenticity even as it evokes and excavates rock's preference for other iterations of blues traditions that are equated less with folk purity and more with raucous urban licentiousness and the desire for violence (as the figure of the "midnight rambler," below, reveals).

Simultaneously, by introducing a minor vi chord that is absent from Hurt's song, Welch references the complicated racial and class politics of doo-wop (as the minor vi chord is central to doo-wop chord progressions made famous in the 1950s alongside and through the formations of rock Elvis helped to popularize).⁹⁸ "Doo-wop," as it would be nostalgically remembered in the

96 John Kimsey marks this relation and describes it as follows: "Hurt's song, with its droning, sinuous fingerpicking and understated vocal delivery, puts an introspective spin on the familiar story of John Henry's hammer. Adapting Hurt's sound and feel, Welch and collaborator David Rawlings craft a spacious, keening meditation on another 'country boy.'" See Kimsey, "Pulling Justice From That Maze: Walker, Marcus, Presley, Magic," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 42-62.

97 See *The Atlantic*, accessed March 16, 2014 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/em-rainbow-quest-em-pete-seegers-strange-magical-1960s-tv-show/283406/>>

98 I'm indebted to Seattle musician Sam Russell for his generous insights regarding the musical and historical structure of the relationship the songs considered here.

late 1960s and 1970s, references at once fantasies of cross-class and cross-race identification and the unsettled controversies over white rock and roll groups' relation to R&B, soul, and other predominately black musical genres.⁹⁹ As I explore below, it is via other Black musical forms, particularly Chicago blues traditions, that the dominant figures of mid-to-late 1960s rock, their inheritors, and their popular journalistic counterparts (such as Frere-Jones) will forge their imagined relations to blackness.

Midnight Ramblers, Backdoor Men, and the Violence of Rock

The final two figures in “Elvis Presley Blues”—the “midnight Rambler” and the “Harlem queen”—are the most enigmatic. “Midnight Rambler” was recorded by the Rolling Stones and released on the album *Let it Bleed* in December of 1969, the same month as their infamous concert at Altamont.¹⁰⁰ The song itself is a swirling, fever-pitched madness, a Chicago blues that opens with a haunting harmonica and escalates again and again through Keith Richards' driving, repetitive guitar, which he claims to have played on a guitar that was essentially an Australian version of Chuck Berry's. The music itself perpetually threatens to swallow Mick Jagger's lyrics entirely, which makes the opening lines all the more taunting:

Did you hear about the midnight Rambler?
The one that shut the kitchen door?

The track invokes a blues trope of the marauding ladies man, but here he is modeled after the Boston strangler and his penetrations of women happen with a knife. Live versions of the song, like the one released on *Get Yer Ya Yas Out*, include lyrics like the following:

⁹⁹ See Mark Anthony Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (Routledge, 2014), especially 79-90 and 180. See also the chapter “Soul for Sale” in Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ The Rolling Stones, “Midnight Rambler,” *Let It Bleed* (Abkco, 1969).

Did ya see me jump the bedroom door?
I'm called a hit-n-run raper, in anger
Or just a knife-sharpened tippie-toe [. . .]
Or just a shoot-em-dead, brain-bell jangler
(Everybody got to go)

If ya ever see the midnight rambler
An he's standing down your marble hall
An he's pouncing like a proud black panther [. . .]¹⁰¹

There is an unmistakable reference here to the “backdoor man” that Howlin' Wolf made famous.¹⁰² Indeed, Howlin' Wolf looms large in the mythology surrounding The Rolling Stones' relationship to black blues performers. It was Wolf himself whom the Stones brought with them onto the teen variety show *Shindig* in 1965, where he performed “Backdoor Man” while the Stones sit around listening in what Eric Lott terms “full-metal idolatry” (not unlike the idolatry with which Pete Seeger would regard Mississippi John Hurt on his show just months later).¹⁰³ Lott convincingly argues that, in “Backdoor Man,” you can hear in Wolf's voice “a whole social world” of “Jim Crow sound, Jim Crow sex, and Jim Crow space.”¹⁰⁴ For Lott, Wolf's persona in the song, set within the complicated “back-door social life North and South,” works to “remasculinize [black men] through a reclaiming of invisibility” even as it also queers that masculinity, attaches it to anality and to a queer temporality in opposition to or cut across “Jim Crow time.”¹⁰⁵ By this he means “a distinct attitude toward history as well as a separate

101 The Rolling Stones, *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out!* (Abkco, 1970).

102 It is probably, too, that the “proud black panther” doubles as a reference to a different kind of “back door” figure, the Black Panther as iconic symbol of (heteromasculine) revolution and refusal, mobilized here not as part of a political programmatic but for its racial and libidinal allure.

103 See Lott, “Back Door Man: Howlin' Wolf and the Sound of Jim Crow,” *American Quarterly*, 63.3, September 2011, pp. 697-710.

104 *Ibid*, 699.

105 *Ibid*, 707.

'evolutionary' timeline from that of the officially self-regarding Cold War nation, in which white modernity is predicated on denying the coevalness of black life."¹⁰⁶ The Rolling Stones, in contrast, claim to produce their version of the backdoor man not out of Jim Crow time and space but from the narrative of the Boston Strangler and from Mick Jagger's and Keith Richards's homoerotic writing process, which Richards describes through metaphors of sex and violence: the violence, according to Richards, is "just something that's there, that's always been there. Some kind of chemistry. Mick and I can really get it on together. It's one way to channel it out. I'd rather play it out than shoot it out."¹⁰⁷

To open this aspect of the argument, I'll turn briefly to a different articulation that arrives at similar implications for thinking the violence of white rock. Colson Whitehead, in his second novel, *John Henry Days*, also turns to the mythology surrounding John Henry to explore the material traces of race, sex and gender that shape the "post-racial" US.¹⁰⁸ Midway through the narrative, serving as an aside to the novel's working-through of what is animated in the remembrance and commemoration, the simultaneous celebration and forgetting, of John Henry, a few white journalists and music critics gather in a southern motel room, drinking whiskey and exchanging stories from the road. Having just witnessed the protagonist, J., the black mercenary journalist protagonist adrift in a landscape of the salable detritus of late capitalism, nearly choke to death on "plug of meat," the veteran rock critic in the room says the incident reminded of his experience at Altamont, the concert in the California desert that is often said, in certain

106 Ibid, 708.

107 Quoted in Sean Egan, *Keith Richards on Keith Richards: Interviews and Encounters* (Chicago Review Press, 2013).

108 Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* (Random House LLC, 2009). Whitehead's novel also excavates the history of folklorists traversing rural Appalachia, searching for the truth of the John Henry story and an explanation for its ubiquity in various music cultures.

narrativizations of '60s upheavals, to have effectively ended the innocence of the “flower generation.”¹⁰⁹ He recounts an extended narrative of his experience at the concert, which culminates in the death of Meredith Hunter, a young black man stabbed and stomped to death by the Hell's Angels, who were meant to provide “security” for the event, in the midst of the Stones' performance, just feet away from the stage.

In standard, sympathetic narratives of the concert, The Stones are portrayed as naïve victims of forces beyond their control—with their hiring of the Angels an ill-considered move—and the mostly white concert-goers generally painted as equally naïve, innocent, and peace-loving as against the violence of the Angels. Whitehead's version explodes these distinctions. The critic insists that there was something essential to rock culture that produced the violence as a kind of sacrifice. “A sacrifice to what?” asks one of the other writers. “To the culture. The kids had brought a new thing into the world, but they hadn't paid for it yet. It had to be paid for.”¹¹⁰ Meredith Hunter's blackness is central here. By the time The Stones have taken the stage and the Angels have already started to “[bring] down their wrath upon the hippies, raising their baseball bats and pool sticks upon the heads of the kids.”¹¹¹ The Stones roar into “Sympathy for the Devil” and at that moment the story's narrator notices Hunter, a “tall, skinny black cat in a lime green suit and black shirt—he stuck out.”¹¹² He watches as some of the Angels choose their target:

That was the most horrible thing. I saw what was going to happen. I saw them start to fixate on the black dude and choose him. I don't know how I knew it, but I

109 Ibid, 108

110 Ibid, 136.

111 Ibid, 132.

112 Ibid, 133.

knew they had chosen him before it came to actual violence. The black dude was bobbing his head and dancing and I saw the look in the Angels' eyes and knew.¹¹³

His black being, in this account, is a provocation: “One of the Angels came up to the black dude and laughed and grabbed a big chunk of his Afro.”¹¹⁴ A scuffle ensues until one of the Angels stabs Hunter in the back. They don't stop with his death; they attempt to nullify his being, the very possibility of his being: “[. . .] one of the Angels lifted a garbage can high over his head and brought it down on his face. Then the other Angels joined in and kicked his head and body with their motorcycle boots, laying into the black guy like they were going to wipe him out totally, like they were going to make him and his fucking extinct then and there.”¹¹⁵ If the standard Altamont narrative in rock criticism is the loss of innocence, Whitehead finds in this moment something else about the desire for racial and gendered violence in rock: “The Angels did what the people demanded, even if they didn't know they demanded it. They were going with the flow.”¹¹⁶ Whitehead posits that the snarling, fascistic ethos of the Hells Angels was not counter to the spirit of the white youth cultures that fueled the rock scenes of the late 1960s. Read through Whitehead's lens, Welch's reference to the “midnight rambler” evokes a history of violence that is enacted in white rock cultures in both spectacular and hidden ways. Rather than appearing as the romantic, hyper-sexualized exemplar of an authenticity guaranteed by a (re)productive relation to an imaginary of blackness, this reading of Elvis's relation to the midnight rambler links the “innocence” of racial “exchange” in musical cultures to spectacles of racialized and gendered violence that surface amidst a field or ground already structured by violence.

113 Ibid, 133.

114 Ibid, 134.

115 Ibid, 135.

116 Ibid.

Coda: The Harlem Queen and Black Queer Performance

This reading of Welch's "Elvis Presley Blues" has sought to understand it as a kaleidoscopic index of the histories of racialized and gendered violence, containment, and crossing that perforate and haunt white rock music cultures' and their dominant self-narrations. It suggests that we re-imagine the various bridges and disjunctures that connect mid-to-late 20th century rock criticism with both early 20th century performance cultures (and their commercializations) and early 21st performance cultures. It also suggests that we consider how musical expression, embodiment, performance, and exchange happen not (merely) as acts of violence, theft, or appropriation but rather under conditions of violence. That is, racialized and gendered violence condition US popular music's various cultures of enunciation, reception, and circulation (and the categories of race, gender, and personhood they assume and re-inflect). This is true of its schools of popular collection and criticism, including when consideration of race is figured in terms of the corruption of originary disunity and cultural purity (as they were for early folklorists) or the restoration of a pre-existing hybridity, mixture or proper "miscegenation" (as they were for folk revivalists and the rock critics who came in their wake). It is also true of rock musical expression and performance in its many guises, including for the white indie rockers over whom Frere-Jones worries as well as those he ignores.

A form of spectacle and spectacularization very different from the "midnight Rambler" is invoked by the final figure of "Elvis Presley Blues," the Harlem queen. Shane Vogel's work on the "Cabaret school" offers a potential reading of the Harlem queen that links her to traditions of black performance that do not fall neatly into any of the traditions valorized within dominant

rock or folk revivalist cultures and the politics of authenticity in which they traffic.¹¹⁷ Vogel cites Langston Hughes' description of the Hamilton Club Lodge's annual drag ball (known in the 1920s, the period of the commercialization of the first wave of folk revivals, as the “Faggot's Ball”) as a “spectacle in color.”¹¹⁸ While folk revivalists were busy constructing a vision of blackness as rural and primitive, urban club culture was trafficking in other versions of spectacularized primitivism that “helped make Harlem an important tourist attraction for sightseeing slummers.”¹¹⁹ “These scenes of gender insubordination,” remarks Vogel, “drew both black and white spectators of the middle and upper classes to the Hamilton Lodge's box seats.”¹²⁰ The balls became sites which “helped to define the limits of proper and normal racial and sexual behavior.” However, Langston Hughes' reading of the balls, which highlights the transparency and malleability of the drag masquerade and performance, worked at “undermining the spectatorial privilege of the audience”:

From a distance, we may think we see coherent and spectacular images of idealized race or gender—material for phantasmatic projections. But coming down from our seats and approaching the stage, we find something much more mundane and incongruous under the costumes and makeup. [. . .] Hughes takes us past the footlights to see the labor that goes into the performance. He despectacularizes the Hamilton Lodge's drag queens, momentarily making visible what spectacle obscures.¹²¹

Vogel's reading of the Harlem queen via Hughes finds in black queer performance cultures “not the uplift body—the body of proper comportment, and unviolated surfaces—nor the primitive

117 See Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

118 Ibid, 16.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid, 17.

121 Ibid, 17.

body—the body that exists within the gaze of white spectatorial privilege and violence, the body of sexual excess, racial parody, and appropriable identity. We find instead bodies and subjects that undertake the complex negotiations and contradictions of sexual and racial self-definition.”¹²² I turn to Vogel's brief but evocative reading as a way of thinking through the figure of the “Harlem queen” in “Elvis Presley Blues,” emerging as it does in the field of racialized and gendered violence elaborated through each of the song's other figures.

I have read the disparate but interconnected figures in “Elvis Presley Blues” as a way of arraying, expanding, and investigating the common senses of white rock from the vantage of the “post-racial moment.” Each figure, each mode of reaching out for blackness, at once richly reveals and disappears or displaces the racialized and gendered violences that are their conditions of possibility. Each fails insofar as they re-suture and foreclose upon the possibilities they seem to hold out: the country boy's potential avowal of black queer lesbian performance and transgressive remixing of racial embodiment ultimately elide that performance and preserve the sanctity of white racial embodiment; the holy roller's promise of liberatory cross-racial sociality and the suspension or disruption of bodily comportment and self-possession become merely white fantasies of mixture and uneven integration; the chorus girl's resistant sexuality and performance and prospect of cross-racial identification slides into the commodification and containment of the threat of female sexuality and the commodification and inhabitation of racialized otherness; John Henry's revolutionary defiance and authenticity become the conflation of animality, black masculinity, and sacrificial death; and the midnight rambler's upending of property and propriety devolve into fantasies of rapacious (black) sexual appetites and violence

122 Ibid, 18.

that turn back on the black body onto which they were initially projected. Following Vogel's reading of Hughes, we might position the figure of the Harlem queen in this discussion as the figure which best reveals white rock's potential and its failures in its various modes of reaching out for blackness. White rock's fantasies and projections of blackness tend, ultimately, to refix the modes of subjectivity, belonging, and embodiment—and the attendant categories of race, gender, property, and propriety—they purport to transgress or unravel. The Harlem queen troubles that refixing by exposing the fantasy and pointing toward modes of performance that dominant common senses of white rock seek out but cannot properly apprehend, in part because of their reliance on tropes of miscegenation, authenticity, homosocial reproduction, mastery, hybridity, and violence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Second Skins: Nick Cave's Soundsuits and the Common Sense of Post-Racial Embodiment

“Poetry from the future interrupts the habitual formation of bodies, and it is an index of a time to come in which what today exists potently—even if not (yet) effectively—but escapes us will find its time.”

– Kara Keeling¹

“And though acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that is and represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround.”

– Stefano Harney and Fred Moten²

In 2012, potential visitors to the NGO World Vision's “Step into Africa” exhibit at the Seattle Center Pavilion were invited to “become” one of three African children—Kombo, Babirye, or Emmanuel—by wearing headsets and walking through a simulated rural village in order to experience the real “Sub-Saharan Africa, where about 22 million people are infected with HIV, about two-thirds the world’s total cases.”³ In briefly possessing, performing, and consuming the “authentic” experience of a Black African child suffering and surviving landscapes of death, visitors to the Seattle exhibit—not far from World Vision's headquarters—would join more than 300,000 others who have performed the same “life-changing” ritual of embodiment in order to learn how, “as an individual,” one can take part in “help[ing] [to] turn the tide against AIDS,” “the greatest humanitarian disaster of our time.”⁴ My purpose in invoking this instance of intimate “interconnection” between US audiences, African children, and the

1 Keeling, “Looking for M-: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 565-582.

2 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013).

3 See “Step into Africa: A World Vision Experience: Virtual African Village @ Seattle Center, accessed on 12 December 2013, <<http://seattlepipeline.com/2012/08/23/africa-seattle-center>>

4 Ibid.

imaginaries of race, cultural and geographic difference, health, embodiment, suffering, and death through which such audiences are hailed and constructed is to open a different terrain for continuing the work of interrogating forms of “post-racial common sense” as well as to move toward thinking about the possibility of alternative and insurgent formations.

In the US context, all common sense is racial common sense.⁵ In this chapter I refer to *common senses of post-racial embodiment* to name some of the dominant if also implicit, partial, and contradictory grammars of embodiment proper to the “US post-racial moment.” World Vision's “Step into Africa” exhibition offers a striking and unsubtle example of how post-racial imaginaries and performances of encountering racialized and gendered otherness are so often enacted through what I name below as logics of *captivation*, *commodification*, and *surrogation*, in which the (white) looking and acting subject variously inhabits, consumes, and performs modalities of embodied (black) otherness—modalities that carry the trace of ongoing histories of gendered racialization and violence such acts cite but often seek to disappear. In turning to the work of black visual artist Nick Cave and his two-decades-long “soundsuits” project—a project roughly coterminous with the “post-racial moment” as taken up in this dissertation thus far—this chapter understands Cave's work as a rich site for revealing and undermining post-racial common senses of embodiment and the racialized and gendered histories through which they operate. My particular interest in Cave's work, alongside and against many other contemporary

5 Alexis Shotwell makes this argument in *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*. In this chapter I follow Shotwell's theorization of Gramscian common sense alongside those of Keeling and Hall taken up in previous chapters. Shotwell explores the importance of common sense for recent critical work on racial formation in the US context, arguing that a wealth of work in critical race theory and related fields demonstrate “the centrality of implicit understanding [or the commonsensical] to political transformation of racialization on both individual and collective scales.” See Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (Penn State Press, 2011), 29-31. See also Linda Martín Alcoff's discussion of “common sense” as it is theorized within critical race theory in *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

cultural workers, is due in part to how I understand his work as participating in, recapitulating, and working through rather than avoiding, disavowing or straightforwardly critiquing the allure of post-racial common senses of embodiment.

An Ocean of Buttons

An ocean of buttons; uncountable, incalculable buttons; an abacus where a face might be; the frame of the body as chair, as shopping cart; the tokens and trinkets of mass desire and production, disposed, thrifted, disposed again, found; funereal wreaths from multiple coasts of the Atlantic; forms and frames that sometimes resemble the instruments of the slave coffle, devices supposed to make impossible human intimacy, sociality, and insurgency; cascades of sounds, fabric on fabric on hair on sequins on skin; sounds as vibration, buzz, drone; sound as implied or sensed; sound that, if linguistic, feigns universality only to mask its encoding; ritual movements of forgotten or secret religions; ecstatic, ruptural, writhing dance. All of these are “activated” and do the work of activating bodies in the moving center of the earth that visual artist Nick Cave's “soundsuits” call into being.⁶

As the catalog for the recent—and perhaps final—soundsuits exhibition at the Denver Art Museum describes, Cave “has made at least five hundred [. . .] 'soundsuits' [since the early 1990s], and these elaborate, highly ornate works are the artistic bedrock on which his

⁶ Cave uses the term “activate” to describe the suits in motion and their effect on bodies. My thinking on Cave's work and its “activations” has benefitted from personal conversations with Cave over the past year as well as from the generosity of Cave and his photographer James Prinz in sharing visual materials connected to the soundsuits (including those featured in this chapter). I've also benefitted from conversations with Dr. Rizvana Bradley (whose own, as yet unpublished, work on Cave, treats them as complicated assemblages in relation to the work of other contemporary black artists) and the visual artist Julia Freeman. Bradley's unpublished dissertation is entitled “Corporeal Resurfacings: Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave and Thornton Dial,” 2013, <<http://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/7245>>.

international reputation rests.”⁷ The project famously begins with the Rodney King beating, and Cave has articulated the relationships between the suits and that moment in a number of different ways over the past two decades. He describes sitting in a Chicago park in 1992, thinking through the narrative depictions and visual images of Rodney King's body as they circulate in state

[Figure 1: Soundsuit with buttons, fabric, and



antique abacus. Image courtesy of Nick Cave
and James Prinz.]

discourse and popular media. King's body, in its myriad representations, seems to Cave “larger than life,” “mammoth-like,” super- or supra-human, massive, dense and yet rendered thoroughly disposable and degraded.⁸ It is how “the police [. . .] brought identity to [him]” that most immediately demands Cave's attention.⁹ The phrase speaks to the retrospective attempts to narrate King's Black and male body—immobile, kneeling, handcuffed at the moment when the

7 Nick Cave, *Nick Cave: Sojourn* (Denver Art Museum, 2013).

8 Recorded materials featured as part of the Seattle Art Museum 2011 exhibition of Cave's work, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*.

9 Ibid.

infamous beating begins—as a threat, eminently lethal and animalistic. It also connotes powerfully how the police officers' bodies and their instruments—metal batons, tasers, feet, fists—unleashed on King, work to describe, to outline, to elaborate, to *produce*, even, his body as they set out to destroy or nullify it. The “beating of Rodney King,” as it floats through the ashes of the LA Uprisings, reveals much about the post-apartheid United States including some of the ways in which whiteness continues to function as (synonymous with) value itself while blackness—often discursively synonymous with “race”—is marked and devalued, violently, by its perceived distance from—and, paradoxically, nearness to—whiteness. In Nick Cave's hands, it also points to the capacity of (representations of) racial, sexual, and gender violence to reinforce or potentially cut and transfigure common senses of racial embodiment. His response to this moment was to gather twigs from the ground around him, “discarded” and “devalued” things that would form the first intertwined fragments of his “soundsuits,” massive, elaborately-constructed, mobile, sculptural suits whose multiplicity of sights, surfaces, and sounds continue to appear in varying configurations in installations, performances, and “invasions.”¹⁰ “We live within the history of a double violation,” remarks Fred Moten: “the denigration of things and the coincident devaluation of people that is carried out by what is supposed to be their reduction to things.”¹¹

10 Cave's work might be fruitfully placed in dialogue with a range of prominent works by black artists that take up the LA Uprisings and earlier moments of rebellion and conflict. David Hammons, for instance, whom I discuss below, describes some of his work of this period as emerging initially from the Watts rebellions: “Buildings were burning. I got the juxtaposition of Black people against the American flat.” “In the midst of black rebellion,” writes Celeste-Marie Bernier, “Hammons created a series of body prints depicting crumpled, gagged, broken, hanging and mutilated black men.” Danny Tisdale, by contrast, took up the frames of the video from the Rodney King beating as a silkscreen on canvas work that invokes and critiques the courtroom use of individual frames of the video to construct King as threat to the police officers. Although much more elusive in its political enunciations, Cave's work, like Hammons' includes partially-visible black male bodies in surprising and complex ways. See Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008); David Hammons, *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble* (Institute for Contemporary Art, 1991); and Kellie Jones, *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960 – 1980* (Hammer Museum, 2011).

11 Fred Moten, “An Ecology of Eloquent Things,” Lecture, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN. 8

Cave's soundsuits, understood as an extended meditation on and intervention into this double violation, are figured in this chapter as a multivalent archive of the imbrications of racialized and gendered embodiment, valuation, and violence as they move across the spatial and temporal scales of racial capitalist modernity that operate (through and as) that violation. Cave's work, I argue, situates those imbrications as effects of unfinished histories of colonial and racial domination and, simultaneously, as the peculiar and particular conditions that mark a period of contestation over common sense racial meaning, the "US post-racial moment," when the alleged obsolescence of the logics and effects of racism is asserted alongside reinvigorated instantiations of racism's (systemic, spectacular, subjective, and submerged) violences. My own attempts to address this emergence, which is also a reiteration of previous dynamics and processes, focus on cultural repertoires of narrative, visual, and sonic enunciation to read how histories of racialized and gendered violence circulate, (dis)appear, and congeal in and as common sense in a period in which the uneven dispensation of value and violence afforded different bodies is purported to no longer break down along the same old racial lines.

Cave's soundsuits valorize what is not supposed to be valued, what was formerly or never valued, what appeared lost; they value in ways that are out of time, out of sync, out of joint with the dominant regimes of race and value to which they refer. They invite in their viewers a sense of play—the allure of otherness, the promise of the malleability of gendered and racial embodiment, even the possibility of surrogation or the total inhabitation of racialized difference, or the otherworldly and fantastic erasure of racialized and gendered embodiment altogether—all features of post-racial common senses of embodiment. Each of these invitations suggest (and

April 2011.

partially masks) histories of violence: the violence of settler-colonial encounters with and constructions of otherness; the subjective violence of material bodies colliding in space, such as the LAPD officers' bodies with King's; the ghostly violence outlined in the suits' striking forms and frames that sometimes resemble the instruments of slave coffles, barracoons, the Middle Passage, and the plantation; the silence and stillness of death as an effect of violence; the epistemic violence of "post-racial" discursive formations; and the saturating, objective violence suggested in that paradigmatic scene of value, the production and movement of the commodity within a regime of proprietary relation that extends to and engulfs human being.

Within the "double violation" by way of which New World (re)production operates, these violences condense in the figure of the captive Black female as an index of unfreedom that guarantees (and reveals) "freedom" in its social, political, and economic senses.¹² The black body, from slavery forward, captive or free, is a locus of racial capitalism's violence.¹³ As Barrett writes, in the "post-Enlightenment Western thought [that undergirds racial slavery], the African body signifies an existence entirely or virtually within the bodily half of the [mind/body] antithesis."¹⁴ "Reason, rationalism, and enlightenment," continues Barrett, "sanction a hostility

12 This is a line of thought that can be traced through the work of Hortense Spillers and Angela Y. Davis, among others, with recent elaborations by Kara Keeling and Katherine McKittrick, among others. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2009; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (Random House LLC, 2011); Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review*, 1972, 81–100; Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And the Cartographies of Struggle* (U of Minnesota Press, 2006). See also Andrew Apter, "The Blood of Mothers: Women, Money, and Markets in Yoruba-Atlantic Perspective," *Journal of African American History* 98, no. 1 (2013): 72–98.

13 On the problematics of "the body" and embodiment, see "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2011). See also Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (U of Minnesota Press, 2006).

14 Lindon Barrett, "Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom," *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (June 1997) 315-36, pg. 318.

toward African Americans endemic to the U.S. [. . .]. The black body stands as the point of 'certainty' underwriting New World hostility."¹⁵ In Cave's work, "the black body" is an *uncertain*, never-quite-disappeared figure upon which the meanings of other "things"—buttons, sequins, thread, cotton, toys, instruments—might be arrayed and allocated, valorized and confounded. His works move within and elaborate a space and a desire between the (im)possibility of representing the black body outside of the dominant colonial-capitalist and racial logics of value, vision and visibility and the apparent (im)possibility of modes of representation that would fully unravel or explode those logics.¹⁶ Read in this way, Cave's work constitutes a forceful and complex recapitulation or rehearsal of dominant post-racial common senses of embodiment. As they work to reveal and cover over the histories of racialized and gendered violence that shape those common senses, his soundsuits bespeak counter-histories and oppositional common senses within and underneath those violences. Cave's soundsuits project, in other words, unearths and potentially disrupts the habitual performances and violences through which bodies come into being—they enact this disruption in the confounding, captivating interplay of stillness and movement, "self" and "other," "thing" and "person," material order and symbolic disarray.¹⁷

Toward an "ALTERNATIVE WORLD"?

15 Ibid, 318.

16 I'm influenced in this formulation by the following passage from Kara Keeling: "Insofar as colonial logics can be said to undergird present socio-economic relations, black people can become visible only through those logics, so danger, if not death, attends every black's appearance. Yet precisely because what is visible is caught in the struggle for hegemony and its processes of valorization, one cannot not want the relative security promised by visibility." See "Looking for M-." Nicole Fleetwood makes related and complementary claims in her *Troubling Vision*, which I discuss below. See also Michele Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?": The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture," in Gina Dent, *Black Popular Culture* (The New Press, 1998).

17 Here I reference and borrow from this chapter's epigraph from Kara Keeling.

To think about Cave's work in this way demands that we move against a couple of the tendencies common to critical appraisal of his productions in general and his soundsuits in particular. The first is the tendency to identify Cave as a black artist and to note the importance of the Rodney King experience to his work and the development of the soundsuits project, only to then discuss the soundsuits themselves and their deployments of bodily form, movement, and sound without reference the racialized and gendered logics that structure both the impulse to name Cave's blackness and the imperative of recognizing King's. This is characteristic of the most prominent iterations of multiculturalist discourses that emerge in the “post-racial moment”; the increasing visibility of black artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in particular, was widely narrated as a the liberating move “out of the hood and into the mainstream, where, 'free at last' from racial constraints and loyalties, individual talent can thrive.”¹⁸ Thus the celebration of Cave as a black artist has often meant, implicitly, celebration of his transcendence of (what is taken to be) the constraint of blackness, even when it is not named as such.¹⁹ The second, related, tendency is to take up the otherworldly and fantastic nature of the soundsuits as an incitement to childlike wonder, play, fantasy, and enjoyment and as a purely open-ended address whose appeal and implications are readily accessible to all. The former stance speaks to the contradictory nature of post-racial common senses that are unable to apprehend Cave's work through the dense range of histories, expressive cultures, and social forms it cites and reworks; the latter equally

18 Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 2. These discourses were granted a kind of critical patina by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., who contended, in Copeland's phrasing, that, “unlike the unfulfilled Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s or the ideologically constrained black arts movement of the 1960s, advanced African American art since, say, 1987, has benefited from deeper pockets, institutional endorsement, and radical 'openness.’” Gates emphasized in particular black artists' “transcendence” of slavery. See Copeland, 3.

19 Cave himself has been read as endorsing this point of view by avoiding explicit elaboration of the “racial” and political valences of his work.

perniciously strangles the critical valence and insurgent potential of the fantastic or the marvelous by selectively forgetting the deadly seriousness through which they often move and do not attempt to ever fully escape.²⁰

In the context of black visual and expressive cultures we might think of Cave's soundsuits as first appearing within a period of intense debate over the possibilities and violent impossibilities that attend modes of seeing and being seen. Nicole Fleetwood summarizes the particular status of race and blackness within these debates as follows:

Much of scholarship and art that address visual culture and race have demonstrated how optical technologies have been used to discipline racialized bodies. Vision and visual technologies, in this context, are seen as hostile and violent forces that render blackness as aberration, given the long and brutal history of black subjugation through various technologies, visual apparatus among them. Yet it is a rendering that often totalizes the gaze so that black subjects have no recourse in which to challenge scopic regimes. Vision becomes a metaphor for the far-reaching arms of repression and the inescapability of racial marking.²¹

Fleetwood's work is important, in part, for its assertion of the importance of visual practice by black artists and cultural workers, especially black women, and its arguments for the “productive possibilities of black subjects to trouble the field of vision precisely by presenting the black body as a troubling figuration to visual discourse.”²² The works and approaches Fleetwood describes

20 In a sense, the critical tendencies I'm describing are the flip side of the coin of what Darby English identifies as the widespread “tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character.” See English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007). On the fantastic and its political possibilities, see Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 2008); on the marvelous, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2003).

21 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 17.

22 Fleetwood, 18. She writes, “my project is to theorize the strategic uses of the body by black female artists and cultural figures. To this end, I aim to develop a theory of 'excess flesh' to articulate the visual and discursive breaches that these enactments make in dominant visual culture [. . .].” She continues, “My purpose here is to move away from an analysis of how dominant visual culture represents black women to a focus on black female cultural producers' engagement with the imago of black female excessiveness and their critique of the racializing

do not take up in any simple or straightforward manner the task of working to “formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse of the body to effectively resist white supremacy,” which bell hooks suggested, in the 1990s, is part and parcel of “every movement for black liberation.”²³ The strategies Fleetwood describes are decidedly more illusive and ambivalent about the representational strategies that were deployed as counter-hegemonic under racial dictatorship, including those that emanate from uplift traditions and the politics of respectability.²⁴ I argue that Cave's work might be understood within the schema that Fleetwood describes, in part because of the “troubling presence” and movement of the black body in both material and spectral forms in the soundsuits project. As I suggest, part of what is striking about the “troubling presence” in Cave's work is how readily it is avoided by curators, critics, and, in some ways, by Cave himself, at least in some of his public declarations. In so doing, I also consider how his work participates in the turn to sound and embodied performance as alternative or disruptive domains to the dominant “sense-making activity of vision”²⁵ from which Black Americans have been historically disbarred.

Against the critical tendencies named above, then, we might ask of Cave's project the

and gendering apparatuses of the visual field.” See *Troubling Vision*, 109.

23 See hooks, “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic” in Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994). hooks continues, “If black men were seen as beasts, as rapists, as bodies out of control, reformist movements for racial uplift countered these stereotypes by revering the refined, restrained, desexualized black male body.”

24 See, amongst others, Hazel V. Carby, “Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist,” 1989; Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kevin K. Gaines, “Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership,” in *Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability,” *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, 1880, 185–230. See also Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (Verso, 1990), especially “Introduction: Negative/Positive Images.”

25 See Barrett, *Blackness and Value*.

following: to what imaginaries and forms of embodiment do Cave's soundsuits refer? Is it a pure, otherworldly or alternative order of being entirely, or might we think about the imbrications constitution of racialized and gendered embodiment with the (seemingly) alternative forms of embodiment that appear in Cave's work? How might the presence of other kinds of bodies in Cave's creations in installation and performance point us toward a more nuanced, potentially-challenging way of understanding the different modes of encounter between the soundsuits and their audiences? How does the very multiplicity of the kinds of encounters staged—from public “invasions” to the sanitized stillness of the museum; from the dance stage to the street; from the immersive installation to the melding of sonic, filmic, and visual landscapes—suggest that the various “invitations” for audience participation, nearness, and even surrogation might grate against or undercut the openness and accessibility they would seem to hold out? How might Cave's work offer ways to think critically about the production, performance, and imagination of raced and gendered embodiment under allegedly “post-racial” conditions? To elucidate some of the ways I read the soundsuits in excess of common critical appraisals, much of this chapter is focused on *captivation*, *commodification*, and *surrogation* as logics that are continually worked through in Cave's soundsuits in their different iterations and forms of appearance.

Captivation

In the promotional print and web materials for *Meet me at the Center of the Earth*, one of the largest touring collections of the soundsuits, the show is described as “an invitation to meet the AMAZING creations that spring out of Nick Cave's imagination. Cave calls them soundsuits. We call them a beautiful, joyous, EXUBERANT, colorful opportunity to explore an

ALTERNATIVE WORLD which challenges conventions and inspires new ways of thinking.”²⁶

As I indicate above, this emphasis on the playful and imaginative aspects of Cave's soundsuits and its suggestion of the entirely-otherworldly coordinates Cave's projects bring into being is characteristic of curatorial and journalistic renderings of Cave's work.²⁷ In fact, commentators often take this further by suggesting explicitly that the modes of embodiment Cave's soundsuits produce and challenge exist without reference to human embodiment and the “marks” of race and gender in particular. For instance, Linda Yablonsky, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* about the same exhibition, describes the soundsuits as follows: “Pitched at a decibel the eye can hear, they armor the body in dyed feathers, brilliant sequins, bugle beads and fake flowers, thatched twigs, strips of old sweaters and gaggles of pipe cleaners. They may have tall chairs or wicker baskets for heads. There’s no way to know if they’re male or female, or of what race or class, but they’re too dazzling for anyone to care.”²⁸

The assertion that, even when they are worn in exhibition or performance, the soundsuits do not adhere to or cite what are supposed to be the dominant distinguishing markers of human embodiment is curious in light of the the fact that Cave names the specific experience of and representation of racialized embodiment and violence in the Rodney King beating as the impetus for the project as a whole. It is an assertion, in other words, that amounts to a refusal to consider

26 See Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth. Seattle Art Museum, 2011, accessed 22 March 2014, <<http://www1.seattleartmuseum.org/exhibit/interactives/nickCave/>>. See also Nick Cave, *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2009).

27 A common art reviewer's description reads, “we immediately feel pulled in by the irresistible attraction and festive elation of Nick Cave's playfully imaginative and intricate designs.” See Peter Erickson, “Meet Me at the Center of the Earth by Nick Cave (review),” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 31, no. 1 (2012): 148–51.

28 See Linda Yablonsky, “Characters Welcome,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2011. Accessed 20 February 2014, <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9505E3DB1030F93AA35753C1A9679D8B63>>.

how the soundsuits might cite, cut, comment on, or refigure racialized and gendered embodiment. Considered alongside the tendency to figure the soundsuits as wholly otherworldly, the assertion is doubly problematic, given that the ways that the suits are constructed, worn, displayed, and set in motion all position them in differently variegated, overlapping, and dialogic relation to the historical grammars of gendered and racial embodiment and violence that shape political modernity. This was signaled in another fashion in the first major exhibitions of the soundsuits, *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, in which the suits were preceded by and paired with a series of lawn jockeys and other small, caricatured, racist statuary arranged in found-object assemblages and placed in various configurations. In one untitled piece, a lawn jockey holds up a variety of elaborate ships appearing to sail in multiple directions; in another, entitled “Profiling,” a caricatured black jockey stands atop a dartboard, surrounded by old darts; and in another, “Momma’s Baby Daddy ‘You Clownin’,” an Aunt Jemima figure stands as a kind of headpiece for another caricatured and cartoonish head (with hair that is half-black, half-white, split down the middle), all above an American flag badge containing an image of Abraham Lincoln’s head.²⁹ These works resonate in a number of ways with prominent works by other contemporary black artists, including Carrie Mae Weems, Fred Wilson, Glenn Ligon, and Betye Saar, among others, yet Cave’s work is seldom placed in conversation with such figures.³⁰

These critical refusals and avoidances might be said to evince a desire to experience the

29 Nick Cave, *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2009).

30 See Copeland, *Bound to Appear* and “Feasting on Scraps,” *Small Axe* 16, no. 2 (2012): 198–212; Charles Gaines et al., *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Fine Arts Gallery, 1993); Valerie Cassel Oliver, *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970* (Contemporary Arts Museum, 2005). See also Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2013); Tanya Barson et al., *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (Tate Liverpool, 2010); Scott Rothkopf, *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews, Glenn Ligon* (Yale University Press, 2011); and Thelma Golden and Hamza Walker, *Freestyle* (Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001).

soundsuits through the logic of pure *captivation*, articulated here as the effect of the interplay between stillness, apprehension, and self-possessed acts of looking that are supposed to comprise the encounter between the art object and its viewer. In the space of the museum or gallery, *captivation* is assumed to be the purview and prerogative of a certain kind of (white and male) looking subject who, according to regulative aesthetic and political discourses central to post-Enlightenment Western thought, is he who occupies the mind half of the mind/body split.³¹ Works of art are “consummated,” in this schema, by this viewing subject who possesses the “human disposition to be captivated” and for whom *art* connotes only those artifacts “not useful for survival.”³² For the foundational “modern artistic discourse[s]” through which this schema has been implemented and rehearsed, “racialized barbarity and aesthetic discrimination go together,” demanding attention to “how dark figures have been mobilized time and again to demarcate the limits of culture, representation, and the human itself.”³³

Blackness has been central to such discourses and their imbrication with the modes of subjectivity and subjection they help to fabricate. As Huey Copeland argues,

The multivalent operations of blackness—at once abstract and bodily, literal and metaphorical, the ultimate sign of aesthetic negation and the prime marker of the socially negated—can [. . .] be taken as indices of those political and historical forces that continue to differentially engender subjects and objects in the modern era, everywhere shaping a visual field in which the individual effects of racialization necessarily assume a shifting texture despite the unyielding ruthlessness of their overarching collective logic.³⁴

31 See Lindon Barrett, “Hand-Writing: Legibility and the White Body in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,” *American Literature*, 1997, 315–36, pg. 318.

32 Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007), 269.

33 Copeland, “Feasting on Scraps,” 205.

34 Ibid.

This articulation of the racial logics of aesthetic discourses, the construction of the visual field, and the scene of captivation is played out on another register in Fred Moten's critique of Michael Fried (and, differently, of Kant and Diderot) by way of Adrian Piper.³⁵ Fried's rejection of “theatrical” visual art—particularly minimalist works which incite or require audience interaction or immersion—and its reliance on the construction and preservation of what I'm calling the *captivated*—he who is held and self-knowing in the act of beholding—becomes for Moten a site for rereading and potentially unsettling “an already existing notion of the private (or, more properly, of the proper) that operates within the constellation of self-possession, capacity, subjectivity, and speech.”³⁶ Momentarily putting on Fried's perspective, like a garment, and expanding and elaborating it (with reference to the metaphorical uses of darkness/blackness mentioned above), Moten writes:

The beholder is never estranged, never lost or even dark to himself; rather, he continually fulfills that self in the ascription of meaning to the beheld and, more fundamentally, in the ascription of greatness or not, authentic and autonomous aestheticity or not, to the artwork. The beholder arrives at that self-possessive sense or knowledge of self [. . .]. The beholder becomes a subject again in this profoundly antitheatrical moment. One isn't absorbed by the painting as in an entrance into its scene; instead, one is, in the instant of the frame, in the visual experience of flatness as an instantaneous moment of framing, absorbed into or by flatness conceived as a mirror. The painting is a mirror.³⁷

Here the consummation of the artwork—paradigmatically instantiated in the modern painting—renders or makes possible the being of the beholder, experienced as total self-possession, “the

35 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (U of Minnesota Press, 2003). See also Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218; Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 269–310; Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1743–47; Moten, “Black Kant (Pronounced Chant): A Theorizing Lecture at the Kelly Writers House, February 27, 2007,” accessed April 30, 2014, <<http://curate.tumblr.com/post/456804060/black-kant-pronounced-chant-a-theorizing-lecture-at>>.

36 Moten, *In the Break*, 12.

37 *Ibid.*, 236.

very fullness of a presence that could never admit its own psycho-political ephemerality.”³⁸

Cave's soundsuits project takes up and challenges captivation—and the attendant modes of (dis)embodiment that are supposed to precede and precede from captivation—along multiple overlapping lines, only a few of which I explore here. Specifically, I'm interested here in how the soundsuits project 1) continually minimizes and breaks down the distance between audience and artwork; 2) suggests a doubling of the encounter in the museum with the colonial encounter of embodied (racialized) difference; and 3) invokes the histories of *captivity* that haunt *captivation*, histories made manifest here by the troubling presence of the black body in what are assumed to be non-racial or post-racial bodily forms.

The soundsuits, in the space of the gallery or the museum, stage the audience encounter as a kind of “ambush,” a surprising, potentially-shocking meeting with radical alterity. The less-or more-than-human or not-quite-human, larger-than-life bodily forms tower over viewers as they enter the gallery, often intentionally situated just around corners or at the end of corridors. They are without exact measure or specification, as the show descriptions do not include dimensions of any of the suits, though many are close to eight feet tall.³⁹ Nor do individual suits have distinguishing titles or names. Instead they appear together as a disordered spectacle of difference, bright, exotic, multi-form, bodily but not identifiable, looming over or surrounding the viewer. Exhibitions of the suits themselves are commonly paired with projected video of the suits in motion, either in video installations by Cave or in footage of public “invasions,” which feature the soundsuits in performances or happenings in spaces outside the museum.

38 Ibid, 237.

39 “Art review: Nick Cave at Fowler Museum,” *Los Angeles Times* (21 January 2010), accessed on 2 January 2014, <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/01/nick-cave-fowler-museum.html>>



[Figure 2: Soundsuits in Denver Art Museum, 2013. Image courtesy of Nick Cave and James Prinz.]

The links between the stillness of the suits in the gallery and their real and implied movements operate in the first instance to break down the stability implied by captivation and to achieve a kind of “colonization of the space between the beholder and the work.”⁴⁰ By making “direct reference to human scale” and to common perceptions of human embodiment, they serve to “activate a body consciousness strong enough to secure visceral [dis/]identification.”⁴¹ By this I mean that they “implicate” the viewer in a way that perpetually promises or threatens to

40 Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2010).

41 I borrow here and deploy differently Darby English's reading of Glenn Ligon's works. English writes: “it is a condition of entering these paintings that we permit them to enter us, and thereby to understand ourselves as implicated in their production.” Part of English's reading explores Ligon's engagement with Irving Sandler via his *The Triumph of American Painting. Triumph*, for English, “demonstrate[s] how modernist rhetoric pulls along in its wake the very social content it works so hard to shake off: that is, by presenting the embodied if suppressed difficulties, such as flatness, that define later-modernist painting, against itself, as functions of relationships external to painting. See English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. On disidentifications, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota Press, 1999).

obliterate the distance between beholder and beheld. But the metaphor of “colonization” should be pushed further and interrogated, and the potential identification or recognition made possible by this obliteration becomes both a marker of danger and desire when this “ambush” is considered more fully.

For curator Dan Cameron, the features of Cave's work described above allow the soundsuits to achieve “the engagement of the viewer at a level of completely sensual and tactile enjoyment,”⁴² but I suggest that the viewing subject who is affirmed in his “sensual and tactile enjoyment” in the space of the museum is haunted and interrogated in Cave's work through its dramatic doubling of the encounter between the beholder and the “not useful” art object with the colonial encounter between the “rational [white] subject” and the “other” body that is constituted by the colonial gaze.⁴³ The larger-than-life, not-quite-human forms; their contained or captive display for audience “enjoyment”; their admixtures of human hair, animal-like shapes and features, and “natural,” found objects; their striking similarity to costumes, masks, and ritual traditions of Benin and other African sites (as well as the ornamentation of Mardi Gras Indians); their indecipherable “language” and sounds in performance and video installations; their writhing, “exotic” dance performances—all of these suggest a peculiar slippage between the space of the museum and the colonial scene. And they also function to call up and question the simultaneous fear of and desire for “authentic” and radical otherness, for the consummation and consumption of difference in every sense. The construction of the “other” body of the colonized out of embodied and lived material difference is an act of violence and fantasy that produces

42 See Dan Cameron in Nick Cave, *Nick Cave: Sojourn* (Denver Art Museum, 2013).

43 Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao, *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

both viewer and “object.” As Anupama Rao and Steven Pierce articulate, the “act of recognizing someone as colonized was not an act of recognition, of reflecting what was already there. Rather, because the colonial context was inherently dehumanizing and inegalitarian, it deprived both colonizer and colonized of full humanity and placed the colonized in the category of the other, a position both injurious and inherently unstable.”⁴⁴ Thus, “[w]hite and black became positions that reflected not biology, not culture, but a position of privilege or disenfranchisement determined by one's relation to 'whiteness' as a phantasm.”⁴⁵ In Cave's work this form of “recognition” is reconstructed and replayed, looped, and remixed in the allegedly sanitized and nonviolent space of the museum. The soundsuits function, in short, to turn the museum into a scene of colonial encounter that elucidates and calls into question the presumed distance between forms of “looking” and longing in the museum and forms of violence in the colonial setting and in other modern spaces of bodily and epistemic projection and violation. The consummations of the “self-possessed” “rational [white] subject” in the museum and in the colony are not coterminous but they are always linked; they are also always anxious and under threat.

It is significant, here, that the suits themselves often incorporate forms and frames

44 They write, further, “The history of colonial corporeality thus encompasses a particular kind of modernizing project caught up in the rise of global capitalism, which comprised a distinctive relationship between the organization and exercise of political power and which enabled changing conceptions of personhood.” And later, “Violence constituted colonial difference, but the brutality of violating native bodies continually threatened scandal. Corporeal practices that governed the colonized en masse conflicted with liberal claims to universal equality. Equal (if separate) bodies implied a right to bodily integrity, but this norm emerged only through its scandalous violation, a pattern repeated from India to King Leopold's Congo, everywhere the Royal Navy sailed.” See 6-7 and 21.

45 In a related argument, George Yancy writes, “it is not the materiality of the dark body as such against which whites form and perpetuate their identities. Rather, the dark body as the phantasmic object of the white imaginary regulates production of the white self. Before long, the authority and power of whiteness, through white ideological sleight of hand, appears devoid of a beginning or an end. White reactionary values become the universal measure of the human. The Western world becomes the destined site of greatness. Black male bodies become equated with criminality. The dark body becomes the site of the uncivilized.” See Yancy Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gaze*, 49.

redolent of the particular tools of captivity of racial slavery—iron masks, barbed head-cages, and other cage-like frames appear underneath or within assemblages of lacquered beads and buttons and elaborate ornamentation.⁴⁶ One soundsuit (Figure 3), for instance, features a shopping cart forming part an elaborate headpiece and a cage-like mask, all adorned with hundreds of buttons. Its legs are squatted, as if under weight or preparing to leap; its arms are swept bag and incapable of movement. The suit powerfully mixes forms of constraint and torture whose purpose was at once to make impossible human sociality amongst slaves and, paradoxically, to “manage the depletion of life that resulted from the conditions”⁴⁷ of the Middle Passage and slavery with a primary emblem of contemporary consumer culture. The beaded fabric that hangs from and obscures the suit's “face” resemble at once chains, a whip, and decorative tassels. It resonates in this way with David Hammons' “Spade Series,” in which the metaphoric and symbolic implications of the term “spade” are explored by adorning shovels with chains, draped fabrics, instruments, and mannequin hands.⁴⁸ Hammons, as I mention above, is one of many black visual artists of the post-apartheid and “post-racial” moments in relation to whom Cave is seldom considered in significant detail. This and other aspects of Cave's work also resonate deeply with the work not just of Hammons but also the productions of a range of other prominent black artists since the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in Los Angeles, many of whom responded to the

46 This fact is widely noted but un(der)explored in reviews of Cave's work. An ARTFORUM reviewer, for instance, remarks, “The heads and torsos of five figures are obscured by metal armatures - cages, essentially - gussied up with the same strain of Miss Havisham-ish flourish as the lawn figurines.” The “lawn figurines” in question are the racist lawn statues Cave sometimes displays alongside the soundsuits; that they might share other links remains unquestioned, as I mentioned above. See “Nick Cave,” *ARTFORUM*, March 2009 <<http://www.mutualart.com/OpenArticle/Nick-Cave/A0C4E5989D00ED7F>>.

47 Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 36.

48 See *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble* (Institute for Contemporary Art, 1991) and Kellie Jones, *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960 – 1980* (Hammer Museum, 2011).

emergent conditions of the post-apartheid US by referencing the histories that were making and unmaking the social and political landscape in that moment of transition. I'm thinking particularly of works featured in *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2011-12, including Melvin Edwards' "Some Bright Morning" (1963) and its use of welded steel, works on paper by Charles White which link the black body to detritus (such as "Birmingham Totem," 1964), the references to captivity and commodification in John Outterbridge's "Case in Point" (1970) and "Captive Image #4" (1974-6), the found object assemblages by Noah Purifoy, and Betye Saar's "Spirit Catcher" (1977), among others.

Combined with its "distortion" of bodily form, the implied distortion of vision via the soundsuit's face cage might reference the vision of the captive slave, for whom, in the moment of capture, the slave ship appeared "as a collection of 'instruments of woe'—shackles, manacles, neck rings, locks, chains, the cat-o'-nine tails, the *speculum oris*"⁴⁹—as well as a vision that is obscured in the viewer of the art object, for whom instruments of constraint and torture can appear as a shimmering and fantastical surface. Fred Wilson, another black visual artist whose work turned, albeit more explicitly, to slavery in the early 1990s, dramatizes this powerfully in *Metalwork 1793-1880*, in which slave shackles are arrayed amongst ornate silver vessels from the same period.⁵⁰ In *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, this and other soundsuits are arrayed alongside life-sized photographs of Cave himself donning other instruments of constraint and torture: in one shot of Cave's head, "the artist's open mouth displays a rounded white object held

49 See Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Viking Penguin, 2007), 127.

50 See Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

in place by red-yarn netting anchored to his teeth”: “He is both poised to utter and impeded from



[Figure 3: Soundsuit with mixed media, buttons, shopping cart. Image courtesy of Nick Cave and James Prinz.]

doing so, his head tilted to the side and upward as though making a plea and expressing agony.”⁵¹

In another, “the enmeshed naked body of the artist [appears] entrapped and caged by the black-and-white fabric netting.”⁵² An accompanying video installation depicts Cave in the same cage-like suit, caught in a “continuous up-and-down motion as he vigorously wrestles with, and struggles to release himself from [the] netting” in an “endless filmic loop[s]” during which his

51 See Peter Erickson, “Meet Me at the Center of the Earth by Nick Cave (review),” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 31, no. 1 (2012): 148–51.

52 Ibid.

“body [sometimes] collapses and is crushed to the floor.”⁵³ If Wilson's “harrowing juxtapositions of objects” “[evoke] the material pressures that [order] the lives of black subjects and the larger worlds of which they [are] part,⁵⁴” Cave's partial obscuring of the implements of torture and cruelty (and, here, his play with visual apparatuses and his blending of restrictions of vision, vocality, and mobility) open onto a different but overlapping set of material pressures. The hybrid mixture of something-like-human and enslaved embodiment, under constraint, with a shopping cart as a symbol of the limited “freedom”—figured in purely economic terms—supposed to accrue to modern subjects speaks powerfully to the way in which racial slavery undergirds and remains present within commodity culture and how political and visual economies remain sutured to that ghostly presence, even as it is disavowed. Further, it speaks to the modes of bodily and material dispossession that are brutally evident in the Rodney King beating and the political economic landscapes of the “post-racial” US, in which black vulnerability to premature death and violently circumscribed life changes precisely as “black faces were increasingly well represented in the arts, higher education, and the mainstream media.”⁵⁵

The scenes and productions of (white) self-possession I'm invoking here through the term *captivation*, then, are twinned and haunted not (merely) by the distinct and varying corporeal practices of colonialism in general and in the abstract but by the specific forms of *captivity* of chattel slavery and its afterlives. The figure of the captive is she who is not supposed to be able

53 Ibid.

54 See Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 7.

55 Ibid, 6. On racism and premature death, see also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2006).

to occupy the space of captivation. The dominant visual and political economies of US political modernity have been structured by the figuration and containment of the black body through disciplinary discourses and scopic regimes centered on captivity, consumption, exchange, and disposability. As Hortense Spillers writes, “the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as prime commodity of exchange.”⁵⁶ It is thus through “*a visual economy of flesh and trade*,” writes Fleetwood following Spillers and Lisa Collins, that the “*black body enters the field of vision*.”⁵⁷ In the US post-racial moment, captivity—and the contemporary regime of carcerality for which the captive remains a central (if absented) figure—might be thought of as the reiterative reproduction of race, by way of technologies of containment and bodily disintegration for which the inherited “tools of raciality”⁵⁸ provide the ready-made populations, practices, and operative terrains for what is supposed to be racially unmarked carcerality. The visibilization and invisibilization of various “scenes of captivity” are central and formative features of post-racial common senses.⁵⁹ In invoking this fateful convergence of blackness, captivation, and captivity, the space of the museum, in Cave's work (as in Wilson's and Hammons's and Lorna Simpson's and Kara Walker's, amongst others)⁶⁰ is interrogated as one of the sites where the uneven of dispensations

56 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” quoted in Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 127.

57 Fleetwood, 127.

58 Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 200.

59 See Dylan Rodríguez, “American Globality and the US Prison Regime: State Violence and White Supremacy from Abu Ghraib to Stockton to Bagong Diwa,” *Kritika Kultura*, no. 9 (2007): 22–48; Rodríguez, “(Non) Scenes of Captivity: The Common Sense of Punishment and Death,” *Radical History Review* no. 96 (2006): 9–32.

60 See Roderick A. Ferguson, “A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 185–92; and Copeland, *Bound to Appear*.

of value and violence that accrue to certain types of racialized and (un)gendered bodies is materialized and disavowed, where regulative aesthetic protocols central to fabricating modern subjects cross and intermingle with the modes of bio-political regulation and violence that go under terms like “security.”⁶¹

Here it is significant that Cave's soundsuits are wearable and all modeled on Cave's own



[Figure 4: Soundsuit with mixed media, fabric, buttons, and bentwood chair. Image courtesy of Nick Cave and James Prinz.]

black and male body. That is, they reference blackness in particular as a signifier of radical alterity in the scopic regimes of colonialism: to look upon them in the gallery or museum requires the viewer to apprehend what at once seem to be animal-like or alien embodied forms and to apprehend the Black body as what shapes, holds up, or melds with those forms. This

61 Saidiya Hartman writes, “atrocious becomes a commodity for transnational consumption, and this history of defeat comes to be narrated as a story of progress and triumph? If restaging scenes of captivity and enslavement elide the distinction between sensation- alism and witnessing, risk sobriety for spectacle, and occlude the violence they set out to represent; they also create a memory of what one has not witnessed. The reenactment of the event of captivity contrives an enduring, visceral, and personal memory of the unimaginable.” See Hartman, “The Time of Slavery,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 757–77.

intimacy between the soundsuits and black skin—or, more properly, flesh—is reinforced by all of the photographic iterations of the suits that accompany their exhibition and performance, as they feature Cave himself or, occasionally, other black artists and performers. It is reinforced again and also troubled by the use of black mannequins under the suits in exhibitions, a technique which operates not only to reference racialized embodiment but also to revivify and question the relationship between the black body as commodified, displayed and circulated “object” and the black body as the point at which total or complete commodification breaks down or is rendered impossible.

The effect of the continual appearance of Cave's own body demands a consideration of how the form of his body haunts the suits by making possible their shape; it becomes a kind of negative space in each suit that operates as an animating presence and as a felt absence that can be glimpsed in the layers of the suits' surfaces. At times the soundsuits seem to reference unidentifiable bodies, the “not-yet-body bereft of the cultural accoutrements required for assignations of gender.”⁶² At other times, when Cave's own black and male body appears emerging from or underneath the suits, Cave risks subjecting his own body to what Maurice Wallace describes as “spectagraphia,” the mode of “cultural vision that frames black men 'through the spectral and the spectacular in racialist representations.'”⁶³ Cave's body, then, might

62 Michael A. Chaney, following Spillers on “the vexed dynamics of race and gender embodiment,” writes of “the slave's metaphysical expulsion from the body altogether”: “For Spillers, the slave configures flesh, the not-yet-body bereft of the cultural accoutrements required for assignations of gender. Stranded in this vestibular zone separating unacculturated flesh from the social and gendered descriptors of the body, the cuts and wounds of the slave's vestibular flesh are displayed for the pleasure of subject-viewers, who are, in turn, reassured of their own protective prophylaxes in the law. Likewise, Saidiya Hartman contends that even scenes of slave enjoyment and jollity reinforce white privilege by recalling the pained expression of the black body and thus associating blackness with subjection and terror.” See Michael A. Chaney, “Slave Cyborgs and the Black Infovirus: Ishmael Reed's Cybernetic Aesthetics,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 2 (2003): 261–83; see also Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

63 Wallace, quoted in Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 123. See Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995* (Duke University

be read as contributing to the spectacularization and disappearance of the black male body (and redoubling the marking of the black female body as “ontologically aberrant”) but his body might also be offered as a prominent but also surreptitious ground that situates the soundsuits in relation to common senses of racial embodiment, in that it becomes the point of refusal of the supposed otherworldliness—or escape from this world—that the soundsuits seem to hold out. But it is a ground and refusal that is immediately eroded, in some sense, by the range of bodies that show up in the suits and alongside them in performance and by the mannequins and other forms that lend the suits shape and coherence in installations.

To summarize: read in this way, Cave's work turns the museum into the scene of captivity of colonial encounter (enclosure, capture, violation) even as the encounter with radical difference is figured as fantastical and playful. Meanwhile, in constructing the “other” body, the soundsuit, as a syncretic *mélange* or assemblage of devalued and discarded commodities through which the form and frame and black bodies can still be glimpsed, Cave's works do more than question assumptions about the space of the museum as a sanitized space free from the violence of the colony and other modern spaces of bodily and epistemic violence. They open onto dense questions about the valuation of black and other “other” bodies in relation to the commodified objects through which the black body is framed, disappeared, and transmuted.

Commodification

As captivating ensembles or assemblages, the soundsuits are comprised specifically of commodified objects supposedly “not useful for survival”—grandmothers' doilies, fragments of

Press, 2002).

phonographs, a menagerie of ceramic birds, endless twigs, metallic flowers, beanie babies, antique sifters, sea shells, hot pads, craft baskets, sock monkeys, endless waves of synthetic hair—all of which are sutured together and sewn by multiple hands as local producers sew, fabricate, and create not pre-planned suits but semi-spontaneously and jointly-crafted assemblages. One of the effects of the syncretic, improvisational, and collective process through which these objects are conjoined is that the distinctions between high fashion, high art, mass culture (and its disposable commodities), textiles and craft are at once redrawn and collapsed. The “sartorial glow of the commodity”⁶⁴ produced in high art and high fashion here bespeaks, again and again, the densely ordered productions of surplus values and gendered and racialized surplus populations upon which it relies. The captive body and the captivated viewer that Cave's work reference also, then, reference the captive body's relationships to other commodities—and the forms of de/valuation for which the captive body is a central indicator and tool of measurement—and to other kinds of bodies.

Maureen P. Sherlock describes the contemporary alignments and contradictions of high fashion and disposable commodity culture that Cave's work performs thusly:

At this historical juncture, the complex system of the rag trade is the model not only for art, but all forms of production, distribution, advertising, and consumption. The plight of every textile and garment worker, past and present, is the future of everyone under the rule of a global late capital. [. . .]. At first, fashion appears to resolve certain conflicts within the economy by creating new 'needs' for the consumer that result in increased production and profit, but it also displaces many of the older producers and their goods. In flexible accumulation someone always pays, and anyone can be left with a warehouse full of Cabbage Patch Kids or Currins, Beanie Babies or Basquiats.⁶⁵

64 See Maureen P. Sherlock, “Piecework: Home, Factory, Studio, Exhibit,” *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production*, 2007, 1–30, pg. 1.

65 Ibid, 2.

Cave's work playfully comments on, recapitulates, and partially unveils this situation by blending the intricate techniques and styles of high fashion with the accumulation and reiteration of expendable commodities of all sorts (including Beanie Babies). For Sherlock, exhibition spaces (and other institutions, such as the studio) are “sites of conflict where capital seeks to solidify its power and profit over the existential needs of people to make themselves out of their own labor, intelligence, and creativity,” often “consign[ing] [to] the liminal the infinite variety of real producers, factory workers, and artists alike.”⁶⁶ Cave participates in this process—and his works come out of it—even as it seems to undermine it, in part by making collective acts of making central to his exhibitions and in part by referencing the world-making traditions through which differently situated peoples produce out of their “own labor, intelligence, and creativity.”

In so doing, Cave's work simultaneously elides and calls attention to the “fragile and worked-to-the-bone body” that is fashion's precondition and “substrate”—before the suits themselves come into being or movement for performance.⁶⁷ And it aligns the use and display of the captive body, unevenly, with the use, disciplining, and disappearance of the laboring body within regimes of global capital. Here it is significant that the soundsuits constantly cite the elaborate forms of local (re)production on all coasts of the Atlantic and beyond: in addition to the traditions of Benin and New Orleans mentioned above, Cave and commentators variously make reference to Nigerian, Haitian, Japanese, British, and other traditions, including those documented by photographer Phyllis Galembo, with whom Cave had a collaborative show.⁶⁸ But

66 Ibid, 5.

67 Ibid, 1.

68 “For more than 20 years, Galembo has traveled alone with her 'portable studio' to small villages and large cities [throughout West Africa], documenting costumes and culture. Her large-scale color photographs depict costumes worn by traditional priests, dancers, and voodoo practitioners. Her subjects' faces are hidden behind a mask of inexpensive materials including paint, flowers, sticks, carved wood, leaves, and yarn.” See Amy

his works also reference contemporary craft traditions in the US and the insurgent and controversial presence of feminist “crafting” practices within and beyond the art world, particularly in the last two decades. Ann Cvetkovich argues that “[c]rafting forges a complex set of relations to the historical past, situating itself in dialogue with both second-wave feminisms of the 1970s [. . .] as well as with longer histories of women's culture and industrial culture.”⁶⁹ By blending collective “Global North” crafting traditions with processes of mass, industrial production and with other sites, forms, and traditions of production explicitly, and by deploying the detritus of commodity culture prominently *within* the process of “craft,” which is often figured as purely artisanal and alternative to mass culture and mass production, Cave's soundsuits do not neatly endorse craft as outside or non-complicit in the forms of exploitation and discipline that produce the laboring body.⁷⁰ (Relatedly, the use of pearl buttons by the tens of thousands also references other craft and festival traditions in which working class culture both contains itself and accommodates rather than upends the regimes of production in which the laboring body is caught up, such as the “Pearly Kings and Queens” of London.)

Stockwell Mercer, “Nick Cave and Phyllis Galembo explore masquerades in Halsey exhibit,” *Charleston City Paper*, accessed March 2, 2014 <<http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/nick-cave-and-phyllis-galembo-explore-masquerades-in-halsey-exhibit/Content?oid=2008534>>

⁶⁹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2012), 177-183.

⁷⁰ This part of my reading is influenced by conversations with Suzanne Schmidt and a dissertation writing group directed by Professor Eva Cherniavsky at the University of Washington.



[Figure 5: Soundsuit, mixed media with synthetic hair. Image Courtesy of Nick Cave and James Prinz.]

I'm suggesting that Cave's work takes up (rather than collapsing or conflating) the differential and discontinuous productions of the disposability of the black body, the disposability of the laboring body, and the disposability of the object—the mass-produced commodity, the individually-crafted familial or affective trinket, and everything in between. But it does not conflate the three or hold out an unproblematic reclamation of the body as the body of the self-possessed subject. That is, his work does not counter the historic and ongoing bodily dispossession that characterizes New World black experience with the promise of a “post-racial”

form of self-possession. Nor does it simply counter capital's valuation/devaluation of objects by straightforwardly arguing for the valuation of the discarded, the rejected, the undervalued. Instead it takes up the questions of possession, propriety, and value, from within, as ongoing or unfinished questions about formation and potential transformation.



[Figure 6: Soundsuit, mixed media, twigs, and found objects. Image courtesy of Nick Cave and James Prinz.]



[Figure 7: Soundsuit, mixed media including mannequin, fabric, ceramic birds, metal flowers, and antique gramophone. Image courtesy of Nick Cave and James Prinz.]

Surrogation

To explore this line of inquiry further, I turn now to *surrogation* as a way into a consideration of the effective and affective movement and sound the soundsuits make possible. I use the term to name what is promised and threatened by the immersive, enveloping quality of the soundsuits in exhibition and performance, whether they literally take in their viewers (as

when viewers are chosen to inhabit the suits) or invite acts of projection and imagined inhabitation through their interaction and interplay with viewers. In their most extreme forms, they invite viewers to wear and perform them directly, and they often flee the space of the museum entirely in what are sometimes called “invasions,” in which the soundsuits in take on new and unpredictable life and cross both literal and metaphorical boundaries of the gallery. I suggest that soundsuits both literally and metaphorically invite the audience to identify with or put on the soundsuits, to embody otherness or become its surrogate (even as assemblages of objects seem to become surrogates for the captive body). The layered masks of Cave's soundsuits ultimately unhinge the very desires and expectations they activate in their viewers—the desire for otherness, the exoticism of “African” forms and dress, and the imagination of surrogation or the inhabitation of a “second skin” through which one might “capitalize on [the] disturbatory effects” of the other, specifically black, body.⁷¹

My deployment of surrogation in the context of the ambit of Cave's work cites, uneasily, Joseph Roach's theorization in *Cities of the Dead*.⁷² For Roach, surrogation is one way to name the richly complex performances, practices, and processes through which cultural self-invention and transformation occur in the historically novel spaces and times of an emergent colonial capitalist world system and the contradictory racialist discursive formations at its core. “The key,” he writes, “is to understand how circum-Atlantic societies, confronted with revolutionary circumstances for which few precedents existed, have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others. They could not perform themselves, however, unless they also

71 See Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and Copeland, *Bound to Appear*.

72 Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

performed what and who they thought they were not.”⁷³ My different use of surrogation here cites Roach's theorization in the first instance because the grammars of embodiment and performance Cave's work ceaselessly reference and depart from are those constitutive of and emergent from the creation of the New World, that surreal time-space where, as Michael Taussig writes (engaging in a productively problematic metaphors of reproduction), the African, the European, and the Native gave birth to the modern world.⁷⁴ In the second instance, Cave's work marks the post-racial present as an apparent departure from the cultural performance traditions Roach names as central to the circum-Atlantic world and their tendency to proffer self-definition through distancing from cultural others—distancing that always risks substitution. Cave's work seems to offer landscapes in which, paradoxically, those grammars of embodiment and performance might be left behind—or already have been, or have never existed at all—and, at the same time, his works require those grammars to the extent that the soundsuits rely on the “human” body as frame as they elaborate a series of scenes of transgression and embodied play. What I mean is that the soundsuits project enacts at once a deeply colonial drama that produces and performs what we have come to know as racial and gender difference and it slyly insinuates that the legacies of those modes of embodiment might be transcended through the dramatic acts of overlap and substitution in which audience participants can move amongst and *become* forms of radical bodily alterity.⁷⁵ In so doing, it renders them at once spectral and material, present and absent. The circum-Atlantic domains that appear under Roach's lenses are “particular kinds of

73 Ibid, 5.

74 See Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1986).

75 “Raced skin,” writes Anne Anlin Cheng, “is a *modern material fascination*.” See *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 25.

world[s] [. . .] in which racial surrogation operates as a potent social threat.”⁷⁶ My use of the term transmutes the concept onto a social landscape in which “racial surrogation,” the potential or promise of the inhabitation of racial difference or the becoming-other, taking on a “second skin,” is a potent feature of common senses of embodiment—even as race is alleged or promised to be nearly obsolete.⁷⁷

Cave himself has referred to the suits as a kind of “second skin” and as “armor”: “Like a coat of armor, [the soundsuits] embellish the body while protecting the wearer from outside culture.”⁷⁸ (I like the magic of it, and the question of who really is in [the] position of authority.) In is in their implied and actual motion, through dance and sound, that the complicated implications of this sense of the soundsuits can best be glimpsed. Motion is always implied by the suits, and, as Cave discovered when he first began to weave together twigs to make the first suit, they produce sound the moment they start to move or when they are activated by outside forces. As Cave puts it, “Something inexplicable happens when the suits are in motion, the sounds they make give them a magical life of their own.”⁷⁹ As they do, as I've suggested, they conjure and sound out whole histories of fabrication, collective acts of world-making, moving and looking, and potential captivations that cannot be trusted to stick to the script of regulative aesthetic protocols or assumed divisions of genre, style, and medium. In performance, they

76 Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 31.

77 Roach writes, “The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central.” See *Cities of the Dead*, 39.

78 Quoted in Peter Erickson, “Meet Me at the Center of the Earth by Nick Cave (review),” *nka Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 31, no. 1 (2012): 148–51.

79 Quoted in Peter Erickson, “Meet Me at the Center of the Earth by Nick Cave (review),” *nka Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 31, no. 1 (2012): 148–51.

activate and are activated by professional dancers and security guards, first-time performers and veteran choreographers, and they call up religious rituals, underground dance scenes, drag shows, and street performance, all sites historically inadmissible to the museum. It is striking that these literally and metaphorically immersive qualities of the suits, particularly in motion, incite not just claims about fantastical modes of embodiment detached from racialized and gendered violence but also claims about the liberatory potential of the suits. As one scholar puts it, plainly, “The artworks [in *Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*] enable the artist and others to achieve liberation.”⁸⁰

Lindon Barrett, in an extended investigation of the black singing voice's significance within and against the dominant sense-making, meaning-making, and value-producing activities of New World social formations, also attends to the importance of the dancing body. “In a landscape in which African American presence is initially premised on ruthlessly exacted labor,” writes Barrett, “dance seems a singularly important activity in which immanently resistant communality is expressed and achieved insofar as the capacity of the body to work is taken and dispersed 'uselessly.’”⁸¹ Barrett continues:

Dance, as it ludically redirects the capacity of the body to work, exchanges the alien 'value' inherent in the status of chattel (or outsider) for the 'value' of a resistant self that finds no self-recognition in officially sanctioned 'work.' Dance, this is to say, can be understood as one means of establishing the rule of the self in circumstances that provide very little opportunity to do so. Like the singing voice, it can be considered a subversive African American sign for the most intimate control of one's body, self, community, and expressivity. In dance, the capacity to work is recreated in a novel, subtly meaningful and satisfying form.⁸²

80 See Peter Erickson, “Meet Me at the Center of the Earth by Nick Cave (review),” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 31, no. 1 (2012): 148–51.

81 Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, 88.

82 *Ibid.*, 88.

Barrett's work makes possible a consideration of the deployment of dance in and in relation to Nick Cave's soundsuits project as it militates against simple notions of liberation, surrogation, and self-possession.

As a student, Nick Cave trained as a dancer under Alvin Ailey, and that experience has influenced all of his subsequent work. In investigating the cultural significance of Alvin Ailey's dance company, Thomas DeFrantz names Ailey's productions as “emphatic dances of presence” that address both “unequal power relations” and “kinetic fun.”⁸³ “These dances implicate all who would perform them,” writes DeFrantz, “to be in the pursuit of an efficacious corporeal orature. Their mastery can be achieved by any dancer—not only by black bodies [. . .].”⁸⁴ The juxtaposition between the particular African American valences of dance described by Barrett and the assertion, by DeFrantz, of the potentially open and available “mastery” inherent in Ailey's choreographic interventions highlights usefully the dissonance between the protective second skin or armor articulated by Cave (and its liberatory potential) and the promise of inhabitation and liberation for all who apprehend or wear them. In this regard, I suggest that the soundsuits hold up and revivify the modern(ist) impulse for second skin inhabitation. But in so doing it redraws the distinction it seems at times to erase. In viewing the suits in performance, the viewer must perform a spectatorial labor in which the black body is placed in intimate and variable relation to other (de)valued and commodified things; the affective labor of the viewer at once segments and sutures the black body and the commodified fragments again and again, precisely at a moment in which the dancing body threatens a mobile, momentary, unruly “rule of

83 See Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 121.

84 Ibid.

the self,” to borrow Barrett's terms. The second skin that would protect Cave from “outside culture”—that which emerged from the question, “How can I condition myself to protect my spirit?”—defies and confounds that other mode of inhabitation it seems to make possible—the use of black skin as phantasmatic ornamentation for the production and protection of (white) self-possession. Cave's work propensity for mobilizing sound as a motivating or activating force is important here insofar as the sonic propels and contains the material and the visual, even as it becomes an effect of the material and the visual. The sounds of Cave's suits are both above and below the register of the human voice, a kind of sub-linguistic or extra-linguistic hum or drone that extends the suits outwardly and inwardly, troubling again the boundaries of person and thing, between listener and speaker, between viewer and viewed. In densely layering, collating, and sounding multiple orders of embodiment, including those premised on commodification and the denial of black subjectivity—that continuing “double violation” that lives in the suits as traces and fragments—the soundsuits invoke not a pure or permanent reclamation of subjectivity and self-possession or merely a critique of the ongoing violence of those orders. Rather, they are a kind of armor for the spirit that also turns inward against the body, or the alleged certainty of self-possession. They seem to presage modes of embodiment, other orders of being not premised on self-possession, in stars and at the center of an earth to which the present order is affixed but might be made otherwise.

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