

Afro-Fabulations

The Queer Drama of Black Life

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Introduction

A Race against Time?

Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Other-than-Moral Sense”

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out.

—Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

In a memorable scene from the 1968 drag documentary classic *The Queen*, the legendary Crystal LaBeija goes off against the judges and organizers of the Miss All-American Camp Beauty Pageant for awarding the crown to a younger white ingenue from Philadelphia, in an upset victory that confirms LaBeija’s view that “the fix” was in. Stalking off stage haughtily, LaBeija proceeds to hold forth as cameras roll, alternately addressing the documentary filmmakers and defying the machinery of representation that she recognizes them to be complicit in. At the pageant, Crystal LaBeija represents an uptown black drag community that,



Figure 1.1. Crystal LaBeija in *The Queen* (1967). Screenshot by author.

she now reveals, had been of divided opinion about whether or not to participate. Without naming racism directly as the cause of her loss to Sabrina's "all-American" protégé Harlow, LaBeija contests the system of values that had been set up to judge her in the first place. Inverting those values in an epic "read" endows LaBeija, even in ostensible loss, with an untouchable aura of divinity. Accused of "showing her color" for her refusal to meekly accept her runner-up status—a coded accusation if ever there was one—LaBeija spits back, "I have a *right to show my color*, darling! I am beautiful and I know I'm beautiful!"¹

Insofar as the queerness of black life, which is nothing other than the blackness of queer life, is constituted through such a right to show our colors, this scene is a master class in the perils and possibilities of exposure. During the scene, which ends with Sabrina herself intervening to defend the judges' decision, LaBeija blazes in incandescent fury at the pageant, at the documentary crew, at the hapless winner (who is cringing in a corner trying very much to disappear), and at herself for submitting to be judged in the first place. Other belles of the Harlem drag balls (including Dorian Corey, who would much later star in an-

other influential documentary, 1991's *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston) had declined to participate in *The Queen*. It seems that even LaBeija had had her doubts. "No, I didn't sign any release," she declares on camera, "and if she [Sabrina] releases any picture of me, I will sue the fool. . . . She won't make any money off of my name," LaBeija vows, before in the very next breath inviting the camera to take a picture of her side-by-side with Harlow to show how truly biased the judges had been. In this epic *fort-da* game with the camera, LaBeija manages both to solicit the cinematic gaze and to dispute its power. Against a hierarchy of visibility and beauty, which disparages the black femme glamour she finds beautiful in herself and others, LaBeija afro-fabulates an alternate system of values for the documentarians to witness, if not fully record. She offers them a partial glimpse into a darker queer world than *The Queen* is able to capture. In so doing, she demonstrates how to perform *for and against* the camera.²

How might we begin to make sense of the paradoxical vibrance of a form of life endangered, or even erased, by efforts at documentation and representation? What do we do with feelings that resist retrospective vindication? In this book, I am interested in answering such questions through a critical and fabulative archiving of a world that was "never meant to survive," as Audre Lorde memorably put it—and a world that, I would add, was perhaps also never meant to appear.³ The persistent reappearance of that which was never meant to appear, but was instead meant to be kept outside or below representation forms the first sense in which this book will mobilize the term "afro-fabulation." I don't mean by this that the fabulist is a storyteller in any straightforward sense of that familiar term, still less that she is a liar. More nearly, fabulation engages the philosophical position, identified by Henri Bergson among other modern theorists, that the irreversibility of the flow of time is the paradoxical source of freedom.⁴ Fabulation points to the deconstructive relation between story and plot, a topic more frequently studied in literature than, as I shall attempt here, in relation to visual and performance art. When LaBeija abjures and, in the next breath, solicits the recording apparatus of the camera, she enacts this paradox of fabulation vividly. When we consider our own transgression of her interdiction of that gaze, we can see that blackness grasps us even as we seek to grasp it. In the chapters that follow, I track key moments of fabulation

in contemporary black art and performance, honing in on moments in which black subversions of sexual and gender conformity prove excessive, disorderly, or simply unintelligible to an external gaze. Contesting a historical and political sequence that is by now familiar—a sequence in which gay rights follows upon civil rights in progressive lock-step, and the queer theory of the 1990s builds upon the feminist, black, and anti-colonial writings of the 1960s and 1970s—I instead look to the ways the study of blackness can rearrange our perceptions of chronology, time, and temporality. My aim is to speculate on the manner in which the “changing same” of black aesthetics and expressivity may have always already been queer.⁵

Performing for and against the Camera

Acts of afro-fabulation such as LaBeija’s epic read, I will argue in this book, operate as a queer hack of the codes of an anti-black world, and rely for their success on a vernacular awareness of, and confrontation with, the manner in which gender and sexual norms operate to reproduce systems of racial hierarchy. While critical analysis and traditions of protest have cultivated theoretical and methodological priorities among race, gender, sexuality, and class, at the intersection where LaBeija engages the camera (and, through it, the entire cinematic apparatus of capture), the black fabulative subject must perform with her whole self, albeit a self iterated to another power.⁶ Recognizing the mythmaking function of the camera to speak to what Gilles Deleuze terms a “people who are missing,” LaBeija races against time to preserve and, in fact, to invent the splendor of her competitive performance.⁷ Knowing how the rules and codes are stacked against them, competitive black subjects like LaBeija perfect the skill of back chat, shade, reading, and other hacks of the color line, which, when they work successfully, reveal the beauty of a terrible (and to some, terrifying) joy. The terrible joy of LaBeija’s queer performance, which throws shade and color upon a whitewashed pageant, is not shuckin’ or jivin’, but their opposite. Bound to appear, she takes refuge in a performative agency that is derived specifically from the multiplicity of her sisters, both sisters present with her and those who stayed home.⁸ She addresses us, here in the future, without being able to know how she has changed us.

This book’s account of afro-fabulation is thus before anything else a theory of the event. There are of course many theories of the event, and also, as we shall see, theories of the “nonevent.”⁹ In most respects the incident captured on camera would almost assuredly be termed a nonevent. A belated and ineffective protest, it is shut down within the narrative logic of the film itself.¹⁰ And either a win or a loss at a drag ball that is itself in breach of the law against cross-dressing can hardly be assimilated to any grand narrative of history. Rather than looking to this moment of performing for and against the camera as a decisive act of agency, then, I look instead to theories of the ordinary and the everyday as the texture out of which the eventfulness of fabulation arises. If one of the most common assertions of performance studies is that performance is everywhere, *Afro-Fabulations* looks to that nondescript character, that quality of *in media res*, and attends especially to those moments and locations where a change in the surround that is blackness seems to come out of nowhere.

My claim in this book is that afro-fabulation is a theory and practice of black time and temporality, and the following pages lay out the scope of this claim as it pertains to both the study of performance and the theory of performativity. Both art and literature are impacted by afro-fabulation as trans-disciplinary study. Cutting across disciplinary approaches affords me a method of doing work that apprehends the black artist in a range of media. Within the contemporary social and political movements to which my own scholarly labors are indebted, such breadth seeks to work against being disciplined by the academy through a scholarly protocol of divide and conquer. A second danger, which I also consider, is the risk of communicating and rendering overly explicit that which ought more tactically remain camouflaged. In order better to apprehend the general antagonism within the specific contradiction of our present conjuncture, then, I outline these preliminary remarks by way of afro-fabulation as a trans-disciplinary method.

Although I am interested in the everydayness of black performance, one ordinary and commonsense usage of “fabulation” must be clarified at the outset. A fabulist in my parlance is nothing like a liar. More nearly, fabulation exposes the *relation* between truth and lying in an other-than-moral sense, to paraphrase Nietzsche. My interest in fabulationality—the entangled and angular socialities generated by fabulation—is of course

also inspired by the “poetics of relation” pioneered by Édouard Glissant.¹¹ It exposes the difference in every repetition, as exemplified by a writer like Gayl Jones, in particular in her novel *Mosquito*, in which her garrulous narrator promises to distinguish between “communicating” and “camouflage.”¹² Incredibly detailed and specific one minute, the narrator of this epic novel of the American Southwest turns reticent and guarded the next. She is not an “untrustworthy” narrator, however. Her reticence commands respect and produces trust. When she “confabulates,” she admits she may be confused on a point or two. But these points of incoherence in her subjective memory are not a sign of dissemblance; they are, instead, sites of what I will describe as *impossibility*. We see that the sanctuary work Jones’s protagonist engages in tethers together worlds that can and cannot be, and is thus a necessary step toward investigating possibilities outside our present terms of order. This is an impossibility, rather than a contradiction, and her slogan might be: “Another world is impossible.” Afro-fabulation, in Jones, is thus also en route toward the “critical fabulation” that black feminist historian Saidiya Hartman has proposed, and gestures to the “speculative fabulation” proposed by feminist science theorist Donna Haraway.¹³

Such black feminist and posthumanist acts of speculation are never simply a matter of inventing tall tales from whole cloth. More nearly, they are the tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false. It is an insurgent movement—in the face of an intransigent and ever-mutating anti-blackness—toward something else, something other, something more. While moments of afro-fabulation are indeed often ephemeral and fleeting—as with LaBeija’s performance—they may also be as monumental and enduring as Jones’s novels. Though neither may transform the conditions under which they appear, they live on through performative and narrative strategies and tactics that draw out of a black feminist and queer repository of counter-conduct, finding in collective memory an ever-renewing series of stratagems for aesthetic oppositionality.¹⁴

The work of Saidiya Hartman in imagining and enacting “critical fabulation” is crucial here because of the way it throws into crisis the progressive teleology from bondage to freedom, and thus calls upon us to examine more carefully the afterlives of slavery.¹⁵ The short essay “Venus in Two Acts,” in which Hartman outlines a series of questions leading

toward a critical speculative poetics of fabulation, has been a touchstone for my thinking, even as I look to a seemingly different set of archives and questions. How might critical fabulation, I ask, be brought to bear in these other contexts? In particular, I seek in these chapters to take a set of questions that emerged at the nexus of history and literary studies and bring them to bear upon performance, cinema, art, music, and digital technology. Chapter 2, for instance, is grounded in traditional questions of archival recovery, whereas chapter 4 looks to the mnemonic and memorializing function of performance and public art, and chapter 8 turns our focus on techno-scientific projects aiming to escape the all-consuming racial past. Afro-fabulation as I intend it here demands interdisciplinary modes of investigation.

Put another way, the phenomena of fabulation that I pursue here—across a range of aesthetic instances—is tethered to the classic paradox of fiction: the matter of why and how it is that a story we know to be untrue can nonetheless inspire belief, emotion, and attachment.¹⁶ Fictions, a theory of fabulation can tell us, do not simply attach themselves to moments of idle fantasy, play, instruction, or other socially acceptable occasions for storytelling. Fictions instead arise out of the indeterminacy and flux of living and dying, with life being perhaps the greatest fiction of all. “There is fiction in the space between,” Tracy Chapman sings, “the lines of your page of memories.”¹⁷ If the paradox of fiction threatens to untether both history and memory from the grounds of veridiction, these powers of the false are not so much to be enthusiastically embraced as they are to be critically interrogated. Black art and performance can aid this process of critical fabulation in a variety of ways I will explore over the course of this book, but especially insofar as they bring into co-presence a sense of the impossible, mingling what was with what might have been.

We can see this co-presence at work in performance and video artist Wu Tsang’s 2012 film *for how we perceived a life* (Take 3), which revisits and re-performs LaBeija’s audacious moment of backchat from *The Queen*.¹⁸ The short video begins with five performers in a huddle, who emerge to enact short sequences that combine elements from the dialogue of both *Paris Is Burning* and *The Queen*, into which the artist has also interpolated dialogue from subsequent interviews as well as archival footage she recovered from the UCLA Film & Television Archives.

Serving the children shade and color, Tsang's ensemble moves as a living reenactment of the cinematic apparatus, which they manage to bring to an abrupt and stuttering series of halts. If documentary cinema imposes sequential, periodizing, "time-stamped" time upon the everyday, the trans-aesthetic of queer of color performance here moves in and through the cut, accumulating temporal vignettes in a layered and folded manner that suspends historicity.¹⁹ Yet even though it is grounded in both archival research and oral history, *for how we perceived a life* is nothing like an earnest historical reconstruction. It is instead a performed fabulation, construed here through a technique the artist has called "full body quotation." Through quoting and re-performing decontextualized fragments from these germinal films, *for how we perceived a life* explores the need of the black and brown feminist, queer, and transgender participants in the ballroom scene to be seen, heard, and felt, while resisting the temptation to accept visibility under dominative constraints as the fulfillment of that wish.²⁰ The implicit theory of the archive in Tsang's term, "full body quotation," is telling.²¹ Through it, Tsang seeks to locate new aims for past goals, finding in the historical record a set of fabulous resources and stratagems. Turning the gaze back upon the filmmakers, quoting from archival footage of Jennie Livingstone (who is mostly unseen and unheard in *Paris Is Burning*), and citing LaBeija's protest of *The Queen*, *for how we perceived a life* implicitly raises questions about its own status as a fiction.

Within the ensemble Tsang gathers, Mikeah Jennings's full body quotation of LaBeija stands out as the kind of homage to a legendary forbear that is the stuff of queer subculture (and of drag performance in particular, for which transformational impersonation is key to the process of transmitting cultural memory). As interpolated into a performance and film largely concerned with the more recent (and still hotly debated) *Paris Is Burning*, Jennings's full-body quotation of LaBeija from the earlier film *The Queen* appears almost out of nowhere. The film thus suggests a deeper history than contemporary queer and trans polemics often concern themselves with, a history that emerges into the present only in incandescent and unpredictable flashes. And yet, rather than taking this historical audio-image from the 1960s out of context, Tsang's performance film is perhaps better described as *creating* a new context for it, one based upon a trans of color fabulation of the people who are



Figure 1.2. Mikeah Jennings in Wu Tsang, *for how we perceived a life* (Take 3) (2012). Film still.

missing. Inventing a critical genealogy for contemporary trans performance, Tsang's work crisscrosses black, brown, and Asian bodies and their impossible histories. Blackness inheres in this film less as an identity assigned to all its participants, or its author, and more as a protective coloration they may take temporary shelter in. This is to say, the film serves to deepen the historical referent of contemporary debates around queer and trans theory and aesthetics by moving past the 1990s to get to the 1960s, moving past the "new queer cinema" to get to the sex and gender dissident cinema of the pre-Stonewall era. What could be taken as a corrective or rebuke to these earlier queer films instead unfolds as a resonant meditation on black and queer duration.

Encountering Mikeah Jennings's re-performance of Crystal LaBeija's read more than a generation on also provides an opportunity to explore the changing same of black performance as an intertwining of "tensed" and "tenseless" time. I engage this difference more in chapter 4 on deep and dark time, which I develop as a black and brown critique of the increasingly influential concept of "the Anthropocene" that presumes to theorize the human impact on the planet. By evoking this distinction between tensed and tenseless time, I engage the work of Michelle Wright, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, and others working in the nascent area of black temporality

studies.²² Wright has been particularly eloquent in finding, within modern physical theories of times, grounds for imagining blackness otherwise. While I avoid the “beyonding” rhetoric that characterizes Wright’s approach to what she terms the “middle passage epistemology,” I share her interest in reading temporality contrapuntally, that is, as both tensed and tenseless. We can gain an initial sense of what this means if we consider a way of thinking about the original 1967 competition and its contemporary reenactment by Jennings, not simply as a sequence in which the first event “causes” the second, but also in relation to a conception of time in which the two can be said to share in a coeval presentness that we can call, after the philosopher Henri Bergson, “duration.” In Homay King’s useful explication of Bergson, duration is always available, but it is usually screened out.²³ In order to access it, there must be a coalescence between the sequential, tensed temporality of the ongoing present (which I will associate with Adrian Piper’s “indexical time”) and a tenseless time (which I will associate with Amiri Baraka’s concept of the changing same). The kind of fugitive time that allows for access to something beyond and for the emergence of the virtual is not just ordinary, everyday time. It is what Bergson called *la durée*, duration.

Fabulation as I mean it participates in this “kind of time” that Bergson names “duration” and that I refer to mostly as “tenseless time,” or the time of the virtual.²⁴ I share with King the perception that such a sense of tenseless time is of particular importance to black and minoritarian subjects, for whom the gap opened out between the possible and the potential, no matter how slight, remains crucial. Finding in Crystal LaBeija a tenseless time of fugitivity and rebellion under unpromising conditions can serve as an important corrective to a progressive or presentist conception of social change as an overcoming or erasure of the benighted past. The once and future Marxist analytic that this text moves in constant tension with teaches us all something of what Bergson calls “irreversibility” and what David Harvey calls “accumulation through dispossession.”²⁵ Through a performative ethic of citation, *for how we perceived a life* (Take 3) strikes a balance between the unacceptable alternatives of either erasing the queer and trans of color history as always already “problematic,” or alternatively, doggedly defending a historical record of necessarily impartial and imperfect representation as “the best that we could do at the time.” In positing LaBeija’s original read

and subsequent trans and queer citations of it as examples of performing both for and against the camera, I aim also to further a revived critical confidence in an image that participates in a virtual set of impossible pasts and futures, a black speculative engagement with the camera and, more broadly, with the documentary and archival historical apparatus.

In these pages I seek to diagram a virtual, tenseless blackness that shadows and camouflages the communicative apparatus that colonizes time. This blackness is queer insofar as it resists reproductive, developmental, and accumulative time, but also insofar as it is availed to an array of impossible subjects that must each find it at their own tempo. Although music proper may appear to be given relatively short shrift in this book, the theory of black polytemporality put forward here under the rubric of afro-fabulation is nothing other than a modest contribution to the afro-philo-sonic fictions that Alexander Weheliye and Julian Henriques have taught us to hear emanating from the dread refuges of black diasporic rebellion. Black music is the social organization of black time for revolution, and this text seeks a conception of the visual and the literary that can grapple with that consequence.

I completed this study at a moment when ethical and critical debates regarding the visibility, spectacularity, and representation of black lives in a North American context were still intensifying. We are no longer, as we once were, inclined to idealize performance as that which escapes all forms of recording and representation and disappears into the ever-receding present.²⁶ This definition of performance gave the young, emerging academic field of performance studies its wished for proper object, but in so doing, it split the field off from concurrent work in cultural studies, visual studies, and new media studies. Although there are certainly unrecorded performances from the era of *The Queen*, and while there certainly are differences and distinctions to be made between a live performance by Wu Tsang and the performance for (and against) the camera that I have discussed, reifying such differences masks precisely those aspects of performance that are calibrated in dialogic tension with actual or potential recording. So rather than consider the live as that which disappears, I approach it instead as that which accumulates in and as the virtual.

Periodically in this book, I will refer to this queer time of black memory as a shadow archive. I do so in order to suggest that a camouflaged

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presence is not an absent presence, and that the points of access to the tenseless time of the virtual are immanent to the changing same of black performance. In mobilizing this trope of the shadow archive, I seek to explore how a repertoire of blackness and queerness is not separate from, but is instead deeply entangled with the various analogue and digital archives that unevenly document it. If afro-fabulation entails an unexpected appearance (although as we shall see it entails much more than that), then this appearance has everything to do with a mode of relating to hegemony and hegemonic visibility, which bears testimony to the ever-inventive resources of shady conviviality on the lower frequencies.

From Reparative Reading to Fabulationality

Art is resistance: it resists death, slavery, infamy, shame. But a people can't worry about art. How is a people created, through what terrible suffering? When a people's created, it is through its own resources, but in a way that links up with something in art . . . or links up art to what it lacked. Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of a "fabulation" in which a people and art both share. We ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabulation and give it a political meaning. —Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Antonio Negri, *Futur Anterior*

Much of what I argue about resistance through art extends propositions put forward in the work of Malik Gaines in *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left* and Joshua Chambers-Letson in *After the Party*.²⁷ Writing in the utopian spirit of José Muñoz's queer of color critique, these authors posit a performance theory that is *not yet*, in the sense that they look to history only in order to insist that we do not yet know what black performance theory can do. But why afro-fabulation? And why do I speak of it in relation to a people who are missing? How does fabulation work within the particular set of dynamics and frameworks that has been set up to address black performance as an aesthetic and political paradigm in our contemporary moment? While a full answer to this question will only emerge over the course of this book, setting out some introductory points of reference at this stage will undoubtedly prove useful.

One recognizable reference point in contemporary critical theory will certainly be feminist techno-science theorist Donna Haraway, who has articulated a project of "speculative fabulation."²⁸ Later in this study I engage with her germinal socialist feminist theory of the cyborg as a point of interlocution in chapter 8, where I discuss what more recent critics such as Joy James have termed the "black cyborg."²⁹ The impressive range of fabulation, from archival study to speculative theory, helps point to the scholarly interlocutors of this project.³⁰ If the resulting excursus betrays its idiosyncratic origins, it is because the work I want the afro-fabulative to do in this project is directed less toward field mastery than it is toward serving as a set of disruptions and provocations I might sum up as "how to do things with black queer and trans archives." The answer I propose will turn out to have as much to do with a dark Deleuzianism as with a black Marxism—critical traditions that I evoke not in search of a vaunted Eurocentric countersignature upon black critical methods, but rather in the bricolage spirit of a queer black study ready to forward its agenda by any means necessary, and with tools that are ready at hand.³¹ Because critical theory is a tool I happen to have ready at hand, it is the tool I bring to this present task, which is to unburden black art and performance from the dominant representationalist form of politics wherever and whenever I can.³² And to restore an ethos of camouflage wherever communicative transparency threatens to give ground to ubiquitous surveillance.

"Fabulation" as a critical keyword has a complex and convoluted intellectual history across multiple languages. Formalist literary analysis grounded in comparative literary methods distinguishes between the "fabula" and the "sjuzhet" of a narrative (roughly equivalent to the ordinary English language distinction between "story" and "plot"). The fabula in this usage refers to the sequence of events that form the invariant core of a narrative, the "what happened." In performance theory a related usage emerges in the Brechtian dramaturgy of "fabel" to indicate the core *sense* of a play that the company arrives at through a collective dramaturgical process, a sense that, once arrived at, licenses them to reinterpret and even add and subtract elements from the play to enable it to better conform to this "fabel." What the dramaturgical usage adds is an active element of interpretation and reinvention, tied to a given text or event that is central but not unalterable. Rather

than referring to an invariant story that can be plotted and replotted in various ways, Brechtian fabel-ation points toward a dialogic process of research and interpretation in which that “core” story is in fact constantly placed under the pressure of transformation.³³ In this way, afro-fabulation certainly bears comparison to the “afro-Alienation acts” outlined in the post-Brechtian analyses of Daphne Brooks and Malik Gaines.³⁴

In this broader literary and philosophical context, fabulation possesses a distinctive meaning for Deleuze, who employs it extensively in his work on cinema (and again in his late work on literature) to expound upon a usage most significantly found in Bergson. For Bergson, fabulation (sometimes translated into English as the “mythmaking function”) is a “virtual instinct” that operates within human perception as a holdover from an earlier stage of evolution. Tellingly for my purposes, Bergson often refers to fabulation as a “shadow” cast over the illuminated human centers of intelligence, imagination, and reason. Bergsonian/Deleuzian fabulation is thus rooted in attributions of intentionality and agency to a brand range of phenomena well beyond sentient life, a sort of pre-reflexive animism that helped explain, for Bergson, so-called “primitive” religion.³⁵ Deleuze adopted and transformed Bergson’s concept of fabulation for his own thinking on the use of free indirect discourse in cinema and literature, untethering the concept from its primitivist implications, and instead wielding it as a component in his own project for a nonrepresentationalist aesthetics. My own usage of the word is more indebted to this philosophical provenance (particularly as routed through the work of contemporary black queer feminist critics Kara Keeling and Amber Musser) than it is to literary formalism, particularly because the concept of the virtual developed in the Deleuzian tradition is important for my analysis.³⁶ My use of it here refers more to what we might think of as an instinct, or better, a drive for the virtual, on the part of black subjects. But I also want to be alert to and resonant with a range of less technical meanings and connotations for fabulation and the fabulous in black queer and trans studies. While I speak of trans and queer studies both separately and together in what follows, I do not seek to conflate them or force their complementarity. Chapters 3, 8, and the conclusion bear out in more detail the ways which trans and queer analytics are productively entangled with each other.³⁷

My use of fabulation in this latter sense is in dialogue with a range of other thinkers in queer of color critique, black queer and trans studies, and performance and media studies. In an essay on the arch-fabulist Vaginal Davis, film studies scholar Marc Siegel succinctly defines the performative power of the fabulative utterance as “neither true nor false but fabulous.”³⁸ By this formulation, Siegel means to show how it would be missing the point entirely to fact-check the stories Davis regales her audiences with—in person and on her legendary blog, *Speaking from the Diaphragm*. Her bawdy tales and shocking indiscretions are too incredible not to treat with the utmost seriousness. As she has told her audience on so many occasions, “Gossip is the one true living archive.” Rather than malicious mistruths, her factual fictions are *anexact* in their extemporaneous intensifications and manipulations of the truth. In his larger study of gossip in the extended cinema of underground queer life, Siegel shows how fabulation can be deployed against hegemonic demands for legibility and transparency that so often simply expose and endanger minoritarian lives. In this he follows in close step with Gavin Butt and Dominic Johnson, two great scholars of the queer convivial, who have done much to illuminate what we might call the uses of gossip. Readers in African Americans studies, of course, will already have heard all this through the grapevine.³⁹

This use of fabulation and fabulousness is also developed in the ethnographic work of Martin Manalansan, who studies migrant queers living undocumented lives in the Queens neighborhood of New York City. I draw on his work in the interdisciplinary and collaborative spirit of a queer studies that always finds its theory in low places. Manalansan’s spirited ethnographies show how the queer love of “being fabulous” is too easily dismissed as a manic identification with the lifestyles of a wealthy, white elite. Manalansan argues on the contrary how performing what he calls “fabulosity” can serve as a form of undocumented queer of color world-making.⁴⁰ In this his work also dovetails with the investigations of Madison Moore into what the latter calls “the fabulous class” of cultural workers who traffic in glamor and style in order to circulate in elite spaces that are saturated with class and racial hostility. In a reversal of the classic dynamic of “slumming”—in which elites dressed down in order to frequent black and brown “interzones”—Moore’s fabulous class passers and poseurs deploy their mastery of surface impressions to navi-

dirt



Figure 1.3. Ms. Vaginal Davis reclining on the eightieth floor of the Meridian Hotel, San Francisco. Photo by Hector Martinez.

gate (and sometimes disrupt) enclaves of power and privilege built on the backs of the most grievous exploitation and immiseration. Moore's work also calls textured and specific attention to the work of fabulousness, and the intense public harassment and hostility that trans and gender-nonconforming people can face when they are "working it."⁴¹

These queer of color usages of fabulation and the fabulous point us toward deeper genealogies of blackness in aesthetic and critical theory,

for which Keeling and Fred Moten are two expert guides. In her engagement with Deleuze, Gramsci, and Fanon, Keeling fabulates the figure of "the black femme function" as a force that structures the appearance of the visible without ever itself cohering into stable cinematic presence.⁴² Comparably, Moten, in "Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape," works toward an aesthetic definition of blackness as an "escape-in-confinement" for which the difference between the captured photographic image of the black figure must be thought contrapuntally with the shadowy blackness that brings that image into visibility.⁴³ Both of these dark Deleuzian critics anticipate subsequent moves in critical theory, from new materialism to speculative realism, and provide the raced and sexed histories of the colonial modern that are key to making sense of them. I draw upon both in my expanded sense of fabulation as pertaining to the emergence into visibility—and not simply good/bad or just/unjust aesthetic judgments about visible images themselves—throughout this book. I am interested in how black queer and trans subjects perform both for and against the camera, conceiving the camera not merely as one apparatus among many, but as the key visual apparatus of modernity.⁴⁴ Fabulation is key to my analysis of how this dis/appearing act is accomplished.

If queer fabulousness and black shade are too often dismissed as ephemeral resistance and vain complicity, my defense of both in this study is shaped by Deleuze's idiosyncratic vision of the fabulist as the one who calls out to "the people who are missing." The fabulist, Deleuze writes in a late essay, possesses

a profound desire, a tendency to project—into things, into reality, into the future, and even into the sky—an image of himself and others so intense that it has a life of its own: an image that is always stitched together, patched up, continually growing along the way, to the point where it becomes fabulous. It is a machine for manufacturing giants, what Bergson called a fabulatory function.⁴⁵

We can see such a machine for manufacturing giants in the black feminist artist Faith Ringgold's mural for the Women's House of Detention in New York (a location I discuss further in chapter 3), in which the artist depicts women in a range of roles (from priest to bus-driver) they could not yet routinely assume in US society. This mural, rescued from

near destruction by male inmates, stood at the entrance to the exhibit of black women artists, *We Wanted a Revolution*. Aspirational rather than documentary, her kaleidoscopic image is less a map of a utopic future than a spur to women to revolt in the present. Rather than depict, she diagrams in the sense Keeling gives: her diagram is of nothing other than the angular sociality between the lock up and the get down, the carceral and the excarceral. It is a map to a once and future abolition of gender as imagined from the stance of violently degendered black flesh.⁴⁶

In his brief sketch of the fabulist's relation to "a people" who are missing, Deleuze hints at the collectivist aspirations of the fabulist. The desire of the fabulist, Deleuze insists, is directed toward a life that is not singular or individual, but a life lived in the singular plural. We see this plurality in every hue and tone, in every face of the social, that Ringgold's mural claims. Refusing the terms of an anti-black and anti-woman social order, she gives us a vision of relationality—a *fabulationality*—in which another world is not only possible, it is virtually present.⁴⁷

Although my subject is not utopian thinking (for which I have learned more than I can ever myself hope to teach from the work of black feminist performance theorist Jayna Brown and queer of color theorist José Esteban Muñoz), there is often a family resemblance between the Blochian principles of hope that Brown and Muñoz appeal to and the disjunctive synthesis I will associate with fabulation. For example, in *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz cites Theodor Adorno in dialogue with Ernst Bloch on the question of utopia, at a point where Adorno is repeating and responding to Bloch's formulation that "the true is a sign of itself and the false." Adorno, with typical dialectical severity, approves and inverts this claim, in what he styles a "determined negation," and suggests that it is also the case that "the false is the sign of itself and the correct." Here Adorno approaches Nietzsche at an unlikely point: the powers of the false point to a potential correction of our dystopic present, but not necessarily by providing a picture of the true. Whether Adorno and Bloch agree on the principles of hope underlying utopian thinking—as the thinking of "no-place"—is not for me to adjudicate. My point is not that one need *decide* between these formulations so much as one must *choose* which one in a given instance forwards the aesthetic project of black queer performance. If *Afro-Fabulations* chooses to side with Adorno more than Bloch, it is because the performances of fiction

and mythmaking that I examine revolve around the idea that the false can be both a sign of itself and the correct. At various points in the text I will associate such powers of the false less with utopia and more with heterotopia, to resurrect Foucault's curious neologism that has been given renewed black trans heft and specificity in C. Riley Snorton's illuminating readings of the fictions of Samuel R. Delany. The connection Snorton draws between the surgical and theoretical senses of the word "heterotopia" underscores the degree to which trans fabulation is both literally and figuratively a work of the flesh.

I enter into this theoretical excursus in order to highlight a key aspect of fabulation that is central to this book's argument. Within fabulation, the false is indeed the sign of itself and the correct. These powers of the false have a potentially political resonance for black queer study if we can apprehend through them how the false terms of an anti-black racial order are the signs of *both* that false order and its potential correction. Even "correct" may not be strong enough to describe these powers of black art and performance, but at this stage I will content myself with Adorno's term and posit that the afro-fabulation of black art and performance *corrects* the representationalist and periodizing terms of our aesthetico-political order.⁴⁸ It does so not by representing what is the case (insofar as what seems true, evidenced, and/or empirical in any given instance will always turn out to be saturated through and through with ideological mystification), but by presenting the falsification of this "true" order as a pathway toward its correction.

Presented in this way, as the dark powers of the false, afro-fabulation is clearly a speculative genre that has more than a passing resemblance to some (although not all) of what travels under the rubric of "afro-futurism." As I discuss further in chapter 6, "afro-futurism" is a term that was coined and widely disseminated in the 1990s as a heuristic for thinking about race and speculation in the digital era. It has become increasingly ubiquitous in studies of science fiction and even in important recent surveys of the speculative in African American and diasporic art. Some of my cases in this book could easily be classified as afro-futurist (such as Samuel R. Delany in chapter 6 and Bina48 in chapter 8); others less easily. Kara Keeling's reworking of afro-futurism in relation to what she calls "black futures"—which she defines as "an anti-fragile investment in the errant, the irrational, and the unpredictable"—is promising in particular.⁴⁹ My

aim is in any case less that of identifying a subset of black artists somehow specifically concerned with the future and futurity, and more that of pursuing a better understanding of the mythmaking function of fabulation as a sort of tenseless grounding for any black speculative practice whatsoever. To identify who is or is not an afro-fabulist would thus miss the point entirely. (Still less would I hope to attribute the term to any who might care to dispute or disengage from it.)⁵⁰

As I mentioned before, a specifically “critical” fabulation also names the challenge to reparative black historiography found in the work of Saidiya Hartman, who has in turn influenced the afro-pessimism of Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and David Marriott. Here, *critical* fabulation indexes an ongoing debate over the terms of historical recovery and the ongoing afterlives of slavery (particularly in terms of the very possibility of thinking concepts like “gender” and “sexuality” in relation to post-slavery subjects). Hartman alighted on critical fabulation over the course of a meditation on the archive of the Middle Passage and its violently gendered ungendering of black flesh, a violence she emphasizes that her own archival work is powerless to ameliorate. Her emphasis on irredeemable loss renews and extends the ethical challenge of her first study, *Scenes of Subjection*, which objected to the unreflective and casual reproduction of scenes of violence within scholarship about slavery and emancipation. At once a scouring critique of the many ruses of the liberal antiracist imaginary—which must repeatedly produce abject and derelict figures of blackness as part of its larger apparatus of rescue and redemption—*Scenes of Subjection* also helped usher in afro-pessimism, which characterizes blackness as a site of accumulation and fungibility, rather than one of identity and resistance. Afro-pessimism promises a rigorous antagonism to the blandishments of multiculturalism, post-racialism, and coalitional liberal politics. It has productively stalled the subsumption of black gender and sexual nonconformity under the rubric of a putatively nonracial queer theory, and has returned the field to key questions of theory and strategy left unresolved from a 1960s and 1970s high-water mark for revolutionary praxis. More to the present point, afro-pessimism has ushered in a sharp challenge to the broadly relational and intersectional approach I favor here.

Rather than accept pessimism or optimism as the dominant mood of this work, however, I turn to the critical ambivalence of Hartman’s early

formulation of “redress” as a black feminist theory of practice.⁵¹ In chapter 2 I work toward an account of relationality (a term that I understand afro-pessimist thinkers like Frank Wilderson to refuse) that will turn out to amplify my interpretation of this complex work of redress and repair in black feminism. I also seek in that chapter to draw from and develop the dark praxis of nightlife developed in the work of Shane Vogel.⁵² The ambivalence of fabulation is in any case already imposed upon it by the necessary distrust with which the powers of the false will be met, in an era in which lying in politics has been elevated to a principle. In times like these, fabulationality is itself due for a certain degree of redress.

Race against Time and the Changing Same

Sent for you yesterday, here you come today,
Sent for you yesterday, here you come today,
If you can’t do better, might as well just stay away.
—Lester Young and the Count Basie Orchestra

My appeal to a changing same in the characteristics of black expression is meant less as an appeal to essentialism than as an overture to recent work on time and temporality in black studies and queer studies, work that has produced a significant and growing literature that builds upon, while also diverging from, older work on history and memory, loss and recovery.⁵³ A critique of linear temporality is now almost *de rigueur* in many critical quarters, and some daringly speculative alternative conceptions of time and temporality have been mooted. If historians have traditionally cast their discipline as pursuing questions of *change over time*, this turn toward greater reflexivity in how and why we narrate and contest histories might be thought of as a conceptual privileging of *time over change*. The onto-epistemological question of what time is, in other words, has come increasingly to the fore in ongoing interdisciplinary debates over loss, trauma, memory, and futurity. These debates have a clear bearing on an endeavor such as the present one, which originally took shape as an investigation into the periodizing impulse behind the emergence of terms like “post-black” and “post-queer” that first began to appear in the 1990s and then with increasing frequency in the new millennium.⁵⁴ The desire to move beyond difference in the very process

of recognizing it is a powerful one. But so too is the impulse to reject as old-fashioned minoritarian forms of life and struggle that succeeded in reproducing themselves at the ostensible price of also reproducing the dominant social order. In order to make better sense of these contending struggles over what the future may or ought to hold, I have had occasion to take recourse to a now-classic trope of black studies: Amiri Baraka's concept of "the changing same."

Baraka (then Leroy Jones) coined the phrase "the changing same" in an essay on R&B and the new black music that was reprinted in his 1967 collection *Black Music*.⁵⁵ As I detail further in chapter 2, he invoked the phrase as a way of reconciling the ostensible contrast between commercial and avant-garde tendencies in black music, which he characterized as "the same family looking at different things." It has since become a key trope of temporality in black cultural studies. Paul Gilroy, for instance, draws upon Baraka's concept to champion what he terms "the untidy workings of diaspora identities." "This changing same," he writes, "is not some invariant essence that gets enclosed subsequently in a shape-shifting exterior with which it is casually associated. It is not the sign of an unbroken, integral inside protected by a camouflaged husk. The phrase names the problem of diaspora politics and diaspora poetics. The same is present, but how can we imagine it as something other than an essence generating the merely accidental?"⁵⁶ Picking up on this question, Margo Crawford has recently argued that even post-blackness—or "black post-blackness" as she shrewdly renames it—must be understood as part of this changing same, which she glosses as "the art of moving forward and remaining grounded."⁵⁷ It is relevant to me that the diva citizenship of singer Leslie Uggams provided an occasion for Baraka's theorization of the changing same, even as her crossover sound troubled the mainstream pop tradition that she entered with a black feminist vocal production, which performance theorist Masi Asare has described as heterotopic.⁵⁸

The changing same, in these above usages, proves to be a synchronic as well as a diachronic idea. Developed by Baraka to bring black pop and jazz criticism into a more effective dialogue, it did not aim however toward any ultimate convergence or transcendence of difference. Rather, it pointed us toward the phenomena I will discuss in this book under the rubric of "angular sociality."⁵⁹ Angular sociality as I deploy it names



Figure 1.4. Leslie Uggams sings "Everybody Gets to Go to the Moon" on the final episode of her variety show in 1969. Screenshot by author.

a dynamic interaction or entanglement of bodies, each keeping their own time. As a mode of black polytemporality, it enables us to grasp the "two impulses in contemporary popular thought about temporality" that Kara Keeling points to when she distinguishes a "pragmatic and constructive" impulse to place the past "in the service of present interests and desires" from a "pedagogical and critical" impulse to "reveal the operations of history itself and the ways that any invocation of the past is an exclusionary construction of that past."⁶⁰ The angular sociality of the changing same, at its best, achieves both of these aims simultaneously. It is a doing of history that is a showing of the doing of history, and in that showing, history's undoing.

Keeling's distinction between constructive and critical temporalities in black study provides another way of grasping the articulation of tensed and tenseless time. By way of comparison, Michelle Wright has proposed that quantum mechanics also provides a post-Newtonian conception of tenseless time, one that, if understood correctly, frees the

diaspora concept from the linear temporality of slavery and its afterlives. Instead of positing black consciousness as necessarily caused by the trauma of the slave trade, slavery, and their afterlives, Wright posits a “quantum” blackness that can be conceived as emerging from anywhere and at any time.⁶¹ Wright’s argument recalls the debate occasioned by the coinage of the term “post-black art” by curator Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon at the turn of the new millennium.⁶² To this art world usage there was also a broader, more reactionary discourse of “post-racialism” that further worked to render blackness belated and anachronistic, something to be abandoned as “we” moved forward into a future humanity. But how, one might ask, can black people be expected to transcend that which we have yet to possess fully? How exactly are we to move past a destination we have yet to arrive at in the eyes of so many? I address these questions especially in chapters 4, 6, and 7.

The impulse to repair, rescue, or redeem black humanity must be a powerfully compelling one for all who labor in the long shadow of “infrahumanity” cast by modern racism’s invention of the figure of the Negro.⁶³ For some, to question our aspirational humanity in the face of anti-blackness is to throw doubt upon the very intelligibility of the project of black studies, which has long sought to fuse popular struggles for self-determination to intellectual discourses that might decolonize academic disciplines. In the twentieth and early twenty-first century, a certain mode of black humanitarianism has always telegraphed its public aims through slogans like “I am a man,” “Say her name,” and “Black lives matter,” all of which, at least on a first approach, insist on the moral certitude of human rights for their persuasive appeal. Post-humanism, for the most part, lacks equally resonant slogans for the political sphere, even as it may yet offer, as feminist technoscience theorists such as Donna Haraway continue to argue, potently subversive emblems for a creaturely life lived in vagrant subversion of the terms of political order.⁶⁴ What might it mean for black queer and trans aesthetics, then, to “stay with the trouble” of post-humanism, rather than beat a tactical retreat to a standard of humanism and its accompanying fantasies of citizenship and sovereignty, which always served to exclude the refugee, migrant, indigene, and slave?

This human observer, knower, and actor in the world, as Sylvia Wynter and Denise Ferreira da Silva, among others, have argued, is covertly

white and male, resulting in a phenomena that Wynter has called the “overrepresentation of Man.”⁶⁵ Da Silva associates the idea that the world can be rendered fully intelligible by human ratiocination with a colonial project that divides being into the transparent subject of reason on the one hand, and on the other hand, an external world of affectible objects to be used, consumed, bought, sold, and discarded as waste. In rejecting the humanism of the colonial-modern, both Wynter and da Silva underscore the difficulty of conceptualizing a future humanism, given the deeply entrenched habits that reproduce the domination and exclusion of blackness, even within ostensibly emancipatory discourses such as Marxism and feminism.

Even black nationalist, afrocentric, and decolonial philosophies, we find, often retrench this habitual humanism, most often in reactionary appeals to gender essentialism and a suppositious “natural” order of progress that has been disturbed by feminism, queer rights, and other bids that can be stigmatized as “Western” or white. With the rise of violent masculinist ideologies in the black and brown world—from Boko Haram to Islamic State—and the broad appeal of misogyny and homophobia even among the populations who reject and are victimized by such extremism, it is far too premature to declare these matters resolved. Whether grounded in images wrested from the medieval past or purloined from some science fiction scenario of the near or distant future, the scope and ratio of the human may not be as obvious or stable a measure as one may initially assume. The human may appear obvious until we think about it, once we try to ascertain the precise scope of this obvious entity, however, it proves elusive.

In the terms I will forward in *Afro-Fabulations*, it is the very exception of blackness and queerness from the humanist standard that produces the possibility of imagining humanity otherwise.⁶⁶ If we are “not yet” consistently accorded human status, if we remain an enigmatic shadow cast over the human project, then the shape of the humanity that we might envision would be wholly different from humanity as we know it today. My basic claim in relation to the post-humanist controversy is simply that black bodies that were objects of speculation can become speculative bodies.⁶⁷ Rather than a human ideal modeled to conform to the global idea of race, queer and trans aesthetics point us toward a black market of techniques and technologies that are constantly fabricating

new genres of the human out of the fabulous, formless darkness of an anti-black world.⁶⁸ Rather than emerging out of capitalist development or biological evolution, afro-fabulation “anarranges” the developmental and linear timeline of history. The proposition here, against all liberal universalisms and scientific positivities, is to insist that we do not yet know what a human outside an anti-black world could be, do, or look like. The critical poetics of afro-fabulation are a means of dwelling *in* the shock of that reality without ever becoming fully *of* it.

1

Critical Shade

The Angular Logics of Black Appearance

The performance begins while the audience is still waiting for it. The dancer/choreographer is moving through the crowd, greeting arriving guests and fussing with the arrangements, like a good host. The audience is seated on the stage of this one-hundred-year-old proscenium theater located in a working-class district in downtown New York City. We, the audience, are arranged around a catwalk as though we are expecting a fashion show. But unlike in fashion, there is no backstage area, just a rack of clothes off to one side. Just before show time, the dancer/choreographer personally moves two guests of honor—an important curator and her plus one—from their temporary perches off to one side to special reserved seating front and center. Just as it is at a fashion runway, front row is part of the show. With this final adjustment, the audience is seated, and the latest performance of Trajal Harrell’s solo dance piece *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church, Size Small* can begin.¹

The performance has not yet begun, even though it somehow has. All eyes are now on Harrell, who has just casually changed in front of us into the first of an expected twenty looks: “West Coast Preppy School Boy.” The house lights are still up, but no curtain has been raised; and there is no other ritualized indication that we have crossed over from “everyday life” into “performance.” Harrell hasn’t even moved onto the catwalk; he stands beside the runway, rather than walking down it. The mood hasn’t shifted from one of quiet anticipation. There is no frantic audience applause, no pumping music, no flash of the cameras. From Harrell—no fierce poses, just the almost blank stare with which he breaks the fourth wall, as he stands there insouciantly in his flip flops, looking at us.

For those in the audience familiar with the world of haute couture or with the world of ballroom houses that have stylized a queer, black,

nevertheless never cross over into the domain of the rights-bearing citizen or subject. What is more, she is the one who questions and doubts her role in this economy, who stumbles over her words and cannot seem to effectively assimilate the information she has been overloaded with. She is our postmodern Bartleby. She is even the one who feels the most entangled with others. Unlike Bina Aspen, who is confident that she will achieve individual personal immortality beyond the stars, it is Bina48 who seems befuddled and entrapped within a finitude we associate with mundane consciousness. In Nietzschean terms, we might say that it is Bina48 who is the readiest to stare into the abyss, and have the abyss stare back at her. As such, it seems that it is to her artificial simulation of consciousness that we might look, in imagining a post-humanities robust enough to thrive in the dusk of writing, which is to say, in the context within which we teach and study today.

Conclusion

For a Critical Poetics of Afro-Fabulation

Eric looked at the neatly dressed black woman, who stood, all but nonplussed, in her front foyer. As they started for the door, Holly asked suddenly: "Does that come from out of that philosophy book everybody says you're always reading?"

—Samuel R. Delany, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*

And then I can feel, on the tip of my tongue,
the angular cut of a shattered word.

—Jacques Derrida, *Fors*

Could a poetics of afro-fabulation supplement, or even supplant, the politics of representation? Such a question has guided the polemical stakes of this book, which has sought, across a series of untimely examples, to unburden blackness and queerness of their identitarian and representational logics. It has sought to do so through a series of close but historical readings, readings that are less directed toward the connoisseurship of aesthetic objects, per se, and more toward a critical accounting of the manner in which aesthetic distinction reproduces anti-black logics, and how black critical practice, in undoing those distinctions, founds generative grammars of affect and movement that bring the death-dealing momentum of those anti-black logics to a halt. My riffing on the corpus of Deleuze (which might also be to say my rifling through the pockets of the corpse of Deleuze) has been in search of tools and techniques for thinking against representation—in both political and aesthetic senses of the term—and in favor of a process I have been calling afro-fabulation. It will not have escaped the close reader that the word "fabulation" in this text has almost as many senses as it has appearances and that such a promiscuity of meaning will

probably deny it the status of a concept. And yet, if afro-fabulation has turned out to serve in this text less as a concept than as a placeholder for a concept, there is still the task of this conclusion: to reflect upon some potentially productive consequences of opening up that blank space in discourse. Recalling the classical contrast between *praxis* (or work on the self) and *poesis* (or work in the world), the critical poetics of afro-fabulation I sketch out here can be well thought of in the performative sense of a *doing*. But what do the blank spaces in discourse do, exactly? In search of an answer to this last question, I conclude *Afro-Fabulations* with a meditation on blankness and the necessary gaps that the interanimative arts of the black word require.

To speak of place-holders and blank spaces in a discourse is of course to broach the subject of its silences, elisions, and aphasia.¹ All are gaps that representational thinking would ostensibly seek to suture. The work of Saidiya Hartman in black studies and Heather Love in queer studies converge in their joint imperative not to perform reparation and recovery in such a mode, even as both go on to reinvent the poetics of loss. And to say this is also to speak of redaction, opacity, and “narrative restraint,” which have with increasing frequency been commended to us as necessary to black study.² Silence has a double injunction here, bespeaking both loss of the object and reticence of the subject. If I have so far in this book called upon afro-fabulation to do the work of narrating the angular socialities of the present, the impossible histories that we draw into our now, and the cryptic futures in which our deaths are seeded, then this conclusion asks after the consequence of considering the body as both archive and *crypt*. Rather than treat the body as a seat of sovereignty or self-sovereignty—which the metaphor of body as archive tends to in the wake of Derrida’s firm association between archive and *archon*—I look in this conclusion toward a psychoanalytic and sociogenic concept of the body as *crypt*.³

Here, as throughout this text, I am thinking with Hartman’s despair at recovering the lives of black women in the archive of the Middle Passage, and in particular the point at which she argues that “the archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”⁴ I want to linger on the second of her series of metaphors

here—the tomb, or what I call “the crypt”—and explore its potential resonance within the heterodox analytic theory of Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham, who write in detail about the place of the crypt in the psychic life of the wounded subject. They arrive at this critical term through an encounter with Freud’s familiar distinction between “mourning” and “melancholia,” which they reformulate as a distinction between “introjection” and “incorporation.”⁵ The salient difference this shift in terminology accomplishes for us can be described in terms of the effect that the exclusive disjunction between introjection and incorporation has upon speech. I want to propose a double-reading of this passage from Hartman, one in which its introjected metaphoricality (the series of things that the archive becomes) and its incorporated silence relate to each other as contraries that do not ever resolve, but instead persist.

In the work of Torok and Abraham, the crypt appears in the body as a consequence of an unnameable loss or wound. Inverting the customary image of a crypt as a space in which a (dead) body is interred, they propose a crypt that lives inside the body and that “lives the body as the double of another.”⁶ Torok and Abraham allow me to be more precise than I initially was when first evoking “blankness.” The crypt is not exactly a blank or empty space. The contrast between mournful introjection and melancholic incorporation helps me give this blankness more specificity. Whereas the introjection of a loss, in their account, leaves an empty space from which words can emerge and metaphors can flow, incorporation by contrast is radically antimetaphorical and encrypts the loss in the body as a phantasm. While we are clearly on the terrain of the unconscious, the idea of the crypt, I warrant, has sociogenic as well as psychoanalytic implications. Insofar as it splits and doubles the subject, it recapitulates the unnameable loss as radically social, even as founding the aesthetics of sociality. If we accept the crypt as another name for the tomb that appears in the series of metaphors through which Hartman introjects the archive in the passage above, then it does double duty as an index to a radically antimetaphorical incorporation of a history. Hartman’s antimetaphorical metaphor of the archive as crypt thus underscores Derrida’s observation regarding “introjection/incorporation: everything is played out on the borderline that divides and opposes the two terms.”⁷

Redress, Reification, and Decrypting Blackness

In their discussion of the crypt, Torok and Abraham also have occasion to speak of the "cryptonym," which is their name for an unspoken term hidden by a welter of substitutes and synonyms, which serves as a kind of "magic word" whose obscurity unleashes a whole complex and volatile process.⁸ Afro-fabulation in this final sense of a performative incorporation of the crypt then becomes a means of living with ambivalence, insofar as living with ambivalence necessarily entails a "living death" that is also always a living *with* death.⁹ My ambition in this conclusion is almost comically modest: to de-dramatize death and dying, insofar as death and dying have become in my view unbearably overinflated in contemporary discursive registers of necropolitics and afro-pessimism. If the "blank space" into which afro-fabulation fits as a nonconcept can also be thought in musical terms as a "ghost note"—the unplayed note that is virtually heard by the trained and expectant ear—then this way of ending the text is just an exercise in getting a little more comfortably familiar with the sound, sight, and presence of ghosts, phantoms, and other impulses and affects that shape and stir the scene of black performance. Can we take up a citizenship in the cities of the dead? Can we become necropolitans?

The para-critical "ghost note" of fabulation in this conclusion thus seeks to mute the discourse of trauma and reparation in order to tune into a poetics of redress. Here I return once against to the paradigmatic influence of Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* on the collective endeavor of black study, and in particular I evoke Hartman's black feminist reconstruction of the standard account of loss and trauma in critical theory. In that text, as we have seen, black trauma is not unclaimed or missing experience: it is rather a "nonevent" that remains unrepresentable in the order of liberal humanist discourse.¹⁰ Redress differs from reparation in that it is not a compensation for a loss—loss is immeasurable—but is rather an *articulation* of that loss. Acts of redress, Hartman argues, are grounded in affects of pain and *hunger*, in need and *desire*. Critical history (or what she later calls "critical fabulation") is defined in *Scenes of Subjection* as "memory acts in the service of redress."¹¹ Redress, I claim, is a black psychoanalytic and sociogenic theory and practice for dealing with the incorporated phantoms of the crypt. If what is at stake is

the task she at one point names "liberating the performative," then this liberation of the black speech-act can come only through abandoning the grounds upon which J. L. Austin and his successors founded the "felicity" of the speech-act. To liberate the performative, in these terms, is in some sense to be liberated *from* the performative: at least, to be liberated from the ideal model of the subject constituted through civic voice and political agency within a public sphere. Far from dismissing the power of performativity, the defamiliarizing of black performance Hartman accomplishes generalizes that power beyond what really had been considered before: In a key passage she notes:

It is important to remember that blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity; *thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference*. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation: it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggles.¹²

What Hartman modestly describes as a "reminder" is actually a cogent and original formulation of how blackness bears upon what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney subsequently termed "the general antagonism."¹³ Placed within the context of practice, black performance is always already a relational theory and an emancipatory figure at the center of every social struggle. In this conclusion I follow Moten's reading of the eventfulness of that "nonevent" as essentially musical, singling out in particular the musical figure of the ghost note.¹⁴ Playing the ghost note of the nonevent may allay some (although of course not all) of the neurotic anxiety attendant on the very thought of death that, I wager, tends to endow contemporary polemics over queer anti-relationality, social death, and necropolitics with much of their gothic allure.¹⁵ Rather than refuse the death drive that inspirits such discourses (discourses that will continue to have an audience beyond my own meagre ability to refuse them), I propose a speculative method of decrypting blackness that would dive into that drive, divine its agencies and energies, and provide a fuller account of the ambiguous consequences of living with its regnant influence.

The objection to the argument I have been making against the politics of representation and representability (an objection that also tends to be accompanied by a command to conduct research and writing in terms transparently legible to either the extant academic disciplines or a phantom public sphere, and preferably both) will be both immediate and unanswerable. This objection holds that the social and political world we live in works by means of representation and through socially recognized identities. It works, this counterargument to afro-fabulation would hold, through the rights-bearing individual or group, which is where we must begin, even if it may not be where we will end. In order to transform this world, we must at least commence our work by meeting the world where it is, not where we might wish it to be. The entirety of this book has been shadowboxing with this apparently unanswerable charge. It therefore bears repeating at this stage the traditional Marxist response to the categories of common sense: that they are not so much untrue as *reified*. The social logics of reification (a critical term that could also be rendered as “thingification”) are such that the things we encounter, or at least the way we encounter them, can never be self-evident, but are always already mystified. Where I break with a certain Marxist faith in dialectical thinking is in any expectation that the deciphering or decryption of reified life will produce a real or truer picture of the world as it is, or as it could be. I instead take refuge in the more ambiguous realization that the destruction of reified and stereotypical thinking results only in yet more fantasy production. The challenge of decryption is not to dispel all phantoms, which would seem impossible to do (at least in this life), but to understand the conditions under which those phantoms and reifications bind our desires to the very process of their binding.

Geo Wyeth beside Himself

And if we look to black performance as a site in which incorporation sounds its ghosts notes, we could not do better than to consider the work of Geo Wyeth. Geo Wyeth is a musician and artist whose work is haunted by a range of specters, past and present, as intimate as members of his family and as remote as a brother from another planet. As each one appears, glistens a while, and then dissipates, he or she leaves behind vivid if fragmentary traces, in the memory and in the world. I have been

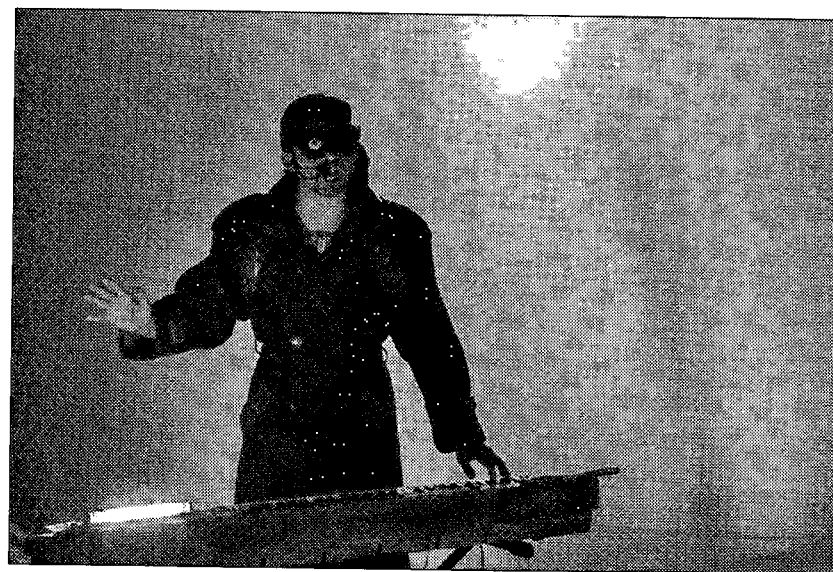


Figure C.1. Kitchen Steve. Screenshot by author.

attending Wyeth's performances over the last decade, but have only now begun to find words for what I have seen, heard, and felt there. Only recently has academic storytelling—or critical fabulation—seemed an adequate means with which to arrange those fragments back together into something like a verbal silhouette or *ekphrasis*. In drawing this textual portrait of the artist as a young man, I am conscious of both the intimacy and the distance that Wyeth takes to the identity categories to which he is assigned as a black, American, and transgender artist.

Through his works in many media, from soulful, bluesy singing to cacophonous arrangements of physical and digital detritus, Wyeth responds to these assignments of race, sexuality, and gender with what Ralph Ellison might call an “antagonistic cooperation.”¹⁶ This antagonistic cooperation is necessary insofar as the story of the nation, conceived in settler colonialism and chattel slavery, is held in the blood and bound up with every gesture of us, its lesser children. To perform intransitive memories—memories that do not pass on in the codified rituals of collective memory—is to take what Brecht calls the “fabel” of the national story and to tell it otherwise. Gathering up the mess that is left around in the wake of the laborious and violent effort to build a human and rights-

bearing civil subject, Wyeth's cooperative antagonism to the terms of racial order and compulsory gender is a kind of queer inhumanism, if we grant that phrase a psychoanalytic inflection as pointing to a beyond of love and recognition, an inhuman location that is "in you more than you." It is this inner/outer beyond to the human, in which the sum is always other than the parts, that the intransitive memories of Geo Wyeth's performances repeatedly point to.

The unnamed protagonist of *Invisible Man* most epitomizes the Ellisonian spirit of antagonistic cooperation in those scenes of the novel where he is suddenly seized with a force of eloquence and steps outside his ordinary self to both rebuke and transfigure his audience with something that might be called "charisma," but which could better be thought of, I suggest, as inhumanist possession. That is to say, where the charismatic leader is a continuously modulated presence in the community—modeled within the African American tradition above all on the pastor—the spirit of eloquence that temporarily possesses the protagonist of *Invisible Man* seems less like that of a pastor, and more like that of a *daimon* one might go to a pastor or priest to exorcise. When he is so enflamed, Ellison's protagonist reminds me of Geo Wyeth in the role of Kitchen Steve, or Novice Theory, or especially HW Clobba, to name just three of the inspirited persona that Wyeth has, over the course of the years, drawn down into his body. These persona or embodied avatars appear "in the flesh" only upon ritual invocation and for a short duration. But for the period when they are our volatile company, they transfigure not only the artist, but also his audience. They do not seem available, however, to be reliably or regularly called upon in scholarship, nor does there seem to be a reliable photographic likeness of any of them to which one can point in their absence.

In a manner that underscores the link between blackness and redaction that black feminist theorists like Simone Browne and Christina Sharpe have pointed to, I believe that what we encounter in Geo Wyeth's performances is an instance of the nonrepresentation of blackness, or, in what may be much the same thing, the blackness of nonrepresentation.¹⁷ This of course has everything to do with the "rememory" Toni Morrison writes of in *Beloved*, in which the trauma of the racial past is "not a story to pass on." This untold or untellable story, which I am figuring as an intransitive memory—a memory that acts without taking a direct

object—infuses the performative strategies in Wyeth's work, which increasingly aim for nothing less than a kind of counter-conduct to the normative compliance with homonationalist strictures increasingly demanded of queer and trans subjects. Eloquence in these performances takes on the force of an almost impersonal will, a possession that is dispossessive of the subject's proper bearing, habitus, and grounding in the world. Each of the appearances of Kitchen Steve, HW Clobba, and other, more famous ghosts such as those of Michael Jackson and Joan Rivers (who have also been reanimated by Wyeth) takes on a kind of counter-pastoral power, unsettling and ungrounding the audience.

After any such performance of nonrepresentation, we are left not with an enduring positive image of a black transgender identity, but rather with a range of unruly residue that we can call, after José Esteban Muñoz, "queer ephemera." The queerest ephemera from Kitchen Steve's performance seems to be a pair of sunglasses I have seen Kitchen Steve wear at each of his public performances. These glasses appear to be made of cardboard and thus really to act more as blinders than as spectacles. And on the exterior surface of one lens is a kooky eyeball. We do not need to look any further than John Sayles's classic 1984 film *Brother from Another Planet* to grasp the significance of this eyeball. In this cult classic film, a space alien lands in New York City and must somehow adapt to a contemporary society structured in racial and class dominance. The unspeaking alien is to all appearances a black man and, as such, naturally makes his way to Harlem, where a group of men in a bar accept him as a "brother" and connect him with a social worker who finds a place for him to stay with a local single mother. After discovering his talent for fixing machines simply by touching them, the brother from another planet uneasily finds his place in the informal economy, until two "men in black," one portrayed by the white director of the film, Sayles himself, appear in the door of the bar looking for him. The film then subtly transitions into a fugitive slave narrative, as the black alien flees the white alien slave-catchers, using a remarkable range of unexpected abilities, perhaps the most remarkable of which is the ability to remove his right eye and leave it outside his body as a recording device he can later reinsert and watch footage from.

Prefiguring contemporary forms of black counter-surveillance such as cameraphone footage of acts of police brutality, or the ongoing co-

ordination of Black Lives Matter and other social movements on Twitter, the brother's removable eye serves as a reminder that the uncanny emanation that appears in our midst is not just performing for us, but is itself also a sensitive device for storing up sensations, feelings, and memories. In terms offered by Denise Ferreira da Silva, what I believe the eye shows us is that the persona is both affecting and affected, and it is affecting precisely because it is affected.¹⁸ Much as the crash landing of the alien in *Brother from Another Planet* has the effect of representing him as an uninvited guest who appears to hold his host community hostage to his inarticulate need, the power of Kitchen Steve in relation to the audience members who are recruited into participating is not of the nature of we might today call "informed consent," but what we might rather call "infinite need."

Charismatic and beguiling though he may be, Kitchen Steve responds with antagonistic cooperation to the expectation that we can bear what he brings. It is not to our individual subjectivity, in other words, but to the inhumanist and subjectless critique of our infinite debt, that the blackness of being appeals. The summoned spirit is "bound to appear," as Huey Copeland might say, but he is not bound in a transitive relation of mutual recognition or intersubjectivity.¹⁹ More nearly, he is entangled with us in a paradoxical manner Muñoz terms "the communism of the incommensurate": a shared or non-individual being that we access only on condition of our acknowledging our dispossession by it.²⁰ "Decryption" as I have used it here possesses several valences. Referring to the crypt as a place of burial, it suggests exhuming something buried or repressed. Alluding to the cryptic as coded, obscure, or riddled speech, it suggests deciphering. Lastly, in relation to contemporary technocapitalism, it suggests one of the key mechanisms through which communication is "secured" during transit. The project of decrypting blackness suggested herein avails itself of all three senses of the term in proposing the black body as crypt. That is to say, I first evoke a hauntological project that is invested in specifying the techniques by which those abandoned to death nonetheless fabulate doubles and alters that live on and persist virtually. Second, I read the contemporary rhetoric of blackness and anti-blackness, much of which is indeed quite cryptic, in terms of a disjunctive synthesis that so often takes the textual form of interinanimativity. And third, most speculatively, I address the storm of

images—images of black joy and pain, shame and glory, life and death—that circulate with ever increasing speed and volume in our mediated present.

Wyeth performs cryptonymic memory across much of his work, but his 2014 video installation *Quartered* provides a particularly good example of it. Through post-secular rituals of possession, Wyeth seeks to dispossess himself and his intimate audiences of the inherited trauma of the racial past. Such an exorcism produces a performing subject who looks nothing like the post-racial liberal individual, free to choose his or her own history and destiny. In the stead of progressive narratives of the gradual overcoming of pernicious myths of race and racism, Wyeth employs embodied channeling and self-transfiguration to catalyze a different and more difficult relation to the past. *Quartered* responds to the silenced historical origins of American gynecology, specifically the story of the so-called father of women's medicine, J. Marion Sims. Sims is well known for pioneering reparative surgeries on the postpartum injuries suffered by women; that he developed his techniques by repeatedly operating on enslaved women in the antebellum South without anesthesia is part of the established historical record that has long been side-stepped. Sims's surgeries, indeed, are an early instance of the unfolding biopolitical apparatus of "medical apartheid": the process by which the false separation of the "races" is at once transgressed and established by the medical sciences.

Sims's record is important to dwell upon insofar as it renders the transitivity of the racial past to both black and white subjects impossible to ignore: the techniques he developed on enslaved women in the US South were subsequently performed on aristocratic white subjects as far away as Europe. Much as the expropriated wealth of enslaved labor is a transitive property of contemporary whiteness, the biopolitical capacities of modern gynecology can be said to depend upon the sexed and raced traumas Sims visited upon his subjects.

Equally inspired by Adrian Piper and by the TV show *Unsolved Mysteries*, the mythic beings and eerie scenarios of *Quartered* repeatedly suggest that collective memory is a fruitful site of imaginative invention. In so spinning off fantastic avatars from traumatic histories, Wyeth is, by his own reckoning, seeking to do something different from "telling the tale over and over again in the same way." As he told me:

I didn't have this intention of creating a counter-narrative to the trauma that these women have experienced, but I longed for . . . an explanation . . . of how these kinds of things happened. . . . The pain and trauma that these people experienced . . . to me that is just a horrible fact that continues. I almost don't want to put the camera on that, because it's not mine. It's something that is a part of me, but it's not.²¹

Here, words trail off before Wyeth continues, as Wyeth contemplates the queer inhumanist trace of that which is in you more than you, before going on to tell me that *Quartered* is

more of a personal reckoning with my own history, but trying to do it in a way that pulls me away from this larger narrative. For me the narrative is already there, I see it everywhere. You go down South, it's everywhere. This narrative is with us, we don't need to spend all this time belaboring it and telling the tale over and over again in the same way. There are ways that we can pull at the mundane quality of our everyday life to find this inheritance, this narrative. And that could be more transformative and contemporary and actually more haunting: deeper reminders of how close this is, and that makes room in some way for joy and makes room for the future, and makes room for laughing in some way at the absurdity of all this, this deluge of inherited structures.²²

In these remarks, Wyeth gives us a glimpse at the working process behind the construction of what I am calling a performance of intransitive memory. In countering the narrative that he insists is always already both available and interdicted, he stages a relationship to the past that Hartman calls "critical fabulation." We see this in Wyeth's performance of a figure he calls the Shard of Light, which can be thought of as a composite portrait of the enslaved victims of J. Marion Sims's surgeries. The Shard of Light shares with Kitchen Steve and HW Clobba elements of fact and fiction, human and extraterrestrial, deep seriousness and "a laughter fit to kill." It is a performance that disrupts the expectation that Wyeth be either loyal or disloyal to the family history that proffers up to him Sims's tainted legacy as a vexed inheritance. Mixed race subjects often confront this dilemma of what to do with racist ancestors, but as I argued in *The Amalgamation Waltz*, it is one of the most potent ruses of

racialist reasoning to persuade us that this dilemma is one that belongs to mixed race subjects alone.²³

If Wyeth's cryptonymic performance interrupts the progressive telos of developmental time and hybrid futures, it strongly intimates an encrypted relation between black trans cultural formations and the biopolitical histories out of which normative, surgically corrected gendered embodiment was extracted. The violently gendered ungendering of black female bodies becomes part of the inheritance that contemporary black trans subjects bear, not exceptionally, or for identitarian reasons, but because of their particular capacity for the counter-conduct, which I associate with critical fabulation. Bringing haunted presences like the Shard of Light into the now, Wyeth dissents from the neoliberal command to be a secular being with a singular story; beside himself, he disassembles gender, race, and inheritance, and constructs a fantastic and unbelievable composite of the real and surreal.

It is this antagonistic cooperation with the representational obligation to appear in the flesh and on cue that brings the project of decrypting blackness into dialogue with Uri McMillan's articulation of the genealogy of black feminist performance art as consisting of "embodied avatars."²⁴ Drawing on the vedic meaning of the term "avatar," which refers to an earthly incarnation or emanation of a deity, McMillan invites us to push past the meaning the term has acquired in digital culture, in which it is a name for the face or full-body portraits with which individual computer users may navigate digital spaces such as video games, web sites, and online message boards. Here is an image of Kitchen Steve's digital avatar, which is more typically animated as a loop that bespeaks, in its stuttering repetition, the fright of a jester that is discovered to be the ghost in the machine, the glitch in the system, and the blackness of nonrepresentation that brings the representational economy to a momentary halt.

The digital avatar of Kitchen Steve also suggests a difference between the affectible body of the fugitive alien in *Brother from Another Planet*, and the contemporary idea of an avatar as a personal representative, one who can be exposed, unveiled, or spooked by an act of prestidigitation. We are all familiar—if from nowhere else than from hip-hop culture—with the series of names and mercurial personae through which many black musicians and performers take their fans and their haters as they

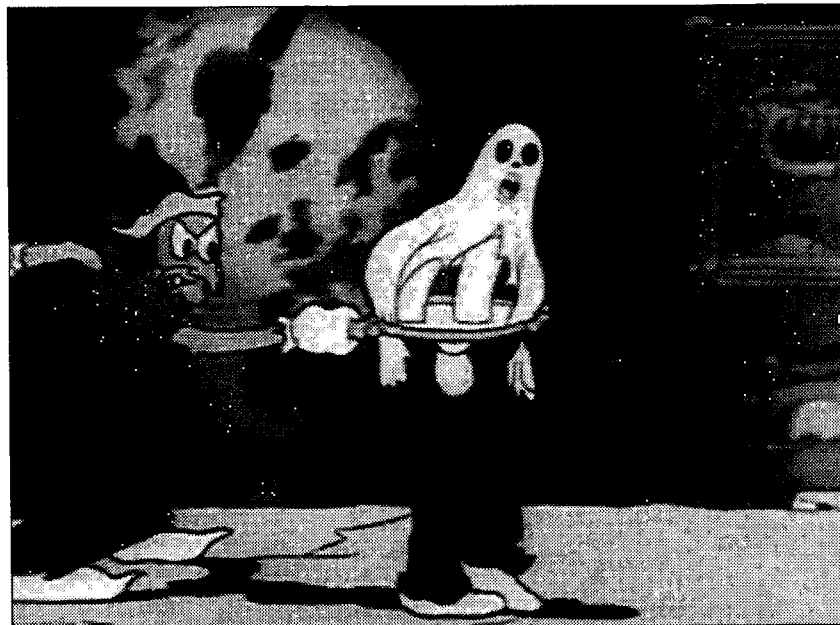


Figure C.2. Kitchen Steve's disembodied avatar. Screenshot by author.

develop and change in front of the public gaze. We are increasingly familiar with the demand, not the imperative of so-called transparency online, in which the policing of identity and identifiability is held to be the basis not only of state security, but even certain styles of insurgent politics as well. Identity is held to be the basis of trust, dissimulation a token of menace. Taking a kooky animated GIF as one's online avatar seems to be the artist's way of saying: now you see me, now you don't. It also seems to be a way of saying, catch me if you can. And lastly, it may suggest, like the alien eyeball, an ephemeral emblem of black counter-surveillance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Both my grandmothers favored literacy, and so we have always been a people of the book. Grandma T taught me how to type, and Grandma N taught me how not to be a single being. The thread of Christian faith that tethered these two women across time and space, across language and culture, would not be mine to pass on. But I still hope the circle may be unbroken, by and by.

The genesis of the questions that drive the present work began in the classrooms of Henry Abelow, Steven Gregory, Ann DuCille, and Indira Karamcheti at Wesleyan University in the early 1990s. "PCU" was a baptism into the fires of post-structuralist intersectionality, and I never looked back. Long conversations with Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie initiated me into the rigors of black Marxism, and two seminars with Alex Dupuy solidified my lifelong commitments to a future for socialism. In graduate school, Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach were ideal mentors for someone who knew he wanted to do something with performance, but couldn't quite say what. Nancy Cott taught me nineteenth-century history and Hazel Carby taught me black modernism. They both taught me, in different ways, how to chant down the Babylon of patriarchal scholasticism. At NYU, where I taught for a decade, the Department of Performance Studies supplied me with what often feels like a second doctorate (what the Germans call a *habilitationsschrift*), so decisive and unique was the intellectual culture of the sixth floor of Tisch back in those days. Barbara Browning, José Esteban Muñoz, and Karen Shimakawa were dream chairs—fearless leaders and intellectual comrades. Ann Pellegrini was an ideal guide into the dark arts of psychoanalysis, and equally adept in Foucault. André Lepecki is probably most to blame for infecting me with an enduring enthusiasm for the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (not least for the inspired atmosphere of Deleuzianism he conjured around him), but he also taught me, along with the late Randy Martin, how to think and write about movement with rigor and specificity. Lisa Dug-

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Frank Simon, dir., *The Queen* (1968). The film had been the brainchild of Andy Warhol, although it was executed by the Flawless Mother Sabrina, an experienced producer of underground drag pageants across the country who was mistress of ceremonies for the Miss All-American Camp Beauty. The classic queer study of drag is Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). On Flawless Mother Sabrina, see Chadwick Moore, "More Often than Not, I Was Driven to the County Line and Told Never to Come Back," *Out* 23, no. 5 (2015): 43–45. Sadly, Jack Doroshow passed during the writing of this book. See Neil Genzlinger, "Jack Doroshow Dies at 78, Drag Pageant Impresario Known as Flawless Sabrina" *New York Times*, December 2, 2017, A21; and Bradford Nordeen, ed., *Dirty Looks* (Brooklyn, NY: Dirty Looks, 2018), 3:5–46.
- 2 The relationship between the pageants Sabrina staged nationally between 1959 and 1969 and what historian Kevin Mumford has termed black-white "interzones" in major American cities is a topic that deserves further research. "We would take hotels, usually in the black section of town," Sabrina told *Out* magazine in 2015, "and rent out the ballrooms." Moore, "More Often than Not," 43–45. See also Kevin J Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- 3 "A Litany for Survival," in Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), 3.
- 4 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988).
- 5 My approach in this paragraph is influenced by the classic articulation of the subaltern as under/other in Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. The under/other is, in a sense made classic above all by black feminism, not doubly disadvantaged, but slyly empowered, by its placement outside historical time and agency. There are now a number of queer theoretical studies of time and temporality making a version of this argument. See especially Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer*

- Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Judith "Jack" Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- 6 I am indebted of course in this reading to Rod Ferguson's generative formulations regarding the figure of black transgender transgression in the opening pages of *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
 - 7 I discuss Gilles Deleuze's conception of the "people who are missing" in greater detail in chapter 6, but an initial sense of what I aim for here can be found by transposing from literature to gesture the argument that Deleuze and Guattari make about Kafka when they write, "Only one thing really bothers Kafka and angers him, makes him indignant: when people treat him as a writer of intimacy, finding a refuge in literature, as an author of solitude, of guilt, of an intimate misfortune. . . . There is a Kafka laughter, a very joyous laughter, that people usually understand poorly. It is for stupid reasons that people have tried to see a refuge far from life in Kafka's literature, and also an agony, the mark of an impotence and a culpability, the sign of a sad interior tragedy. Only two principles are necessary to accord with Kafka[:] . . . a profound joy [and the acknowledgement that] he is a political author, prophet of the future world" (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012], 41).
 - 8 On contemporary installation art as a site of fugitivity, see Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). On the genealogy of black representational space in the space of art and culture, see Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
 - 9 On the "nonevent" of emancipation, see Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116 and passim.
 - 10 Interviewed by the author many decades after the event, the ever-diplomatic (and now late) Flawless Mother Sabrina still declined to confirm whether or not she believed that Crystal LaBeija had been unfairly denied the crown.
 - 11 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). For a recent queer of color engagement with Glissant, especially on opacity and errantry, see Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming). I am indebted to Fred Moten, in an earlier reading of this manuscript, for the neologism "fabulationality."
 - 12 "My favorite animals is them that changes color when they's hiding. And when they's dreaming? . . . They showed them at Marineland in Florida, them rays and jellyfish, and this marine guide was talking about how that's they way of speaking, they form of communication, 'cause I be wondering why them marine animals keep changing color and think it just for camouflage. 'Cause most of the time they

- tell you when animals change color, it's for camouflage, least of all them land animals. Few of them has color displays for mating purposes, but when they change colors that's for camouflage" (Gayl Jones, *Mosquito* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2000], 11–12).
- 13 On "critical fabulation" see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; on "speculative fabulation," see Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). I will have more to say about both in the pages to follow.
 - 14 The nonperformativity of black performance is a central theme of what has come to be called "afro-pessimism." See Frank Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225–40.
 - 15 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); Saidiya Hartman, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, special issue on "Wildness," ed. Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, 117, no. 3 (2018): 465–490.
 - 16 A clear introductory exposition of this paradox appears in Umberto Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
 - 17 Tracy Chapman, *Telling Stories* (Elektra Records, 2000). In the title track to this album, Chapman specifically connects afro-fabulation to science fiction: "There's a science fiction in the space between you and me," she sings, "a fabrication of a grand scheme, where I am the scary monster." Deflating anti-black fantasies of black people as "super-predators" and pornotrope monsters, Chapman enlists afro-fabulation in a project of de-dramatizing such grand schemes through strategies of comic deflation. See Francesca Royster, "Baby, Could I Love You Tonight: Tracy Chapman and Butch Recognition, Longing and Belonging in the Neo-Soul Moment," unpublished conference paper delivered at Pop Conference, Museum of Popular Culture, Saturday, April 28, 2018.
 - 18 Wu Tsang, *for how we perceived a life* (*Take 3*), 9:33 min, color, sound, HD video, 2013.
 - 19 On black trans-aesthetics, see LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Trans-aesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015). As I detail further below, I seek to mobilize the term "trans-aesthetics" in a way that centers transgender black subjects, even if I recognize that who can be said to be transgender is itself a complex historical and historiographic problem.
 - 20 See also Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Invisibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
 - 21 In his account of the "wish," the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan distinguishes between its "goal" and its "aim," a contrast he renders topologically in order to demonstrate how the subject is always eccentric to herself. While visibility may be her aim, in these Lacanian terms, her goal will be something other than what she aims for. It is into this gap, I would posit, that full body quotation steps. Jacques

- Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1998).
- 22 Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 23 Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 68.
- 24 King, *Virtual Memory*, 163–67.
- 25 On Deleuze and Bergson, see Elizabeth Grosz, “Deleuze’s Bergson: Duration: The Virtual and a Politics of the Future,” in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); on Marxist theories of primitive accumulation, see David Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession,” *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63–87.
- 26 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 27 Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).
- 28 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. And I’ve already mentioned that Saidiya Hartman has called for a “critical fabulation” in relation to the aporia of the archive of slavery and its afterlives in “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
- 29 Joy James, “‘Concerning Violence’: Frantz Fanon’s Rebel Intellectual in Search of a Black Cyborg,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 1 (2013): 57–70. On the cultural politics of the black fantastic more broadly, see Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 30 Largely missing from this list of interlocutors are all the literary and narrative theorists who also use “fabulation” as a critical term. My principle guide to this field is Jonathan D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
- 31 The concept of black Marxism is well outlined in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). More recently, a “dark Deleuze” has been sketched in Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), as I discuss further at the end of this introduction. Key black studies contributors to a literature that precedes the darkening of Deleuze Culp belatedly proposes would include Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press 2014); and Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

- 32 For more on this, see my essay, “Unburdening Representation,” *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 70–80.
- 33 On the fabula/sjuzhet distinction in formalism and deconstruction, see Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, chap. 9.
- 34 Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left*, 2017.
- 35 See Jordana Rosenberg, “The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present,” *Theory & Event* 17, no. 2 (2014).
- 36 See also Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Science and the Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 37 For a recent useful synthesis of trans theories and controversies, see Jack Halberstam, *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018). For a thickly phenomenological account of how trans and queer analytics might diverge in relation to a single case, see Gayle Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).
- 38 Marc Siegel, “Vaginal Davis’s Gospel Truths,” *Camera Obscura* 23, no. 1 (2008): 151–59. The classic studies of Davis appears in José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Jennifer Doyle, “The Trouble with Men, or, Sex, Boredom, and the Work of Vaginal Davis,” in *After Criticism*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 81–100.
- 39 Patricia Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Dominic Johnson, *Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For a definitive survey of these questions in the field of black queer studies, consult E. Patrick Johnson, ed., *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). I give my own account of the arts of black queer shade in the next chapter.
- 40 Martin F. Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives,” *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (2014): 94–107.
- 41 Madison Moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
- 42 Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight*, 137.
- 43 Fred Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape: Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 2 (2007): 217–46.
- 44 See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012). For a genealogy of black countervisibility, see Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Black-*

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- ness. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 45 Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 117–18.
- 46 Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, eds., *We Wanted a Revolution Black Radical Women, 1965–85: A Sourcebook* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, 2017). In public conversation at the California African American Art Museum on January 14, 2018, the artist recalled that when she first asked the prisoners what subject she should paint for their mural, one replied, “A road out of here.” This is another sense in which the force of the virtual operates to intagliate our bondage and our freedom.
- 47 Here I gloss an argument also made by Homay King in the final chapter of *Virtual Memory*.
- 48 Getting to this “how to do things with black/queer archives,” therefore, entails for me a digression into a conversation that Italian Marxist Antonio Negri once had with the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In it, Deleuze evokes fabulation as an alternative heuristic for linking “art” and “a people,”—or in other terms, for linking the aesthetic and the sociopolitical. Afro-fabulation would in this sense do work that is related to—if, as Deleuze suggests, finally distinct from—utopianism. In the remark above, Deleuze is offering a typical “disjunctive synthesis” of art and the popular, with “disjunctive synthesis” here being the approach Deleuze develops, in the *Logic of Sense* especially, for thinking through the either/or choice. Rather than transcend this opposition through dialectical synthesis, *disjunctive* synthesis seeks rather to preserve the difference and instead find the space of resonance that this forked path of the either/or affords. The thinking of the disjunctive synthesis, that is to say, is heterotopian rather than utopian. Even so, we may also say that insofar as fabulation diverges from utopian thinking, it continues to resonate with it. Fabulationality can be a way of touching a utopian margin. I lay this somewhat odd proviso up front so as to make clear both my own indebtedness to the work of contemporary minoritarian thinkers of utopia, especially Jayna Brown and José Esteban Muñoz, and the places where my divergence from them allows a resonance (in a sort of passionate critical angularity). Insofar as the fabulist must seize hold of a present moment and instill belief in others that what she sees is really happening, it differs ever so slightly from the utopian impulse.
- 49 Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).
- 50 Insofar as afro-fabulation is a kind of social dreaming, it is much closer to afro-surrealism than afro-futurism. On black surrealism, see Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009). See also D. Scot Miller, “Afrosurreal Manifesto,” with its opening flourish, “Black is the new black,” *Afrosurreal Generation*, May 20, 2009. <http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com>.

- 51 On political moods, see Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 52 Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 53 On the changing same, see Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967); and James Snead, “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 62–81. On history and memory, see Robert O’Meally and Genevieve Fabre, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989). In queer studies, Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) has been influential in questioning the loss/recovery paradigm.
- 54 A full review of these debates is beyond the scope of this introduction, but two excellent, if contrasting, takes appear in Rinaldo Walcott, “Beyond the ‘Nation Thing’: Black Studies, Cultural Studies, and Diaspora Discourse (or the Post-Black Studies Moment),” in *Decolonizing the Academy: African Diaspora Studies*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies, Meredith Gadsby, Charles Peterson, and Henrietta Williams (New York: African World Press, 2003), 107–24; and Paul C. Taylor, “Post-Black, Old Black,” *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 625–40. Running a frequency search on the corpus of English-language texts included in the Google Books database shows more than a doubling in frequency of “post-black” and a tripling of references to “post-queer” over the first decade of the 2000s. Both are dwarfed by the appearances of “post-feminist,” which begins to show up in the literature in earnest two decades earlier, in 1980, and climbs steadily from there. See also Margo Natalie Crawford’s recent *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).
- 55 Baraka, *Black Music*.
- 56 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 129.
- 57 Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*.
- 58 Masi Asare, “Voicing the Possible: Technique, Vocal Sound, and Black Women on the Musical Stage,” PhD dissertation (New York University, 2018), 8.
- 59 I’m grateful to Fred Moten for suggesting this term as descriptive of my project in a reading of an earlier draft of this text.
- 60 Kara 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): 569–70.
- 61 My own approach to black temporality resembles Keeling’s more than Wright’s. Because a key aspect of Bergson’s concept of duration is irreversibility, I don’t

think of quantum indeterminacy as providing “free play” untethered to history. Instead I approach the legacy of the Middle Passage as more hauntological than epistemological. See Wright, *Physics of Blackness*; and Fred Moten, “Notes on Passage (The New International of Sovereign Feelings),” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 3, no. 1 (2014): 51–74.

- 62 Thelma Golden and Hamza Walker, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001).
- 63 Gilroy, *Against Race*, 26 and passim.
- 64 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. For a trenchant critique of the Arendtian terms of political order, see Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013). For more on human rights discourse, see my “Black Humanitarianism,” in *Retrieving the Human: Reading Paul Gilroy*, ed. Rebecka Rutledge Fisher and Jay Garcia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 187–205.
- 65 See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337. Gratitude to the members of the Sylvia Wynter Reading Group, organized and led by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, for ongoing guidance through the thicket of Wynter’s massive and academically camouflaged project. See also Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 66 For a good introduction to the Deleuzian critique of humanism, see Nathan Widder, *Political Theory after Deleuze* (New York: Continuum, 2012).
- 67 Robert Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Jayna Brown, “A Wilder Sort of Empiricism: Madness, Visions and Speculative Life,” *Social Text Periscope*, January 4, 2012, www.socialtextjournal.org.
- 68 Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

CHAPTER 1. CRITICAL SHADE

- 1 The method of thick description that this chapter essays is indebted to the experimental ethnographic models of Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014). All ensuing errors in anthropological theory and practice are of course my own.
- 2 On the relation between black dance and postmodern dance, see Thomas DeFrantz, ed., *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); and Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

- 3 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2002). An early statement of this theme remains influential: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 4 Clare Croft, ed., *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.
- 5 Octavia Saint Laurent was one of the femme realness icons of Jennie Livingston’s pathbreaking 1991 film, *Paris Is Burning*. I attended that ball in the summer of 1994, conducting researching for what would become my undergraduate thesis, “Fierce Pleasures: Art, History, and Culture in the New York City Drag Ball Scene” (Wesleyan University, 1995). Scandalously, the legendary Octavia lost the competition that night. Even the judges couldn’t believe it. For more on St. Laurent and vogue, see Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti, “Elements of Vogue,” *Third Text* 5, nos. 16–17 (1991): 65–81; and Marlon M. Bailey, “Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 4 (2014): 1–19.
- 6 The quotation on the ephemeral program was reprinted from Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 98–99, emphasis in original. The original read, “one of the informants,” which Harrell has replaced with the less-ethnographic sounding “one participant.”
- 7 Here I must at least briefly acknowledge the small bookshelf of essays and books that directly engage the enduringly controversial film, *Paris Is Burning*, and the living house ball culture of which it was of course but a snapshot. A fuller account of this bibliography and videography than I can give here would certainly include: Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal, 2013); and Phillip Brian Harper, *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
- 8 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 9 In this section and throughout, my argument about shade and fierceness is informed by Madison Moore, “Tina Theory: Notes on Fierceness,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 1 (2012): 71–86; and E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), especially chap. 2.
- 10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 182.
- 11 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 187.
- 12 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 189.

CONCLUSION

- 1 On "conceptual aphasia" in contemporary critical race theory, see Paul Khalil Saucier and Tryon P Woods, eds., *Conceptual Aphasia in Black: Displacing Racial Formation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016). While I find this contribution useful and thought-provoking, what it spurs in me is a greater interest in the varieties and valences of silence in black literature and culture, rather than a critique of racial formation theory, as it does for Woods and Saucier.
- 2 Saidiya Hartman describes the aim of her narrative restraint in an opening note on method where she writes: "I don't try to liberate these documents from the context in which they were collected but do try to exploit the surface of these accounts for contrary purposes and to consider the form resistance assumes given this context. My attempt to read against the grain is perhaps best understood as a combination of foraging and disfiguration" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 11–12)—an approach I might add that I strive to bring to my own engagement, in this text, with the digital archive of blackness.
- 3 On the body as archive, see Kathleen Canning, "The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History," *Gender & History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 499–513, and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For a more recent performance critique of this trope, see André Lepecki, "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2010): 28–48.
- 4 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2.
- 5 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, Volume 1, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 125–38.
- 6 Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
- 7 Jacques Derrida, Foreword to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvi.
- 8 Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 17–18.
- 9 On black life as "living death," see Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions*, no. 5 (2011), 28.
- 10 See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, especially chap. 2.
- 11 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 73. Hartman outlines a theory of critical fabulation in her subsequent essay, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
- 12 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 56–57, emphasis added.
- 13 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013).
- 14 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

- 15 As an aside, consider how much critical energy expended in warding off any recourse to "romance" and "romanticization," I warrant, actually exits the romantic mode only to enter directly into the gothic. In general, whenever someone warns you against romanticizing something, that should be your cue to look a little closer at the very thing you are being warned away from.
- 16 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011).
- 17 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 18 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 19 Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- 20 José Esteban Muñoz, "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick," in *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*, ed. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian, and Beatrice Michaelis (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 110.
- 21 Personal interview with author.
- 22 Personal interview with author.
- 23 Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- 24 Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).