

Savannah Shange

BLACK GIRL ORDINARY: FLESH, CARCERALITY, AND THE REFUSAL OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Abstract

Written at the confluence of Black girlhood studies and a critical anthropology of the state, this essay is an ethnography of social death in gentrifying San Francisco. I argue the gendered and raced patterns of school discipline at a San Francisco high school help us apprehend the afterlife of slavery. Within the context of schooling, the particular association of Black girls as loud and disobedient is well-documented in the literature. Using flesh (Spillers 1987) as a hermeneutic to understand Black embodiment in the late liberal US, the essay centers on two young women who are targeted for school push out. Ultimately, the self-making strategies employed by young Black women in San Francisco flummox the progressive political project and model “Black girl ordinary” as a practice of ethical refusal, both within and beyond the academy. [gender, youth, schooling, urban anthropology, blackness]

The toes of Cyarea’s kiddie size white-on-white Nike Air Force 1’s squeaked as she dragged them across the speckled linoleum floor.

“Go on ahead,” said Jeff, “we ain’t got all day.”

Craning her neck in order to make sure he could see her rolling her eyes at all six-plus feet of him, she exaggeratedly picked up her feet and speed-scooted toward the principal’s office. Jeff, the security advisor on duty, looked over at me on my perch at a student desk in the hall, and broke into a wide grin. He shook his head and tried to suppress laughter at Cyarea’s comedic timing.

The school building that housed Robeson Justice Academy was plagued by the same faulty infrastructure and lax upkeep that impacted the rest of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Half the classrooms at Robeson had

radiators that never turned off, even on the sunniest of days, while the rest of the rooms were jerry rigged with heaters teachers brought from home because the radiators never turned on. My room was one of the former, assigned to me for the two classes I taught as part of my combined volunteer role of instructor-researcher for the 2012–2013 academic year. My hallway perch was a perk for an ethnographer; I had a plastic chair with flip-down desktop stationed outside the door for myself or a sweaty student to escape to whenever the room got too hot. There, as I graded papers or fiddled with field notes, I got to see the parade of smaller and larger beings rounding the corner near my room as they made their way along the square path created by the high school’s four hallways.

Cyarea seemed to come past at least once a day during her freshman year, usually on her own but sometimes escorted by Jeff, the brawny school security guard who spent most of the last ten years as a bouncer at gay clubs. His round cocoa face sparkled with steel hoops in his eyebrow, septum and even a labret piercing poked through his beard. The imposing “don’t even think about stepping to me” air to his self-presentation was scented with a queer impishness exemplified by his nickname “Sweetie Pie,” also the moniker of a weekly party he hosted at a local bear bar.¹ Jeff’s official title as *student advisor* was creatively designed by the co-principals so that Robeson could avoid hiring a security guard from the district pool of union security guards. The SFUSD guards were notorious for corruption and incompetence. In the first two years of Robeson’s existence, they had committed acts of sexual harassment and fomented conflict among students, leading to this personnel workaround. Jeff’s position had more hours per week than typical SFUSD guards, was better paid, and more significant in terms of institutional governance, had a new restorative-justice-based job description that allowed site-based hiring, rather than being shuttled through the central office like the Special Education and counseling positions often were.

The shift from “guard” to “advisor” also points to the institutional exceptionality of Robeson Justice Academy. Located in one of Frisco’s last working-class neighborhoods, Robeson was founded by a group of parent-activists, teachers, and youth to offer a social justice based, college preparatory education to students of color in southeast San Francisco.² The public, in-district high school was designated by the District as a “small school by design,” and thus granted a measure of autonomy usually associated with charter schools. Budget, schedule, curriculum, and personnel decisions were made at the school level, and Robeson’s investment in democratic governance meant that often all thirty or so staff members tussled through consensus on topics ranging from the start time of the school day to whether a doo-rag counted as a “hat.” Robeson’s staff was less than half white, with the balance reflecting the diversity of Northern California’s “people of color”—Latinx, Filipina, Indonesian, Chinese-American, with a couple Black folks for good measure, mostly concentrated in lower-paid, non-teaching support staff positions like Jeff’s.³

Even with his fancy title, his piercings, his blackness, his queerness, and his dessert-themed nickname, there were still times that Jeff served the same function of school security across the US—removing mostly Black children from classrooms and delivering them to their administrative fate.⁴ He, like every other staff member at Robeson and most folks reading these words was caught in a late liberal double-bind: we work for institutions that we know are soaked in bias and inequity, even as those same institutions have (more or less robust) commitments to ending bias and inequity.⁵ Robeson’s status as an institution with an exceptionally robust commitment to social justice did not map predictably onto disciplinary practices. The year that Cyarea enrolled, the school had the highest rate of suspensions for Black students in The City.⁶ Rather than indict individual actors for the crimes of structural racism, I engage Jeff, Cyarea and other folks in the school building as a way to trace the flows of race, place and power in the context of gentrifying San Francisco.

In this essay, I argue the gendered and raced patterns of school discipline at Robeson help us apprehend the afterlife of slavery as lived in Frisco. It draws on a larger book project on coalition, anti-blackness, and the late liberal state in which I sketch the contours of an abolitionist anthropology. In doing so, I seek to stage an

encounter between contemporary anthropology and what some call the “Afropessimist” thread of Africana theory: this is, in part, an ethnography of social death.⁷ The first section of the essay focuses on Black embodiment. In it, I situate my engagement with Cyarea and her homegirls in the field of Black girlhood studies, and turn to *flesh* as a hermeneutic to better understand how they flummox the multiracial progressive project. In the second section, I sketch the carceral geographies of San Francisco and Robeson Justice Academy as (re)produced through the figure of Kate, a White Robeson teacher. Finally, I close the essay with a rumination on what we might imagine as a Black girl methodology, an ethical mode of refusal both within and beyond the academy.

Echoing the multilingual chaos that sings through the sidewalks of San Francisco, I tell this story in several registers at once, layering Black English, neighborhood dialects, and academic prose into the ethnographic text.⁸ I am inspired by Aimee Cox’s assertion that the social choreography of Black girls “can disrupt and discredit normative reading practices that assess young Black women’s bodies as undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place” (2015, 28–9). In the pages that follow, I attempt to disrupt normative *writing* practices and to craft a Black girl text that keeps the narrative conventions of our discipline on their toes. As anthropologists, we often splice our short-form work into macro-level “theory” pieces and narratively driven “ethnographic” pieces; this essay is an attempt to do both at the same damn time.

HEAR OUR TRUTHS: BLACK GIRLHOOD STUDIES

One of the first monographs to center the lived experience and cultural contribution of Black girls was Kyra Gaunt’s (2006) *The Games Black Girls Play*, which in many ways lays the groundwork for the burgeoning field of Black girlhood studies, even as it also is a key text of hip-hop feminisms. Ruth Nicole Brown (2008), an early proponent of Black girlhood studies as a disciplinary field, grounds much of her academic work in her role as a co-founder and advisor for the Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) performance program created by and for young Black women in Urbana, Illinois. Through the practice and theory of SOLHOT, Brown (2013, 14) conceives of “visionary Black girlhood as a space of freedom,” indeed, a fount of Black girl genius. Working in the tradition of SOLHOT, Dominique Hill (2016)

asserts that transgression of both racial and gender norms is central to both being a blackgirl and researching blackgirls. She, like Robin Boylorn (2013), uses the neologism *blackgirl* to denote the mutual imbrication of blackness, gender, and coming of age. Several scholars have challenged the notion of Black girls as victims of rap music stereotypes by highlighting the agentic relationship that Black girls develop as critical consumers of hip hop (Clay 2012; Lindsey 2013; Love 2012). Indeed, Brittney Cooper (2016) argues that the hypervisibility of Black women in popular culture provides models for sisterhood in action, in which “black girl is a verb”—to show up, and show out.⁹

Because silence and fragmentation dislocate Black women’s lives in the archives of the past and present (Fuentes 2016), cultural geography presents another methodological approach that allows us to focus on one local site of Black girlhood as a strategy of analysis (Field et al. 2016). Both *South Side Girls* (Chatelain 2015) and *Crescent City Girls* (Simmons 2015) are excellent historical examples of this approach, as is Aimee Cox’s *Shapeshifters* (2015), one of the only works in anthropology to center on Black girlhood in the US. Cox’s ethnography of young women living in and around a homeless shelter in Detroit highlights the role of non-profits and educational institutions as sites of Black girl self-making. She renders the Fresh Start Center as the kind of place that Brown et al. envision as a site to “stage Black girl utopias” (Brown et al. 2015). My approach to Robeson is deeply indebted to Cox’s work, and though I focus more on the dystopian elements of Black girlhood, the notion of community organizations as “stages” proposed by Brown et al. is instructive.

Among activists and academics who work on and with schools, there is a growing awareness of the disproportionate targeting of Black girls in school discipline for behavioral concerns like disrespect (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2015), as well as the relative dearth of research and intervention efforts directed towards them as opposed to Black boys (Morris 2012, 2016). Connie Wun’s (2016) research on antiblackness, school discipline, and Black girls is among the first to apply the *afterlife of slavery* (Hartman 2007) to Black girl’s educational experiences. Beth Richie’s “prison nation” (Richie 2012) provides a broader frame for understanding the interface between schools and Black girls as it expands the notion of “carceral” beyond the borders of physical imprisonment to ensnare Black women in the traps of male violence,

punitive welfare and housing reform, and, I would argue, public schooling. Across this body of literature, researchers highlight the criminalization and pathologization of everyday Black girl practices, on the one hand, and the multitude of strategies Black girls use to make space for themselves in hostile terrains. Saidiya Hartman’s oeuvre of work (Hartman 1997, 2007, 2016) grounds both of these dynamics in the practice of chattel slavery and in turn provides the central logic of this essay.

INTERNALIZING THE WHIP: SCHOOL AS A SCENE OF SUBJECTION

Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (Hartman 1997) is an exegesis of Black female subjecthood before and after the formal abolition of slavery and offers a crucial set of tools for anthropological work on power, agency, and the US settler-state. In particular, her notion of “burdened individuality” speaks to the contortion of subject and object manifest in unbound Black folks. It refers to “the antagonistic production of the liberal individual, rights bearer and raced subject as equal yet inferior, independent yet servile, freed yet bound by duty, reckless yet responsible, blithe yet brokenhearted” (Hartman 1997, 121). Burdened individuality is useful here as a framework because it helps us pay attention to the shift in tactics, but not in power, that attended Jubilee.

The role of educators and freedmen’s schools in realizing this shift is crucial—Hartman’s work excavates what we might call a “pedagogy of respectability,” one overly concerned with the proper comport of freed slaves and committed to stoking an inner fire of duty and deference:

In freedman’s handbooks, the displacement of the whip can be discerned in the emphasis on self-discipline and policing. The whip was not to be abandoned; rather, it was to be internalized. The emphasis on correct training, proper spirit, and bent backs illuminated the invasive forms of discipline idealized as the self-fashioning of the moral and rational subject. (Hartman 1997, 140)

Certainly, it’s easy to see the link between the emphasis on proper spirit and the character training espoused in the official institutional discourse of a place like the Knowledge Is Power Program, better known as KIPP, the neoliberal school reform behemoth with its motto to students: “Work Hard, Be Nice.” It’s harder in a place like Robeson, which as an organization is explicitly

committed to liberation as a pedagogical outcome, and where staff members are well-versed in the literature on the school-to-prison pipeline and are adamantly opposed to the privatization of education. However, I argue that it is in this bastion of state-funded progressivism, which is probably the best place to send your kid to as a Black parent in San Francisco, that the lash has been most deeply internalized, where pedagogies of respectability are masked behind the language of decolonial liberation.

Pedagogies of respectability disproportionately impacted Black girls at Robeson—in Cyarea’s disciplinary file, staff members complained about how loud and how often she talked. Whether actually labeled as a “Loudie” (Morris 2007), Black girls’ assertive use of their voices is interpreted as unladylike and deviant, indexing the enduring incompatibility of blackness and hegemonic White bourgeois norms of femininity, and as Spillers (1987) suggests, perhaps the entire oeuvre of gender. The gendered dimensions of citizenship are shaped by over a century of scholarly and political investment in theories of Black family pathology that crystallize in the US in the infamous Moynihan’s (1965) report but are reflective of a transnational push to use respectability as a tool to manage Black people across the hemisphere in the wake of emancipation and decolonization (Alexander 2010; Browne 2015; Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004; Hartman 1997; Higginbotham 1993; Thomas 2009). Surveillance of Black sociality—particularly family formations and patterns of intimacy—is a central Reconstruction technology, which also manifests as an intense attention to Black performativity, or what we might think of as, *The Search for the Well-Behaved Negro*. That search is thwarted over and over in the hallways and classrooms of Robeson, where Black children like Cyarea refuse the deference of “burdened individuality” and instead use their bodies, voices, and self-styling as a practice of Black ungovernability.

BLACK GIRL ORDINARY: AN EXCEPTION TO EXCEPTIONALITY

Cyarea never stops moving, and aspires to dance in music videos like Ciara, the multiplatinum R&B star whose name she invokes every time a new teacher hesitates when they see the attendance roll. The first time she was in my theater class, she jumped out of her seat to do a quick eight-count footwork and gyration combination, announcing, “duh, it’s pronounced... [chest pop, chest pop] *Ciara!*” Cyarea’s projection of self is, on the one

hand, quotidian in its mass-market ubiquity, and yet dissonant in the context of the self-styling of most of Robeson’s Black staff, which was dripping in what one teacher, Benita, called “Black alterity.”¹⁰ In contrast, Cyarea instantiates what we might call, “Black girl ordinary,” a genre of *crisis ordinary*, which posits “the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (Berlant 2011, 8). Within San Francisco, those pressures include housing precarity, misogynoir, police terror, street violence, and the grinding disorientation of having been a slave.¹¹ Ordinary in this sense is marked by the temporal—an impasse, a lacuna in the ongoingness of linear time. In this frame, Black girl ordinary is that which signifies on (but does not conform to) normative notions of gender through a performative blackness shaped by hip hop, social media, and conspicuous consumption: it is a mode of queer(ed) disidentification (Muñoz 1999). However, those of us who are Black girls, who have been Black girls, and who love Black girls know that there is nothing unremarkable about Cyarea, Ciara, or any other Black womanchild refusing to be disappeared at the margin of common sense.

EVEN ORDINARY BLACK GIRLS IS ALLERGIC TO ORDINARY

Cyarea’s constant dancing, stomping, and booty popping in classrooms and hallways invokes Aimee Cox’s (2015) notion of social choreography as a descriptor of Black girls’ creative and strategic engagements with the state. Black girl ordinary inverts the logic of the Talented Tenth—we don’t need no lifting, climbing, or saving. Instead, it improvises on social and aesthetic choreographies to disrupt the inherited rhythms of captivity, progressive or otherwise. Regular, degular, schmegular Black girls stay dancing in the face of state-sanctioned slow death—ours is flesh made fierce.¹² You also might know *Black girl ordinary* by her government name: #blackgirlmagic. A circulated, selfied, carefree mode of Black femininity, #blackgirlmagic has been both celebrated for its affirmation of Black women’s thrival despite the adversities of racial capitalism and critiqued for its association with a light and curly stratum of bourgeois negroes.¹³ Black girl ordinary and #blackgirlmagic are coterminous; I use the former to center a materialist reading of gendered Black self-making and refuse the misogynoir that may seek to elide what is common to Black girls in order to

elevate that which is seen as exceptional. We are conjurers, all—what’s magical is that we are still here. *Life after Death* indeed.¹⁴

Furthermore, Black girl ordinary can serve as a counterweight to what we might imagine as *Black boy special*, a category of reverence and urgency that has coalesced around a century of handwringing over the fate of Black men (Alexander-Floyd 2007). At Robeson, those hands are wrung to the tempo of respectability-driven anxiety about the hyperincarceration of Black men and wipe away tears shed in staff meetings over having so few Black boys in a given graduating class. Only four young Black men crossed the stage at the 2013 and 2014 commencements, and a whopping seven out of the fifty-six graduates of 2015 were Black boys. Both non-Black and Black staff participated in the institutional focus on Black boys, and some Black staff saw working with Black boys as central to their teaching identity. For instance, in a focus group I convened for Black Robeson staff, Nyla, a fair-skinned Robeson English teacher who had been in her position for nine years, recounted going to the mat when her students were threatened by her fellow advisors with not being able to participate in the graduation ceremony: “they were saying two of my Black male advisees couldn’t walk onstage!” She ended up walking out of the meeting because “at that point I’m going to have a personal beef with you, and it’s not going to be professional.” Maurice, a young Black retention counselor and Frisco native in his early twenties, agreed: “I feel that. The graduation means so much for an African-American male, it’s like being drafted to the league or something.”

While both Nyla and Maurice lift up their concerns about Black boys, a closer look at achievement data from 2013 to 2016 reveals that Black girls did not fare much better. In the 2013 and 2014 graduations, only five Black girls graduated each year, compared to four Black boys. In 2015, when seven Black boys graduated, only *four* Black girls crossed the stage. Zahra, the college counselor, explained the gender differential in how Black children at Robeson were treated this way:

Because there’s this bleeding thing of like Black boys are not being educated and, you know all of these terrible things: they’re going to get caught up in the streets and all these different things. When a Black boy is completely off the Richter, but then shows some kind of promise or progress people are so

ready to just grab him and cuddle him in such a frustrating way. And I think for Black girls I don’t think there’s that much space. There is a fear associated with angry Black women, like angry Black young girls, and I feel that folks don’t necessarily know how to deal with that.

Zahra uses spatial language in rendering the terrain of racialized gender, whereby the institutional fear of ordinary Black girls compresses their range of motion—there is “not that much space” for Cyarea and her homegirls. When “folks don’t know how to deal” with Black girl anger, their default response in the school context was often to displace children from the classroom, hence the meandering trip Cyarea and Jeff took through the hall that opened this essay.

FEELING THE FLESH

Cyarea’s Peter Pan-like frame folded onto a splintered wood chair older than she was; she was neither the first nor the last to sit in it that day—about four or five kids were sent out of class every day at Robeson, most of whom were Black. The collection of [un]disciplined Black beings that come to wait outside the principal’s office manifest the liminality of *flesh*, suspended as they are, from the real time of the school day. Waiting in itself is an aspect of what Michael Hanchard (1999) calls racial time. In Hanchard’s frame, waiting structures Afro-modernity insofar that Black folks in the US are made to wait our turn to board the bus, to read a schoolbook, to gain the right to vote and so forth. The majority–minority context of south-east San Francisco warps racial time, such that in the absence of White bodies, the waiting *itself* is a disciplinary technology. Cyarea is made to sit in class, and if she won’t, she is again made to sit in the office as the late liberal state delimits the shape of acceptable Black embodiment.

In this section, I explore the notion of the *flesh* as a hermeneutic to sit with Cyarea and dwell in the space between belonging and exile occupied by ordinary Black beings in gentrifying San Francisco. Offered by Hortense Spillers as a searing intervention in her ovaric essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), the flesh has been taken up by scholars in Africana Studies and queer studies as a foil for dominant discourses of gender, the body and the human.¹⁵ Spillers’ essay tears asunder a century of social scientific “misnaming” of Black women and

families, using the 1965 Moynihan Report's focus on [purported] matrifocality and Black family pathology as a prime example of epistemic violence. She engages the enslaved Black female form as a key transfer point for American modes of domination. However, because captive Black bodies were "ungendered" in their wholly undifferentiated availability for torture, rape, labor and death, Spillers argues that enslaved Black women's femininity was undone in the service of power, leaving the semiotic system of *thingification* intact (Césaire 2000). "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" traces the knowledge project of chattel slavery into the twentieth century, and because it makes plain the interdiction of Black folks in the Americas from the normative categories of personhood, gender, and kinship, the essay is a crucial resource for critical anthropology. The flesh challenges our attempts to enact an ethical social science, and demands that we "speak a truer word concerning" (Spillers 1987, 65) our Black selves, particularly for those of us who are or have been Black girls. In my ethnographic work on anti-Blackness and state-funded progressivism, the *flesh* provides an analytic frame that capacitates what we might think about as a Black girl methodology, one that emerges from but is not reducible to Black feminist knowledge production.

Spillers distinguishes the [subject] "body" from [object] "flesh" such that "flesh" is:

that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, of the reflexes of iconography... if we think of the "flesh" as primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen or "escaped" overboard (Spillers 1987, 67).

In this frame, the "body" is the paradigmatic subject of the social world—a normative "person" with access to citizenship and genealogy. Conversely, "flesh" is the sentient object manifest as the slave—she who can be a literal *belonging of* a person proper and thus never can *belong to* herself, much less to a genealogy or to the body politic. In this sense, *flesh* invokes a kind of kinlessness endemic to Blackness in the New World, so vertical ties across time are forcibly supplanted with horizontal ties across space, the nexus out of which Black social death and social life is forged (Patterson 1982; Sexton 2014)—spaces like Frisco, like Ferguson, like Ponce, like Robeson,

like the Sunnydale housing projects, like the pages of this journal.

Spillersian flesh allows us to discern between our sentient, agentic, brilliant beings and what Sylvia Wynter calls the overdetermined "biocentric ethnoclass genre of the human" (2003, 317). Black girl flesh spills forth in excess of the discourses that seek to locate it, to know it, to translate its "noncommunicability" (cf. Wilderson 2010, 59). Again and again scholars have returned to "the hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Spillers 1987, 67) as a sacred turn of phrase, and I return to it here as a methodological imperative. For Spillers, the hieroglyphics of the flesh are the corporeal afterlife of torture, which structures the relationship between Black beings and the state, whereby:

these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural *vestibularity* and the *culture*, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, "owners," "soul drivers," "overseers," and "men of God," apparently colludes with a protocol of "search and destroy." (Spillers 1987, 67)

Here, Spillers marshals form in the service of meaning: she lists the modes of violation—"lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh" without an "and." These are not a sum of parts laid side by side and divided with an oxford comma. Her syntax produces these modalities of death as simultaneous on the Black "body." Palimpsestic as they are, the hieroglyphics of the flesh attune us to the spatial relation between blackness and culture. The flesh reconfigures anthropology's object of analysis: those of us who purport to study human culture must reckon with the gap Spillers points to between cultural vestibularity and culture itself, such that the latter is manifest in the carceral state-capital nexus, and the former in our own racialized beings. The "and" returns with a vengeance in her theorization of the state—"judges, attorneys, 'owners,' 'soul drivers,' 'overseers,' and 'men of God,'" (not to mention what these scare quotes are doing!) all participate in the flesh hunt. As an addendum to this list, we might write *and* teachers *and* principals *and* police *and* social workers as they operationalize key nodes in the state apparatus.

School discipline thus becomes legible as both a node of this state apparatus, and a technique for

wounding the flesh, and rendering it outside of the [proper] cultural body. At Robeson, even though the institutional rhetoric of anti-racism rendered the school largely immune from political critique, I saw this dynamic play out in the quotidian policing of Black students. In particular, these micropatterns of exclusion are revealed in the school-wide practice of “referrals,” which were given any time a student was sent to the office by a staff member. Referrals were treated as in-house data collected for each student’s advisor and thus were not necessarily visible from the district level, because most of these referrals do not escalate into suspensions or expulsions. Referrals are nonevents that don’t formally “count,” and yet structure the borders of belonging at Robeson. Almost half of Robeson students got at least one referral during the 2012–13 school year. However, Black kids made up seventy-seven percent of highly policed students who had five or more referrals, even though they were only twenty-three percent of the school population—when students accrued multiple referrals, they were then flagged for likely transfer to another school. Cyarea, with eight referrals, was marked as a candidate for transfer, which raised the stakes for even the most mundane behavioral concerns. Thus, racially disproportionate school discipline instantiates what Spillers calls the state’s “search and destroy” function in the sense that young Black people are closely surveilled and then bureaucratically destroyed through school push out.

Furthermore, though discussions about school discipline are often framed in terms of the targeting of Black boys, the student with the most referrals that year was a Black girl. Azizi had been sent to the office twenty-three times in her sophomore year, mostly for being out of class when she wasn’t supposed to, or for being “disrespectful”—never for fighting, theft, or any other major infraction listed in the state disciplinary code. Black boys and girls had almost the same likelihood of being in the highly policed group—there were thirty of the former and twenty-eight of the latter. This equity stands in stark contrast to how gender played out in disciplinary patterns for Latinx kids: Latino boys were *twice as likely* to be highly policed than Latina students, reflecting a more conventional pattern of school discipline in which female gender functions as a protective factor against suspension and expulsion (Wallace et al. 2008).¹⁶ Black girls were as highly policed as Black boys, revealing the fragility of “gender” when met with the force of blackness. Azizi’s disciplinary file

is one more “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’ [that] offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations” (Spillers 1987, 68). This “method for reading” is also a method for *writing* Black girlhood. If “the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed” (Spillers 1987, 80), we must read *and* write her as daughter and daughter-dispossessed, unprotected by and illegible to both the categories of woman and child.

Riffing on the diasporic imperative to “make a dolla out of fifteen cent” (Shakur et al. 1993), *flesh* is the script and its flippage, the wound and the platelets that rush to close it, the pigeonhole and the escape hatch. Vestibular in form as well as content, flesh may be kin (even in its kinlessness) to queer theorist and anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2006, 7) later notion of *carnality*: the “socially built space between flesh and the environment.” Carnality erupts in Robeson’s hallways, doodled into margins, cryptically texted during a class lecture, pulled aside when Cyarea gets a talking-to from a teacher-turned-auntie. Much like Spillers’ flesh/body functions as an asymmetrical opposition that helps us to apprehend black ontology, Povinelli differentiates carnality from corporeality, the juridical-statal lens that seeks to make the body visible in late liberalism’s grid of power—subject of/to the illusions of settler-democracy. Carnality and corporeality sit diagonally across from the binary relationship between the *autological subject* and the *genealogical society*, with autology functioning as the domain of the conventional capital “S” self of the Enlightenment, while “genealogy is a specific reckoning of time and the human(ist) subject of reason; genealogical inheritances threaten to determine the present by the past” (Povinelli 2006, 200).

Returning to “An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers *been* demonstrated the inadequacy of both autological (she who is owned cannot choose for herself) and genealogical (there is no inheritance for she who can be inherited) frames for understanding Black subjects in the United States. Furthermore, as we exist in and out of what she calls the “enforced state of breach,” as embodied vestibules for the wealth of others, Black folks are also *flesh out of time*, given that the inability for an enslaved woman to claim the child she births as “her own” alters any notion of how genealogy could function in this hemisphere. Flesh is that glitch in the Matrix, the asterisk that

undoes centuries of sentences, a Berlantian “im-passe” that holds open the broken promise of the now, holds it *in the break*.¹⁷

Spillersian flesh allows us to discern between our sentient, agentic, brilliant beings and the overdetermined genre of the “biocentric ethnoclass genre of the human” (Wynter 2003, 317). Black [girl] flesh spills forth in excess of the discourses that seek to locate it, to know it, to translate its “noncommunicability” (Wilderson 2010, 59). Shift the scalar view and Robeson itself is errant—this community-based school, founded by Black, Latinx, and Polynesian parents in partnership with dissident White and Asian-American educators, where district mandated textbooks gather dust in a closet while teachers build their own curricula about US imperialism in the Phillipines and mass incarceration. This is not the school reform of Teach for America.¹⁸

Robeson is a nested exception—an especially progressive school within the especially progressive city of San Francisco, which itself is part of the nationally progressive exception of the state of California. In this context, the right wing of political discourse is still generally to the left of the Democratic Party. It’s not for nothing that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office is just a few miles from Robeson—she represents “the establishment” in Bay Area politics. At Robeson, the primary agonism is between centrist progressives and radical leftists, whereby the former insist on the recovery of the state and the latter are dubious of its legitimacy. While the political center of gravity has shifted, the formative power of anti-Blackness has not. Cyarea and her homegirls’ performances of Black girlhood are out of step with the Bay Area’s progressive march toward justice.

Elsewhere I have argued that a key strategy of contemporary progressive movements is *managing dissent*, whereby social justice non-profits provide avenues for highly visible but functionally limited critique of the state by directly impacted communities (Shange 2012). The focus on performative spaces like rallies and press conferences allows for community members to have a cathartic experience of “speaking truth to power” without shifting the balance of that power. When applied on the institutional scale, rather than at the municipal level, we can see a similar pattern at work at Robeson. The school leadership attempt to manage dissent from within. In order to maintain its position that is critical of and yet complicit with the late liberal state apparatus, Robeson must (appear to) cohere as a political unit, one unified

around a clear articulation and practice of a progressive mission. Put another way, Robeson’s ability to successfully mobilize for change on a municipal and state scale beyond its walls was limited by the amount of institutional energy spent on managing errant forces within—whether they be unruly Black children or the draconian staffers intent on punishing them. In the next section, we turn our attention to one such staff member as a lens into the reproduction of carceral logics in progressive San Francisco.

“YOU CAN TELL A SUNNYDALE GIRL”: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE & CARCERAL GEOGRAPHY

Kate took pride in her reputation as a hard-ass, both with students and with other staff. A White Science teacher from the Midwest, she was part of the right-wing (read: liberal) flank of three to four Robeson staff members who were invested in racial equity but saw individual agency as a key path to social change. Kate’s carceral logic was on display at one meeting where the co-principal Tina asked the eleventh-to-twelfth-grade team to help shape the school-wide goals for the following year, because “a lot of times we are jumping to the solution, and we are not even sure what problem we are fixing.” Tina guided the team through a process of identifying bright spots and obstacles in relation to reaching Robeson’s mission of “community, independent thinkers, and social justice.” As usual, she tic-tacked her glittery nails absently on the desk as she listened to our responses. Along with stretch skinny jeans, graphic tees, and cropped blazers, Tina’s nails made her appear younger than her thirty-seven years. Her self-presentation was a strategy to set herself apart from the dozens of other Chinese American women in local school leadership. Tina had confided to me that it was harder for her to win the trust of Black families because they were used to racist principals who looked just like her. Frisco is proportionally one of the most Asian American cities in the United States, with eight generations of Chinese American residents forming a locally hegemonic cultural and economic power bloc among diverse Asian American communities. The SFUSD reflects those demographics with the highest proportion of Asian American students of any major school district, and significant numbers of Chinese American women in school and district leadership.

When it came time for Kate to read her Post-It note obstacles and place them in the flow chart on the white board, she rattled off:

kids struggling to take responsibility for learning; kids being disrespectful to teachers and peers; a core group of kids don't seem to adhere to our values, *like repeat offenders*; kids being truant; teachers seem to believe in our mission more than our kids do. [emphasis added]

My eyebrows weren't the only ones to perk up at Kate's penal system reference to "repeat offenders." Several other staff piped up, saying that the obstacles were on the sides of both students and teachers, and that things like "lack of diverse student leadership" and "systemic oppression" might also be making it hard to achieve the school's mission. In this sense, Kate was not representative of the general tone of Robeson staff and certainly was at odds with Tina, her supervisor. However, in the context of the school's progressive strategy of consensus-based decision making, her perspectives got a significant amount of airtime. She minced few words, and fashioned herself as both valiantly committed to racial justice and taking no shit. During another staff meeting about how to de-escalate conflict with students, Kate scoffed at the notion of a horizontal relation between teachers and students: "I think they *should* be scared of me because it's my fucking classroom." The struggle within Robeson to manage the right-wing elements within their leftist space (Kate) and while also neutralizing insurgence from below (Cyarea et al.) reveals the deep imbrication of multiracial progressivism with liberal retrenchment, an old story in the City by the Bay.¹⁹

When I interviewed Kate for this project, I shared with her some of my findings from descriptive analysis of disciplinary data at Robeson and asked her to reflect on the demographics of punishment at the school. Even with the numbers in front of her, Kate denied that there was a pattern of racial bias in referrals and argued that instead Robeson was far too lax with students. She brought up Tarika, a Black sophomore, as a prime example.

Kate I think Tarika's story was largely written before she walked into Robeson. Right? I think the kids from Sunnydale are really, really, really interesting to me, because you can almost always tell they're from Sunnydale. It's just this little part of the city, right?

Savannah How can you tell, what is it that makes you feel like you can tell a Sunnydale kid?

Kate You can definitely tell a Sunnydale girl. The boys are a little bit tougher to figure out. . . I think it's two things. I think that it's skill level, which is really interesting to me. I don't know how that transfers through neighborhoods. But, really the kind of thing where you just, what happened before now that you, that there wouldn't have been some intervention that would have —? Whatever. Really, really alarming skills. And also, I don't know a word other than hurt. These Sunnydale girls are just, really, really mistrustful of the world. Really, really mad. Really, really defensive. Really unconcerned with, really unconcerned with how other people think about them. . . That, that's all already gone when they get to us. Like, when I would be having trouble with a student in class, I would ask other teachers for advice, and somebody would eventually say, "oh, they're from Sunnydale." And that would be an explanation for, like, there's nothing really that we're going to be able to do.

Sunnydale, nicknamed The Swamp, is The City's largest public housing project, with just under eight hundred units held together by duct tape and desperation. From exposed wiring and toxic mold to lack of access to fresh food and health services, to its complete erasure from any mainstream image of San Francisco, Sunnydale is a portrait of urban disinvestment. Like the other four remaining "severely distressed" subsidized public housing projects in The City, the Swamp was slated for demolition in Spring 2018, destined to go the way of the Towers and the VG's—places that used to be home, and now are just an excuse to fight, to get ink, to defend your right to be from some *place*, even in a city that has no place for you at all.²⁰ Project residents are disproportionately women and are overwhelmingly Black in the context of San Francisco's Black-less diversity.²¹

In Kate's rendition, the Swamp is less a political economic force than an ontological one. Tarika and her ilk are somehow *of* the landscape—they become "*these Sunnydale girls*." Blackness is recast as indigeneity in the second order settler-colonial landscape that has already been (as far as Kate can imagine) exhausted of native bodies. In this sense, Kate's deployment of Sunnydale girl is

shadowed by narratives of the Vanishing Indian, turned Disappearing Negress, for by 2018 the Swamp will be eroded by neoliberal urban expansionism. Kate's ethnological move to categorize Tarika as *Sunnydalius feminem*, while doused in the ruse of Black girl knowability, points to the contested relationship between Blackness and land in the Americas, and to "the Black female body as a process that is constituted by and constitutes landscapes" (King 2013, 16). Perhaps this is why she finds it harder to "tell" boys from Sunnysdale—place is etched more deeply into the flesh marked as female even when *displacement* is a constitutive characteristic of Blackness in the first place.

While Kate names poor academic preparation as the primary marker of what makes a "Sunnysdale girl," the ethnographic record contradicts that assertion. Even though she can tell that Tarika's low skill story has already been written, she had never actually taught Tarika, or seen her in a classroom setting. If Kate had spent time in Tarika's classes as I had, she would have seen her begrudging attentiveness in US History, heard the hesitant curve of her tongue around Spanish vowel drills, witnessed her bored irritation after finishing the Do Now equation before the rest of her peers in Geometry. Unlike most of her peers at Robeson, Tarika actually passed the Math portion of the high stakes standardized California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) on her very first try. But Kate wouldn't know that, because she had never had Tarika in her math class. All of her encounters with her were disciplinary, and mostly happened in the hallways. Kate's leap in logic reveals the way that Black girl affect can be made to stand in for both structural location and the capacity for agency—if Tarika acts defensive, it's because she's from the projects and can't "do school"—her story was over before it began.

Like Kate and Queens-bred rapper Nas, I also believe that when it comes to the story of Black girls in the Americas, *It Was Written*.²² However, we diverge radically on the beginning, middle, and end of this always-already-written story, with me always writing from the hold of the slaveship, and toward an elsewhere beyond the grip of racial democracy. Kate's storyline seems to hinge on the very notions of respectability and poverty pathos that so frustrated her Black coworker Zahra in the previous section. Her willful "white ignorance" (Mills 2007, 13) of how structural racism and community disinvestment impact educational attainment was disconcerting given the airtime the

school leaders gave to those very topics in professional development sessions during her tenure at Robeson. From redlining in housing, to the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder in violence-ridden neighborhoods to the intersections of race and intimate partner violence, the adult curriculum at Robeson provided every opportunity to integrate these themes into staff members' analysis.

IMPOSSIBLE FUTURES

Kate laments Tarika's gendered deviance from affective norms—you can tell a Sunnysdale girl because she is distrustful, angry, and hurt. Rather than engage the twenty generations of good reason for her not to trust the State and its agents, however benevolent they may be, Kate is distraught that "there's nothing really that *she* is going to be able to do." Perhaps, then, it is Kate's own fear of ineffectiveness, of impotence in the face of Black sass and anti-Black racism that marks Tarika most deeply as a Sunnysdale Girl.

It is ultimately Tarika's anger that justifies her expulsion from the proper(ty) Black, her affective violation reinforcing the boundaries of Robeson's exceptional space. Anger is an "outlaw emotion," a category developed by Erica Meiners (2010) as a way to operationalize the relationship between the White Lady Bountiful teacher archetype that emerges amidst nineteenth-century expansionism, and what she theorizes as the school-prison nexus at the core of most schools serving Black and Latinx youth. She argues "the ontological disqualification of individuals perceived to be superfluous to the economy, and to the ideologies at the core of the nation-state, has long been the purview of teaching, specifically the work of white women teachers" (Meiners 2010, 54). Meiners uses the historical archive to cement the link between benevolent White women's labor and the carceral continuum that expands across sectors of social service provision in the United States.

Kate's version goes something like this:

[In the hallway] she will go from nothing to very, very, very mad. And maybe Tarika's going to be fine. Maybe she's fine. It's hard for me to imagine her in the world. It's hard for me to imagine her in a retail job, or however people transition from youth to adulthood. It's hard for me to imagine her, I don't know, interacting with outsiders. And I think that's really scary. That's how the cycle continues. Right? If Tarika has a baby, and she brings the baby up the same way. Right? I

can't stand the cyclical nature of this whole thing. And I, I feel like Tarika is not going to help break the cycle.

Kate cannot fathom a future for Tarika, and yet she fantasizes about her [as a] Black Hole—ruminating on her reproduction and her impending failure as a Black parent, echoing decades of professional anxiety about the mythical Black culture of poverty. Kate's invocation of "breaking the cycle" positions a sixteen-year-old girl as responsible for her community's downfall, thus issuing an alibi for fifteen generations of enslavement and dispossession in the New World. Though she asserts that Tarika's story as a Sunnydale girl was written in advance, Kate still preemptively indicts her for its lack of a happy ending: her vision of Black girlhood is evacuated of agency, dripping with blame. Kate's foreclosure of Black futurity also anticipates the demolition of The Swamp and pulls discussions of time into those of space.

She can't imagine Tarika in the world, in part because, for Kate, Sunnydale is not in the world. The community center, the library, both corner stores, the families, the homies, none of these count as life for her because The Swamp is a space of social death, excised from the map of the Human. Sunnydale as the spatialization of social death counters the claim that the Black is nowhere-to-be-found, without spatial coordinates (Douglass and Wilderson 2013). Instead, we might imagine the map of blackness starting within the flesh of *les damnés* (Fanon 1967), with Black girlhood as the cartographic (im)possibility that sutures life to death, then to now, settlement to plantation. When Kate encounters Tarika in the hall, she *fails to see* the possibility of her future ("transition from youth to adulthood"), or her escape from the muddy terrain of The Swamp ("in the world"), or even an encounter between her and a Human Being ("interacting with outsiders"). In her flesh, Kate sees an unmistakably gendered void, an invagination that is non sequitur to the loops of Time, Space, and the Social.

Note, here, that Tarika is unthinkable as an adult, even as someone who takes your money at Old Navy, but crystal clear as a bad mother. College graduate, spiritual leader, mathematician, sitting president, mentor, urban sociologist, community activist—none of these paths show up on Kate's map of the Swamp. Instead, she recycles antebellum notions of Black people as perpetual children and breeders (Dagbovie-Mullins 2013; Davis 1972; Jones 1985; Morgan 2004), and recalls

Cox's prescient warning that "our failures to articulate and witness Black life—and, in particular, Black girlhood—as a dynamic, creative space continually being remade in the future tense have grave consequences" (2015, 233). These consequences are doled out daily in the name of "breaking the cycle" at Robeson Justice Academy, and in urban schools and non-profits across the US.

AFRAREALITIES: PROGRESSIVISM & BLACK GIRL DISPOSABILITY

What if, instead of an alien outside the circuits of settler sense, we imagined the un-seeability of Tarika's blackness, the impossibility of her futurity, the Black (W)hole that preoccupies Kate, as the very center of a knot tying together the world as we know it? Thus is the Afrarealist imperative. Developed by Joy James (2013) as a rejoinder to the masculinism of some Afropessimist scholarship and the foundational racism of democracy, Afrarealism centers on the Black Matrix, which is both the material and signified maternal Black body. The Black Matrix is where anti-Blackness is yoked to anti-feminism, and where their disimbrication provides an embodied departure point for marroonage. Afrarealism recovers Black girl flesh from its disposability at the margins of settler democracy and *places* it/her/me at the center of freedom's landscape. What happens if we do the same in the social fields of Robeson, remapping its topography with Tarika, Cyarea, and their home-girls as the compass point?

James observes, "Western democracies manufactured the Black Matrix as disposable through libidinal, linguistic, and material economies" (2013, 127). In its commitment to a progressive reinvigoration of democracy through consensus-based decision-making and racial equity, Robeson at times also reinforces the boundaries of democracy by excluding those who challenge its terms. Ironically, Tarika is made disposable at Robeson through professional discourses of equity and inclusion. She is one of a flank of Black girls in her incoming class—along with Azizi and Cyarea—who were pushed off the Robeson rolls between their sophomore and senior years.

Kate's long jag on poverty pathology was actually part of her argument that more kids need to be kicked out of Robeson in the service of social justice. When I asked her who she was thinking of, she identified "that little crew of tiny Black girls. You know who I'm talking about. Like, Cyarea, Jacki, that group of tiny ones... Like Tarika—I can't believe she's still there!" At

the time of our interview, Tarika was a junior at Robeson, and Kate had moved back to the Midwest for graduate school. She reflected,

If I can't really be a social justice educator because I have just a couple of kids being cray-cray, then how are we any different?²³ And I want kids to know that they are in a special place. And I want them to treat it like they're in special place.

Tarika and them were being "cray-cray" instead of demonstrating the "proper spirit and bent backs" of deserving Negroes (Hartman 1997, 140). These "tiny" Black girls had the nerve to stand up straight, and Kate thinks they've got to go, because otherwise she won't get to live her dream of "really being a social justice educator." Here, Robeson's exceptionality ("how are we any different?") *requires* the punishment of unruly Blackness—in this case, the coerced transfer of Cyarea, Jacki, and Tarika out of Robeson's "special place" to other district schools.

Of the three young women Kate names in this invective, only Tarika lives in Sunnydale. Cyarea traveled over an hour to get to school from a predominately Chinese middle-class neighborhood on the other side of town, and Jacki lived in Oakland, using an aunt's address to stay in San Francisco schools. However, the abjection Kate identifies with Sunnydale seeps beyond the few square blocks of the housing project to ensnare these Black girls across a wide swath of urban topography. "Sunnydale" has been made to stand in for a certain mode of Black [girl] affect that cannot be emplotted in her "special place." Rather than Kate's boastful prowess of "being able to tell a Sunnydale girl," housing project geography is revealed as yet another alibi for antiblackness.

In Kate's lament, we see echoes of White abolitionism as well—America is a special place, and you need to treat it that way now that you are free and all. But instead of rescuing Black folks from the ravages of the plantation and delivering them to participate obediently and deferently in the free market, by creating this special social justice high school, the educators at Robeson have rescued Tarika and her peers from the dysfunction of militarized, miseducating comprehensive public schools and given them this incredible place to learn. And they *were* learning—Kate was a deeply competent classroom teacher, as were most of the Robeson faculty. Young people in her class really did grow in terms of numeracy and develop

confidence as mathematicians. Kate quit her teaching job after a few years at Robeson, partly because of increased tension between her and the administrators, who questioned the utility of her strident approach to discipline and partly because she wanted to enter academia to pursue a career in educational policy.

ABORTIVE MISSION: LEAVING ROBESON

What happens when we engage school spaces beyond academic content, and instead attune to them as interfaces between the state and the stateless, listening for what they can teach us about what it means for flesh to get free, or get kicked out trying? Just as Joy James reminds us, "in fantasies of democracy, the enslaver rescues the savage from barbarity, and the abolitionist saves the savage from the enslaver. Afrarealism sees both forms of 'salvation' as captivity" (James 2013, 125). James' critique of White abolitionism points to its collusion with the power structures that constrain Black life, both before and after the "non-event of emancipation" (Hartman 1997, 116). We can see this contradiction inherent to both the broader promise of liberal democracy and the specific project of liberatory schooling. Kate's proficiency in the classroom demonstrate that even when Robeson meets its community-driven mandate of culturally relevant teaching and learning, it depends on the benevolence of liberalism for both its funding stream and to round out its personnel.

By all accounts, Kate quit of her own accord when she returned to the Midwest to get her doctorate. During our interview, she told me "I use Tarika as an example over and over because she is pretty much why I went back to grad school." She said she missed teaching and the students, but was happy to move on. In part a reflection of the demographics of credentialed Science teachers, Kate's replacement was also a White woman from the Midwest who reproduced some of the same patterns that we glimpse in Kate's classroom.²⁴ Amma, the hapa restorative practice coordinator and Frisco native, mused, "it's like Kate never even left."²⁵

While there was much fanfare about Kate leaving Robeson—including a special montage video put together for graduation, class time dedicated to students writing thank you cards, and a going away party—there was no public ritual to mark the departure of Black girls from the school space. The institutional imperative to memorialize the loss of Kate and rationalize the loss of Tarika and Cyarea renders Black girlhood collateral

damage, their absence expected and thus ungrievable. A day late and a dollar short, this essay is a kind of ceremony in their honor: an attempt to name their all-too-ordinary removal [*escape*] from a small building at the top of a hill in Frisco, and hold space for that which is unassimilable to the multiracial progressive project. Of the eleven Black girls that completed tenth grade with Tarika, only four made it to the end of senior year. Cyarea's class fared a bit better—four out of seven Black girls in her class graduated from Robeson.²⁶ Because I had left the field by the time both girls transferred out of Robeson, I asked around to see what had happened, and no one could give me a clear account—it was academic and behavioral “stuff.”

“Ms. Shangaayay!!” Cyarea exclaimed on the phone, in the extended vowel style most young people used to say my name. I had called to tell her I was in the Bay for the Robeson graduation but that I had heard she was no longer there.

“I was through with them! They was always getting me in trouble and wasn't gonna let me graduate, so I went to Urban Options instead, and it's lit.” I had Cyarea's old number from when she was my student, so when it was disconnected, I asked her bestie for her new number, and we chatted for a while before she invited me to her graduation.²⁷ Even though it was just a short walk through the park from the Robeson building, at a time slot when there were no classes or staff meetings happening at Robeson, I was the only Robeson staff member in attendance. Unlike my relationship with Cyarea, which remained warm even three years after she had last been in my classroom, Tarika and I were cordial, at best.

THE OPACITY OF THE FLESH: A METHODOLOGICAL CODA

“You can follow me, but I'm not gonna to talk to you.”

That's what Tarika told me when I had asked her if I could shadow her classes. My first impulse was to cajole her with jokes and build rapport—surely, she *would* talk to me eventually. Or else I could have simply defaulted back to one of the other dozen or so Black girls with whom I had an easy bond, whose text messages bottlenecked on the screen of my phone, whose mother's voices I knew by heart. But I bit my tongue, and in the interest of taking young people at their word, I assented and silently sat beside her, not only through the

Beginning Spanish class that I spent a part of each day in, but also shuffling on through the halls to Algebra, Humanities, and Advisory period.

Even now, I know former Robeson staff who have Tarika's current number, and I have her Instagram handle. I heard from someone around the way that she did end up graduating from another SFUSD school, and I could ring her up with a few questions about that experience. I could slide in her DMs, or take her to In-N-Out for a follow-up interview next time I am in the Bay, but I won't.²⁸ Built into the genre of ethnography is an expectation of narrative thickness, a rich tapestry of voices that leaves the reader satiated by the elegant rhythm of *I saw, she said, I saw, she said*. The “right” way to end this essay is with a pithy quote from Tarika, an emic insight that could stand in for twenty-odd pages of academic grandstanding and simultaneously give me cred as a community-accountable ethnographer who gives her research participants the last word. But to reach out to Tarika with the intent of hearing her perspective, even in the interests of a putatively liberatory ethnographic project, still demands access to Black girl interiority as the price to ride on the freedom train. If both the carceral and the decolonial engagement with young Black women rely on the same remedy—her performative transparency—then both political projects prioritize their pre-authored frameworks over Black girl self-determination.

Perhaps here I fail as an anthropologist, and the petticoat of my disciplinary drag is showing. But I sense there is more explanatory power in Tarika's agentic absence, in the opacity of not-knowing, than I would find tracking her down (*like a runaway*) and feigning a complete circle of analysis.

TARIKA DON'T WANT ME TO FIND HER

We were never close, and while she assented to participation in the study, she also drew clear lines around her involvement, just as she did with Robeson. Tarika's counterinstitutional (and counterdisciplinary) negotiations signify on the politics of belonging by remaking the rules of participation. In her Math class, I watched her obstinately roll her eyes and refuse to speak when called on, and yet had completed all of the algebraic equations correctly, along with the extra credit problem. She rolled her rs with the best of them in Spanish class, before she escaped into the hallway for half an hour of respite from the tick and tock of the justice-themed school day. She refused the weight of burdened individuality, and thus was refused citizenship in Robeson's tiny, progressive polity.

I am trying to write in collusion with Tarika's ethnographic refusal—following her “no” without trying to transform it into a “yes.” Her manifestation as a Black Matrix straight outta Sunnydale brings us back to the utility of indigenous political theory in The City, where Frisco indigeneity is a new foil for the old dispossessed twins, the Ohlone and the Negro.²⁹ Audra Simpson (2014) articulates an indigenous politics of refusal in her engagement with Kahnawa'kehró:nnon communities facing ongoing settler colonialism. In lieu of DuBoisian/Fanonian and later Coulthardian double consciousness, Simpson theorizes proliferating consciousnesses that refuse the recognition of an external gaze, producing “endless play,” along the lines of “I am me, I am what you think I am, and I am who this person to the right of me thinks I am, and you are all full of shit, and then maybe I will tell you to your face” (2014, 107).³⁰ Understanding slavery as structure rather than event (King 2013; Wolfe 2006), I borrow Simpson's caution that “to think and write about sovereignty is to think very seriously about needs and that, basically, it involves an ethnographic calculus of what you need to know and what I refuse to write” (2014, 105). I refuse to write light into dark, to coerce quiet from noise, or to wipe color on to a canvas soaked in Black. Methodologically, I am attempting to compute the value of self-possession in the context of dispossession and figure a way to get Cyarea and Tarika back into the equation. The reclamation of Black girl sovereignty in the ethnographic text may only be possible through what John Jackson calls a *thin description*, a sort of “nonknowing that disentangles the ethnographer's *will to know everything* from an interconnected *will to disclose everything*” (2013, 158).

Opaque on purpose, Tarika's practice of Black girlhood is an epistemic refusal as well as an ethnographic one: she does not concede to the terms by which we seek to know her. Hers is a familiar fugitivity, one that social science can perhaps track but never apprehend. What does it mean to contour our method such that refusal is part of the shape rather than an aberration? Silence, refusal, absence: the missing Black girls of the humanities archive challenge the dominance of the order of vision in the human sciences and force us to contend with opacity as a site of knowledge production.³¹ The scopic regime of social scientific surveillance is met with what Simone Browne (2015) calls *dark sousveillance*: just as *surveillance* gazes down from above, *sousveillance* is the practice of looking up at power from

below. The epistemology conjured by Black girl ordinary refuses empirical elaboration: *you can follow me, but I'm not gonna talk to you.*

Generative and nuanced, Tarika's refusal is a mode of dark sousveillance in that it “charts possibilities and coordinates modes of responding to, challenging, and confronting a surveillance that was almost all-encompassing” (Browne 2015, 21) in both the hallways of Robeson and the pages of my nascent book manuscript. She watched me watch her, her Black girl opacity demanding to be seen but refusing to be seen through.

In a wholly different register, Cyarea also watched me watch her, waving giddily as she crossed the stage at her Urban Options graduation, stunting on her haters in absentia. The us-ies of that foggy morning littered Cyarea's Instagram timeline, my face squeezed into the frame beside her sheeny red regalia and her mama Ms. Yvette's beaming grin.³² I snapped a bunch more photos on Cyarea's phone before her extended fam loaded up a borrowed car to head eighty miles back north to Sacramento and reverse the sojourn made to the city that had once been a home. Even though Kate remembers them as “tiny,” both Cyarea and Tarika stood tall in their Frisco flesh, refusing to bend their backs to the lash of progressive statecraft. I lift my head hesitantly alongside them, as the three of us make our own ways forward as ordinary Black girls.

Savannah Shange Anthropology Department,
University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz,
CA, 95064
E-mail: shange@ucsc.edu

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NOTES

1. A “bear bar” is a fixture of a particular strain of gay men's leather culture in which copious body hair is a valued erotic and social asset.

The bar functions as a gathering space and a key node of queer sexual geographies.

2. “Frisco” is a contested nickname for San Francisco, used mostly by working-class communities, Black communities, and communities of color in the Bay Area and throughout California. As a reflection of my intellectual, personal and political debts to them, I too call it Frisco.

3. “Latinx” is a gender-neutral descriptor, pronounced “Latinex,” that is an alternative to Latina/o. The ending “x” is an intervention of feminist and queer cultural workers as a form of linguistic resistance to the binary gendering of the Spanish language, as well as the subsumption of all genders under the masculine “o” ending. In solidarity with their efforts, I use “Latinx” as an inclusive marker of collective racialization throughout the text. Earlier neologisms included Latin@, but with the advent of “@” being used as a key command in online spaces, new adaptations were required. For more on the racial and political implications of the “x,” see Johnson, Jessica Marie. 2015. “Thinking About the ‘X.’” *African American Intellectual History Society* (blog). December 12. Accessed November 6, 2017. <http://www.aaihs.org/thinking-about-an-x/>

4. For more detailed accounts of the proliferation of school security, policing and militarization within US schools, see Tuzzolo and Hewitt (2006) and Meiners (2010).

5. “Late liberal” here refers to the uneven economic, political, and symbolic arrangements of power that mark the contemporary moment. Like “neoliberal,” late liberal turns our attention to privatization and the shrinking role of the state in the provision of basic services. At the same time, it is a phrase that also questions the novelty of this state of affairs, connecting the “neoliberal” to the much older mode of liberalism that emerges from the Enlightenment and provides the engine for colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and industrialism. For more on late liberalism as a structuring episteme, see Elizabeth Povinelli’s *Economies of Abandonment* (2011) and *Empire of Love* (2006). On the double binds of the academic industrial complex, see Roderick Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things* (2012), Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons* (2013), and Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira’s *The Imperial University* (2014).

6. “The City” is a common nickname for San Francisco, used by Bay Area residents across racial, linguistic, and class categories. It is used in a manner reminiscent of how “The City” refers to

Manhattan for residents of New York’s tri-state area. Oakland, by contrast, is known as “The Town,” a term that is used by a more bounded set of folks who are marked as working class, Black, and/or of color, and is a mark of pride in the provinciality and insularity of old Oakland.

7. I use social death here in the sense of Patterson (1982), whose work is part of the impulse behind the unruly body of scholars that have been associated with Afro-pessimism, including Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Joy James, Kara Keeling, and Lewis Gordon. All of their work is made possible by the intervention of Black feminists, particularly Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman. For more on the possibilities and perils of the Afro-pessimist formulation, see Fred Moten (2013), “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh).”

8. My use of Black English as an academic and theoretical language is inspired by the tradition of Zora Neale Hurston and June Jordan. I am also guided by the interventions of Xicana feminism, particularly Gloria Anzaldúa. For more, see Jordan’s “Nobody Mean More to You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan” (1985), and Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).

9. Brittney Cooper, 2016. “Black Girl is a Verb: A New American Grammar Book.” *Crunk Feminist Collective* (blog). March 28. Accessed October 30, 2017. <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2016/03/28/black-girl-is-a-verb-a-new-american-grammar-book/>

10. Of the five Black classroom teachers who ever worked at Robeson, I was the only one with two Black parents. Three others had White mothers and Black fathers, and another had a Filipinx parent and Black parent. Even among the other folks of color on staff, mixed-ness was such the norm that one teacher called a POC caucus called at a staff meeting the “White Mamas Club.” Even within the black-on-both-sides staff, like myself, Zahra (college counselor), and Jeff (security advisor), our dreadlocs and Afropuffed bohemian look set us apart from some normative notions of Black style, pumped into the mainstream by the likes of BET.

11. Coined by gender studies scholar Moya Bailey (2010), “misogynoir” refers to anti-Black modes of misogyny that seek to denigrate or expel the bodies and voices of Black women. Misogynoir seeks to name the specificity of attacks on Black women without reinforcing the violences that maintain the category and is purposefully inclusive of trans and non-trans Black

women, girls, and those who are perceived as such. See Moya Bailey, 2010. "They Aren't Talking About Me..." *Crunk Feminist Collective* (blog). March 14. Accessed October 30, 2017. <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/>

12. Stripper turned reality TV star turned rapper, Cardi B is quintessential Black girl ordinary. Her oft-repeated maxim "I'm just a regular, degular, schmegular girl from the Bronx" resists the exceptionalism of celebrity culture and respectability politics while also pushing back on anti-Black racial norms that would make a light-skinned (and now wealthy) Dominicana "special" rather than schmegular.

13. #Blackgirlmagic was originally coined by Cashawn Thompson in 2013 as a way to celebrate the achievements of Black women. Since then, its utility as a frame has been hotly debated in popular media. For a nuanced intervention into #blackgirlmagic as an otherhuman, rather than superhuman, mode of Black womanhood, see Jalondra A. Davis (2018). For an accounting of the debates and the evolution of the term, see the works from Ashleigh Shackelford, Akiba Solomon, and Dexter Thomas below. Ashleigh Shackelford. 2016. "Hood Femmes and Ratchet Feminism: On Amandla Stenberg, Representation, and #BlackGirlMagic." *For Harriet* (blog). January 28. Accessed February 9, 2017. <http://www.forharriet.com/2016/01/hood-femmes-ratchet-feminism-on-amandla.html#axzz51jnsWS1S>; Akiba Solomon. 2016. "The Real Problem With the #BlackGirlMagic Backlash Is That You're Missing the Point." *Colorlines* website, January 13. Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/real-problem-blackgirlmagic-backlash-youre-missing-point>; Dexter Thomas. 2015. "Why Everyone's Saying 'Black Girls Are Magic.'" *Los Angeles Times* website, September 9. Accessed December 15, 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyone-s-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmlstory.html>

14. Biggie Small's posthumous album *Life After Death* was a sort of hip-hop miracle, released after he was gunned down in LA. It's also a miracle that Lil Kim, Faith Evans, and Charli Baltimore survived his vicious attacks when they were partnered with him. For more on Biggie's pattern of intimate partner violence, see "Love Hurts" (Berry 2005).

15. Pathbreaking scholarship is often called "seminal," in part because it plants the seeds of

many generations of intellectual fruit. Given the gendered association between seminal and semen, "ovaric" (of or pertaining to ovaries) offers another biologically driven metaphor for seed. Though both terms turn problematically on the presumptions of dimorphic gender and biological reproduction, "ovaric" signifies on patriarchy's terms of order. Among the most prominent recent deployments of the flesh in Black studies are Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* (2014), a book-length Black feminist slaying of the genre "Human," and Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision* (2011), which attends to the stakes of black hypervisibility.

16. Latinx, Latina & Latino are used separately here to mark gendered modes of state discipline while also holding space for the capacious of indigenous and racialized genders. For more on the "x," see note 3.

17. Berlant 2011; Moten 2003.

18. For an insider perspective on the crises of TFA, see *Teach for America Counternarratives* (Brewer and deMarrais 2015).

19. See Christina Hanhardt's *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood and the Politics of Violence* (2013) for a historiography of liberalism's shifting tactics in twentieth century San Francisco.

20. "The Towers" and "the VG's" are the colloquial referents for the Geneva Towers and Valencia Gardens, two majority-Black public housing developments in San Francisco. Both have been demolished; the latter rebuilt as putatively mixed-income housing. For more on the ruse of mixed-income urban redevelopment, see Lipman (2011).

21. NLIHC tabulations of Public Use Microdata Sample. Accessed December 6, 2016. www.huduser.org/portal/pumd/index.html; San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA). 2011. "Tenant Demographics Powerpoint, 2011." Issuu website. September 26. Accessed September 20, 2014. http://issuu.com/sfha/docs/sfha_demographics?viewMode=magazine&mode=embed.

22. Nas's sophomore album, *It Was Written*, was released on Columbia Records in 1996 to a mixed critical reception, given its indulgence in gratuitous violence and disconcerting oscillation between Mafioso fantasy and Black masculinist uplift. On the cover, the rapper's face is interpolated with the Queensbridge housing projects where he was raised, knitting his visage onto the wintry bricks. Fittingly, the album opens with the scene of an imagined slave rebellion: "Harriet done left the night befo.' It's time we go—ain't no place for Black folk here." My reference to Nas

here and Biggie above reflects my own regional upbringing on the (b)east coast, which shapes my engagement with California's storied hip hop traditions, as well as my conflicted intimacy with heteropatriarchal violence. Both Nas and Biggie also have documented histories of physically assaulting Black women, which points to the disposability of Black girls as a structural feature of American life, Black or otherwise.

23. "Cray-cray" is slang for "crazy," popularized through social media and popular culture in a way that may have started with Black women's usage but soon mushroomed into a mocking pejorative that dismissed their rage.

24. Coincidentally, before Kate quit, I had chosen what I imagined as an archetypically "White-sounding" pseudonym for her in my memos. I had to change it to "Kate" because the fictional name I had chosen was the *actual name* of her replacement, producing in me the vertigo of being trapped in *The Matrix*—suddenly my caricature of structural racism became photorealistic.

25. *Hapa* is a racial signifier commonly used in West Coast Asian American communities to denote someone with one Asian parent, and one non-Asian parent. Derived from the Hawaiian pidgin word for "half," *hapa* first was used to describe the children of indigenous Hawaiians and European colonizers but is now used more broadly as a neutral term for those of mixed Asian heritage. For some, the use of *hapa* by Asian-descendent communities is part of a larger pattern of cultural appropriation of indigenous lands and language by several centuries of migrants to the region. For more, see Nicole Rabin's "Excursus on 'Hapa,' or the Fate of Identity" (2012).

26. One contributing factor to the difference in Black student population between the younger Cyarea's class and older Tarika's class is that the latter's class was the last one to enter while the former Black co-principal, Randall, was in leadership. During his tenure, he conducted targeted recruitment of Black families to enter Robeson, and those three incoming classes have significantly higher proportions of Black students. However, the increased enrollment did not result in increased matriculation, because so many of the Black students who entered as ninth graders left or were pushed out before they could graduate.

27. Bestie is gendered millennial slang for "best friend," akin to BFF, or "best friend forever."

28. The phrase "slide in the DMs" emerges with the rise of social media messaging in which

public interfaces on Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat are paralleled by private exchanges via direct message, or DM. Direct messages can be used for a variety of exchanges, from inquiring about rates for a photography shoot to finalizing logistics for a direct-action protest to arranging an extramarital soiree. The expression carries with it a furtive whiff that is apropos in this discussion of slippery ethnographic ethics.

29. *Straight Outta Hunter's Point* (Epps 2001) is a feature-length documentary made about street violence in Black communities in southeast San Francisco and is one of a handful of instances in which Frisco appears in the Black popular imaginary.

30. For more on the indigenous application of Fanonian theory, see *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* by Glen Coulthard (2014).

31. Aimee Cox (2015) deftly outlines the contours of the "Missing Black Girl" as she confounds the canon of social science.

32. An "us-ie" is a collective form of selfie, a digital photo of several people taken by someone in the frame.

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