BLACK ALIVENESS, OR A POETICS OF **BEING**

KEVIN QUASHIE

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INTRODUCTION

ALIVENESS

What would it mean to consider black aliveness, especially given how readily—and literally—blackness is indexed to death? To behold such aliveness, we have to imagine a black world . . . we have to imagine a black world so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of black death, of blackness that is understood only through such a vocabulary. This equation of blackness and death is indisputable and enduring, surely, but if we want to try to conceptualize aliveness, we have to begin somewhere else.

This is a story of us, a story of black aliveness as the being of us.

Imagine a black world: The invocation of a black world is the operating assumption of black texts, a world where blackness exists in the tussle of being, in reverie and terribleness, in exception and in ordinariness. This black world is not one where the racial logics and harming predilections of antiblackness

are inverted but one where blackness is totality, where every human question and possibility is of people who are black. It is what Toni Morrison, our great thinker, describes as "a sovereignty" of "race-specificity without race prerogative" ("Home" 3, 5). Such a world might not exist in modernity, though it radiates in the will to make a poem, an essay, a song . . . it radiates in the text's imaginary as a philosophical audacity, as an embracing generative quality of indisputable aliveness.

What makes "imagine a black world" so necessary is the exemption of black humanity from our commonsense understanding, the world's lack of imagination for black being that is also its brutal enactments against such being. There is no outright assumption of black humanity in the world (the potency of "Black Lives Matter" as an emblem confirms this), and indeed black humanity has to be argued over and again. And yet we might suppose that every black text rests on a quiet premise of black humanity—that the text and its aesthetics *assume* being.

I am interested, then, in the quality of aliveness notable in the worldmaking aesthetics of poems and essays, in how those poems and essays can be read for what they tell us about our being: about how we are and about how we can be. I am interested both in the ways that the world of black texts constitutes our rightness of being as I am interested in the ethical implications of such a constituting.[1]

The best example I know of aesthetics as aliveness is Lucille Clifton's poem "reply" first published in her 1991 collection *Quilting*:[2]

> [from a letter written to Dr. W. E. B. Dubois by Alvin Borgquest
> of Clark University in Massachusetts and dated April 3, 1905:
>
> "We are pursuing an investigation here on the subject
> of crying as an expression of the emotions, and should
> like very much to learn about its peculiarities among
> the colored people. We have been referred to you as a
> person competent to give us information on the subject.
> We desire especially to know about the following salient
> aspects: 1. Whether the Negro sheds tears. . . ."]
>
> reply
>
> he do
> she do
> they live
> they love

they try
they tire
they flee
they fight
they bleed
they break
they moan
they mourn
they weep
they die
they do
they do
they do (337)

Notice first the dancing waltz of the anaphora, as if this is a drum- or heartbeat of paired stressed syllables, how this sequence creates a deliberate formation in what might otherwise look like a random gathering of actions, such that "live" precedes and parallels "love," "moan" yields to "mourn." The alliteration guides our recognition of the connection between the poem's verbs, just as the assonance—those rich, deep vowel echoes—threads together another relation of things: the long *e* of "flee," "bleed," and "weep"; the *i* of "try" and "die"; the extended pleasure of the long *u* in "do," "do," "do," especially in closing. These threaded sounds manifest something larger than a simple catalog; they are worldmaking, a cosmological arc of being.[3]

Notice, too, how the poem's speaker directs us where to look and assumes that we can and will know how to look rightly; that is, pay attention to how the poem negotiates the politics of looking via its pronouns, by casting the speaker awry from and as observant of black collectivity. Beautifully, Clifton uses the objectification of the third person to relish in distance and plurality: "he," "she," "they," those people. (Even the singular pronouns, via vernacular phrasing, are sutured to plural action: "he do / she do.") This syntax invites the reader to *behold* the other, and in this way, the poem refuses the specular as a site of black abjection; rather, it instantiates looking as a shared relationality, especially since the looking is something that the reader does in concert with the speaker's prudent guidance: "Look at this," the speaker seems to intone, "and now that—look at that." Clifton's astute use of the third-person plural positions the speaker as observer and chronicler, and reorients the practice of looking beyond its destructive intent to secure racial difference. We know well the peril of such terrible visuality, what philosopher Frantz Fanon codified aptly with

the phrase "Look, a Negro!" where the imperative "Look" is one and the same as the name "Negro," where the invitation to look at once invents a category and performs its denigration.[4] Importantly, then, Clifton uses the distance of "they" to encase the scene in its own world; doing such amplifies the potential to behold the humanity of the poem's black ones.

Said another way, the poem's dynamism resides in its elision of the easy alliance between the speaker's roll call and the black us who are exemplified by the calling. The elision is possible because the poem's scene is a black world, full of the blackness of the presenting one and the ones being presented. Masterfully, the speaker stands as an emcee, a host who seems to revel in what it is to look at all this quotidian magnificence rendered via the expansive line of words ambling down the page, staircase or waterfall or slideshow of being after being after being, linked in music and gesturing toward what cannot be said fully since, after all, it is not possible to present every instance of black being in a pantheon or to map it in the sky or track it over all the edge of the earth. Through third-person plurality, Clifton's speaker reorganizes our gaze, an example of what cultural theorist Daphne A. Brooks describes as the critical use of distance to navigate black alienation. Being looked at is a horror for us, and so I love that this poem marshals looking as a constitutive act of black being.[5]

I cannot overstate how crucial it is that the speaker doesn't say "we," as in "we live," "we love," since that pronoun would cement the poem's stance as being against the hateful question—as a black voice speaking to resist the harmful overtures of white volition. Clifton's speaker *witnesses*, such that the reply is not toward white violence but instead recognizes the capaciousness of being; *here the speaker stands not on a side but in the midst of the whole world of black being*. The poem, so gorgeous, unfurls as a text of black world relationality where the difference between the (black) one saying "they" and the (black) ones indicated by "they" reflects the breadth of our humanity. Difference not as a calculus of inferiority but as of our totality.[6]

This is a worldmaking poem: Notice the way its aesthetics negotiate repetition and time, how the verbs ("love," "flee," "weep") are enduringly present, timeless and not anchored by historical sociality. Indeed, the poem's time register moves toward the infinity of the last three lines, which mimic the orthography of ellipses: "they do / they do / they do," eternally and into a future we cannot see. Repetition fuels this infinity, repetition that works according "to *miracle* rather than to law . . . an *eternity* opposed to permanence."[7] "Repetition is holy," poet Nikky Finney tells us, and the repetitious doings in Clifton's "reply" are, exhibit, and make a black world, an inhabiting where blackness is

totality, where everything is of people who are black—every capable thing, every small or harming thing, every extraordinary thing or thing of bad feeling . . . all of it is of blackness. This worldness exists in Clifton's beautiful verbs, these quotidian deeds that generate something of a utopia and that render the material excellence of a "they" who spin off the page and outward toward a somewhere, beyond the racist order of the world.[8]

We are supposed to not-see ourselves or to see ourselves through not-seeing; we are, indeed, supposed to fear—and hate—our black selves. But Clifton's poem invites us into a practice of encountering black being as it is, in its beingness, in its terribleness and wonder and particularity.[9] Beautifully, Clifton's range of verbs marks a black world as one which hosts pain and love and life, the effects of struggle where struggle is not singularly defined as a condition of oppression. Struggle in being alive. (The sustained inflection of action, "they do" in triplicate, reminds us of this.) A racist happening prefaces the poem, and racist happenings surely linger in every indicative verb in the verse. But in a black world, the racist thing is not the beginning or the end of being, and what matters is not only what is done to the subject but also *how* the subject is. Antiblackness is part of blackness but not all of how or what blackness is. Antiblackness is total in the world, but it is not total in the black world.

In this way, the paratext might be a scene of subjection, but Clifton's poem proper is a scene of aliveness, a world of us told in a reply.[10]

We can think about black worldmaking in regard to the project of black studies. That is, as philosopher Sylvia Wynter argues, black studies' intellectual ambition wants to reject the world of antiblackness and to organize, instead, ideologies of and for a world that could embrace blackness. Such worldmaking manifests also in the declarations of the Black Arts/Aesthetic movement, which emphasizes blackness as an *idea* that could be remade beyond the limits of a racist discourse. This investment in the possibilities of ideation—what literary historian Margo Natalie Crawford smartly describes as a "black post-blackness"—is vital to conceptualizing an overhauled universe realized through aesthetics.[11]

Such dynamics are at stake in Amiri Baraka's 1966 *ars poetica* "Black Art":

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> teeth or trees or lemons piled
> on a step. Or black ladies dying
> of men leaving nickel hearts
> beating them down. Fuck poems
> and they are useful . . . (219)

The poem seems like a formless ranting catalog, though even in these few lines one can recognize aesthetic formality via the doubling irony where "Fuck poems" is followed by a celebration of poetry's utility or as the expletive works as both an adjective and an imperative. There is formfulness, too, in the deployment of conjunctions to create a propulsive rhythm and in the astute line breaks. As such we can see that "Black Art" is rife with deliberateness as it determines what a poem is and how a poem should work. "We want poems / like fists . . . / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns" (219), the poem declares of its ideal verse and its idealized black subject. Baraka's text becomes animated with combativeness, a ferocious textual explicative that enacts and materializes fury: "Put it on him, poem. Strip him naked / to the world!" (219–220). Its attack names biracial black women, Jewish people, gay men, civil rights leaders, police officers . . . a wide-ranging and rangy pugilism intended, perhaps, to strike every oppressing thing. The intensity of its poetics is so high that one almost misses the breakneck turn three-quarters of the way through:

> Poem scream poison gas on beasts in green berets
> Clean out the world for virtue and love,
> Let there be no love poems written
> until love can exist freely and
> cleanly. Let Black people understand
> that they are the lovers and the sons
> of lovers and warriors and sons
> of warriors Are poems & poets &
> all the loveliness here in the world
>
> We want a black poem. And a
> Black World.
> Let the world be a Black Poem
> And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
> Silently
>
> or LOUD (220)

The casual movement from "Poem scream poison gas" to "Clean out the world for virtue and love" constitutes an astonishing change in tone, syntax, rhythm, sentiment, and ideology, a deviation that gives way to a lyrical invocation that mimics God's call for illumination in Genesis. This is Baraka's speaker at his magical best, summoning restoration after having authorized the decimation of the world that demeans blackness. We should notice especially that this glorious transubstantiation is incited by the repetition of "let," an imperative

verb that functions subjunctively to indicate the thing that hasn't yet but still might happen.[12]

If you know "Black Art" in full, you know that I have sidestepped the hefty middle of the poem, which is where its vulgarities lie—it didn't seem necessary to repeat them. One might notice, too, that the world conjured at the end cites "sons" but doesn't articulate the possibility for daughters or even just children, thereby keeping a masculine prerogative intact. My point here is not an indulgence of the poem's ideological limitations but an exploration of one specific aspect of its working: its invocation of a black world. That is, I am struck by its inclining toward capaciousness, yearning, possibility, ideas that recall the case Baraka—as LeRoi Jones—makes about imagination in his essay "The Revolutionary Theater": "What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. . . . *The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as 'things.' Imagination (Image) is all possibility*, because from the image . . . any use (idea) is possible. . . . Possibility is what moves us" (*Home* 239; emphasis added). This declaration of being transformed by possibility matches the ambition that coalesces in the ending of "Black Art."[13]

Sigh: I am trying to read Baraka's poem through the surrender and magic of its conclusion. In such a reading, the speaker's politics are important to but not determinative of the world to come, since the world is not yet here and the poem breaks open, at its end, into the new thing that is not constrained singularly and ideologically by its beginning. And still, such a reading is complicated by the case that literary scholar Phillip Brian Harper makes about the conundrum of audience in Black Arts poetry, where the goal of speaking against white violence is conflated with the delicate work of trying to call blackness into formation.[14] This conflation fuels the narrowing of the idealized black world and homogenizes which kinds of blackness are presumed to fit in that world habitat.

And yet, the imagining of a world of black aliveness cannot be narrow. Indeed, in trying to reckon with Baraka's invocation at the close of "Black Art," I turn again to the logics of address in Clifton's "reply," the gorgeousness of her use of "they," that sly, embracing, worldmaking syntax that seems to work differently from Baraka's "we." Clifton's capaciousness establishes openness as the ethos of black worldmaking. The worldness of her aesthetic formation is not a contracting imaginary that reiterates normativities or secures boundaries of who we are but instead beholds an expansive relationality where "every form of life that has ever been ever enacted, is a part of us."[15] This is a world of heterogeneity whose only cohering value is the rightness of black being, the possibility of black becoming. If we read Baraka's speaker as a figure immersed in *evolution* rather than as one entrenched against a dominant audience, we can appreciate "Black Art"

for its *inclination* toward black totality, its closing call which collates the poem, the world, and the one as a praxis of *becoming*—"Black Art" as an enactment of verse imagining.[16]

The thinking on black being always has to countenance death, as the field of black pessimism makes clear. And perhaps no one has taken up this figuring of being and death more extensively than literary scholar Christina Sharpe, whose *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* characterizes "wake" as an idiom not only of consciousness but also of life's deathness: "In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death?" (17). This attending to life is what Sharpe theorizes as "wake work," the materialization of being through death such that "even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected" (4; emphases in the original). *In the Wake* is Sharpe's pursuit of "the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death" (22). I read Sharpe's study as a definitive articulation of black pessimism as a field, especially its exploration of what cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman describes as the enduring afterlife of slavery and coloniality.[17] Indeed, by placing the terms of death (including "abjection," "negation," "terror," and "nonbeing") at the center of thinking about blackness, black pessimism has reenergized a critique of liberal humanism's uncritical faith in progress and its fallacies of freedom. The meaning of black freedom, these scholars remind us, cannot be indexed to the Enlightenment and cannot be mapped in the syntax of Western norms; there is no end to the condition of coloniality and captivity—no end, but there is life in the midst and aftermath of those interminable conditions. Cohering black pessimism as a field is challenging, especially because some scholars whose ideas are taken up in its name don't identify precisely with its project. And still, I want to highlight here black pessimism's construction of black ontology both as an impossibility in the logic of the antiblack world and as a possibility that requires perceiving differently what the world is or looks like or can be—worldmaking.[18] I believe as black pessimism does that the world of antiblackness excludes black humanity in at least two ways: the antiblack world is built to be against the human, and the idea of the human it permits is built to be against some of us (black people) who are exactly that—human.[19]

And though we might be inclined to emphasize death as a feature of black pessimism, the truth is that terms of life are legible in the field's critical explorations: in the foregoing quotations from Sharpe; in the phrase "the social life of social death," which Jared Sexton uses to frame the field ("Ante-Anti-Blackness"),

theorizing that he calls "an ars vita" ("Afro-pessimism"); in the poetic clarity of Hartman's "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (*Lose Your Mother* 6); in Nahum Dimitri Chandler's exposition of exorbitance; in the vivacious speaker in Frank B. Wilderson's theoretical memoir *Afropessimism*. We might say, as Terrion L. Williamson has, that black social life is "the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence, but is the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms, traditions and ways of being" (9). An overemphasis on death simplifies the nuanced insights of black pessimism and its related discourses and, in this way, my argument for aliveness is not a sharp detour from this field of contemporary theoretical thought.[20]

My difference from black pessimism might be in my attempt to displace antiblackness from the center of my thinking. That is, though I don't deny the terribleness of the world we live in, nor its antiblack perpetuity, I am interested in conceptualizing an aesthetic imaginary founded on black worldness. Death, nonbeing, the "ontological terror" aptly named by theorist Calvin L. Warren—these are conditions of black being, but they are not total in my appreciation of aliveness. I don't mean to make the distinction sharper than it is, since I acknowledge how diverse the field is and how much terms of life circulate through it. Perhaps the keenest point of contention for me is the specific register of black pessimism's declaration of totality: it is true that every black one of us lives under the legacied terror of modernity and coloniality—that no matter how differently we perceive or respond, terror is a condition of every black life. Or as Wilderson describes it, "violence precedes and exceeds blacks" (*Red, White and Black* 76). My quibble is that the definitive fact of black subjection, true as it is, is not exactly sayable because no statement about every black person can be genuinely sayable. Such a claim might be ideologically or conceptually or theoretically or structurally factual, but its truth is and should remain an opacity.[21]

I am cautious about the declarative assertion of nonbeing and its slippery poetics.

I know that theoretical study produces claims that are as broad and metaphorical as they are generative—they work as provocations; as such, I know that "nonbeing" is a metaphor for the pervasive condition of subjection more than it is a literal description of black being. Simply, every human is of being. I am trying, then, to elide what is elided by hefty terms of subjection, or at least as those terms move beyond the specific nuanced interrogations of their authors. It may be true that subjection prefaces everything in an antiblack world, but in thinking through a *black* world, I am trying to surpass terror as the uninflected language of black being, as well as to suspend the anti/ante position of blackness. In that

surpassing and suspending, I am trying to articulate the aesthetics of aliveness. What I want is the freeness of a black world where blackness can be of being, where there is no argument to be made, where there is no speaking to or against an audience because we are all the audience there is . . . and, as such, the text's work can manifest an invitation to study and to becoming for the black one. What I want is the wayward world made through Saidiya Hartman's method in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, the way that Hartman's close narration deepens the past's historic scope by being as local as possible: by residing in the figure of human life evident via the traces of the one who lived that life. In the prefatory "A Note on Method," Hartman describes this doing: "At the turn of the twentieth century, young black women were in open rebellion. . . . This book recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes. . . . To this end, I employ a mode of close narration, a style which places the voice of the narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text" (xiii–xiv). Hartman's use of close narration is genius, because it instantiates a sense of presence and presentness—it instantiates a live and lively *now* to the histories it tells. And in doing so, Hartman eludes the discursive trap of the black historical past as a monolith of terror wrought by the structures of modernity. That is, Hartman offers us a past that, in its aliveness, holds relation to our being now. Hartman is not alone in this praxis of reckoning with the past and the scale of being (of harm, of living) sometimes illegible therein—one could look toward Stephen Michael Best, Sharon P. Holland, Tavia Nyong'o, Robert Reid-Pharr, Jared Sexton, and Michelle M. Wright, just to name a few contemporary thinkers. Sigh: What I want is the ethos of a world like the one Hartman reveals, like those in Lucille Clifton's poems, worlds where black living is compassed by being alive, where aliveness sets the parameters for understanding loss, pain, belonging, for countenancing love, grace, healing. Surely, Clifton's poems can be used to consider antiblackness, but their habitat is not essentially of this.[22]

I am embracing the luxuries of thinking with and through the materiality of texts. That is, in a black world, in whatever manifestations of black worldness texts create, *blackness* (not antiblackness) is totality; in such a world, black being is capacious and right—not more-right-than, just right-as-is. Life-as-is. I believe that the worldness of black texts, if one reads with such a temperament, makes it possible to withstand black being as human being, to behold blackness as one's ethical reckoning with being alive.

An antiblack world expects blackness from black people; in a black world, what we expect and get from black people is beingness.[23]

In a black world, every black being is of *being*, the verb that infers a process of becoming.[24] Near the conclusion of *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Wilderson writes, "To say we *must* be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath, is what I have tried to do here" (338; emphasis in original), an admission that resonates both with the impossibility of imagining a black world and with the sheer urgency of doing just that. I am writing out of that urgency, trying to conceptualize a black world as an aesthetic totality that is free of air and full of ways to breathe. It is why, throughout this work, I hardly use the term "nonbeing"; the human who is black is a being, is of being. The gambit of *Black Aliveness* is that the black one's ontological dilemma is not in regard to not-being or being-against; the ontological dilemma, as such exists, is being.[25]

I will say it once: antiblackness and white supremacy, as they live in and are enacted by any person in implicit or explicit or structural registers, both are sins against the human. I want to be clear that a call to aliveness is not contradictory to this thing I understand to be true.

One further reinforcement: the idiom "a black world" names an aesthetic imaginary that encompasses heterogeneity. I take inspiration, as ever, from the worldmaking conceptualized prominently in black women's feminism. When the Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" announces that "our politics initially sprang from a shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable" (15), it signals not only the enduring marginalization of black women in the world but also an imagining determined to locate philosophical and political meaningfulness through the specificity of black femaleness. There is a similar capaciousness in Hortense J. Spillers's argument about black femaleness in the iconic "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," or in Alice Walker's womanism, with its ever-widening pool of human insight cultivated from a black female vernacular idiom. There are other examples too: Anna Julia Cooper's epiphanic "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*'" (63; emphasis and capitalization in original); Toni Morrison's telling of the entire story of modernity and coloniality through Sethe and her daughter Beloved, which Saidiya Hartman repeats—revises, elegantly—in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*; Audre Lorde's belief that a queer black mother's body could be enough to conceptualize what it is to know ("Poetry Is Not a Luxury" or *The Cancer Journals*). Black feminist thinking might be specific in naming black women, but its ambition has always been the breadth of being alive, the principle that the lived experience of one who is black and female is comprehensive enough to manifest totality. Indeed, we

might call this work *feminist black studies*, where the commitment to a feminist orientation determines the entirety of what black studies might be.[26]

The world of black aliveness is gendered, binarily and otherwise. It recognizes gender as a site of human beingness but also as a violation. Moreover, the invocation of this world should not be confused with "calling all black people," especially if such hailing intends to exclude or regulate certain habitats of being. In a black world, there is no need—would be no need—to call in or to exclude anyone. The solicitation of a black world is replete with eccentricity and is allergic to the imposition of normativity or authenticity. Blackness here "is . . . broad enough and open enough to encompass, but without enclosing" (Harney and Moten 158), blackness as a commonwealth untroubled by needing to speak *to* or *for*. Such conceptualization liberates us from blackness as difference so as to be able to see—to be—all the black intraracial difference there might be. The black world is an assemblage, an open collective of dynamism, of pull and tug and relationality; this characterization recalls what Hilton Als, in "Ghosts in the House," writes of Toni Morrison: "Situating herself inside the black world, Morrison undermined the myth of black cohesiveness." Exactly.[27]

Since blackness cannot exist fully, humanly, in the world, we will imagine a world where the condition of being alive is of us. In a black world, the case of our lives is aliveness; not death, not even death's vitality, but aliveness. We are alive, we are alive, or, as a poet once put it, "This is the urgency: Live!"[28] Such aliveness is relational and it moves one into other habitats of (one's) being, into and toward more, akin to the stringing together of being in Clifton's "reply."

In *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, I am interested in theorizing aliveness through poems of relation and first-person essays, especially in considering the philosophical work of pronouns ("one," "me," "I") and verbs (imperatives, subjunctives). I believe that an aesthetic of aliveness makes possible an encounter with the ethical question "how to be." That is, though an antiblack world would to foreclose ethical possibility for the one who is black, in the totality of a black world, we can conceptualize "how to be" as a reckoning of human capacity, as the right and burden of being.[29]

A note to the reader: In these pages, I am trying to create a clear, readable line. As such, I have privileged the creative works (poems and essays) as well as a particular genealogy of thinkers who are mostly black and female, though the breadth of my scholarly debt is indexed in my endnotes.[30]

(Today I am sad, mad, wild, full of rage in and out. Today is a day in June 2020, summer of racism's recurring pandemic. Today, I am of molecular rage about Ahmaud Arbery, killed by white vigilantes while he was jogging; George Floyd,

killed during a police arrest in Minneapolis; Breonna Taylor, a health care worker killed by police fire. And others, many others, including Dominique Fells and Riah Milton, two black transwomen whose murders add to the particular vulnerability of our black transgender folks; like Tony McDade, a black transman killed by police in Florida. And more, including the disregard for black life that manifests as everyday menace: in this season, a black man has been harassed and threatened while birding in a city park, and an eleven-year-old black girl has been assaulted by a white woman while trying to collect her grandmother's mail.[31] Today, when I am thinking about black aliveness, I am exhausted by black death; today I am sad that I am exhausted. Racism is murderous, and its murderousness travels and compounds insidiously and without impunity. By the time this paragraph is published, by the time one reads it, these names and incidents will be old news, replaced by another incalculable catalog of harm. That certainty exhausts me today.

As necessary as "Black Lives Matter" has proven to be, so efficient and beautiful a truth-claim, its necessity disorients me; to hear it said or see it printed as an emblem is existentially disorienting. I want a black world where the matter of mattering matters indisputably, where black mattering is beyond expression. I want to read and study in the orientation of a black world.

Today there is no reconciling the facts of our lives, which seem tethered to death, and the case for black aliveness. Both have to be true at the same time.)

This work begins with a single premise, an instruction, really: imagine a black world. Such a directive acknowledges that the New World plunder of modernity and coloniality enacts a destruction of the world as it was and might have become, that the New World unorders the relationship of the human to place, time, other human. Or we might say there never was a world, that imperialism's destructiveness *is* that it imposed a world logic. Either case describes world-failure that, among other horrors, mobilizes blackness as an antithesis to human life.[32]

In the face of failure that is so unspeakably broad, I use "imagine" as a turn toward the small, an opportunity to understand black worldness as what black texts do . . . as the aesthetics of black art. Reading this way scales the matter of world-and-being to a level I can manage, and though it may not resolve catastrophe, it moves away from summoning black literature to teach about black humanity. (What is there to learn? The human is human.) "Imagine" postpones the logics of address, dominance, and misrecognition—the terms of an antiblack world—that interfere with beholding both black aliveness and a black ethic of relation. This study of aliveness rests on the inclination to

imagine that the black text speaks to and in a black world, subjunctive and imaginary as that is, away from the false and damaging expectation that black texts have to speak universally, which means that they speak to the larger racial project or conversation—that is, to people who are not black . . . which indeed they do (a text speaks to any reader who reads it). Simply, I want to elude the imposition of the generic nonblack reader, an imposition that potentially corrupts how we regard the aesthetics of black art, or, at the very least, excludes a black reader from being the "one" who is referenced and imagined as the human person reading, learning, becoming. "Imagine" installs the possibility that a black one might be the reader who could find themself there, beheld in the suspension of literary worldmaking.[33]

"Imagine a black world" is both a way to read texts and a way to understand what is instantiated by the text itself, a choral subjunctive that exemplifies but does not plead. This undertaking is Cliftonian and Morrisonian, since no thinkers or writers have advocated for the textual world of black being like Lucille Clifton and Toni Morrison.

This is a story of us—there are and could be many stories, and this is just one, a story of aliveness rather than of life, since I am determined to avoid the trouble that comes in trying to represent life's unrepresentability. The word here is "aliveness," a quality of being, a term of habitat, a manner and aesthetic, a feeling—or many of them, circuits in an atmosphere. Like breath. We are totality: we *are* and are of the universe; we *are* and are of a black world, this us who are cited by that great poetic riff—"they do / they do / they do."

This is a conversation of us, black us and our aliveness.

NOTES

Introduction

1 My use of "rightness" here echoes Sylvia Wynter's argument about "wrongness of being"; see the essay "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in an Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desêtre*: Black Studies toward the Human Project," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (London: Routledge, 2006), 107–169.

2 All my references to Clifton's poems are from *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton, 1965–2010*, ed. Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2012).

3 I could mention, too, that the long *e* sound resonates with the short *i* of "live" because of the sonic play of the consonants in that word, which is another way of saying that sonic entanglement is rife throughout this poem. Gratitude to Mike King, who used the word "waltz" in a discussion with my Smith College students in 2015 and who engaged me in conversations about black sonic and verse practices. Thanks also to Herman Beavers, who alerted me to Michael S. Harper's poem "Deathwatch," which makes reference to the DuBois query.

4 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), 82. Thanks to Heather Williams for an astute question about the vernacular inflection of "he do / she do."

5 See Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), especially the introduction, as well as her engagement of Brechtian distanciation in "Nina Simone's Triple Play," *Callaloo* 34, no. 1 (2011): 176–197; in both instances, Brooks reminds us to attend to the black performer more than to the presumptive white audience, to listen to and for blackness. My discussion of looking here could be described by the term Elin Diamond, a performance studies scholar, uses: "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness." Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997), 52. For more on distance, looking, and black subjectivity, see Hortense J. Spillers's consideration of the black specular in "Mama's Baby,

Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" ("*being* for the captor" as a "distance *from* a subject position" [*Black* 206; emphases in original]) and "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203–229, 376–427; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be Black and Look at This?' Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 77–94; Jasmine Nicole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Courtney R. Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2002), which describes race as a "regime of looking" (2). That this list reflects only part of my encounter with a subset of works in this area suggests the potency of matters of blackness and looking.

6 The dynamics of address are multiplied when "reply" is read in regard to the poems that precede and succeed it in *Quilting*: "memo," which is dedicated to Fannie Lou Hamer, where the speaker addresses Hamer directly and includes herself in the "us"; and the aptly named "whose side are you on," where the speaker, in the first person, declares allegiance with a woman trying to get on a bus before its door closes.

7 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2–3, emphasis added. In the longer passage, Deleuze uses the terms "general" and "ordinary" in ways that might seem in conflict with my thinking about the quotidian excellence in Clifton's verse. I take my cue on Deleuzean time from John Rajchman's introduction to Deleuze's *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2001); Rajchman notes that for Deleuze, "We are always *quelconque*—we are and remain 'anybodies' before we become 'somebodies'" (14). For more on Deleuze's thinking, see Daniel W. Smith, *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); and John Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida and the Body Politic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001). I am also drawing on Michelle M. Wright's argument about time, phenomenon, and epiphenomenon in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Finally, in regard to my comment about the orthography of the repetitive "they do," see Jennifer DeVere Brody's consideration of ellipsis as a black sign in *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), chap. 2.

8 This Finney citation is from her National Book Award acceptance speech, included at the end of *Head Off and Split* (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books / Northwestern

University Press, 2011), n.p. My comment about utopia references Clifton's *Quilting: Poems, 1987–1990* (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2000), the collection that contains "reply" and that is inundated with iterations of subjunctivity where time and history are on the make. For more on conceptualizations of utopia, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

9 I am riffing here on Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Billy "Fundi" Abernathy's photographic verse collection, *In Our Terribleness (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). I am also acknowledging that many of Clifton's poems are invitation poems in the tradition that Erik Gray explores in his essay "Come Be My Love: The Song of Songs, *Paradise Lost*, and the Tradition of the Invitation Poem," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 370–385. This point will be explored further in chapter 1.

10 I am using the phrasing here from Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

11 I am referring to Wynter's essay "On How We Mistook" and to Margo Natalie Crawford's *Black Post-blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017). The worldmaking that Wynter advances as a feature of the intellectual project of nascent black studies complements the case that Crawford makes for experimentation and abstraction as central to the Black Arts movement's intellectual commitments. As a complement to Crawford's work on expanding how we understand Black Arts, also see Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2011); James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Howard Rambsy, *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Cheryl Clarke's conceptualization of circles in *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); and GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016). Indeed, the era's worldmaking instinct is legible in the example of the renaming of *Negro Digest* as *Black World* in 1971, the return to Négritude as an ideology of the black subject's "being-in-the-world" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* [Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963], 41), or the think-tank Institute for the Black World, founded in 1969.

The reference to Wynter is intended to signal her superlative contribution to the power of narrative in inventing worlds; see, for example, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 19–70. Scholarship on black worldmaking is vast, including Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), which offers a thorough consideration of blackness, aesthetics, and black life-worlds; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), which explores black writers' "imaginative practices of worlding" that refuse liberal humanism's terms of the human (1); and Anthony Reed's reading of

"textural and textual" "worldliness and wordliness"—via Martin Heidegger and Black Arts theorists—in *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 31. Also see studies on Afrofuturism and cosmopolitanism—for example, André M. Carrington, "The Cultural Politics of Worldmaking Practice," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 8, no. 2 (2015): 1–13; Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). For studies on aesthetics and cultural history, see works such as Imani Perry's reading of "I'll make me a world" in *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Mark C. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). For performance studies, see works such as Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); and Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018). For black gender studies, see, for example, Kimberly Nichele Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); and L. H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015). For works on the black radical tradition, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Ashon T. Crawley's notion of dreaming and otherwise in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); and Barrymore Bogues's "radical imagination" in "And What about the Human? Freedom, Human Emancipation and the Radical Imagination," *Boundary 2* 39, no. 3 (2012): 28–46. For work in black political cultures, see Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post–Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). This partial list explores what Greg Thomas summarizes well in *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power: Pan-African Embodiment and Erotic Schemes of Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007): "The world put in place by colonialists is not the only world that has ever been. It is not even necessarily the only world that is. It is most assuredly not the only world that can be" (154).

Suffice it to say, also, that the discourse of worldmaking is expansive in humanist theory, including Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978); Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of language and worldmaking in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (San Bernadino: Decades, 2019) ("*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" [5.6, p. 123, emphasis in original]); Toril Moi's engagement of ordinary language theory and worldmaking in *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. chaps. 1, 2; Nicholas F. Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2018); Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1993); Jacques Rancière's construc-

tion of heterotopia in "The Senses and Uses of Utopia," in *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*, ed. S. D. Chrostowska and James D. Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 219–232, and "The Aesthetic Heterotopia," *Philosophy Today* 54 (2010): 15–25; and Charles W. Mill's interrogation of the worldmaking of racial ideology in *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Finally, worldmaking has also been important conceptually to thinking about aesthetics and narratology; see, for example, Jerome Bruner, "Self-Making and World-Making," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25, no. 1 (1991): 67–78; Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), which includes the beautiful phrase "literature that worlds a world" (10).

12 Baraka's verse use of emotion (anger, rage) is consistent with Sara Ahmed's argument about emotions as worldmaking; see *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004). I read this closing call, in its turn to the cosmic, as a utopian performance, "a manifesto [as] a call to a doing in and for the future" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 26). For further discussion of the unusual quality of "let" as an imperative, see Rodney Huddleston, "Clause Type and Illocutionary Force," in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 851–945, especially the discussion of directive and open imperatives on 934–937. I am grateful to Neal Whitman's blog *Literal-Minded* for the reference. The imperative in Baraka's "Black Art" situates the invocation in all-time, even outside time, such that there is not ever a moment when one cannot imagine a black subject feeling or living through or speaking this call. It is important that Baraka's speaker does not orient blackness via a past or a future (the line is not "Let black people understand that they were or will be"), since these are the common time registers for conceptualizing black subjectivity. Instead, Baraka's speaker speaks through the time of sensibility and feeling, surpassing the logics of what Michelle M. Wright has called "Middle Passage time" so as to focus on "the phenomenology of Blackness—that is, when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal" (*Physics of Blackness* 3). In this regard, Baraka's is a time of the being in embodiment. For more on time and phenomenology, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Mark Hansen, "The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 584–626; Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015); and Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). Finally, it is notable that the poet Terrance Hayes borrows the energetic compounding language—including the reference to poets and warriors—of the end of "Black Art" for the first sonnet sequence and then a later sonnet in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018); see pp. 5, 22.

13 We might consider the poem's closing imperative through Wynter's arguments for upending genres of black nonbeing, her "re-enchantment of humanism," which, in David Scott's language, imagines "the emancipated ecumenical conception of the

human." Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," by David Scott, *Small Axe* 8 (2000): 197. That is, one can read "the ecumenical" in Baraka's relatively open and abstract language at the end of "Black Art," language that contrasts with the excessively concrete diction earlier and that idiomizes a black world as a black poem. Baraka's closing also evokes Édouard Glissant's *tout-monde*, the all-world of relation as a universe of change and exchange: "Thus, I dream, since I am a writer, I dream of a new approach to literature in this excess that is the *Tout-Monde*." Quoted in Bernadette Cailler, "*Totality and Infinity*, Alterity, and Relation: From Levinas to Glissant," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2011): 143–144; Cailler is translating and quoting from Glissant's *Introduction à une poetique du divers* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1995), 91–92. Glissant's thinking will become central to the arguments in chapters 1 and 2. Also see Eric Prieto, "Edouard Glissant, *Littérature-monde*, and *Tout-monde*," *Small Axe* 14, no. 3 (2010): 111–120; Kara Keeling on Glissant and imagination in *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); and Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*. Finally, my thinking here acknowledges that worldmaking is all over Baraka's poetics, including in poems like "Black Dada Nihilismus" and "Return of the Native," both in *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), 71–73, 217. I am also thinking with Essex Hemphill's "Heavy Breathing," an epic poem of blackness that invokes Négritude and that also rages through an expansive black collectivity, though this one is queer and feminist; Hemphill's poem is from his collection *Ceremonies: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Plume, 1992).

14 Harper describes this especially well in his argument about double-voicedness in *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996):

> Because of the way the poetry uses direct address and thus invites us to conflate addressee and audience, it appears that the material is meant to be *heard* by blacks, and *over*heard by whites, who would respond fearfully to the threat of mayhem it embodies. I think that this is appearance only, however, and it will be a secondary effect of my argument to demonstrate that, while Black Arts poetry very likely does depend for its power on the division of its audience along racial lines, it achieves its maximum impact in a context in which it is understood as being *heard* directly by whites, and *over*heard by blacks. (45–46; emphases in original)

Harper also uses Baraka's epigraphic poem, "SOS," and Sonia Sanchez's "blk/rhetoric" to explore the nature and limits of the call toward a black collective as such is conceptualized in the era.

15 Wynter, "Re-enchantment of Humanism" 197. I know that Wynter didn't mean this statement exclusively, but if its idealism is to work, it has to be of a black world too. Wynter's use of "form of life" resonates with Giorgio Agamben's grappling with the same phrase, sometimes hyphenated, in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). There is a striking parallel between Wynter's phrasing here and Baraka's "The World You're Talking About," his introduction to David Henderson's collection of poems *Felix of the Silent Forest* (New York: Poets,

1967), published under the name LeRoi Jones: "The Black Poetry is a sensitivity to the world total, to the American total. It is *about*, or *is* feeling(s). Even governmental structures are made the way people *feel* they should be made. The animating intelligence is a total of all existence. . . . Ways of making sense, of sensing. . . . Worlds. Spectrums. Galaxies. What the god knows" (n.p. [first page]; emphasis in original). Later, Jones (Baraka) concludes that "our content is literally about a world of humans and their paths and forms" (n.p. [first page]), which resonates, too, with his verse in and the ambition of *In Our Terribleness*. I am grateful to J. Peter Moore for pointing me to Henderson's collection and Jones's (Baraka's) introduction.

16 Another way to think of the poem's invocation is through Crawford's notion of "public interiority," especially the idea of the Black Arts movement as "the call for a black interior and the call for the *black* collection of blackness" (*Black Post-blackness* 167; emphasis in original). Crawford's work, like Harper's, frames the matter of audience in Black Arts literature; also see Rolland Murray, *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power, and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); and Stephen Michael Best, *None like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

17 My reference in this paragraph is to Hartman's body of work, especially *Scenes of Subjection*; *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Macmillan, 2008); "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; and her conversation with Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201.

18 Though there are ideological distinctions between black/Afro-pessimism and black optimism, I choose "black pessimism" as an encompassing term since I am not arguing the difference. And though Fred Moten does not identify with black pessimism, I am citing his ideas in this gloss precisely because Moten's exploration of black radical aesthetics and of fugitivity are often incorporated into the field. For more in this regard, see Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions* 5 (2011), http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsexton.php; Sexton, "Afro-pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes* 29 (2016), https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02; David Marriott, "Judging Fanon," *Rhizomes* 29 (2016), https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e03; and Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218. Worldmaking is present conceptually in many works in the field, including in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); in Hartman's refiguring of the archive via fabulation ("Venus in Two Acts"); in Sharpe's exposition of the wake (*In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016]); in Frank B. Wilderson III's conceptualization of the hold and his claim that there is no assumption of human equilibrium for the black (*Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010]); in Nahum Dimitri Chandler's exposition of the DuBoisian color line as a thought horizon (*X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2014]); and in Katherine McKittrick's assertion that "our

historically present black geographies . . . are from nowhere . . . inventions, just as we are" (*Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006], 97). Black pessimism's philosophical thinking allies with the black radical tradition that conceptualizes a black world totality, what Cedric Robinson calls "ontological totality" in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171. There is, too, a manner of worldmaking in the way black pessimism conceptualizes black study: all thinking is blackness, black thinking is black being (see especially Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, as well as Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral* 1, no. 1 [2012]: n.p.).

19 I am gleaning this summation from studying Sylvia Wynter and Frank Wilderson, especially *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), though I imagine that Wilderson might disagree with my exact formulation in this summary.

20 See especially Jared Sexton, who offers a clear rejection of death in "Ante-Anti-Blackness." If we read for it, vitality is evident in Fred Moten's "scream" and his sustained interest in fugitivity (*In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003]) as well his attention to the "aesthetic sociology or a social poetics of nothingness" ("Blackness and Nothingness [Mysticism in the Flesh]," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 742); Glissant's opacity (*Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997]); the theoretical astuteness of the word "social" in Orlando Patterson's conceptualization of social death (*Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018]); Avery Gordon's sociological haunting (*Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008]); Lewis R. Gordon's revision of Sartre's bad faith ("Yet the slave is also simultaneously aware of not fully *being a slave*; he is, after all, *conscious of the beyond*" [*Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995), 16; emphasis in original]); Fanon's zone of nonbeing (*Black Skin, White Masks*); Vincent Brown's understanding of the dead as a social force in *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). I could note, too, Frank Wilderson's use of the idioms "Slave" and "Savage," which surpass the terms of death (in *Red, White and Black*). My thinking is inspired by Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), particularly his warning about suffering as an overriding conceit in some biopolitical formations of blackness, as it is by Achille Mbembe ("Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 [2003]: 11–40; and *Critique of Black Reason* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017]), Darieck Scott (*Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* [New York: New York University Press, 2010]), Joshua Chambers-Letson (his revision of death and/as communism in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* [New York: New York University Press, 2018]), and Neil Roberts (*Freedom as Marronage* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015]). Surely death is endemic to the construction of the rational subject and the racialized subject, as Denise Ferreira da Silva argues in *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), but the matter of black theory always theorizes

life. And again, I am cohering an array of thinkers under the rubric of black pessimism, though not all of them claim—or have had the chance to claim—the label.

21 I am borrowing the notion of opacity from Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*; the reference to "ontological terror" is from Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Also, I read Wilderson's iteration of the Savage/Slave dyad—explored in *Red, White and Black* and in *Afropessimism*—in conjunction with Iyko Day's elision of such a binary in "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 102–121.

22 At stake here is thinking about the role that a history of the black past plays in how we conceptualize terms in black studies. Again, this is not a dispute of the totality of antiblackness, which is past and now, which Sharpe conceptualizes via "the weather [as] the totality of our environments . . . the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (*In the Wake* 104), a totality that leads Warren to assert that "Black freedom, then, would constitute a form of *world destruction*, and this is precisely why humanism has failed to accomplish its romantic goals of equality, justice, and recognition" (*Ontological Terror* 6; emphasis in original). Yes, and still I hear Jared Sexton's important query, "Must one always think blackness to think antiblackness?" ("Social Life of Social Death"), which leads me to ask, Must one always and only think antiblackness to think—or imagine—blackness? This question is asked directly in Best's *None like Us*, which notes that "black studies [is] burdened by . . . the omnipresence of history in our politics . . . [and] confronts the more difficult task of disarticulating itself . . . from the historical accretions of slavery, race, and racism, or from a particular commitment to the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present" (2). The disarticulation is impossible and so too is the balance between Sexton's question and mine. This complication of blackness and time thrives in work by Sharon P. Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Wright, *Physics of Blackness* (66); Nyong'o, *Afro-fabulations*; Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Archives of the Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-humanist Critique* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); as it does in post-soul studies (see, for example, Nelson George, *Post-soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and before That Negroes)* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 [2007]: 625–640). Also, my reference to "anti/ante" riffs on Sexton's "Ante-Anti-Blackness." Finally, thanks to Daphne Lamothe for a conversation here.

23 Thanks to Nichole Calero, a former student, for the conversation that sparked the insight about the expectation of blackness.

24 The word "being" consorts easily with naïve constructions of freedom, individuation, and even agency. In *Ontological Terror*, Warren asks, "What is black existence without Being?" (14), a question that notices the ways that being/Being is already sequestered by Enlightenment imagining. (Throughout the text, Warren uses the term "being" with a strikethrough.) It is important, then, to be clear that I always mean "becoming" when I say "being," since being is not static; being unfurls and

dissolves and accretes, each happening yielding another instantiation. In this work, my thinking on being inclines toward the phenomenology of Audre Lorde (a Lordean phenomenology—see chapters 1 and 2) rather than toward what Moten describes as the exhausted language of ontology (in the preface to *Black and Blur*). See also the case Carl Phillips makes in his essay "A Politics of Mere Being," *Poetry*, December 2016, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/91294/a-politics-of-mere-being.

25 I am inspired here by the clarity of Christopher Freeburg's assertion, in his study of black interiority, "that the powers of human identification never cause ontological ambiguity between people—that is, one never really confuses another person for something else under normative conditions" (*Black Aesthetics and the Interior Life* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017], 42). Wilderson's claim echoes what Nahum Dimitri Chandler describes as the problem of exorbitance, that there is no outside—no "free zone or quiet place"—for black writing and thinking (*X* 14). My invocation of a black world is an attempt to argue that such a zone can be read in the world of the text, not unlike the language Harney and Moten use for the aesthetics of the undercommons: "the sociopoetic force we wrap tightly round us" (*Undercommons* 19).

26 Thanks to Alexis Pauline Gumbs for the reminder about this essential line in the Combahee statement, which helps me to signal my debt to the particular ways black women thinkers have engaged blackness and worldmaking. Central in this regard is bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), a book that holds singular meaning in my studying and that opens, in invocation, "Sisters—and you who are our friends, loved ones, and comrades" (1). Those words are like a spell, the kind of shapeshifting and embodied praxis that Aimee Meredith Cox writes about in *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) or the worldmaking that black girls enact through the poetic in Ruth Nicole Brown's work (see especially "Pleasure Verses: A Five Element Set," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 [2019]: 179–189; and *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014]). In terms of thinking about blackness and heterogeneity, see Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); and Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). And as with all my feminist black doings, I learned much from and with Monique J. Savage.

27 Also see the argument that Robin D. G. Kelley makes in the opening of *Yo Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 2008), particularly his reading of John L. Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*. The phrase "calling all black people" repeats a line from Amiri Baraka's poem "SOS" and invokes the argument Phillip Brian Harper makes about the poem in *Are We Not Men?* Because my commitment is to be thoughtful about gender and gendering, I often use the singular third-person pronoun "their" to refer to speakers when a gender designation is not clear; I also use the reflexive pronoun "themself" for

the same reason. These choices are repeated and become clearer in thinking about aliveness and oneness in chapter 2.

28 Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," in *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 453. I am grateful for conversation with Matt Ashby that sharpened my thinking here.

29 Wilderson explores the ethical limits of/within an antiblack world in *Red, White and Black* (see especially "Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics"). The matter of ethics is taken up in chapter 5.

30 Unsaid here is a larger conversation about citational practice as a matter of scholarly or disciplinary legibility. I am inspired first by Barbara Christian's iconic essay "The Race for Theory," then by Phillip Brian Harper's example in the introduction of *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), esp. 15.

31 Their names are, respectively, Christian Cooper and Skhylur Davis.

32 In thinking about catastrophe and the terms of the modern world, I am reading with Sylvia Wynter (especially "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; and "The Ceremony Must Be Found"), Hortense Spillers (especially "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"), Maria Lugones (especially "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 [2007]: 186–209; and "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 [2010]: 742–759), Kara Keeling (*Queer Times, Black Futures* [New York: New York University Press, 2019]), Sean Gaston (*The Concept of World from Kant to Derrida* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013]), Jacques Khalip (*Last Things: Disastrous Form from Kant to Hujar* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2018], esp. chap. 4), Massimo Livi Bacci (*Conquest: The Destruction of the American Indios* [Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008]), Jason W. Moore (*Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* [Oakland: PM, 2016]), Jodi Byrd (*The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011]), Mark Rifkin (*Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017], which argues against the logic of time and world imposed by colonial and imperial imagination), Kathryn Yusoff (*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019]), and Achille Mbembe (especially *Critique of Black Reason*). Gratitude to Khalip for a conversation that extended my thinking here.

33 For a good engagement with matters of address, see Monique Roelofs, *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

Chapter 1. Aliveness and Relation

1 I am quoting here from Alexis De Veaux's indispensable *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 199.

2 I'll come to affect theory later, though I want to acknowledge Teresa Brennan's argument about the transmission of feeling in *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca,