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Abstract
Epic Black: Poetics in Protest in the Time of Black Lives Matter
David M. de León
2021

This dissertation examines certain book-length poetic works released between 2014 to 2016, corresponding to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement formed in the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2013. I argue that these works emerge from the same political and poetic urgency that demanded a movement like BLM. Using Beyoncé’s Lemonade (2016) as an entrance, I focus on a genrestrategy that Farah Jasmine Griffin calls Epic Black, a poetics that uses the hypervisibility of Black bodies, the inescapable place that Black expression has in popular American culture, and the scale and scope of the Western epic as a liberatory artistic strategy. Epic Black uses the cultural weight of institutions against those institutions, subverting or re-appropriating the dominant systems that would seek to appropriate Blackness.

Popular culture is a political battleground like any other, and the most contested zones are the places where Whiteness encounters the limits of its power in the encounter with the Black body. This place, where the dominant language encounters its limit, I call noirporia. It marks the borderland or frontiers of Whiteness, where it is most open to the possibilities of fugitivity or marronage. Each of the Epic Black works I discuss claim territory out of this contested ground, taking up space in the cultural imaginary through the medium of the poetry book as cultural object, which has dimensions both physical and discursive.

After discussing Lemonade as one of the most visible examples of Epic Blackness, I turn to Claudia Rankine’s Citizen, winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry and nominee in both poetry and criticism; Tyehimba Jess’s Olio,
winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry; and Robin Coste Lewis’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, winner of the 2015 National Book Award. Each of these book-length works is a performance of Epic Black: hypervisible as a cultural object, capacious in breadth and scope, and self-conscious in formal difficulty. I conclude with a brief look at Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s *M Archive: After the End of the World* as a new phase of Epic Black, suggesting that epic strategies must change with the centers of cultural power.
Epic Black: Poetics in Protest in the Time of Black Lives Matter

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by
David M. de León

Dissertation Director: Langdon Hammer

June 2021
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Acknowledgements

I am not Black. I do not occupy space in this country as Black nor am I interpellated as Black. In Puerto Rico, where my grandparents were born, I might be considered Black. They certainly were. But my brown skin and mixed heritage in this country reads instead as ethnic ambiguity. Although I do not move in this cultural landscape as Black, my ancestry is tied up with slavery. I am part of the African diaspora, and it has taken me most of my life to come to terms with that.

So I must thank my grandparents for moving to East Harlem from Rio Piedras, for assimilating only up to a point, for never being ashamed of the color of their skin, and for not fleeing to the White suburbs until after I was born. I thank my father, who has supported me and believed in me every year of my life, even when he didn’t understand what I was doing or why. I thank my mother for instilling in me the drive to get things done no matter the obstacles, which has helped me through this long and anxious year of quarantine.

Writing about living poets whom I’ve met and whom I admire has a feeling of the uncanny about it, as if I were somehow interfering with their lives from a distance. I can only hope I do justice and honor to the remarkable artists included here, even though I feel like I should apologize for every line I’ve written.

Gratitude doesn’t come easy to someone like me, a first-generation student, raised as I was to work, keep my head down, and strive for independence in all things. There is much in my life I’ve had to do without any help, and I am proud of myself for all
that I’ve accomplished. But I was helped along the way by many people who believed in me more than I did myself, or saw something in me when I wasn’t looking.

I wouldn’t be in grad school without the help of William Flesch and Stephen Brown, of Nico Israel and Gavin Hollis at Hunter, who encouraged my education and my graduate studies.

On my prospective visit to Yale I met Claudia Rankine, who, unbeknownst to me, was also considering joining this hallowed yet deeply problematic institution. I asked her if I should still join if I had so many concerns. She advised me to do it anyway. To take the cultural capital of the institution for what it is: a blank check to do with as I, not the institution, wanted. So I (and she) did.

Though I am housed in English, this project owes everything to my coming in contact with the brilliant scholars in African American Studies. Classes with Hazel Carby and Daphne Brooks fundamentally changed how I saw the work of scholarship and my own work as a scholar. I am grateful to all my friends and interlocutors in Af-Am. I also owe gratitude to Anthony Reed. I came to him one afternoon expressing my concern that a brown-skinned Puerto Rican shouldn’t try to write about Blackness, and he told me the story of Felipe Luciano, Afro-Puerto Rican poet, standing before a crowd in Harlem and declaring that he too was part of the Black experience.

From the moment I stepped into his office six years ago, Langdon Hammer has been a tireless advocate for my work and my ideas. I may not have always known where I was going, but Lanny’s unconditional trust gave me the faith to keep at it. Marta Figlerowicz has been amazingly generous with time and energy. And Daphne Brooks is an epic herself, a rock star, a one-woman-bandleader with so many things in motion that I am glad simply to be in her orbit. Thank you all.
Thank you to Emily Greenwood, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Tyehimba Jess for answering my emails.

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And to my partner, Jade. We endured many years apart and many years together in this long process. I am just as happy today as ever to call myself yours.
Taking Up Space: #Beychella, BLM, Black Epic and Epic Black

Introduction

Blackness is epic. Which is to say Blackness, whatever Blackness is, is important, powerful, grand. It is unignorable, larger than life, larger than the frames that would hope to contain it. But more than that, Blackness epics. If epic is a genre that is culturally important because it declares itself culturally important, the work of making cultural importance in the United States has often been done with and against Blackness. Think of cinema, which is often how America explains itself to itself. Think Birth of a Nation, of Gone with the Wind, of the whiteface slave narrative The Ten Commandments (with its whiteface Egyptians). Think 12 Years a Slave or Get Out, but also think The Help, Green Book, or Crash. This extends to literature. Think of the anti-Blackness in Walt Whitman’s founding vision, or the absence of the Civil War in the writings of Emily Dickinson.¹ Think of Phyllis Wheatley. Think of the minstrelsy that Michael North has found in the language of modernists like T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, or the parallels between the composition of The Waste Land and Claude McKay’s Harlem Shadows.² But also think of the unignorable place that Black artists have had on every aspect of popular culture in America. Think blues and rock and roll. Think Jazz. Think dance, funk, disco, salsa.

¹ For more on this, see Eunsong Kim, “Petty Materialism: On Metaphor & Violence.”
² Michael North, The Dialect of Modernism.
Think hip hop, rap, R&B. Think of the mode of thinking that is hip hop, rap, R&B. Think sampling, think electronics. Think Shonda Rhimes. Think Black Panther. Then think about The Black Panthers, whose political and cultural iconography have fused into the image of political power not allied with the State. Think how many echoes their image has in the cultural imaginary. Then think White militias. Think the Proud Boys. Think Black Lives Matter. Then think of its linguistic descendants, All Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, White Lives Matter.³

There is a constant push and pull between Black artists and the culture industry, which Stuart Hall called “the scene, par excellence, of commodification,” “where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology.”⁴ This scene is a site of great precarity but also one of great potential change, where the hypervisibility of Blackness can be turned on its spectators. In the 21st century, during the era of what Rinaldo Walcott calls “the long emancipation,” the age of something not slavery but certainly not freedom— which he calls a “continued unfreedom”⁵— the idea of Blackness in the western cultural imaginary has gone from a literal commodity to a figural one, from a locus of capital to one of cultural capital, which Richard Iton describes as “political disenfranchisement on the one hand and overemployment in the arenas of popular culture in the other.”⁶ To Erica R. Edwards, this overemployment is part of the process by which Black radicalism, of the Civil Rights movement and its afterlives, was and continues to be co-opted and commodified in the name of “US empire.”⁷

⁴ Stuart Hall, 469.
⁷ Erica R. Edwards, The Other Side of Terror, 4.
culture,” to Edwards, is “the very means by which the US nation-state ... consolidat[es] national sentiment and consensus through the incorporation of ‘some, though not all or most,’ of its previously marginalized subjects.”

Respectability, uplift, and visibility all work to turn representations and expressions of Blackness from subversive to conservative.

And yet there are ways that Black expressive culture “refracts” this coercive power. More important than the ways that Whiteness epics Blackness are, to me, the ways that Blackness epics back (and Black). I am concerned with the ways that Black artists have had to contend with this simultaneous embodiment of power and removal from power, simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility, and the productive, subversive, and self-creating strategies that visibility—on the popular stage, in the gatekeeping establishment, and in the archive—can perform.

Culture and the culture industry may never be free from entanglements with power and capital, but critics should not ignore or erase the efforts of Black artists to assert themselves and their experience against this industry, using the machinery of cultural importance against the mechanisms themselves. Because Blackness is epic. It cannot fit within the frames that would hope to contain it. It breaks frames. Works by Black artists in the US since the civil war have done this, and Black art—large, multifaceted, contradictory, and unignorable—has fundamentally changed the cultural landscape as well as contributed to political change. Or, perhaps it is better to say that

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8 Ibid.
9 Edwards is speaking specifically of Black feminist writers. Ibid., 5.
10 As Beyoncé rhymes, “I break chains all by my self.”
11 For more on this subject, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, Daphne Brooks, Liner Notes for the Revolution.
these works of culture are political change—incremental, yes; insufficient, certainly; but political actions nonetheless.

I am indebted to Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, which managed to combine fields like political science, cultural studies, African American, post-colonial, and diaspora studies, music history, and pop culture together in search of the ways in which Black political formations—formal and informal, governmental and “street”—are entwined with popular culture throughout the 20th century.12 To Iton, there should be no separation between “formal politics” and “everything else”—popular culture, cultural politics, media, grassroots activism, the “superpublic” of elite Black artists and culture makers, etc. “For African Americans,” he writes, “partly because of their marginal status and often violent exclusion from the realms of formal politics, popular culture was an integral and important aspect of the making of politics throughout the pre-civil rights era and the civil rights era itself.”13 And so “black deliberative activity,” he writes, “cannot be captured or understood by focusing only on that which happens in the arenas of formal politics and policy making.”14 This is also highlighted by Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, where “Everyday practices, rather than traditional political activity like the abolition movement, black conventions, the struggle for suffrage, electoral activities, et cetera,” are the focus of her analysis, because “these pedestrian practices illuminate inchoate and utopian expressions of freedom that are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere.”15

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12 Iton, 28.
13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid.
Iton recognizes a separation between formal politics and informal politics that begins in the civil rights era. Bayard Rustin in 1965 called on Black leaders to move away from street protests and actions, to “downplay protest, recognize compromise as inevitable, and embrace political action within the Democratic Party.” This political optimism was short-lived, and “not surprisingly, the civil rights/labor/liberal coalition collapsed by the end of the decade, and Rustin’s confidence regarding the progressive capacity of American democracy proved to be largely displaced.”

The separation between formal and informal politics continued to widen, however, through the post-civil rights era and beyond. Iton identifies a “post-post-civil-rights” period in the ‘80s and ‘90s, where the synonymity of politics and aesthetics that defined the civil rights era faded into a “retreat from progressive politics” signified by a clear demarcation between what happens in culture and what happens in congress. The “respectability” of formal politics was locked in a tension with the subversive movements of Black music, visual art, and popular entertainment. This emerged in tandem with what Erica R. Edwards calls “the long war on terror,” the counter-insurgent drive of American imperialism that was “a decades-long assault on third world radicalism which preceded but also was intensified by 9/11.”

Though Iton’s book was written in 2007, it’s hard not to see the election of Barack Obama as the logical conclusion of the formal/informal politics divide put through the crucible of the long war on terror. In 2010, Iton gave a talk titled “The Obamas & the New Politics of Race,” where he writes:

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16 Ibid., 5.
It has been suggested in many quarters that the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America might figure the end of black politics. According to this logic, the election of a president who happens to be black should make black political mobilization and organization superfluous and unnecessary. Moreover, this narrative assumes that the election of a black president has long been the desired end—the primary goal—of American blacks.

Against this backdrop, the Obama election provides an opportunity to think through the relationship between a politics of fulfilment and a politics of transfiguration... the status of the politics of deferral that have long characterized black practice; and the intensity of the sublative urge—the desire to deny or abandon certain political possibilities and spaces—within contemporary politics.18

In other words, the “end of black politics” presaged by Obama’s election was indeed an end—the logical conclusion of the drive towards formal politics since Ruskin. And as such it was a reckoning with the strategies of deferral, assimilation, and “sublation,” whereby Black politicians have searched for ways to “fit into” White politics and the White political imaginary. The end-hope of this was something like the election of 2008: a Black man at the head of government, the culmination of both representation and respectability. And yet, the struggle continued. Black people continued to be oppressed, sent to war, sent to prison, deported in the name of “security” and “keeping America safe.” Black people were still dying at the hands of the State. Something had failed.

Edwards locates in this a shift not only in the political but in the racial imaginary of America. “The year 2012,” she writes, “marked a shift into a new racial regime as the postracialism that enabled and punctuated the Obama era crumbled into a sea of loud, unbridled white supremacy.”19 This was also the moment when high profile public deaths of Black Americans at the hands of state agents (police, prison guards, state-

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18 Iton, “Diaspora Talk Series.”
19 Edwards, The Other Side, 8-9.
sanctioned vigilantes) emerged into public view, forcing the public to reckon with the failures of formal politics and the omnipresence of a different kind of representation: Black suffering. Co-founder Alicia Garza describes the impetus for the movement in a post on FeministWire:

I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements.

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.20


Daphne A. Brooks writes on how the era of Black Lives Matter has changed the stakes of Black art on the cultural stage in a time of simultaneous overrepresentation and hyper-precarity:

We are in an era characterized by spectacular dichotomies in black modern life, the ironies of hypervisible black-celebrity wealth existing alongside an outsize, cancerous black and brown carceral complex. So it makes sense that such a diverse array of voices would emerge in tandem with, in response to, inspired by, and occasionally at ideological odds with Black Lives Matter, the most prominent grassroots black-liberation movement in the US in more than two decades.21

20 Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.”
21 Daphne A. Brooks, “Second Coming.”
Brooks points out how Black Lives Matter, “was started and is led in part by three young African American women (two of whom identify as queer)—women who “know a thing or two about intersectional politics.” And so the movement that began with these three women must be, in Brooks’s terms, “as capacious as blackness itself.” The bigness, the broadness, the centerless-ness of BLM, with its lack of a singular pronoun, leader, or subjectivity, is key to its political and cultural power. It is also a part of the art that emerged in this era, whether that art was directly inspired by BLM or not. They must contend with hypervisibility, duration, and largeness as a strategy, attributes that are not necessarily positive, attributes that have been used against Blackness for all of post-emancipation (Blackness is too seen, too loud, loiters too long, and so must be policed, in all senses of the term). Using these attributes of hypervisibility, these tools of oppression, against the systems which seek to oppress, is fundamental to what I am calling the Epic Black.

Paul Gilroy writes about the “politics of transfiguration” in “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” in contrast to “the politics of fulfillment,” which roughly tracks onto Iton’s informal and formal politics:

The politics of fulfilment is mostly content to play occidental rationality at its own game. It necessitates a hermeneutic orientation that can assimilate the semiotic, verbal, and textual. The politics of transfiguration strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable. Its rather different hermeneutic focus pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic, and performative. These performances “exists on a lower frequency” to the formal, “where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about”—“willfully damaged signs” that

22 Ibid.
“partially transcend modernity, constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come.”24 Black Lives Matters protesters, marching through Ferguson or Brooklyn or Minneapolis, shouting and chanting, occupying the streets and highways, are also willfully transcending politics, creating an anti-modern past (Black Lives have Mattered) as well as a performing unto a yet-to-come (Black Lives will Matter). This is a poetic act. It is linguistic, durational, rhetorical. It acts and enacts. It sings. It tells stories intimately tied up with the history of a culture. And that culture, Black culture, like the stories and songs of old, is locked in a struggle with entrenched powers. On the streets of the protest, culture and politics and publics were inseparable. The “body politic” was the bodies, Black, brown, and otherwise, on the streets in every city. They used civic goods: public streets, public parks, “free speech,” “the right to assembly,” against the anti-Blackness of civics itself.25 This struggle is important, grand, unignorable, defiant. It takes up space.

To read the second decade of the 21st century through the lens of Iton and Edwards is to see the failure of formal politics and the resurgence, at the end of the Obama era, of activism, street politics, and popular culture as the driving forces of political change. Black artists took to the streets, to the airwaves, to the internet, to movie theaters. Black Lives Matter, they declared. But this declaration isn’t a statement of fact, a mere reporting of conditions. It is performative. It is an action. Black Lives have to be made to matter. They have to be made to matter against a White cultural

24 Ibid., 37-38.
25 Cf, Iton: “Public goods, by definition, are available to all citizens. Obviously, the key word here is citizen, and the salient question is what value and limits we should assign to this term.” Iton, 132.
imaginary in which Black lives do not matter. They have to be made to matter through cultural work, which includes activism as well as expression, and the merging of the two.

“Black Lives Matter” is a poetics, one of visibility, resistance, and self-creation. It is a poetics of “taking up space.”26 It takes pain and makes it action. It is large, multidimensional, unignorable. It is important because it declares itself important. I am interested in works of Black expression emerging in this era that utilize these same strategies.

When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Revolution

A number of events of sociopolitical import occurred in 2016, but for my purposes the most important occurred not in November, but in April. On April 16, Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter dropped the “Instagram post heard ‘round the world,” a 20-second clip of the singer leaning forward into her fur-decked arms, the only part of her visible being her blonde cornrows. Her voice echoes: “What am I gonna do, love? What am I gonna do?” before cutting to black and a single cryptic word: “Lemonade.” The next title announces “A World Premiere Event. Next Saturday.”

This was the first major release from Queen Bey in three years, and the first hint at a personal response to 2014’s infamous “elevator tape.” Then, TMZ released security footage of Beyoncé, her husband Jay-Z, her sister Solange, and various bodyguards and attendants. In the footage Solange attacks Jay Z viciously, having to be restrained multiple times by their bodyguards. On the video, Beyoncé for the most part stands still and indifferent, not bothering to defend her husband, which led much of the internet to speculate that she thought he deserved it. Rumors of infidelity grew, and though the couple did release a few cryptic statements, the details of the fight remained private.  

The April 16 teaser for Lemonade sparked enough interest that eight hundred thousand viewers tuned in on April 23, with many more in the following weeks. “Beyoncé Viewing Parties” popped up so viewers could share their premium subscriptions with others. Expectation for a new album had already been set: in February of that year Beyoncé had released the single and music video for the song “Formation,” exclusively on the streaming platform Tidal, of which Jay-Z is a co-owner.

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I am indebted to the work of Cole Cuchna and Tita Shodiya on the podcast Dissect for their collation and analysis of the universe of Lemonade.
The video depicted the singer dancing on top of a police car sinking into Louisiana floodwaters, a depiction of Black women’s power against tragedy and violence. The “Formation” video also dropped the day before Beyoncé’s appearance at Super Bowl L, where she performed the song decked in black leather and a bandolier, in a homage to the Black Panthers.28

She and her dancers formed an X on the field, put their fists in the air in a “Black Power” salute, and the singer’s usual warm smile was replaced by a scowl of resistance. The backlash was immediate. Police groups around the country called the performance as

28 Elgot.
anti-law-enforcement, and as inciting violence against police. Calls were made for police to boycott her upcoming tour. Despite this, the tour sold out 23 venues and generated over 250 million dollars, becoming one of the highest-grossing tours of all time.

When the viewing public finally experienced *Lemonade* on April 23, what they beheld was more than just an album or a music video but a sprawling, 70-minute music film, with an accompanying album and 600-page commemorative art book. The film would have seven directors, would include poetry from British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, and cameos from musicians like Chloe x Halle, Ibeiy, and Zendaya, actors like Quvenzhané Wallis and Amandla Stenberg, visual artist Laolu Senbanjo, and athlete and icon Serena Williams. It also included members of the Knowles-Carter family, such as Blue Ivy, Beyoncé’s mother Tina, and video footage of Jay-Z’s grandmother Hattie White. The mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown appear and are given a literal seat at the table.

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29 Lisa Respers France.
30 Billboard.
Shooting locations include a former slave plantation and a Civil War-era fort in Louisiana—the interior of which has haunting similarities to Carrie Mae Weems’s black and white photographs of Elmina Castle in Ghana, the center of the slave trade on the Gold Coast. But all of the visuals and iconography and history circles around the subject of Beyoncé’s own marriage and Jay-Z’s betrayal, finally made public.

*Lemonade*, in brief, is the visual narrative of Beyoncé in the wake of her husband’s infidelity, going through her own stages of grief and acceptance as given by the eleven titles: "Intuition," "Denial," "Anger," "Apathy," "Emptiness," "Accountability," "Reformation," "Forgiveness," "Resurrection," "Hope," and "Redemption." But this singular narrative allegorizes all Black women, “the most
disrespected person in America,” dealing with both the legacies of slavery and police violence but also the legacies of slavery in the form of patriarchy and the breakdown of the family. The appearance at the end of Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s child Blue Ivy shows a sort of redemption, not of the male or masculinity, but of the female and her ability to empower herself—which includes forgiveness. “Our love was stronger than your pride,” Beyoncé sings in the penultimate track, which is on the one hand a taking of the high road in forgiving her husband. But the line also speaks to something that endures and survives the dual violences of race and gender: love, comfort, and care.

Melina Matsoukas, a longtime collaborator and one of the first directors attached to Lemonade, describes Beyoncé’s project as being at the intersection of the personal and the historical: “She wanted to show the historical impact of slavery on black love, and what it has done to the black family…. And black men and women—how we’re almost socialized not to be together.” A personal story of infidelity becomes an exploration of the legacy of slavery’s impact on Black men and women’s relationships in the present. Cole Cuchna, on the podcast Dissect, calls Lemonade:

an ambitious synthesis of film, poetry and music that doesn’t so much address the rumors around Beyoncé’s marriage but obliterates them into irrelevance. Rather than tabloid fodder and clickbait, Beyoncé uses the visual album’s eleven chapters to reclaim control of her public narrative. The infidelity in her marriage becomes a gateway into an education in how America’s history of slavery and systemic injustice affect the structures of the Black family.31

Beyoncé’s private life, already made public by the structures of American celebrity, becomes, in Lemonade, an avenue into the large-scale historical and cultural questions

31 Cuchna.
of race and gender. The “public narrative” becomes more-than-public, it becomes a public good and *Lemonade* a contemporary epic, with Beyoncé as epic heroine.

While the film and album met with critical and popular acclaim, the praise was not quite universal. One notable dissenter was legendary Black feminist bell hooks, who took to her personal blog to call out Beyoncé’s complicity:

> As a grown black woman who believes in the manifesto "Girl, get your money straight" my first response to Beyoncé’s visual album, *Lemonade*, was WOW—this is the business of capitalist money making at its best.

> Viewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color.  

In addition to the self-commodification, there is a deeper problem in the sexual politics of *Lemonade*. To hooks, Beyoncé failed to account for how “black male cruelty and violence toward black women is a direct outcome of patriarchal exploitation and oppression.” To hooks, giving voice to “black female emotional pain” is “a vital and essential stage of freedom struggle, but it does not bring exploitation and domination to an end.” Ultimately, “men must do the work of inner and outer transformation,” and hooks writes that “We see no hint of this in *Lemonade.*” “To truly be free, [Black women] must choose beyond simply surviving adversity, we must dare to create lives of sustained optimal well-being and joy.”

> It is possible that hooks is entirely correct in her critique of Beyoncé and also that there is still something in *Lemonade* that matters. After all, *Lemonade* is not about

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32 bell hooks, “Moving Beyond Pain.”
33 Ibid.
recreating culture or resisting domination, or re-imagining a future free of either capitalism or patriarchy and what they have done and continue to do to Black women. *Lemonade* is about survival, specifically survival within and despite these oppressions. *Lemonade* doesn’t offer a solution to these problems or offer a path to redemption for the Black male beyond being the object of the trust and love of the Black female heroine. It is telling a story of struggle, one rooted in a loss that cannot be redressed or repaired. The narrative is not about justice or reparations, but survival. Daphne A. Brooks calls “the undergirding philosophy of *Lemonade*” one where:

> Black women activists—Mothers of the Movement and culture workers, musicians and dancers, athletes and actors, legendary chefs and Mardi Gras masqueraders—might reinhabit the ruins of our spurned history, might reclaim the earth and overrun the wilderness with our wildly sensual and sumptuous, celebratory selves and ultimately birth a new time and restorative, new collectivities. The journey to get to there, though, requires roaming fields, bursting through floods, levitating on slick, firewall roads, walking through flames, and plunging to new depths, to the bottom of oceans of despair, beneath shipwrecks that left bodies in the wake.\(^{34}\)

In embracing contradiction and contingency, victimization and empowerment, Knowles is offering a poetics of survival in the early 21st century that has its roots in the blues women of the early 20th century, of Mamie Smith or Big Momma Thornton, women who are part of an “insurgent public intellectualism” that has a continuity with “a broad historical context in which black women musicians have disrupted and reimagined the public sphere through sound.”\(^{35}\) Beyoncé’s relative privilege as Queen Bey, her position as a brand and a mogul, an image of “hypervisible black-celebrity wealth” shows the places where, in Iton’s words, “the inside is the outside”—“the excluded are never simply

\(^{34}\) Brooks, *Liner Notes*, 438.
\(^{35}\) Brooks, “Fourth Wave Feminism”
excluded,” he writes; “their marginalization reflects and determines the shape, texture, and boundaries of the dominant order.”

Culture and capitalism shaped Beyoncé, but Beyoncé also shapes culture. Brooks calls *Lemonade*’s reversal of rock’n’roll tropes and appropriations “cultural arm wrestling.” This is “the staging of an historical intervention with the ways in which rock and roll timelines notoriously obscure the labors of Black folks, makers of the form” —using the history of a form against itself in an attempt to recreate it anew.

Beyoncé and other “twenty-first century protest music,” in Brooks’s reading, resists the individual and instead looks for “the congregation,” “producing the vibrations of presence and feeling,” to find “the energy of the crowd, the remnants of collectivity in a universe of neoliberal individuation.” The fulcrum here is the idea of the individual or “individuation,” a term also used by Fred Moten, in his critique of Kant.

Individuation is the culmination of the Western Enlightenment project of secular humanism, whereby an objective yet subjective, personal yet universal yet interchangeable individual becomes the center and currency of a worldview, erasing difference, historicity, and relation. Beyoncé, as singular an individual as she is, is not interesting because of her self, but the way that self touches on a collectivity. Brooks describes how her “provocative modes of sonic and visual social critique think in terms of the collective and make an effort to move black women, Southern black working-class communities, and ‘queer of color’ folk (as Roderick A. Ferguson would say), from the

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36 Iton, 3.
38 Brooks, “Second Coming.”
margins of American culture to its center."⁹⁰ All of this centers not the
singer/dancer/money-maker, but the movement, in both senses of the word:

This new era of black protest music not only provides catharsis but also inspires a
renewed commitment to collective action. Listeners are emboldened by this
music to congregate and to respond to the energy of the congregation, just as the
musicians themselves absorb and recycle the energy of the crowd in their
performances. In their work, we hear, see, and feel the black radical
counterpublic's restless vibrations; the utopian, redemptive, insurgent power
from below; the sonic analogue of the "undercommons" of which Fred Moten and
Stefano Harney speak.⁴⁰

This “power from below” is what turns Beyoncé’s singular story from an anecdote into a
cultural event. But in order to hit these resonances, the work has to be big.

In a way, hooks’s damning with faint praise describes the necessary dimensions
of an epic work: “Beyoncé’s audience is the world,” she writes, with “a visual
extravaganza,” a “broad scope” that “resists invisibility, that refuses to be silent.” Cole
Cuchna of the podcast Dissect describes Lemonade as a Gesamtkunstwerk, a
contemporary version of the Wagnerian total-work, synthesizing every form of art
together into a single driving force. Wagner would unite the arts the umbrella of theater;
Beyoncé locates this in performance.⁴¹ Lemonade birthed the “Formation Tour,” but
arguably its culmination was in 2018, when Bey headlined Coachella, rebranding it #Beychella in what was not only called “the Blackest event” to ever grace the California
festival, but perhaps the Blackest event in modern history.⁴² #Beychella was devised as a
homecoming event at an Historically Black College, with over a hundred band musicians

³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid.
⁴¹ Evie Shockley writes the wonderful phrase, “Performances of Blackness in the Butlerian sense and performances of Blackness in the Beyoncéan sense,” as if these two actions together would sum up everything.
⁴² Paula Rogo, Essence Magazine.
and dancers. The performance of Blackness is not located in Beyoncé’s person but extended to include the hundreds of Black artists on the massive stage. Genres and styles blended together, describing what Doreen St. Felix called a “global Black vernacular,” “rooted in feeling, specificity, and a keen sense of musical history—a mélange of New Orleans and its horns, Houston and its chopped and screwed beats, Brooklyn and its rap velocity, Kingston and its dancehall, and Nigeria and the legacy of its dissenter, Fela Kuti.”

![Beyoncé's stage at Coachella](image)

*Figure 4. Beyoncé, Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé, Netflix.*

Beyoncé’s very presence on the stage of #Beychella was a declaration of war, as St. Felix writes in The New Yorker:

> Branding this performance #Beychella is not merely social-media savvy; it’s a recognition that excelling at her art requires overpowering the arenas that would have the power to diminish her. “Thank you for allowing me to be the first black woman to headline Coachella,” she said, atop the pyramid, in the middle of her set. She added, with a smile, “Ain’t that a bitch?”

43 Doreen St. Felix, “Beyoncé’s Triumphant Homecoming at Coachella,” *The New Yorker.*

44 Ibid.
“Ain’t that a bitch,” indeed. The fact that no Black women had headlined the festival makes her mere presence history-making. But that isn’t enough; Bey needs to bring not only hundreds of performers with her, but needs to entirely transform the space, from the ground to the stars above, into a Black space. This is, again, why the performance has to be big, expansive, expensive, multimedia, multi-voiced, overproduced. Part of its action in the world is to take up space as a cultural strategy. To change space itself is to recast the context of its publics. Beyoncé was no longer a headliner at Coachella; the people at Coachella (and streaming at home) were now attendees at a Beyoncé show.

Similarly, Lemonade was an album and a video essay, each purchasable separately on Tidal. Beychella was a commodity for the ticketholders of Coachella, the (paying) streaming public at home, but it was also a Netflix documentary, Homecoming. The financial presence of Beyoncé saturates every market without, somehow, over-saturating it. This is part of why some dismiss the performer and her public persona as merely a money-making enterprise. It is true, and undeniable: Beyoncé makes money, and in a strictly Marxist sense is not contributing materially to the liberation of her people. But thinking about the market as being more than simply cash money, thinking of it as including culture, we can start to see Beyoncé’s Beyoncé as working (successfully or not) to challenge entrenched systems of power, to “overpower the arenas that would have the power to diminish” Blackness. Lemonade’s Tidal release was a fuck-you to Spotify, Apple Music, and Google music. Her #Beychella rebranding was a fuck-you to Coachella.

This big-ness, the sorry-not-sorry stance, the fuck-you to all capitalist enterprises not directly making her money, is a strategy of turning hypervisibility into power. The
beheld can also behold. The commodity, as Moten reminds us, speaks. It recalls June Jordan’s quip about finding herself in the “hallowed halls” of Yale university: “There I encountered every traditional orthodoxy imaginable so that, as a kind of flamboyant affirmation, rain or shine, I made myself wear very high heels. Let the hallowed halls echo to the fact of a woman, a Black woman, passing through!” When Jordan found herself in a space designed in its very architecture to diminish her, she decided to turn that architecture into amplification, to make noise and disruption the unmistakable, unsilenceable signature of her presence in the world.

**Epic Black and Black Epics**

I am interested in *Lemonade* as it represents a strategy in contemporary Black poetics, where Black performers, writers, and musicians transform the personal into the historical, using the establishments of culture against that culture, and take up space to declare that Black lives, and Black futures, matter. “Epic Black” is a term from Farah Jasmine Griffin, who taught a class of the same name at Columbia. Griffin’s archive includes many “long form works by authors of African descent,” including long poems, visual art, music, dance, film, and novels. *Lemonade* appears towards the end of the semester, after Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (which hooks compared *Lemonade* to, unfavorably) and before Yaa Gyasi’s 2016 novel *Homegoing*, a multigenerational West African family drama.

This is less a genre than an action: a verb. Amiri Baraka’s gives us the construction “from verb to noun” in his essay, “Swing: from Verb to Noun.” There,

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45 June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die*. 
Baraka gives the history of swing music as first being “swinging,” a verb in the
dancehalls and clubs of Black culture, and through swinging artists like Duke Ellington.
Only later did it become “swing,” a noun, after it was appropriated by White artists like
Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw. Nathaniel Mackey in his seminal essay “Other: From
Noun to Verb,” writes that this nouning “means the erasure of black inventiveness by
white appropriation.”:

> “From verb to noun” means, on the aesthetic level, a less dynamic, less
> improvisatory, less blues-inflected music, and, on the political level, a
> containment of black mobility, a containment of the economic and social
> advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation. The domain of action and
> the ability to act suggested by verb is closed off by the hypostasis, paralysis, and
> arrest suggested by noun.46

Whiteness nouns, Blackness verbs. Which is to say that Whiteness makes things of
things (a process of individuation) that did and were.

I argue that the Western modern epic is a nouning: a taking of the actions of
history (colonize, enslave, rape, murder) and nominalizing them (colonization, slavery,
“la raza,” “public safety”) free of agent, to be witnessed and passed by. And so Griffin’s
“Epic Black,” among other things, should remind us that “Epic,” in the presence of Black
artists, is a verb. Blackness epics. These works create importance. They reveal agency,
they resist individuation. The dominant narratives of Whiteness are revealed, taken,
hijacked, and re-verbed (reverb: the sound that repetition makes). I am not interested so
much in works that have strict classical form or formal allusions to the long epic
tradition in the West, but rather in works that take on the genre of epic as something to
change and reinvent.

46 Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb,” 52.
Ralph Ellison describes Liberty Paint’s “optic white” as a color that will override all colors. The narrator’s boss says, “Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through.”47 It’s a white, “The Right White,” that acts as a covering—something that will subsume all underneath into its appearance (and actuality) of pure Whiteness. This is a tongue-in-cheek inversion of the “one drop” rule, where Black blood was considered so powerful that any Black ancestry, no matter how far back, was enough to override Whiteness. “Epic Black,” in this construction, is a tongue-in-cheek corollary to “optic white.” Epic Black is a Black that can Blackify anything from the inside out—including the epic itself.

The fundamental question for Black arts in the English language, as articulated by Evie Shockley, is:

How can black subjectivity—not the object seen as black, but what black-identified people see through the lens of their blackness—be expressed in a language developed over the past few centuries precisely to facilitate, legitimate, justify, and downplay the commodification and devaluing of the bodies who might speak “in the first person” about this perspective?48

Her answer lies in the multiplicity of valences—looking and looking at—in expression:

Black artists working in various literary, visual, and multimedia genres have experimented with ways they can productively activate both looking and reading in tandem; they play these modes of engagement off of one another and draw energy from their fusion, which enables artists to investigate, ignore, momentarily elude, or attempt to explode the constraints that white supremacy places upon the production and reception of their works.49

This is especially true of poetry, given its dual nature of semantic/visual/spatial, and its generic indeterminacy:

47 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 217.
48 Evie Shockley, “On Seeing and Reading the ‘Nothing.’”
49 Ibid.
Given poetry’s unique position as an art made with words that is also fundamentally and self-consciously concerned with imagery (including appeals to our sense of sight) and importantly, in the era of print culture, spatiality (the arrangement of the words on the page)... Poetry thus recommends itself formally for the aesthetic project of rendering black subjectivity as image-text—and, perhaps, epistemologically as well, to the extent that poetry is almost as impossible to pin down generically as blackness is conceptually or experientially.\(^{50}\)

Poetry’s “consent not to be a single being” (to use Moten’s use of a line from Édouard Glissant) is its avenue into a representation of Blackness, which is generically, conceptually, and experientially multiple. Poetry in particular is a mode of imagery and spatiality, but also reading—and Shockley reminds us that Black texts are not merely texts but representations of reading other texts. This recalls Henry Louis Gates’s trope of “the Talking Book” in *The Signifying Monkey*, a fusion of oral and literate culture that is at the heart of Black mythology.\(^{51}\) Epic, then, is useful to 21st century Black poets firstly because of its multiplicity, as a genre-of-genres. Epics are, in the Western poetic tradition, supposed to contain and subsume all other art forms, from pastoral to elegy to drama—which is a way to take up space generically as well as culturally, incorporating other media and histories into one artistic focal point. But they more than contain these things, they subsume them, becoming a locus for not only the study but the dissemination of history, philosophy, cultural criticism, lyric, etc.

What Blackness brings to the genre of Epic, or what epic brings to the expression of Blackness, is an ability to contain multiple contradictory things at once, the visual and the semantic, that which oppresses and that which liberates, that which is “native” and that which is “foreign,” that which is “in” and that which is “out.” Anthony Reed calls

\(^{50}\) Ibid.  
\(^{51}\) Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*. 
this “the production of ‘outfullness’ as self-liberation,” which is “to combine aesthetic techniques, genres, and cultural materials in new ways.” These strategies are often expressed as “intensity” or “difficulty,” which are then read as “rage” or “resistance,” but Reed cautions us to instead see these as instead experimental forays into newness, which is improvisatory, radical, and, in jazz parlance, “out.” He writes: “The ‘blue’ notes, smears, slurs, glissandi, and so on all mark instances of playing ‘outside’ the Western tradition, as do the polyrhythms.”52 This is a tradition of “intergeneric borrowing, mixing, and transformation of techniques” that imagine “new modes of politics that help us reclaim past techniques and the dreams they carry as a future.”53

Moten calls “the ability for Blackness to exist within and along all the tones of the scale, not just the white keys, “chromatic saturation.” In color theory, Blackness is both no color and all colors. It consents to be multiple. The encounter with the black keys on the piano is called, if we are playing in C major, “accidentals,” as if it were a type of happy accident, dissonance created along the way from harmony to harmony. But this dissonance has always existed; it was not created by the formal ratios of musical harmony. Rather, it was excluded from that harmony as a course. "Accidentally" stumbling upon what was always there, the dissonant F# next to the perfect fifth of G, is an encounter with that which must necessarily be excised from harmony. That F# is the "blue note" of the blues scale in C, which is not some found evidence of Blackness, but rather the presencing: a bodily, affective, immediate presencing of the “not one or

52 Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time*, 208.
53 Ibid., 209.
many” which always has been, but is made to not be within the harmonic frame. It is a presencing of the multititudinousness— which is chromatic saturation.

In his essay “Entanglement and Virtuosity,” Moten talks about the difference between, on one hand, the “maternal” act of attention and “exhausted, exhaustive care” that leads to the state of relation he calls “entanglement,” a “virtuous, communal maternal attention” which he equates with Alexandra Vazquez’s “listening in detail,” and on the other hand the divisive, “patriarchal” and “individuated” actions of “virtuosity”— though the two cannot be separated. In talking about Rakim’s jazz-like Black performance on “I Know You Got Soul,” Moten writes:

What the soloist says when he appears to have come to announce himself is that it’s not about me, it’s about us, the social field from which I and you emerge, and to which they recede, like vapor, as the illusory relation that stands for relationality’s illusory nature, as such.... The soloist, in this regard, does not announce himself but rather our collective evacuation of the field in which the self is incessantly advertised and, therefore, incessantly degraded.54

Thus “the soloist’s departure from the metaphysics of individuation” is part of Moten’s stated “aesthetic sociality of blackness,” which is “against the grain of the very idea of one and many.”55

Ironically, this was all written for Moten to call attention to what he describes as the failures of Kamasi Washington’s 2015 three-part, three-hour jazz album The Epic, described by gushing critics as “virtuosic,” “holistic in breadth,” and “deep in vision.”56 Washington was well-known outside of jazz for his work with hip hop artists like Snoop Dogg and Kendrick Lamar, but The Epic is, according to Pitchfork reviewer Seth Colter Walls, devoid of any hip hop itself. Instead it is a “generation intervention—an

54 Fred Moten, Black and Blur, 274.
55 Ibid., 275, 274.
educational tool that widens the definition of styles that fall under ‘jazz classicism,’” “enamoured of jazz’s past” and “an extravagant love letter to (among other things): soul jazz, John Coltrane (various periods, and 1970s fusion leaders like Miles Davis and Weather Report.” But that fascination with the past is precisely what Moten finds troubling in the album. He identifies a “separateness” between what Washington described in his hip hop tutelage and “his own music,” “what now shows up as musics.” Moten sees in Washington a man surrounded by men of the past—a two-page quote about Washington’s father Rickey symbolically baptizing the young Kamasi in the wisdom of the male “elders” of the Los Angelis jazz scene. So Moten finds in The Epic too much “virtuosity”:

In seeking to represent what can’t be represented, The Epic is an exercise in Bildung where such self-picturing, such attendance upon the face and, even, upon the name, is inattention to detail. This commitment to personality... remains the crisis of the negro intellectual.58

“Personality,” which is a fascination with the “face,” or with individuation, is tied up with a linear, historical view of time shown be an over-reverence for the past—and here Moten equates certain men’s claim to be the “founders” of the Movement for Black Lives (erasing the queer Black women who actually founded the movement) with the over-reverence of the past in the institution of jazz:

The insistence on being called the founders of a movement, a claim that undermines the supposed movement’s claim on the very term movement... is an insistence upon personality... that doubles down on the patriarchy it is supposed to combat, a patriarchy that its putative soundtrack, The Epic, ironically, but also emphatically, claims.”59

57 Seth Colter Walls, “Kasami Washington: The Epic.”
58 Moten, Black and Blur, 278.
59 Ibid.
The separation between the present of hip hop and the past of jazz, and the idea that one could re-create, even in homage, the past in an album, puts *The Epic* in the tradition of what Franco Moretti calls “the modern epic,” which treats the past as a space of innocence in order to not deal with the culpabilities of the present, which I will return to in the next section. But when Moten writes “there’s nothing epic about this virtualization of virtuosity,” he leaves open hope for such a thing as Epic Black—one that is more matriarchal, one that finds “an entanglement in matrical detail that so thoroughly ruptures the logic of individuation/relation/the same,” one that embodies “haptic, differential nothingness.”

Racial Innocence

Central to Griffin’s class is Moretti’s 1996 work *The Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*. Griffin’s syllabus quotes from the book’s description: “For Moretti the significance of the modern epic reaches well beyond the aesthetic sphere: it is the form that represents the European domination of the planet, and establishes a solid consent around it.”

Moretti’s interest is in the modern epic as a tool of Western imperialism, a tradition of works that are hard to categorize except as, “very long, and very boring,” propped up by the academy and academic reading practices: “an almost super-canonical form, yet one that is virtually unread.”

Even the “modern epic” as a phrase reveals “a kind of antagonism between the noun and the

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60 Ibid., 279.
61 Franco Moretti, *The Modern Epic*, back cover.
62 Ibid., 4.
adjective: a discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world."  

To Moretti, the “modern epic,” beginning with Goethe’s *Faust*, is part of a “rhetoric of innocence.” “They are metaphors of innocence,” he writes, “which present the power of the West as something fundamentally innocuous.” The violence of lived history becomes the fantasy of history retold, and the modern epic subject wanders through this fantasy without obligation or culpability, an “innocent” spectator whose name could be Faust or Ishmael or Stephen Daedalus or, in a post-colonial reversal, Buendía. These texts provide an “ideological function”: the modern epic needs to be read and studied in the West because it as a genre purges Western culture of culpability.

The “construction of white innocence,” as Evie Shockley puts it, has a long and storied history in the West. But why is the epic its form? Moretti reminds us that the epic was necessary for modernity precisely because it is “inherited.” The indebtedness to the past represented by the form was a challenge to history:

It was the form through which classical antiquity, Christianity and the feudal world had represented the basis of civilizations, their overall meaning, their destiny. In theory, modern literature could certainly have dispensed with that precedent, and contented itself with the far narrower spacetime of the novel. But that would have been to admit its own inferiority with respect to the greatness of the past.  

Competition with the past, and the appropriation of historical cultures to prove the superiority of the contemporary, is the modern epic’s way of being, but also its failure. As Moretti writes, “the epic is not just inherited from the past, but also dominated by

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63 Ibid., 5.  
64 Ibid., 53.  
65 Ibid., 36.
it.” And so the epic runs counter to the “ideology of progress” represented by the novel. This hints at Ernst Bloch’s concept of “non-contemporaneity” or “non-simultaneity,” the fact that in Modernity, “Not all people exist in the same Now.” “Times older than the present continue to effect older strata,” times that “contradict the Now in a very peculiar way, awry, from the rear”—which speaks to how an unevenness of development under capitalism makes it so “Now” may change based on where you are, and this fact is technological as well as cultural. “Many individuals,” Moretti writes, “albeit living in the same period, from the cultural or political viewpoint, belong to many different epochs,” and this is both politically powerful and politically dangerous.

In the “ideology of progress,” non-contemporaneity is erased:

The ideology of progress, as we have seen, privileges non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous: the “Alongside” becomes a “Before-and-After,” and geography is rewritten as history. Well, for the modern epic the opposite is true: contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous moves into the foreground: the “Before-and-After” is transformed into an “Alongside” — and history thus becomes a gigantic metaphor for geography.

This is an important point and worth unpacking. In the ideology of progress represented in the novel, the fact that different people living in the same calendar year may live in wildly different political or cultural “times” is erased, or, rather, the axis of geography (and culture) that marks these differences—rural/urban, e.g.—is transformed safely into a purely historical one. “Alongside” becomes a “Before-and-after.” The past is the past, and the people living there were and thought different: a sentiment which is true; however, privileging only this sentiment hides or shades the fact that people living in the

66 Ibid., 39. Emphasis original.
67 Bloch, 22.
68 Moretti, 52.
69 Ibid., 52. Emphasis original.
present also are and think different. But the dominance of the past on the modern epic reverses this privileging. The axis of time that separates before-and-after is transformed into an axis of geography. Before-and-after becomes alongside. History and epochs are treated as not inaccessible or lost but only as far away as an epic voyage.

On the one hand this transformation of history into geography calls attention to the non-contemporaneity that is ignored or refused by the novel of progress. But on the other hand, this introduces new problems of power. Moretti expands on this at length in his reading of Faust Part II, with its fantastical zipping around between historical, mythical, and legendary times and peoples:

In this metaphorical field, which seems to unite more or less the whole of European culture, the shifting back and forth of Faust and Mephistopheles loses its senselessness: if we replace the “ancient” by the “distant,” the zigzag then turns into a series of geographical expeditions, where arrival in far-off epochs recounts (and masks) landing on distant shores. And as for Goethe’s games with the past, or those legendary personages who end up “working” for Faust—they too are metaphors: for playing with the world, and for a concrete power over real persons in the present. And since every metaphor always involves an emotive aspect, a value judgment, let us add: once again, they are metaphors of innocence, which present the power of the West as something fundamentally innocuous.\(^{70}\)

In other words, Faust’s power over the past, which is a figure for Goethe’s power over the past, analogizes the colonization and exploitation of Goethe’s own time. Faust mines and conscripts history as Europe did to much of the globe. The fact that Faust’s reasons were aesthetic rather than commercial analogizes colonization and enslavement as similarly aesthetic, and innocuous, acts.

Non-White authors writing in modernity have each had to contend with the rhetorics of innocence and the ideology of progress in their own ways, but Moretti’s

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 53.
delineation of history/geography opens a window for subversive writers in the Black tradition to explore and resist these systems of power. After all, if history is geography, then returning to the past is as simple as a sea voyage. But as Hartman and others have reminded us, Black people in the diaspora have no history to return to. Everything before those gates of no return (the ones that Hartman visits at Elmina Castle in Ghana) is lost. The condition of the ex-slave and her descendants is to lose your mother. The past is a foreign country and your visa has been revoked.

So how and why would Black artists use the modern epic, with its long and problematic history in the West? Well, for one, because the modern epic is the device of racial innocence, the Black epic is a prime location for a critique of racial innocence. The epic’s historical geography allows voyages of witness and reclamation. Beyoncé can return to Katrina, to the Superdome, to the plantation, to the Civil War fortress. She can walk through the dining halls of the re-imagined past. She can put Black women’s portraits on the walls. She can invite Serena Williams and Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden, and they can occupy the manor house, draped in Black excellence.

This is not to rewrite or recast history, but rather to identify it, or to identify the possibility of Blackness in it that is not the slave or the subjected. Not challenging these narratives would be to submit to the depictions of the White imaginary, would be “to admit its own inferiority with respect to the greatness of the past.” And so the inherited form of the epic is a way to reckon not only with history but with the cultural machinery that produces and excuses history.

Like Édouard Glissant’s voyage on the Queen Mary II that gave us the phrase “consent to not be a single being.”
Whose Epic?

Hegel defines epic in *Aesthetics* as such:

the epic, having *what is* as its topic, acquires as its object the occurrence of an action which in the whole breadth of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch. Consequently the content and form of epic proper is the entire world-outlook and objective manifestation of a national spirit presented in its self-objectifying shape as an actual event.\(^72\)

Hegel describes it as a totalizing work that captures an “objective manifestation of a national spirit” self-objectifying “as an actual event,” “connected with the total world of a nation and epoch.” He goes on:

This whole comprises both the religious consciousness, springing from all the depths of the human spirit, and also concrete existence, political and domestic life right down to the details of external existence, human needs and means for their satisfaction; and epic animates this whole by developing it in close contact with individuals, because what is universal and substantive enters poetry only as the living presence of the spirit.\(^73\)

This “religious consciousness” as well as “political and domestic life” emerges “animated” only as connected to “individuals” or “the living presence of the spirit.” In other words, the epic contains the totality of nation and epoch, from the spiritual to the quotidian, in relation to the action of heroic individuals. These become “the Saga, the book, the Bible of a people” that form “memorials” that are “nothing less than the proper foundations of a national consciousness.”\(^74\) In other words, the epic is interested in heroes not as individuals, in the sense of a novel, but as a “living presence of spirit” in which to animate a total world-outlook and cultural consciousness.

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\(^72\) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1044.
\(^73\) Ibid.
\(^74\) Ibid., 1045.
The epic is also, classically, the story of a struggle, a struggle which defines a culture, a “tale of the tribe,” in Ezra Pound’s sense. The proto-fascistness of “tale of the tribe” should not be discounted, but we should also take seriously the totalizing force of the epic as originary to a culture’s self-conception, even or especially as a back-formation. The classical epics, of course, did not emerge simultaneously with their respective traditions; they and their cultures developed alongside each other. But this development is always framed in opposition to something prior and external: Aeneas and the Italians, Achilles and Odysseus and the Trojans, Gilgamesh and the wilderness of Enkidu. Froma Zeitlin has written that the Theban plays of Athens posited Thebes as an “anti-polis,” an oppositional force for self-critique. In Oedipus, Athens could interrogate its ideas of the polis through crisis, ultimately absolving itself of the dangers, of parricide, incest, and non-burial, which could only exist outside of its borders. Similarly, in Moretti’s “modern epic,” civilization itself is presented as a its own anti-polis. Civilization’s other, its privileged Athens, can only be individuality itself, the separate and subjective point of view from which civilization can be critiqued from “outside.” But this of course is a fiction. There is no outside to modern culture, and the individuality that is extolled by the modern epic is itself a product of the totalizing effects of Western individuation.

Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson take up these claims in their book Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora. African and diasporic re-tellings of the Oedipal myth, to them, “resist” the imposition of this Athens/Thebes dialectic or “oedipal strife overcome,” which they call “one of the chief

75 Froma Zeitlin, Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama.

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models of cultural transmission within colonial culture.”76 “[T]hese adaptations within the African diaspora,” they write, “maintain that European culture, in its colonial transmission of itself, behaves much more in accordance with the violent transmission that it claims, precisely, to have superseded.” The cultural authority of the imposed colonial epic is countered by a counter-epic, by “aggressively turning this authority against its culture.” This turning does not come without a price, however: “Even as they apply this classical authority to colonial culture and its dissemination, as a critique, the plays accept this authority and enable it to be legitimated by the very infringements that it highlights within this culture.”77 In other words, the aggressive turning of the cultural importance of the Western epic against itself nonetheless reifies the status of the epic as important. “The historical bonds between colonizers and colonized are thus ratified by the cultural efforts of the colonized, even in these audacious acts of resistance.”78

Emily Greenwood, however, reads “the Black Aegean” as “a way of talking about the ancient Mediterranean in a context in which it is not absorbed into a European or North American tradition.” To her, “The black Aegean opens up a zone of translatability within which the particularity of Greek and Roman texts emerges through adaptation and reception, as something more than the Western appropriations through and by which they have been mediated.”79 While Northern European colonization may use Levantine or Mediterranean epic to further its goals, and the colonized may re-use those epics against the colonizers, it must be understood that neither of these uses of epic are pure or “original.” Each is mediated.

76 Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson, Crossroads in the Black Aegean, 3.
77 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid.
79 Emily Greenwood, “Middle Passages,” 31.
Tyla Zax, interviewing translator Shadi Bartsch on her recent translation of Vergil’s Aeneid, reminds us that these contexts were often more fraught than generally assumed:

Before Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, Bartsch said, Aeneas was considered a traitor who helped the Greeks take Troy. In recasting him as a hero, Virgil changed our understanding of Rome’s history. What readers have historically missed, according to Bartsch... is that Virgil’s depiction was self-consciously political, designed to frame Rome’s expanding empire as just, virtuous and divinely mandated.80

The *Aeneid*, often used as a mediating text of empire and colonization, taught in schools all over the world, is itself a mediation. It is an instance of Virgil using the epic tradition, in this case of Homer and the Greeks, to new ends, using the cultural power and visibility of the epic in order to assert the importance of the culture-poor (as Rome often thought of itself) but power-rich Roman empire. Bartsch goes on:

[Virgil]’s writing an epic that points to itself and says, ‘Hey look, I’m in the process of creating a national myth,’” she said. Looked at closely, the *Aeneid* is really a story “about how you rewrite a character into history, turning him from someone who was criticized into someone who is praised.”81

The *Aeneid* is no more an originary and ex-nihilo “tale of the tribe” than Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* or M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, both of which Greenwood talks about as mediated texts of the “middle passage” between the Black Aegean and the diaspora. “Rather than the center, or originary source,” she writes of these modern middle passages, “these adapted classical texts are always at sea, constantly trafficked on the currents of history.”82 De-centering the epic as a singular tradition does much to dissect the multiplicities and crossroads of their origins and receptions. As Bartsch says:

81 Ibid.
82 Greenwood, 29.
The history of the *Aeneid*, ... shows how great the range of interpretations can be: Early Christian medievalists “chose to read the poem allegorically as a bildungsroman of the good Christian everyman”; Mussolini upheld it “as supportive of the resurgence of the Roman Empire”; and certain 19th-century Americans saw it as a “poem about a group of refugees who head westward to found a new nation, defeat the natives in war, take over that land and call it God’s will.”

Those interpretations aren’t necessarily mistaken, Bartsch said; they’re an understandable result of “people thinking their reading supports their set of enduring values.”

The question of “whose epic tradition is it?” must be answered with a resounding: “anyone’s.”

But, as Goff and Simpson remind us, wielding the power of the epic is dangerous precisely because it stands as a synecdoche of the cultural/historical power of tradition. As an object of study, the epic has been reified into a singular object with singular connotations—masculinity, tradition, competition, war, empire. But these have less to do with the epics themselves than the legacy of their reception. For example, note how often the epic (and here including the “epic cycle”) is a narrative of failure: the Achaeans ten-year failure to sack Troy, Odysseus’s seven-year failure to return home (after the off-screen success of the Trojan horse), Aeneas’s failure at Troy, his ambiguous failure with Queen Dido (a moment of constant re- and mis-interpretation), Gilgamesh’s failure to achieve immortality, Oedipus and Orestes’s failure to reconcile both duty and the law. These are epic heroes who are not only singularly powerless to change things, but who are each set against a greater and more established and near-unbestable power—Troy, the Italics, Olympus, the Erinyes. In other words, in each of these Western (or, to be

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83 Zax.
84 Zax writes on how this moment has been misinterpreted.
more specific, Aegean, Adriatic, and Akkadian) epics we see not triumph but resistance, and this will become important for the Black poetic tradition. This is all to say that the dangers of reifying the epic tradition are offset by the knowledge that the epic tradition is not a singular object, but a constantly re- and de-formed continuity.

Each of the works I am discussing in this study, from Beyoncé to Robin Coste Lewis, engage with these epic tropes in similar ways, describing the contours of an epic Blackness and a Black epicness. Claudia Rankine has made a book-length poem that eschews the conventions of the lyric, with its singular, universal “lyric ‘I,’” instead situating an anonymous Black female “you” as its protagonist. Tyehimba Jess has written an epic performance with a cast of hundreds, a cultural history of Black entertainers that is also a poetic history of form and technique. Robin Coste Lewis has written a literal and figurative Voyage, wherein the representation of the Black female figure in Western art embarks on an odyssey to reclaim subjectivity. These epics work by having breadth, scope, duration, critical acclaim, and cultural visibility. They are more than poems, they are cultural objects, with dimensions both real and imaginary.

There are certain descriptive tropes in the epic tradition that every epic. For example, Hugh Holman and William Harmon’s A Handbook to Literature describes epic as such:

Most epics share certain characteristics: (l) The hero is of imposing stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance; (2) the setting is vast, covering great nations, the world, or the universe; (3) the action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage; (4) supernatural forces—gods, angels, and demons—interest themselves in the action; (5) a style of sustained elevation is used; and (6) the poet retains a measure of objectivity. To these general characteristics (some of which are omitted from particular epics) should be added a list of common devices employed by most epic poets: The poet opens by stating the theme, invoking a MUSE, and beginning the narrative IN MEDIAS RES—in the middle of things—giving the necessary exposition later; the poet includes catalogs of warriors,
ships, armies; there are extended formal speeches by the main characters; and the poet makes frequent use of the EPIC SIMILE.85 Simplifying and updating these for the modern era (substituting cultural-historical importance for the supernatural/muse, for example, and the transnational or transhistorical for “covering great nations”) would leave us with something like these: A central character who is more (or less) than individual, performing actions of cultural significance, that are of interest to a larger cultural or historical context in a transnational, trans-historical, or trans-dimensional setting. It occurs in medias res because the socio-historical context is not something that can be introduced. “Objectivity” and “sustained elevation” are not necessary, but rather a degree of self-regard: the epic declares its own importance.

Each of the works I discuss has these elements, plus some others that might not seem necessary to the modern audience. They contain their own forms of the epic catalog, which in the 21st century is a way to overwhelm the reader with importance. In Lemonade it is the sheer number of cameos by Black women. In Claudia Rankine’s Citizen it is the ever-growing list of the names of unarmed Black people killed by police, which grows with every printing. In Tyehimba Jess’s Olio it is the names of “burned or bombed black churches” that form the header and footer for each poem in the double crown of sonnets that is the backbone of the work. Robin Coste Lewis’s Voyage of the Sable Venus is made up entirely of catalogs, built out of the catalogue entries of museums and archives. Each section is even titled “catalog.” But it also contains a prefatory catalog—the poem “The Ship’s Inventory,” which lays out the contours and contexts of her epic.

85 Harmon, A Handbook to Literature, 189.
These epics also contain a “voyage home” or “nostos,” which is only allegorical to a certain degree. For example, *Lemonade* is a journey home back to the home of her marriage, now changed by Jay’s betrayal and Beyoncé’s (not Jay’s) redemption. *Olio* has the voyage of the fictional archivist and amateur musicologist Julius Trotter in his search for answers about Scott Joplin. Trotter ultimately ends up as a musician himself, in a coming-home to the ground of Black expression and improvisation. Lewis’s *Voyage* ends with her own hometown and a version of herself found there, “Venus of Compton.” And *Citizen* is a coming-home to the idea of citizenship itself.

An epic device not listed in Harmon but typically ascribed to the epic is the “katabasis” or the “descent into the underworld,” and this also recurs in the modern Black epic, most obviously as the frame for Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Brooks locates it in *Lemonade* as the parking lot, which is indicated as (but is not actually) the parking lot underneath the Superdome, where thousands of New Orleanians were sheltered in “chaotic” conditions following the failures of Katrina.\(^{86}\) She writes “This is Yoncé the warrior archivist using an enclosed parking lot early in her epic as her omphalos, her laboratory to dissect, confront, and lay waste to patriarchal abuses in the home as well as pop music culture writ large.”\(^{87}\) Beyoncé’s turn from denial to anger occurs here, as well as the intersection of private and historical:

Here in a desolate parking lot, three tracks into her visual album, she rises from the back of an inoperable ride draped in fur armor and rocking a crown of cornrows, hot with fury about micro and macro crimes—thefts, betrayals, desertions, and violations.... From this place that is both symbolic and material, from this place that is the Ellisonian underground rewritten as Black feminist maelstrom, as “undercommons appositionality,” as Nina Simone-style revolution

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 442.
\(^{87}\) Ibid.
(where “the only way we can stand in fact / Is when you get your foot off our back”), she battles catastrophe on two fronts.\textsuperscript{88}

Brooks calls this out as specifically an epic “descent,” writing that “Beyoncé’s epic hinges on passing through this crucible, re-inhabiting this space and transforming it” into something worthy of her and her pain, as well as worthy of the Black woman and the Black woman’s pain.\textsuperscript{89}

Each of the works I am discussing has this katabasis, this descent into death which is also the womb, which is also, as Hartman and others remind us, the slave hold and the abyss of history.\textsuperscript{90}

**Noirporia**

The epic strategies of Blackness in the 21st century must be anti-individualist and anti-patriarchal if they have any hope of countering the rhetoric of innocence of the Western imaginary, otherwise they risk being subsumed into a “diversity” project which casts Black artists as tools of dominant cultural aims. But culture in the Western world has been entangled with individuation. This applies doubly for poetry. I will talk about this more in my chapter on Claudia Rankine, but lyric and what Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins call “lyricization” are part of this individuation—a privileging of a stable, universal, and individual voice of subjectivity, which is separate from its context and its historicity. This leads to the reification in poetry of the idea that the “universal” is White and male, and the proper subjects of the poem are the “universal” concerts of innocent

\textsuperscript{88} Brooks, *Liner Notes*, 441.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 444.
\textsuperscript{90} Hartman, “The Belly of the World”; Sharpe, *In the Wake*. 
White maleness. “Lyric” poetry is safe and, while philosophical, socially conservative in the sense of accepting and perpetuating the social conditions of its making. As Langston Hughes wrote, “Poets who write mostly about love, roses and moonlight, sunsets and snow, must lead a very quiet life. Seldom, I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties.” These “difficulties” manifest in the same difficulties that face all minoritarian subjects who step out of line: state violence: “I have never known the police of any country to show an interest in lyric poetry as such. But when poems stop talking about the moon and begin to mention poverty, trade unions, color lines, and colonies, somebody tells the police.”

Alternatives to the lyric, such as the anti-lyric of conceptual and language poetry, only reify the centrality of the individual lyric subject. In the poetic field, Black artists have been confined by a lyric genre that was never meant for them and which would never allow them to speak in their own voice, which is why, I argue, so many Black poets have had to be formal innovators. I am interested in certain Black poets writing in the time of Black Lives Matter, whose innovation is to take what is useful in the “lyric,” as a mode of present-tense address that affectively conveys the inner life of a subject, and put it in a form that is decidedly un-lyrical (even if, as in Rankine’s Citizen, the form is called “An American Lyric.”) The “lyric epic” is not a new concept. James E. Miller Jr. associates the term with Walt Whitman, who shows how the seemingly irreconcilable genres of lyric and epic fit within one another:

A lyric is traditionally defined as a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of the poet or speaker. On the surface, the lyric appears poles apart from the epic, embodying as it does the poet's own "physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality." But Whitman in effect decided to cast

91 Langston Hughes, “My Adventures as a Social Poet,” 205.
himself in the role of his own epic hero, using his lyric gift not only to express himself but also to "tally" the "momentous spirit and facts" of his "immediate days, and of current America." His eyes would be turned both inward and outward, and his voice would be both personal and public.92

To Miller, Whitman’s “inspiration is lyric, his ambition epic, the one to be fitted within the structure of the other.” This “both personal and public” voice would be the voice of democracy itself, and its hero would be less the “I” of Whitman than the “you” of the reader. While Whitman fits easily within the “rhetoric of innocence,” this move of decentering the lyric subject onto the epic narrator and the epic narrator onto the lyric subject results in an impersonal strategy that is collective, being however wholly within the “Personality” of Whitman himself.

In the 21st century, Claudia Rankine will take this decentering “you” and take it even further—implicating in the “you” not only the epic hero, but the epic other. Rankine’s “you” is an address that, unlike in Whitman, is not “universal”—it is specific, it is Black, it is female, historicized, situational. Rankine exposes how even the seemingly innocuous universals of democracy in Whitman are a tool of White masculine dominance. These pernicious notions are then foisted onto a reader, who then carries them into the future. Rankine reverses this, making her lyric-epic not a universal “you” but an exclusive “you,” a non-lyric “you” that is historical and political while also being personal and affective. This works against, in Anthony Reed’s words, the “ideology of the stable voice, typified by a certain critical hermeneutics of ‘the’ lyric.” This “lyric” hermeneutic is “one backdrop against which black experimental writing works.” Poets like Rankine are “seeking to break the common sense link between poetry as personal

and group expression without claiming some reified notion of the ‘universal.’”93 This continues in the work of Tyehimba Jess, who replaces the “I” with the choir and ensemble, and Robin Coste Lewis, whose “I” is the no-one of the visible and named yet invisible and unnamable “Venus” that is the Black women in Western art.

This is not to say that Black writers have not and do not continue to do important work in more “traditional” lyric forms. But these efforts have been uphill battles, deep in enemy territory, as it were. This is the work that a poet like, say, Jericho Brown is doing, who is using his Blackness and the Black tradition to reforge the “lyric” into a queer, Black, contemporary mold. I have no doubt that Brown and others, if given the same attention and public engagement as they have been in the last few years, will succeed in changing the landscape of “lyric.” But this will not change its history. Rankine, and other poets who challenge the “lyric,” are foregrounding this history and challenging its assumptions head-on, by courageously and insouciantly occupying the uncomfortable places in language.

The place where language fails on the encounter with the Other, which is both the play- and battleground for the Black epic, I call noirporia.

Jenna Wortham and Kimberly Drew, writing on “Seeing Black Futures” in the New York Times, writes, “The cultural landscape is a metaphorical sundown town—welcoming us conditionally and refusing us methodically, violently and consistently.”94 This echoes Iton’s “political disfranchisement on the one hand and overemployment in

93 Anthony Reed, Freedom Time, 97.
94 Wortham and Drew.
the arenas of popular culture on the other.” The contradiction should not feel strange to students of Black studies; in a way, the contradiction is Black studies. Black art and culture have had to live from, with, and within this aporia. As Moten writes on the strategies of jazz in *Black and Blur*, “Jazz does not disappear the problem; it is the problem, and will not disappear.”  

But this aporia strikes both sides of the color line. Think of the encounters with awful White men Rankine writes about in her book *Just Us*, such as this one in an airport:

> I hesitated when I stood in line for a flight across the country, and a white man stepped in front of me. He was with another white man. “Excuse me,” I said. “I am in this line.” He stepped behind me but not before saying to his flight mate, “You never know who they’re letting into first class these days.”

Rankine’s White man with another White man is struck, with embarrassment(?) by the fact that she, a Black woman, either 1) was in line for first class or 2) had the power of speech and the audacity to object. She goes on:

> Later, when I discussed this moment with my therapist, she told me that she thought the man’s statement was in response to his flight mate, not me. I didn’t matter to him, she said; that’s why he could step in front of me in the first place. His embarrassment, if it was embarrassment, had everything to do with how he was seen by the person who did matter: his white male companion. I was allowing myself to have too much presence in his imagination, she said. Should this be a comfort? Was my total invisibility preferable to a targeted insult?  

To the White man, Rankine was perhaps totally invisible, and if not invisible then unremarkable, which is to say not something worth either having language or wasting language upon. Rankine speaking up, then, was a mild shattering of this White man’s worldview, akin to having a chair object to your sitting on it after you’ve sat on it.

95 Moten, *Black and Blur*, xii.  
97 Ibid., 25.
Derrida uses the term “aporia” to describe “the fundamental irreducibility and undecidability of every concept or phenomenon that traditionally has been stabilized, fixed, subjected, represented and normalized by Western metaphysics.”98 “Aporia” is derived from Greek for “impassable,” or “without issue.” Richard Beardsworth defines it as “something which is impracticable. A route which is impracticable is one that cannot be traversed. It is an uncrossable path. Without passage, not readable.”99 In the philosophical tradition this comes from Zeno of Elea, who defines it as a point of two contradictory statements of equal value: a place where judgment must necessarily be suspended. Beardsworth identifies how deeply Derrida’s use of aporia departs from Zeno: “Aporia, for Derrida, is not, as it was for the presocratics, an oscillation between two contradictory sayings. ... the 'contradiction' applies to one and the same entity, not to two different entities.” In other words, “aporia does not suspend judgement, it is the latter's very condition of possibility. No judgement is possible without the experience of aporia.”100

Aporia’s meaning of “untreadable” recalls marronage, where enslaved peoples in the Americas escaped from their plantations into the hills to form independent communities, some temporary, some which survive to this day. These maroons made their homes away from where the White slavers lived on the coasts, near rivers or ports. The maroons lived in the hills, mountains, jungles, or otherwise where it was difficult to pass or tread—the difficulty of the geography was the very condition of their independence.

99 Beardsworth, 32.
100 Ibid., 33.
If, for Derrida, undecidability is the possibility of judgment, and if, for the maroons, intraversability is the possibility of independence (not “freedom,” since freedom is precluded by the system which drove the maroons to flight), then what is the status of the White man struck dumb (the impossibility of the ability of speech) by the presence of a Black woman in the first-class line at the airport? Rankine and Loffreda describe such an encounter as “the moment in which the imagination’s sympathy encounters its limit.”¹⁰¹ The White man’s ability for speech is predicated by the treadability of the space around him, his ability to wander in the world where he whist. This “universal man” on his “universal ground” precludes judgment. To trouble, unseat, or call attention to the limits of the space he walks in is, to the White man, an unspeakable act. To call attention to boundaries calls into question the decidedness of all things (the *thingness*, the individuation of things) upon which unconscious and easily treadability depends.

But intreadability is where Blackness must live, and it is where Whiteness cannot live (at least not as Whiteness). The boundaries where Whiteness encounters Blackness—Shockley’s “performances of blackness in the Butlerian sense and performances of blackness in the Beyoncéan sense”—is what I call *noirporia*. This of course is a b(l)ack-formation, putting bad French into oft-misunderstood ancient Greek, which is to say that it is a term that riffs on etymologies rather than being faithful to them.¹⁰² The term plays off of the recent explosion of the word “misogynoir,” coined in 2010 by queer Black feminist Moya Bailey.¹⁰³ Bailey says she was looking for a term to

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¹⁰¹ Loffreda and Rankine, 17.
¹⁰² The Greek-Greek term would be *melasporia*—meaning “black passage,” which is both an opposite and a corollary to the impassability of *noirporia*.
¹⁰³ Eliza Anyangwe.
describe specifically how Black women are treated in the media differently than other women of color, and came upon misogynoir as a convenient way to talk about the unique, intersectional vicissitudes that Black women face in a culture of misogyny (she jokingly says she also considered the term sistagyny).

*Noirporia* is specifically the aporia—the intreadability, the impassability, the simultaneous suspension of and possibility of judgment, the failure of language and of communication—in the encounter with Blackness. Spillers calls this “the structure of unreality” “in the historical moment when language ceases to speak, the historical moment at which hierarchies of power... simply run out of terms.” In the metaphor of geography, *noirporia* is the no-man’s-land (which is probably but not necessarily masculine) on the boundaries of Whiteness. Whiteness and Blackness do not have clear limits or boundaries; they are not separate polities with clear national lives, or even a polity with subordinate and distinct enclaves contained within. Rather, Whiteness is like colonial power: it has centers where its sovereignty is unquestioned, and it has peripheries where its power is dissipated, porous, fractured and fracturable. Blackness survives on its outskirts, by outrunning the limit of power, by treading in the impassable spaces in fugitivity, marronage, and escapology. *Noirporia* is the frontier and the battleground. *Noirporia* is the speechlessness on both sides where language fails. Being in flux, unclaimed by language, unmoored from power, it is also a productive site for reclaiming space.

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104 Bailey.
105 Spillers, “Interstices,” 156.
The epic tradition is a masculinist one, and it is hard to sever it from masculinist tropes of war and strife. And yet, as Nahum Dimitri Chandler writes, “We must desediment the dissimulation of a war.”106 As Moten writes, “That we are at war, and have been and that the denial of that war is the primary modality of its prosecution, is a crucial and inescapable truth from which, nevertheless, the world we inhabit remains in flight.”107 The war is the war and it is also the denial of the war, and so the moments where the battlefield clears and the fundamental struggle is revealed as something real and in the present, as well as for a long time coming, is the war. This is also picked up in Edwards, who calls the “incessant war” of American imperialism to be the backdrop and the ground in which radical Black feminists define themselves and define the future.108 To Edwards, it is Black feminists, not Black male charismatic leaders, that have been working to “desediment the dissimulation of war” in the post-Soul era.

To return for a moment to Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, he has a moment where he describes how popular culture is better equipped than “formal politics” in the advancement of Black freedom:

The inclination in formal politics toward the quantifiable and the bordered, the structured, ordered, policeable, and disciplined is in fundamental tension with popular culture’s willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening, to sustain often slippery frameworks of intention that act subliminally, if not explicitly, on distinct and overlapping cognitive registers, and to acknowledge meaning in those spaces where speechlessness is the common currency.109

Formal politics is singular and “bordered,” popular culture is “slippery,” it moves through multiplicities and registers and *means* often without speech. There are two

108 Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror*.
109 Iton, 11.
words that immediately jump out here. The first is “policeable.” Iton was writing this in the mid-2000s. This was certainly not an era devoid of police brutality; however, we bring something different to this word in the years after the emergence of Black Lives Matter and the public and often live-streamed deaths of Black people at the hands of police. The goal of formal politics, it seems in this passage, is identical to that of the police state: a policeable population. That Black people have not been “policeable” is, here, a problem that needs to be solved. And the solution is, as always, a politics of respectability, to bring Black people into the police state, even if that is through nice-sounding ideas like “building trust,” “community policing,” or “increasing diversity” in the police force itself. All of these things increase the treadability of the police, which, let’s be clear, is and has always has been the personification of state violence, the “long arm of the law,” which is always White and always armed. This violence is a fundamental part of poetry and literature, though most deny or ignore it:

The second word that jumps out is “speechlessness.” Speechlessness as the currency of noirporia. Speechlessness watching a video of a Black man shot dead in his car at a routine stop. Speechlessness listening to the Black man on the ground plead for his life. Speechlessness as the response of even the sympathetic political figures. And speechlessness also in the throats of the police unions, White leaders, and unsympathetic political figures, who every day fight the war of the denial of the war.

A Beyoncé says, “Ain’t that a bitch.”

Conclusion

How does the hypervisible object, which was made visible precisely to preclude its voice, then turn around and speak? And what does this object say now that there’s
nothing left to say? What is this sound of speechlessness turned into action? And furthermore, how does this speechlessness resist the pressure that will inevitably turn it back into speech? These are my fundamental questions. In the case of the three poets I write about, the answer has to do with scale, space, and duration. These books are bigger than texts. They are cultural objects. They are public events. They are invitations to be taught in the classroom, which is another machine of cultural hegemony. But they also resist or trouble pedagogy—they teach themselves. They are difficult, but in a different way than Moretti’s the “modern epic” is difficult. They call out. They subvert. These works are hypervisible. They are unignorable. They overpower the establishments that would have power to diminish them.

In my first chapter, I write about how Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* is a challenge to the foundations of “lyricism” in the United States. Rankine uses the form of poetry to call out not only the anti-Blackness in the reading practices of the poetry world, but in the very readers who are picking up her book. *Citizen* has graduated from “mere” poetry; it has become a cultural object, a work of visual and spatial art more than a text, seen in political rallies and on college campuses as an unmistakable and hypervisible object that resists turning into a simple text to be close-read. Ultimately, *Citizen* calls out its readers as complicit in their own reading practices.

In my second chapter, I discuss Tyehimba Jess’s *Olio*, and how it uses intricate, ostentatiously crafted formalism in order to “steal” into the hallowed halls of poetic accolades. It wasn’t given the Pulitzer Prize; this book *stole* that thing. And through that stealing Jess manages to recenter the art and lives of a generation of Black entertainers and voices rounding out his ensemble with its cast of thousands. Jess’s *Olio* is a work
that smuggles into the hallowed halls of poetic acclaim the names and actions of near-forgotten Black figures, forever changing its color.

In the third chapter I discuss Robin Coste Lewis’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus*. This National Book Award winner uses the trope of the Black woman in visual art to construct a narrative of absence, to make an epic song of the no-body that is the Black woman in the Western imaginary. The long poem at the heart of *Voyage* is self-consciously epic in scope and form, recalling Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Anniad*. Like Brooks’s use of formalism, Lewis uses only the names and descriptions of visual art depicting Black woman figures in the Western archive to make her 70-page epic narrative. Through this she manages to author her-self, using the epic form to allow and excuse the shorter lyric poems that make up the rest of the book.

These are not the only epic works in the 21st century Black political tradition, but I write this as an introduction to and exploration of the important political, aesthetic, cultural, and social work that Black artists are doing with and against the poetic tradition, with and against the cultural landscape, and with and against the uses and misuses of Black expression. These works are rightly valued as cultural objects but, like the “modern epic,” are not very often *read*. And so I invite everyone to *read* them. To read not just their texts but their histories, not just the poem-itself but all the things that surround the poems, all the actions that these objects produce in culture. These works are protest songs, simultaneous history and futurity, new tales of new tribes that reimagine the epic performance of freedom.
Lord Love a Duck: Claudia Rankine Reads her Readers

We didn’t even notice the white woman. She was a whiff of overly perfumed air I can still smell. She was almost behind us when she said, matter of factly and to no one in particular, “N——lover.” Then strolled into the chapel, past the obelisk dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Once inside, she sat on one of the benches and stared for a long time at the fourteen paintings Rothko installed in the place. She no doubt saw each of them as black, until her eyes adjusted to the dark. Then she must have seen the paintings shift and alter, color swimming up to the surface....

But she did not think: I am this black.

James Allen Hall¹

The Answer

In March of 2015, while a prospective student at Yale, I attended a reading Claudia Rankine had in the English department. The reading was packed to standing with a mix of undergraduates, grads, faculty, and members of the public. Rankine was at the time riding on a wave of accolades for her recently published book Citizen. It had won the National Book Critics Circle award and was a finalist for the National Book Award and would be on its way to winning many other prizes, and Rankine would be on her way to a Guggenheim fellowship. Rankine was being courted for a cushy position at Yale which she would ultimately accept.

I recall this not because I remember much from the substance of her speech but because of the Q&A afterwards. After the usual softball questions, a young Asian woman

¹ Loffreda and Rankine, 155.
was handed the mic. After complimenting Rankine and the book, she asked her question, which was broadly: Why did I read this book? Who is it written for? It’s not for me. I’m not racist. I feel bad for you and your struggles, but I don’t have a racist bone in my body, so why did I read it?

Rankine smiled from her uncomfortable chair. She answered the question briefly and graciously, with her characteristic wit. She talked about how important it is to have difficult conversations, and the usual. But she ended with a direct address to the questioner, “And if you think you don’t have a racist bone in your body,” she said. “Well. Lord love a duck.”

The audience chuckled, both at her quaint Britishism but also at her quick diffusing of the tension. That is what comedy is, according to Hannah Gadsby—a buildup of tension, awkwardness, fear, then: resolution.² It’s all right. She’s not even mad.

I can only imagine that some version of that question showed up at every Q&A Rankine attended that year. It wasn’t said in bad faith. It was a genuine, and therefore more biting attack on the very project of her book. Who did you write this for? they ask. If you’re writing this for Black people, they know all of this already. If you’re writing this for non-Black allies, you’re alienating them. If you wrote it for racists, they’re probably not reading. I’m not racist. So, who are you writing for?

Setting aside for a moment the fact that the question of audience is so often lobbed at writers of color and not at White authors—White authors writing about White subjects, especially at a place like Yale, in a room like LC101, is not seen as divisive or

² Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*.  

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exclusionary but as proper and expected—what struck me about her response was not so much the humor and grace on display but the grammar. What does “Lord love a duck” mean? The origins of the phrase are unknown. The OED lists “lord love a duck” as used “In exclamations indicating exasperation, surprise, or other emphasis.” belonging to a subset of speech spoken when the speaker doesn’t know what else to say.3 The earliest examples is from 1898, but also includes 1920s instances from both Joyce and Eliot (who also has the first written use of the word “bullshit”). In these early instances it is from a lower-class speaker, or, as in the example of P. G. Wodehouse, an upper-class speaker aping the lower class vernacular: “Well, Lord love a duck!’ replied the butler, who in his moments of relaxation was addicted to homely expletives of the lower London type.” The Cockney aspect convinced many that “duck” might be an obscene rhyming slang. However, this isn’t born out in evidence. The best guesses of etymologists are that “lord love a duck” originated as a music-hall version of Cockney slang, perhaps a corruption of “lord love us,” one that had no actual cockney usage.4 This would make it like the vernacular of minstrelsy: a copy of a copy of subaltern speech that outlives its original. Which is to say that, like minstrelsy, there is a kernel of (the possibility of) resistance hidden in it.

The speech spoken when one doesn’t know what to say should remind us of the “Open Letter: a Dialogue on Race and Poetry” Rankine presented on February 4 of 2011, a letter which would form the impetus not only for her next two books, but the entire Racial Imaginary Institute. “I once had a colleague who wrote what some readers

3 OED.
4 OED.
perceived to be a racist poem,” Rankine writes. The poem in question was Tony Hoagland’s “The Change,” but Rankine does not name the poet. Hoagland would later write his own open letter response titled “Dear Claudia.” “The Change” is a persona poem in the voice of a (racist) White person watching a tennis match involving a stand-in for Serena Williams, where the speaker racializes Williams’s body and person, and laments the “change” happening in culture where White people are no longer dominant.

“When I first read it,” Rankine writes, “I thought, ‘What?’” That’s it: “What?” Then she repeats it on a new line with a new punctuation mark: “What!” She describes a moment of poetic interiority, a real and not-real scene of baffled looking-at-not-looking-at that should feel common to those living in the 21st century. “I let the book close on the desk and stared out the window through non-existent trees. There is a parking lot out there. And though my emotions can at times feel wrongheaded, sometimes you just have to say it—what the fuck?”

Grant Farred describes how “the only way in which the black subject can address” the aggressive simultaneous expression and self-denial of White supremacy, is to “materialize it into language as a tentative interrogative: Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?” Brian Massumi defines such moments as “shocks” or “microshocks,” an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life.” Sher Doruff links this to Moten’s concept of the “cut” and Donna Haraway’s “staying with the trouble,” of moments that are “anachronically defying past / present/ future situatedness.” But Moten’s cut and Doruff’s cut is auditory and improvisatory, a

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5 Rankine, “Open Letter.”
6 Farred, 105.
8 Doruff 4.
way to “linger in the music” of the event that enacts a possibility. Rankine is performing silence.

Not only do Rankine’s “What the fuck?” and her “Lord love a duck” rhyme, historically they come at the end of decades of listening to non-Black people deny their anti-Blackness, of watching politicians court the Black vote while supporting systems of oppression, of reading White writers declare their open-mindedness and tolerance while perpetuating damaging stereotypes, of witnessing employers make Black employees feel voiceless, underpaid, and unempowered, of putting up with academics doing the same while also erasing the efforts of Black, indigenous, and people of color from the conversation or misreading them out of existence. It was a “Lord love a duck” that stood witness to violence. It’s not aporia. Aporia would be unresolvable, a doubt, a dilemma. “Lord love a duck” is not a doubt and it is not dilemma. It is not unresolvable; it’s fully resolved. Rankine is speaking the words that are spoken when there is simply nothing left to say. Rather than improvise the possibilities of the future, it negates the possibilities of the present. In improv this would be a Cardinal sin: not saying “Yes, And.” It says “No.” Not even, “no, but.” A simple “No,” followed by dead air. Dead air, in the modern technological world of constant mindful and mindless noise, is deeply unsettling.

Roman Jakobson’s 1960 text “Linguistics and Poetics” describes a scheme by which speech can be categorized based on its orientation to addresser and addressee. In this scheme, speech is concerned with the contact between parties is called “phatic” speech, as in the words “Hello” or “How’s it going?” This includes involuntary or exclamatory phrases where the meaning isn’t the words but the connection, as in the phrase “You know what I’m saying?” The phatic is social. These utterances, as Bronislaw
Malinowski writes, “perform the important function of establishing, maintaining, and managing bonds of sociality between participants.” Andrew Gorin uses the phatic to describe the illustrations in Rankine’s previous book, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, of a TV displaying static or “white noise.” These are illustrations of the noise and the chaos of modern life, but also the “specifically racial inflection” of this noise and chaos. Gorin argues that the “baseline” of “post-Confessional explorations of poetic subjectivity,” “specifically lyric poetry” in the twenty-first century, which includes Rankine’s two “American Lyrics” *Citizen* and *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, is this, “a phatic gesture registering the bare possibility of subjective communication.” In other words, “Post-confessional” poetry is less interested in the intimate, interior subject, but in the barest “communicative potentiality,” the open question of whether or not people are able to hear each other. This is extended in Ben Lerner’s essay on post-Language poetry. Once Language’s ethos of “difficulty” has been exposed as insufficiently radical (he cites how a speech from Trump or Palin, with their grammatical disjunction and almost-sense, would fit perfectly into a Ron Silliman essay) “gives way to the difficulty of recovering the capacity for some mode of communication, of intersubjectivity.”

But what happens when that bare minimum is not met? What happens when you say, “Can you hear me?” and we cannot hear you? What is the sound of failed speech?

One mistake one could make while reading of the work of Black woman like Rankine is to read it only against the White literary tradition. I could instead go back to Henry Louis Gates Jr., who writes about the phatic in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*. “It is

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9 Gorin, 97.
10 Gorin, 99-100
11 Ben Lerner, “Beyond Lyric Shame.”
amazing how much black people, in ritual settings such as barbershops and pool halls, street corners and family reunions, talk about talking.” It is through metalanguage, or intertextuality, that, “Free of the white person’s gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms.”¹² In this sense, the quaint Britishism “Lord Love a Duck” may be the Blackest thing Rankine uttered on that stage. Gates’s signifyin(g) is a “stumbling unaware in a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled” where the signifier has been “(re)doubled.” The Black speaker and the White speaker speak from “two separate and distinct yet profoundly—even inextricably—related orders of meaning.”¹³ Through context, the Black speaker is “proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious.”¹⁴ It is also how, in drag slang, to “throw shade” or to “read” is to critique a thing simply by repeating it. In the words of Paris is Burning’s Dorian Corey, shade is “I don’t tell you you’re ugly, but I don’t have to tell you because you know you’re ugly.” The “shade” is linguistically located not in the sign or the signifier, but in the attention brought by the doubling that occurs between when the text (“your face”) is repeated. Blackness, to Gates, by merely existing in spite of Whiteness, exists as a critique of Whiteness. Lord love a duck.

Douglas Kearney defines something he calls the “dineffable” in his book Mess and Mess and. The dineffable is “a state in which something, often because of extremis or intensity, can only be described by signal that seems noise.” He footnotes includes

¹² Gates, Signifying, xxiv
¹³ ibid. 45.
¹⁴ ibid.
examples from the Black church to graffiti to Jimi Hendrix to Janet Jackson’s wardrobe malfunction: “Grunts, gospel runs, particular Krylon chirographics, assorted salt-jump gestures, ‘but most of all...,’ certain blue notes, choreographed slippages, fuzz pedals, the Confusion! queue, woooo, tsk, soul hiccups, intonational shifts, etc.” In a conversation with Aleshea Harris, Kearney locates the dineffable in racialized speech that would be heard as simply anger by all but a Black audience. His example is the opening track to The Roots’ 2008 album *The Rising*, titled “The Pow Wow,” which is a recording of Black Thou Thought in a heated argument with their former manager A. J. Shine. The exchange is loud, angry, and largely unintelligible. Yet, Kearney says something being signaled to a Black audience:

Now if you hear it and you are inclined to put noise on any moment of Black elevation and mood, you might just hear anger. ... To me, I feel like at some level they put that on there to be dineffable. It’s on there to say, “Some of you are not going to hear this.” Or: “You’re only going to hear this one thing. But we’re trying to tell you something.” In that way, maybe it’s the opposite of a dog whistle. ’Cause a dog whistle says, “We ain’t saying nothing.” There’s an alibi in that. But dineffability says, “We said it. We just knew you wouldn’t be paying attention. We knew that you were predisposed to not believe that we would feel this way, that you would think we’d just be talking loud and ain’t saying nothing. But we said it.”

To Kearney, the dineffable is noise that signals its audience and its audience alone. Neither “Lord love a duck” or “What the fuck?” are noise, although there is an audience that is more comfortable reading one over the other. But while “lord love a duck” may signal mere humor to some, and “What the fuck?” may signal mere anger to others, to a certain audience, a Black audience, they signal much more.

16 Kearney, “Signal and Noise.”
What Rankine’s non-speech speech did in that moment was a kind of active silence: its non-participation in the language game forced the audience to hear not what was said, but the person who said it and the person it was directed to. We in the audience had to turn and look at the poor questioner, as she stood there, defiant or embarrassed. The audience was no longer looking at Rankine, at the figure of this Black woman who in any other circumstance might be seen as the victim of a racial microaggression, expected to respond either civilly or angrily but in either way as an object, a thing upon which the world acts, who could only then react. Through her non-response, Rankine made the questioner the object. We looked at the young woman. Some, perhaps, saw a young person a little out of her depth. Some perhaps saw internalized White supremacy. Some saw the tense and often violent relationships between Black people and other minoritized groups. Still others saw an early victim of call-out culture. But we saw her. Through repetition she was signified.

But what we were actually looking at wasn’t the young woman. We were looking at ourselves. Black or not, sympathetic or not. Rankine, through a deft jiu-jitsu of address, was signifying all her audience, reading all her readers, whether they realized it or not.

I keep coming back to “Lord love a duck” because it describes the moment, the event, where the work of Citizen is done. Rankine describes Berlant’s Cruel Optimism as a model, in how it “talks back to the unreadable or unbearable encounter,” “engaged in conversation with an incoherence.”17 Rankine does not dwell empathetically or emotively on the individual: the victim, the Black body as the object of

17 Lauren Berlant and Claudia Rankine, Bomb Magazine.
microaggressions, macroaggressions, violences, and “bad calls.” The Black body is too often and too easily described as only object and victim of violence in a way that is both every-day and exceptional,\(^\text{18}\) which Moten calls “the opposition of spectacle and routine, violence and pleasure.” To Moten, this exposes the double and triple bind that Black people are in when thinking of their own (para)ontology. In order to prove themselves as subjects, Black people are often forced to objectify their own Blackness, to objectify Blackness as objects, to \textit{Other} the self. In doing so, they prove their subjection to the White audience only as they prove their objecthood.\(^\text{19}\) Thinking through and against this is, to Moten, to enact a “critique of the subject,” “wherein the call to subjectivity is understood also as a call to subjection and subjugation.”\(^\text{20}\) It is to take into account how Whiteness by default affords itself the subject position in the Western tradition, even in works not written by White authors. It is to reject the grammar of White supremacy.

Blackness in the modern world has been predicated by Whiteness, it has been placed in the object position, interpelled into existence by White speech, what Fanon calls “an object in the midst of other objects,”\(^\text{21}\) visible and addressable against and outside of the category of subjectivity itself. This subjectivity Wilderson equates with the Enlightenment category of the Human, which is “not an organic entity but a construct; a construct that requires its \textit{Other} to be legible,” where “the Human Other is Black.” “Blacks,” he writes, with characteristic Afropessimism, “are the sentient beings \textit{against which humanity is defined}.”\(^\text{22}\) Or, as Hartman writes: “The everyday practices of the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \(^{18}\) Cathy Park Hong, “Delusions of whiteness in the avant garde”
\item \(^{19}\) Moten on Wynter.
\item \(^{20}\) Moten, \textit{In the Break}, 2.
\item \(^{21}\) Fanon.
\item \(^{22}\) Wilderson, Afropessimism, 167.
\end{itemize}
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enslaved occur... in the absence of the rights of man or the assurances of the self-possessed individual, and perhaps even without a ‘person,’ in the usual meaning of the term.”

One doesn’t have be an afropessimist to see how the project of modernity is coeval with the creation of Blackness as a category and with the oppression of Black and brown people as a necessity. These writers remind us that it was the Enlightenment itself that cast the shadows of raiding parties, slave ships, plantations, and genocide.

As European culture was codifying itself as Western civilization it was doing so on the labor, blood, and lives of Western and Southern Africa and of the New World. Sylvia Wynter writes about this as both an extension and “mutation” that is at the heart of the Enlightenment project of secular humanism: “It was the concrete, material, essentially economic impact of the New World upon the Old, that would essentially transform that Old World from one civilization amongst others—the Christian, to THE ONE, the West, to which all other civilization were OTHER.”

Western Man would define itself against its colonial Other: “In the new retotalization European man was transformed from Christian man to Western man; the other peoples of the earth were transformed into negroes and natives.”

Saidiya Harman writes similarly in *Scenes of Subjection*, where she writes:

> [s]uppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one’s suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgement was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the presumed endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or relegating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom?  

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23 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 66
24 Sylvia Wynter, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman.
25 Wynter, “Ethno or sociopoetics,” 81.
26 Ibid., 82.
27 Hartman, 3-4.
Hartman is interested in “the ways that the recognition of humanity and individuality” work not to liberate or equalize, but “to tether, bind, and oppress.” Much like Rankine, Hartman focuses on the quotidian, the everyday violences of culture: “Rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned.” Through this, she works to “illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle.”

The spectacle is entangled with the violence that perpetuated it, or as Hortense Spillers writes, the fantasy of power “represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile,” a sliding that moves from metaphor to flesh, and conversely transforms flesh into metaphor, a circular process she calls “pornotroping.”

Underneath and against this objectification, the Black subject, the entity that Wilderson styles as “Black subjectivity (subjectivity under erasure),” must find a way to self-actualize, to resist subjection as well as humanist “subjectivity.” The ultimate goal of Citizen is to let Black subjectivity cloak itself in the same anonymity and ubiquity that Whiteness has allowed itself to be cloaked in. Rankine has done this through a deft use of genre conventions and the expectations of the modern lyric. Rather than the lyric “I” or transparent lyric speaker, the vast majority of the sections in this hybrid “American Lyric” are centered around the “You.” “You” is the second word of the book: “When you are alone...” It is repeated over and over again in the form of short vignettes describing

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28 Ibid.
30 Wilderson, Red, White & Black, xi.
the small inconveniences and major violences that “you” experience, witness, or remember. The book flips the lyric “I,” with its long association and tradition in the Western canon, outward. It becomes a “you” not so that we as readers can identify with that “you,”—no single reader, not even if they are a Black woman, not even if they are named Claudia Rankine, can contain the multitudinous, documentary “you” of the book, which is part of why it feels so alien, cold, and flat in affect. This is intentional. Rankine flips the lyric “I” outward into a “you” so the reader dissociates from the subject and can finally see / hear / talk about that which is impossible to see hear or talk about: Whiteness itself.

In Eve Sedgwick’s “Queer Performativity,” she locates the feeling of “shame” as essential to the establishment and “naturalization” of identity. “Shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is, one therefore is something, in experiencing shame.” While Sedgwick was interested in the entanglements of shame in queer identity, we can see how this affect—shame, and shaming, which is an affect at the “threshold between sociability and introversion—is foundational for something which is not quite individuation but something more like identification, and, as José Esteban Muñoz will pick up on, disidentification. But we can see how a calling out also works against normativity. Rankine, like many others, is not afraid to shame Whiteness, not specifically White people or White actions, but Whiteness in total, as if it were something. Eve L. Ewing picks up on this in her essay on why she has decided to capitalize “White,” writing that while capitalizing the “B” in Black is important, not
capitalizing the “W” in White, “runs the risk of reinforcing the dangerous myth that White people in America do not have a racial identity.” She goes on:

Whiteness is not only an absence. It’s not a hole in the map of America’s racial landscape. Rather, it is a specific social category that confers identifiable and measurable social benefits.... When we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness—the things that it is, the things that it does—we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility.\(^{32}\)

Ewing capitalizes the “W” to call it out, to interpellate Whiteness into being as something. She uses the metaphor of invisibility, as in a sci-fi force field or invisible monster allowed to do its work in secret: “Where there appears to be nothing at all, there is, in fact, danger.”\(^{33}\) Shame, focus, and nominalization (and via nominalization, verbing—as in “to White”) work to draft an outline around something which was already there but invisible. Or, it would be better to say that Whiteness, by not being an identity, is allowed to be merely visible, as background, like wallpaper or landscape. Shame and interpellation forces Whiteness into the foreground, makes it tactile, and reveals how it is not merely the ground of power, but an active agent.

If “Black subjectivity” is the record of erasure, White objectivity is the opposite, something impossible to read because it is written over everything. Citizen (and all the later works of Rankine, including Just Us and her two published plays) is a sketch of the unsketchable, the outline of the White imagination, which can only be outlined by tracing its edges, drawing over the places where Whiteness meets its Other, which in Rankine is the “you,” the grammatical object of the poem but its subjective center. Lauren Berlant writes that Citizen “lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth

\(^{32}\) Eve L. Ewing.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
cannot be spoken to a structure. It emerges only in the spaces in which structure reveals itself in form.”

This is Whiteness that cannot be verbalized but must emerge architecturally, in form. The only way to see this is formal: to remove it from the subject position of the sentence, and to make it an Object, to Other it the way it has Othered the modern world.

The “you” of Citizen is not you, nor is it she. It gets to be anonymous, invisible, aggregate, absent, mythic. In other words, while the audience is struck into noirporia by phatic infelicity (the speech of failed speech), the Black subject at the center of the poems of Citizen takes on the characteristics of both the lyric “I” (the lyric subject) and of the lyric “you” (the lyric apostrophe). The “you” gets to possess itself as “universal,” absent, addressable in the way a god or an unrequited lover would be in a poem to Aphrodite or the moon. And so the cloak of lyric subjectivity that typically hides the White body is reappropriated, leaving free the eye to gaze upon the emperor’s lack of clothes.

Though Citizen is subtitled, like Don’t Let Me Be Lonely, “An American Lyric,” it functions as a critique of the lyric and of lyric reading practices, which often erase the political, racial, and communal as a necessary component of the historicity of the poem. While Citizen is a lyric, it is also an epic. It is big. It is hypervisible. It breaks out of the frames that would hold it in. It uses the weight of established forms—here the lyric itself—against the establishment. The history of lyricization in America is tied up with the history of White supremacy, and Rankine uses this to push outside of lyric, to think

[^34]: Berlant.
[^35]: The scene from Hair
bigger and further, moving into criticism, documentary, video, and memoir, pushing the limits of what could be called poetry, while still packaging it all as a poetic work.

The audience member at the talk I attended was the intended audience of *Citizen*, even as she complained that she was not. This is because audience is you. Yes, you. It doesn’t matter if you’re White. It doesn’t matter if you’re not. By your presence here in this world, on this planet, in this language, you are a participant, willing or not, in the project of White supremacy, under the umbrella of a hegemonic imagination. You are a context and vector of oppression, in ways great and small. *Citizen* wasn’t written to you, but it was written for you. And if you think it wasn’t, well. Lord love a duck.

**Reading the Room**

In November of 2015, *Citizen* graduated from literary acclaim to “internet famous,” when Johari Osayi Idusuyi, a Black woman, clearly and obviously began reading the book at a Trump rally. She was seated strategically behind the presidential candidate, strategically in that the event coordinators offered to sit her and her small group in the VIP section to present a diverse coalition backing (literally) the divisive candidate, but also strategic in that Idusuyi was perfectly poised to deliver an immediate visual response to the candidate, hijacking his own visual spectacle for a small though biting commentary, which was more biting given that Idusuyi’s protest was entirely visual and nonverbal, considering how reliant on spectacle the future president is, and also how little air he leaves for verbal or audible dissent.
But why *Citizen*? In an interview with Jezebel, Idusuyi says, “I was just reading the book at the time.”

In the interview, Idusuyi makes clear she did not enter the rally with the intention of protesting. This wasn’t a planned event. If so, the perhaps would have brought signs or hats or other paraphernalia. They didn’t. And good thing, too, as she describes watching Trump supporters aggressively ejecting protesters. The candidate said, “Get them out of here,” the crowd reacted, even snatching off a woman’s Obama hat (“and her hair just went with the hat”) and throwing it into the crowd.

Idusuyi responded not with hats or signs, but with a book. “I wanted to leave, but I came, I’m in the middle, I’m on camera, so I might as well read because I don’t have anything else to do. I’m not going to waste my time listening to somebody who I can’t respect anymore, so I started to read.”

Two distinct things made her small act of protest arguably more successful than the protestors who were thrown out of the rally, perhaps the most immediately successful protest of the 2016 election season in terms of narrative. First is the visual. Scholars in English like to talk about “texts” in the abstract, as if they are linguistic and cultural entities that exist outside of the physical. But November 9, 2015, proved definitively that texts are objects—physical, palpable, objects with weight and breadth and color and shape. Even without talking about the iconic David Hammons sculpture that graces the cover, *Citizen* has a visualness, a recognizability. It takes up space. It blocks light, as when Idusuyi raised the pages to her face, interjecting the semantics of

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36 Kara Brown.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
the bound paper across the semiotics of her face, which should have been rapt with attention and the grammar of engagement, adoration, and suggestibility that all charismatic (or less so) leaders demand from their followers. Instead of attention we got Hammons’ hoodie, an immediately recognizable icon of Black maleness becoming a set of handcuffs, an icon of the police state and the carceral system.

This gets us to the second aspect of this event: reading. The 45th president of the United States is not very interested in reading, but he and his people are almost pathologically preoccupied with interpretation. It is an administration that needs to “control the narrative,” that holds a tight grip on facts and data, that presents itself in a very particular way for a particular audience. All of these things are matters of interpretation, as was the administration’s insistence, in 2020, that “Critical Race Theory” not be used in federal training. According to them CRT is “divisive, Un-American propaganda.”39 Anyone who argues that the humanities are not important in a changing technological world need not look farther than the Trump administration for evidence that hermeneutics is very much a part of our daily lives. The question of how publics interpret texts and events is can no longer be thought of as an intellectual exercise: it is literal life and death.

Hermeneutics is also the subject of Citizen. The catalogues of micro-aggressions (a word never used in the text) are structured like case studies. The short essays on Zinedine Zidane and Serena Williams analyze how Black and brown bodies are interpreted by people like referees and line umpires. The syntax and grammar flip the subject outward. The sociological subject becomes “you.” The “I” disappears. What

comes into focus are the repeated processes of oppression and aggression that could go unnoticed if instead the focus was on a “victim” or a “perpetrator.” Unlike an artistic object that relies on the myths of completion, totality, and wholeness, Citizen is essentially incomplete. She could go on forever with her examples (and does go on, though differently, in Just Us) and not be done. In that way Citizen is less a discrete text and more of a way of reading.

So when Idusuyi raised the discrete physical object in front of her face, firstly she performing outward disrespect (which was remarked upon by the White people in the row behind her)—disrespect borne out of failing to perform attentiveness to the text that Donald Trump was spewing. That inattentiveness is already a way of interpreting: saying “You aren’t worth reading.” But what is in front of her face is not simply an opaque object but is itself a way of interpreting. Citizen was put up to her face like a prism, shifting and refracting discourse into its component parts, so that what we see is not a rainbow but unalloyed and malignant Whiteness.

To read is also to “read to filth,” as in the gay Black subculture of the 20th century. To read is to look at someone and know their flaws. Reading is signifyin(g). It is interpretation. It is metatextual. It is hermeneutics as affect. And this hermeneutics is a part of survival. As Seth E. Davis writes, “Black people have not simply assimilated to whiteness. We, as Black people, have figured out ways to maintain, mix, and mesh who we are in order to survive in hostile spaces.... I argue that shade, as a form of signifying similar to the dozens, is a literacy of kinship and survival.”

40 Calling shade a “literacy” underscores the grammar of Blackness but also the community: to be “literate” is to join

40 Davis, LISC journal http://licsjournal.org/OJS/index.php/LiCS/article/viewFile/223/323
a community of readers, to be part of a shared textual and intertextual history. And what more “hostile space” to find oneself in than a Trump rally in 2015? By interjecting *Citizen* between her face and the orange face of the text in question, Idusuyi has invoked not only a way of reading but a community of readers, “reading” the text in question like the library was open. “Because reading is what?” asks Ru Paul. “Fundamental.”

This public action is noteworthy and newsworthy precisely because it, in its valences, is so poetic. Idusuyi was invited on Rachel Maddow and interviewed by Jezebel not because of the substance of her critique, but rather in the how of the critique: not only its shape, but how it *landed*. It was *effective*, or in linguistic terms, *felicitous*. What do these terms mean, and how does Idusuyi’s poetic action differ from the actions of the protestors who were thrown out of the rally? Both were *heard*: the protestor’s actions heard by Idusuyi, Idusuyi’s actions by the internet. The poetry of Idusuyi’s action feels poetic perhaps because it is intertextual. Idusuyi hijacked another’s language. She interjected her signifier into a system of signs already in place. Through actively not auditing Trump, she was “moving the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination.” This is to say that the action was not an either/or: either sit in the audience or loudly protest, which would be actions on the axis of selection, she chose an action that *rhymed*: it was a yes-and to sitting in the

41 Despite the T-shirt that reads “Gay Slang Was Invented by white women gay men drag queens Black Women,” the connections between gay slang and Black women is fraught. Some on one side call for non-Black gay men to “stop stealing black female culture,” and others on the other side rightly point out that the conservatism of some Black women is part of the oppression that gay people have had to escape from. Both can be true, as Elegance Bratton says in Paper magazine: “[A]s much as I can acknowledge that so much of what I love about gay culture is inspired by black women, there’s another side to this that so much of who I am is in resistance to their notion of heteronormativity.” Bratton.
audience, not reading Trump, but reading a book. The effect was reading Rankine and “reading” Trump.

This is not the first public event that Citizen has been a part of—the book is itself a series of public events. The genesis was in the similar though more collegiate public event between Rankine and Hoagland, the “Open Letter” and “Dear Claudia.” This exchange (or contact, or failed contact) between Rankine and Hoagland would go on for several more open letters and eventually an entire book project: *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, edited by Rankine with Beth Loffreda and Max King Cap. It would spawn both Citizen and Just Us, as well as the two plays *The White Card* and Help. Each in its own way “lyricizes” or makes-present various encounters between Whiteness and that which is excluded from Whiteness, and the exasperations, discomfort, and exhaustion of such continual failures of communication.42 Each is its own way a reading of Hoagland, and of Whiteness in general. It is a reading, and not a speaking, because what is there to say?

If we can return to that moment of failed speech: “What the fuck?” linguistically, grammatically, and pragmatically, comes at the end of a failed or infelicitous exchange.43 They mark the utterance of speechlessness, at the despair at any words being appropriate because words have (literally) failed. It is related to the linguistic term “pragmatic failure,” which is when communication fails “whenever two speakers fail to understand each other’s intentions.”44 However, here communication halts not because of a failure to understand intentions but an over-awareness of them. It is when the

42 Farred.
43 They also rhyme, which to Jakobson would put them on a further axis of equivalence.
44 Thomas Blum-ulka.
implicature of the utterance precludes further communication. Rankine describes a quick encounter between her and Hoagland that demonstrates this: “When asked what his thinking was while working on the poem, my colleague said this poem is for white people. Did he mean it was for white people to see themselves and their thinking? He did not say that. He said it was for white people.” She continues to mull it over linguistically: “Perhaps by invoking the ‘whites only’ language of Reconstruction, he was suggesting his poem, as a language act, lived in that place. Even with this positioning, it’s not clear he wasn’t also directing the historically exclusionary signifier at me—he was after all speaking to me.”

The implicature carried by Hoagland’s speech was exclusionary—the language of White supremacy—even if a charitable read of Hoagland’s intentions is that they were ultimately reparative. The poem is racist because, as Hoagland writes in “Dear Claudia,” “of course I am racist; and sexist, a homophobe” etc etc. “The poet plays with the devil; that is, she or he traffics in repressed energies.” He writes that he expects his readers to be made uncomfortable but does not feel the need to explain himself: “I expect them to be resilient readers.” This use of “resilience” is curious in that it confers a value judgment on the process of reading. If you understand his intentions, you are “resilient,” and if you don’t, you are weak, or, in 2016’s parlance, a “snowflake.” This confers the blame on the victims of his speech acts (and speech acts, like all acts, can be violent).

The violence in Hoagland’s speech Rankine and Loffreda describe as being about access and address. “Writers of color often begin from the place of being addressed and accessed. To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable, as Judith

45 Rankine, “Open letter.”
Butler has argued, and to be addressable means one is always within stigma’s reach.”
What was violent in Hoagland’s poem and reply is not how he is “trafficking in repressed
energies” but that this trafficking has Black bodies in them, specifically Black women’s
bodies. And this is part of Rankine and Loffreda’s dissection of the White imagination:
“White writers often begin from a place where transcendence is a given—one already has
access to all, one already is permitted to inhabit all, to address all.” In the White
imagination, everything not-White is a tool used to further White transcendence, even if
the aim of that transcendence is nominally anti-racist. Hoagland’s utterance that the
poem is for White people, even if we agree that this is anti-racist in intention, contains
non-severably the implication that Black women are both excluded and also
instrumentalized in the discourse. Black women like Rankine and Serena Williams
become objects in the White imagination. Rankine’s open letter was a calling out of this
implicature, and Hoagland’s open letter response was not a denial but worse. It was a
refusal to engage with the problem as being beneath the lofty aims of poesie.

In the “Introduction” to The Racial Imaginary, Loffreda and Rankine generalize
the tense exchange described in the open letter:

[White writers can get explosively angry when asked to recognize that their
racial imaginings might not be perfect—when asked to recognize that their
imagination is not entirely their own—and in particular when confronted with
that fact by a person of color questioning something they wrote. And the target of
that anger is usually the person of color who shared with them this fact. The
white writer feels injured in this moment misunderstood and wounded—and
believes it is the reader, the person of color, who has dealt the injury.

... What the white writer might realize instead, in this moment of crisis, is that she
may well be an injured party—but the injury was dealt long before. The injury is
her whiteness.46

46 Rankine and Loffreda, 19
This generalization points to how Hoagland is not himself a problem but is a localized instance of “the scene of race taking up residence in the creative act.” Calling this out in public is a specific strategy meant, like Idusuyi, to hijack the narrative and use White supremacy’s system of signification, here being poetry and poetic discourse, to expose Whiteness itself.

Open Lyric / American Letter

But is it poetry?

Both Citizen and her prior book Don’t Let Me Be Lonely are subtitled “An American Lyric” in clear letters below the title. In Citizen, the phrase is emblazoned in the same font and size as the words “Claudia Rankine,” both in a faded gray smaller than the bold black sans-serif title, as if to declare that the labelled genre of this book is as important as who wrote it. By contrast, 1998’s The End of the Alphabet is simply subtitled “poems.” Rankine’s signalling of her book as “lyric” places the work in a larger conversation about how and why we read, and ultimately offers her own set of answers.

Kamran Javadizadeh, in “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject,” defines his impetus for writing his article as being part of the question of “is it poetry?”:

Citizen’s success (its reception as the most culturally significant book of American poetry of the last several years) has, at times, complicated its recognition as poetry. The book was the first ever, for instance, to be nominated as a finalist in two categories (poetry and criticism) for the National Book Critics Circle Award, an emblematic instance of its hybridity occasioning forms of acclaim that,

47 Ibid., 17.
48 2020’s Just Us breaks from this, being subtitled “An American Conversation,” in a small black font, with the words “Claudia Rankine” in white thrown against the black background—the shadowy trees over the reflecting pool of the Mall in D.C.
paradoxically, obscure its status as poetry. One of my aims here is to lay bare the logic behind this obfuscation.49

*Citizen*’s status as poetry is not straightforward. There have been countless occasions where I have spoken to both working poets and academics on the subject of Rankine and they will immediately pivot from the subject of *Citizen* to that of her previous book, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. When I ask why they prefer *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* the answers form a familiar constellation to anyone who’s studied lyric theory: “It’s more personal.” “It’s more emotional.” “I identify with it more.” “I just like it.” *Citizen*, for all its merits, just isn’t “poem-y” enough.

Rankine’s work has been taken into the debate around “identity politics” in aesthetics, with a generation of critics lamenting a change (like Hoagland’s “Change”) that poetry can no longer just be about *people*, which of course means White people. Marjorie Perloff lamented this change in her 2006 MLA presidential address. “Why is the ‘merely’ literary so suspect today?”50 Dorothy Wang writes about this moment in *Thinking Its Presence*:

Perloff expresses what many literary scholars think and feel but do not say except, perhaps, between the enclosed walls of hiring meetings: the frightening specter that, because of “politically correct” cultural-studies-ish pressures in the academy, presumably the detrimental legacy of both 1960s activism and the culture wars of the 1980s, worthy, major, and beloved works of literature—whose merits are “purely literary”—are being squeezed out of the curriculum by inferior works penned by minority writers, whose representation in the curriculum is solely the result of affirmative action or racial quotas or because their writings have passed an ideological litmus test, not literary merit.51

When Annalys Gelman called out a former professor for his sexism and racism, she quoted him allegedly saying “Claudia Rankine has never written a poem in her life” and

49 Javadizadeh, 488.
51 Dorothy Wang, 5.
“You can’t write a poem about a tree these days unless it falls on a person of color.”

There is still an appetite among a certain cadre for contemporary poetry to be synonymous with the personal, for it to be vulnerable and individual, flowing forth unfettered from the complete unconscious of an extraordinary yet ordinary being. But Citizen doesn’t need to be personal to be personal—and that is the condition/contradiction I keep coming back to. Citizen is a release of what the poetic can do rather than what the poetic can be.

This is borne out in Rankine’s bibliography. Consider how much, although analytical, declarative, hyper-focused, Rankine's poetry through the years has dealt with abjection, specifically of the body, specifically of the female body, specifically of the Black female body, specifically of her body. Don’t Let Me Be Lonely is personal in that it surrounds Claudia Rankine's liver and endocrine systems. The End of the Alphabet is personal in that it surrounds Claudia Rankine's marriage and miscarriage. Citizen is personal as well, in that it surrounds Claudia Rankine's body in the historical, occasional world. This body is not the grieving "I/She" of The End of the Alphabet. It is a subject abstracted, but that does not mean it is not personal. Nothing in nature is private, and nothing in poetry either.

Citizen is intensely personal, but that "person" is not the anonymous subject of the White lyric. Ultimately this is not about Citizen, since so much has been written about Citizen, but about the sort of intellectual place we must be in to not consider Citizen poetry, or as poetry, but not the sort of poetry worth talking about as poetry. Sociology, maybe, nonfiction surely, but not as poetry. It is too straightforward, they

52 Twitter.
might say, too clear in its intentions and precise in its organization to be “lyrical.” The “lyric” and the “lyrical” become a battleground—Perloff’s MLA address would become the 2008 “New Lyric Studies” issue of PMLA. Wang calls out this whole issue (and the fact that it included only one theorist of color) for being implicitly about “shoring up the supposed opposition between the cultural against the literary.”

Kamran Javadizadeh writes on Rankine’s decision to write within a tradition, the “lyric,” which is both a suspect term and one loaded with the history of White supremacy in the academy. “Hidden in plain sight” in the “lyric,” he writes, is “its construction of whiteness, an identity that assumes its universality even as it anxiously apprehends its sovereignty to be under threat.” Whiteness being “the (unspoken) name both for a history that cannot be faced and for the privilege that enables its effacement.” Confessional poetry in specific “reifies the white subject whose identity it begins by assuming.”

The “lyric” has been many things over the years, but by the 21st century it has become a stand-in for the imaginary of the literary establishment. The “lyric” is what poetry is, and what poetry is, is what is published by reputable publishers (such as Greywolf Press, publisher of Citizen). In another sense, “lyric” is thought of as a tradition, one that Jonathan Culler outlines in his Theory of the Lyric. Culler’s work, of course, is a direct rejoinder to the “New Lyric Studies” exemplified by Jackson and Prins and inaugurated by Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading. Importantly, Jackson uses lyric as adjective, while Culler defiantly makes his a noun. To

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53 Wang, 7.
54 Javadizadeh, 477.
Jackson, this shifting grammatical usage of the term (reversing Mackey’s “verb to noun”) is both a sign that there is a problem and the mechanism by which the problem manifests. She asks us to think of “the modern imaginary construction of the lyric,” which is part of what she, like Rankine, calls a “social imaginary,” as being “what allows the term to move from adjectival to nominal status and back again.”

“The lyric” is not the lyric or lyric, but the product of lyric, which she calls “lyricization.”

The fact that Culler in his rejoinder more or less proves Jackson right is part of what has been so frustrating, retrospectively, with the New Lyric Studies debate. Culler and Jackson have argued ad nauseum about their respective versions of “lyric,” but their conceptions have little to no overlap. Jackson anticipates Culler’s entire argument when she brings up Susan Stewart’s “distressed genres,” “the late eighteenth century’s highly mediated manufacture of the illusion of unmediated genres.” *Theory of the Lyric* is a late example of the illusion of unmediated genres, of late modernity manufacturing a historical continuity in a literary mode that it invented, a reactionary strategy of situating today’s art within the context of an imagined, golden-age artistic antiquity.

Perhaps this is unfair to Culler, in that it is a critique of the project of his project, so to speak, and not of his project itself. Culler’s point is that there are patterns in the history of “lyric” writing, formed not only by academics but by writers themselves, a generic line of influence and reinvention that he claims goes from Horace to Petrarch to Auden, and from Sappho to Barrett Browning.

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55 Jackson, 7.
56 Culler, 3-4.
transhistorical continuity across the last three millennia in the Western tradition. His scholarship is exhaustive, though narrow in its range, and the point is largely convincing, though Paul Franz (while agreeing with Culler’s main point) questions whether “Culler’s real topic is less a genre, in whatever might be the strict sense, than a rhetorical mode or set of stylistic features, which ‘lyrics’ proper display most consistently, or in greatest concentration.”

Culler has identified useful formal habits in the “lyric” that point less to “lyric” as a stable, transhistorical genre, but more to performative, ritualistic language (ie poetry)’s ability to affect change in the social imaginary. Moten, in his writing on C. L. R. James’s The Black Jacobins, cites this version of “lyricism” as an “opposition—that between lyric and narrative—that in turn shapes yet another fundamental disjunction between the science and the art of history.” While Perloff lamented the intrusion of disciplines like history onto literature and by extension the lyric, Moten shows how the “lyricism” of a writer like James, who was ostensibly writing history, makes art out of language. This is perhaps why a number of theorists of color writing on contemporary poetry, such as Farred and Roger Reeves, begin with Culler’s version of the lyric and not Jackson’s.

If we were to break down what Culler calls his “inductive approach” into its axioms, we may settle on the idea that the lyric has a historical tradition that goes back to antiquity, and the “ritual” markers of this tradition are enumerated in “four parameters”: 1) lyric address (apostrophe), 2) emphasis on the present-tense (event), 3)

57 Franz, 19.
58 Moten, Black and Blur, 2.
the ritualistic, which includes performance as well as rhyme and scansion, and 4) lyric hyperbole—everything is made very, very important. Culler calls this “inductive,” echoing Northrup Frye, as opposed to a deductive one, showcasing how his reasoning is based on personal experience and generalizations. He claims to be “working from a selection of the most famous poems from different periods and language,” but an even cursory glance at the index shows that his examples are overwhelmingly from the (White, male) Western canon.

If one were to go through the index to *Theory of the Lyric* looking for artists of color, you would find four. Three are Caribbean poets, Braithwaite, Césaire, and Louise Bennett cited in quick succession in a paragraph on lyric’s “role in the production of community identity.” Only Bennet is quoted at length, but Culler is most interested in how the Jamaican poet continues to use ballad form for popular ends in her poem “Colonization in Reverse.” Supposedly this poem shows the power of the long tradition of the western lyric: “Bennett herself, writing in ballad stanzas with prominent rhymes and colloquial language, produces a popular poetry dealing with public issues of the day.” Setting aside the implied condescension of “popular poetry,” anyone else reading the poem might notice that she is using the ballad form with supreme irony, lambasting the form, and by extension the western lyric tradition, as a tool of colonization and hegemony. There is also the hint of condescension in Culler’s use of Bennet, since her subject, post-colonial life, takes a back seat to the mere fact that she uses ballad stanzas.

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59 Culler, 33-36.
60 Paul Franz, “Burden of Proof,” 19
61 Culler, 7.
62 Culler, 306.
But this is the familiar undercurrent below most attempts to talk about “craft” and “technique” in opposition to “meaning” or “identity.” The result is erasure.

The other person of color Culler cites is, oddly, Jay-Z. Culler does not deign to analyze the King of New York’s lyrics themselves, but rather cites an interview where Jay-Z talks about the importance of rhyme to “make sense of the world in a way regular speech can’t”: “The rhyme convinces you. The words connect,” he says. “The simple couplet takes the idea of the spoken intro and makes it feel powerful, almost unassailable.”63 But immediately Culler disagrees with the hip-hop billionaire, turning to White European authority for a refutation in the next sentence: “[T]he return of rhyme satisfies, as Hegel says, but rhyme can always be dismissed as empty echoing.”

In his defense, Culler does not pretend to be engaged in any truth-making, but rather in narrativizing his experience: “I have not attempted to determine what is or is not a lyric but have been asking what is the best model of the lyric for encouraging a capacious appreciation of these poems.”64 “These poems” are specifically the poems he, a 20th century critic, likes, which is the crux of Jackson and Prins’s critique. “Lyric,” to them, is not a genre but a back-construct of critics from the 19th century onward, of which Culler is a late example.

Culler has another response to Jackson and Prins and the New Lyric Studies: “If students are not presented with an adequate model of lyric,” he writes, “they will read according to whatever inadequate models they have previously assimilated.... We need to provide students and other readers with a better model of the lyric in order to make

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63 Ibid., 184-85.
64 Ibid., 349.
possible a richer, more preceptive experience of lyrics.” This is part of his belief that “reading” should be separate from interpretation, and that one should read a poem without producing meaning: “Interpretation in the modern sense was not part of literary engagement until the twentieth century... [Previous generations] could acquire knowledge of the tradition and develop considerable expertise and power of discrimination without assuming the goal of engagement without assuming that the goal of engagement with poetry was producing interpretations.” He says this either unaware of or unconcerned with the fact that “knowledge of the tradition” and “expertise and power of discrimination” is precisely how meaning is created. The culture of rote instruction and regurgitation of memorized texts that he seems to nostalgize was a large component of the machinery of Western hegemony, patriarchy, and White supremacy. The fact that Culler has written an entire book interpreting the meaning of poems, in order to tell us that poems shouldn’t be interpreted as meaning anything, shows us some of the circularity that is necessary to maintain his worldview.

In short, Culler represents in one person the incoherences of the modern lyric. For the “lyric” to exist it must be both historical and un-historical. It must be based on a 20th-century mode of interpretation but against the 20th-century modes of interpretation. It must be a genre but also a fundamental way of thinking and acting. The lyric subject must be universal and timeless but also a 71-year-old White man named Jonathan Culler. Instead, we should focus, like Farred, on two useful axioms. This is to reduce his “four parameters” to two: apostrophe and event. The first is a “characteristic indirection,” which Culler calls “triangulated address”: addressing the

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65 Culler, 5.
audience of readers by addressing or pretending to address someone or something else: a lover, a god, natural forces, or personified abstractions.”

This is the trope that Culler has been writing about since his early article “Apostrophe,” published in 1977. Apostrophe is of particular resonance to Citizen and its use of the trope of the “You.”

Javadizadeh highlights this “unspecified second person” in Rankine’s anecdotes, and how “we might imagine the ‘you’ in each episode to be addressed, in the first place, directly to the friend who provided the anecdote, telling each story back to the teller,” but this move is “always also a platform for a more general address.”

The second of Culler’s axioms is what Farred calls “the force of the now” in writing about Rankine in “Citizen: a Lyric Event.” This is a present-tense that “addresses directly the moment of, the moment that is, the very moment that the lyric is making.” He merges this with Hegel, Leibnitz, and Deleuze, writing, “The lyric makes the present; the lyric makes the present present to itself as (the) present.”

Culler calls this model an alternative to reading the lyric as merely mimetic or fictional, as in the tradition of reading all poetry as dramatic monologue by a fictive speaker. Instead, lyric can be a “distinctive lyric event” that he describes in rhetorical, not poetic terms: “encomiastic or epideictic discourse—discourse of praise and blame, articulating values.”

Epideictic speech, articulated in Aristotle’s Rhetoric, is “ceremonious,” performative, and ritualistic, but also social: “It is directed to an audience that does not make decisions, but forms opinions in response to the discourse.”

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66 Culler, Theory of the Lyric, 8.
67 Javadizadeh, 482.
68 Farred, 95.
69 Ibid.
70 Culler, 7.
71 Culler, 357.
epideictic “shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives.”

Both apostrophe and event reframe lyric away from the privileged interiority of Mill and Wordsworth, and into the social and political world of rhetoric and value-making. Mill’s binary between “poetry” and “eloquence” dissolves; if there was a difference between poetry and eloquence it was in the presentation of such, and not in the intentions or effects. In this framework we can easily describe Citizen as “lyrical” and “poetic”; in fact, because it focuses so much on the epideictic event and on the rhetorical connection between performer and audience, I would argue that Citizen is more ambitiously “lyrical” than any book in recent history.

Lyric Reading

Even if Citizen were not subtitled “An American Lyric,” or had that phrase printed as large as the author’s name on its cover, Rankine’s emphasis on the pronoun “you” would announce its “lyric”-ness. “You” is the second word of the text. The first page begins:

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.

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72 Walker, rhetoric, 9
73 Relatedly, Stanley Fish’s radical of presentation.
74 Rankine, Citizen, 5.
A version of the second-person pronoun (singular or plural) appears four times in the first sentence alone and seven times in the first paragraph. The tenor of the passage invokes a lyric solitude, with its feeling of aloneness, of being apart even from the ever-present company of cell phones and social media. The you lingers in a private mental space of hypnagogic memory while it physically lingers “stacked among your pillows.” This is the same quiet yet unquiet solitude of J. S. Mill’s infamous 1833 definition of the lyric as “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.” Jackson and Prins identify this as a source (along with Hegel) of the modern conception of the lyric, as well as of its many contradictions. Mill locates “lyric” in “confession” that is directed (lyric apostrophe) toward the absent or unhearing other of solitude. “Eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard,” he writes. Rankine’s pillowed ruminations give the perfectly crafted mimesis of overhearing.

But if lyric is feeling confessing itself to itself, and lyric is addressing an absent or nonexistent addressee, then who is the “you” of the poem? Is the you the “self” or is you the “absent”? Is “you” the lyric subject, or is “you” the lyric object, or is “you” the audience, triangulated through apostrophe? Javadizadeh writes that the “you” functions so that any reader of the book is invited, however provisionally or imperfectly, to fill the role of the anecdote’s original teller,” but also agrees with Heather Love that “the experience of such identification is unlikely to feel epiphantic or cathartic.” This is a move that works against the “confessional” in poetry, ultimately “making visible the privilege on which its self-disclosures depended for their power.”

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75 Jackson and Prins, 3.
76 Javadizadeh, 482.
77 Ibid.
experience in poetry is not “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude,” at least not to the un-privileged, but Whiteness affirming Whiteness in moments of safety.

Farred writes similarly about Rankine’s use of “event.” The anecdotes told ad nauseum in Citizen are not a single historical or political event, or a catalogue of individual historical political events. They are a “routine,” “so commonplace that it does not rise to the level, philosophically speaking, of (historical) ‘incident…. so routine that it will never attain the status of ‘event’” The function of Citizen is not to enlighten its audience about a single event but to show how the Black body “is made unrecognizable without the mark—of susceptibility—to violence.” He writes: “Citizen catalogues the black bodies’ experiences in the contemporaneous now. These experiences run the gamut. From racially motivated traffic stops... to Travon Martin.... from the secret that was the event of Zinedine Zidane... to the specter of modern lynching.... to the denigrated female black athletic body. The event becomes un-local and unspecific just as it exposes the contours of the now. A single event could be redressed, it could be narrativized; the poetic event is instead an event as event. Its rhetorical thrust is “indistinction, not exceptionality.”

Rankine’s “you” and Rankine’s “event” get to be no one and no one’s. This is the way the lyric “I” gets to be no one, the way that the White subject gets to be no one, the way that the White subject gets to be everyone and the experience of the White subject gets to be everyone’s. The same way that the assumed audience, author, and subject of literature is “no one” and “everyone,” unless the literature is “political,” because the a-

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78 Farred, 104.
79 Ibid., 108.
80 Ibid., 110.

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political subject is “no one” and “everyone” and “a White person.” Just as the problems of the Enlightenment are coeval with the problems of colonization and slavery, the problems with the “lyric event” and the “lyric I” in America are coeval with Jim Crow and post-Reconstruction. Jackson describes how the a-political, a-racial category of “lyric” supplanted forms and genres that had folk traditions and histories through antebellum and Reconstruction America.\(^8\) “Lyric” poetry, as it became codified in the first decades of the 20\(^{th}\) century, is by contrast and paradoxically a poetry without history. The time of “lyric” is an imagined lyric a-temporality where all history is in the present tense, which paradoxically robs it of its political force. The subjectivity of “lyric” is a subjectivity without a body.

If, as Moten has written, the "history of blackness" is the "resistance of the object," then the genre of “lyric,” which is the language of (the performance of) subjectivity, cannot be the performance of Blackness. Blackness is defined against enlightenment and post enlightenment subjectivity; Blackness (not, “paraontologically,” Black people) is the commodity and the object, not the consumer and the subject. And so the Black poets who have entered the traditional lyric tradition—from Phillis Wheatley to Gwendolyn Brooks to Rankine—have not done so without great tension. This is why the exemplar of the racial and social tension in the modern “lyric” and Jackson’s “lyricization” is not Emily Dickinson but Wheatley. How can she have written, fifty years before Mill, “T’was mercy brought me from my Pagan land”? As a slave and

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\(^8\) Jackson, in “Specters of the Ballad”: “Unlike the ballad, the broadly conceived lyric could be indisputably literary without also being apparently raced, without remaining tied to either Anglo-Scots or black (or German, or Ojibwe, or Spanish, or Persian, or Swedish, or Siamese, or Icelandic) folk sources.”
literal object of possession, she was not even in possession of a “me” or a “my.” Her voice was not her own. Her voice cannot be heard. It can only be overheard.

There is also the case of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, whom Jackson uses as a midpoint between the ballad and the modern lyric. She writes on Dunbar’s “The Haunted Oak,” a ballad apostrophe to a bough on which a lynching historically occurred. Unlike in a Romantic apostrophe, where the address to the absent is an occasion for the lyric subject to engage in interiority, the bough answers. Jackson writes that this “makes ‘mute responsiveness’ itself into ‘the speaker’ of the poem, inverting the romantic and Victorian paradigms in which that muteness is the object rather than the subject of enunciation.”82 “Its speech cannot be heard and so much be read;” she writes, “it makes the claims of a subject but cannot be a subject.”83 This is a typographical “turning around,” a calling-out from the called-out to the caller as in Gates’ “talking book.”

These examples use intertextuality and lyricism not to attain some universality of meaning, but to signify the unseen and unremarked-upon subjects at the connective ends of the chain of signification. Again, this is the “phatic,” on the connection between persons rather than a meaning which could be decontextualized. The meaning of Wheatley’s “my” is in her voice, overheard through genre conventions, surviving the hands and bodies who owned her. An emphasis on the phatic, on the connection through words between people which is separate from both meaning and truth, reminds us how Jakobson’s categorization of poetry as language centering on the message, where

82 Jackson, Specters of the Ballad, 194.
83 Ibid., 195.
“the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into
the axis of combination,” is at best outdated.\textsuperscript{84} The axis upon which one needs to be
reading in reading someone like Rankine is not the axis of which word is chosen in each
instant, or which stress is stressing which syllable, but who is speaking and who is
hearing. This is what Jakobson calls “contact” and positions tantalizingly close to the
“message” or “poetic function.” A so-called “close reading” of Wheatley, or Dunbar, or
Rankine, an academic activity which entirely lies in analyzing the axes of selection and
combination, would not get us any close to this horizon of address. For this reason I will
do little close reading.

There is a contradiction inherent in being Black and writing in a Western lyric
tradition, which is a matter of having one’s very being preempted by the genre
conventions. Javadizadeh shows how Rankine was reading Robert Lowell and writing in
the tradition of Eliot, Wilbur, Bishop, and Lowell. Central to this is Rankine’s rewriting a
line of Lowell’s \textit{Life Studies} in the mid-point of the book, which enacts the same sort of
second-person hypnagogic introspection that we read on the first page.

\begin{quote}
Listen, you, I was creating a life study of a monumental first person, a Brahmin
first person.
If you need to feel that way—still you are in here and here is nowhere.
Join me down here in nowhere.
Yours is a strange dream, a strange reverie.
No, it’s a strange beach; each body is a strange beach, and if you will let in the
excess emotion, you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

Name-checking \textit{Life Studies} and Lowell’s “Brahmin first person” while also dismissing
it, Rankine ends by foreshadowing the image which will end the book, that of William

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{84} Jakobson, 240.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Rankine, 73.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Turner’s *The Slave Ship*, shown in duplex, on one side the whole painting, on the other “Detail of a fish attacking a slave,” showing a shackled Black leg sinking into the water, beset by fish. The language of the Atlantic breaking is a direct quote from “Man and Wife,” where Lowell describes an argument with a spouse, “your old-fashioned tirade—
/ loving, rapid, merciless—/ breaks like the Atlantic ocean on my head.”86 The levels of irony in here are staggering: “Why should Lowell’s lines about a private argument have given Rankine the language she adapted to describe the injuries of the Middle Passage?”87 I would add to this the double irony of the Turner painting, of a Black body trapped, literally, in a White man’s imagination. Is Rankine also saying her own language and imaginary is trapped within the racial imaginary of Lowell?

Javadizadeh argues that Rankine is writing an “open lyric” at the moment of intertextuality. This is his answer to Rankine’s question of “How do you keep the intimacy of the language that is afforded the first person in the meditative, introspective lyric, and yet make it democratic and aware of its political investments?”88 It is “open” to a future and a futurity, and to new systems of interpretation. This is akin to how Wynter describes the “openness” of a poem in its generative ability to re-create signs anew:

It is poetry, the poem, that continues, with increasing difficulty, the general human power to create signs. For the poem constitutes each time that it happens—since a poem is an "event" rather than an object—a field force which reinterprets and reinvents anew the meaning of the sign; that is, the poem creates anew the sign. Each poem reinvents the nature of the sign as not arbitrary; but depends on the "openness" of the sign to be able to reinvent it.89

86 qtd in Javadizadeh, 475.
87 Ibid.
The “not arbitrary” nature of the sign is the sign’s intractability to history, its weight and place in the machinery of oppression. But the openness is the sign’s capacity for lightness, its ability to be lifted, no matter how heavy, out of its place and into new systems and forms.

In a different way, both Rankine’s and Javadizadeh’s question is moot. Insofar as *Citizen* is “meditative” and “introspective” it is also not. It is analytical and sociological. If “lyric” is writing toward a subject who isn’t listening, Rankine is in a tradition of Black poetry writing towards an establishment, the reading and writing of poetry, that is not willing to change. This calls into question the project of Javadizadeh’s article, which is to reconcile *Citizen* with the lyric tradition of confessional poetry. Instead of opening the lyric tradition to futurity, what if Rankine is instead closing it? What if she is exposing the “confessional” as a prison of language and imagination? What if Rankine’s “read” of Lowell is not homage but shade, and the irony of misappropriating his quote works to expose how small and insignificant the White lyric subject is? Instead of looking at *Citizen* against the American lyric tradition, why aren’t we looking at the American lyric tradition against *Citizen*?

If this is so, one of the things *Citizen: An American Lyric* does is to read lyric reading. The lyric tradition revolves on individuality and subjectivity. It relies on emotion and emotional connection to identifiable and relatable situations. It pathologizes the detachable “event” that can be extrapolated out of history unto a lyric horizon of universality. This is the tradition that *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* was written in, and *The End of the Alphabet*. But this tradition is not strictly equivalent to poetry in all its forms. It feels like those who solely value *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and not *Citizen* are denying what *Citizen* reveals about the possibilities of poetry. As Jackson and Prins have
been arguing, poetry has existed before and outside the “lyric.” It has not always been private and apolitical. For most of its history, poetry has been public. It has been political. It has been situational, written about historical events, whether that be Pindar’s Olympic games or Dickinson’s private letters. In 18th century America, Poetry was printed on broadsides and posted on walls in public places. It called out politicians and called for reform. It called people together and called them to act. But that type of poetry was not privileged after “lyric turn.”

In the afterword to a special issue of Diacritics devoted to Theory of the Lyric, Culler comments on the various writers who have used his text as a springboard for their work, which by chance, includes Farred’s “Citizen: a Lyric event.” This allows Culler the chance to damn Rankine with faint praise: “Farred takes up a work explicitly identified as a lyric, Claudia Rankine’s Citizen: An American Lyric, which seems to have won every poetry prize going... even though Citizen is not something I would have called a lyric or a collection of lyric poems.” “Rankine,” he writes, “boldly appropriates the noun, lyric, though prose poem would seem more appropriate.” In his guarded appraisal he refuses to treat Rankine’s text as poetry: “Judges doubtless figured that this powerful work would bring honor to poetry, even though it lacks the formal features of poetry, as a series of anecdotes, narrations of incidents that ‘actually happened—microaggressions,’ Rankine calls them, which accumulate as a ‘constant assault’ on the reader.” Again, Rankine did not invent the term “microaggressions” and never uses the term in Citizen. Culler’s interest in the text is purely pedagogical: “because of the

90 J.S. Mill called Wordsworth “essentially unlyrical.” Even in the ur-text of lyric theory, the ur-lyric Romantics were too political to qualify.
attention her book has received, many people who don’t normally read poetry have been brought into contact with something that is at least called \textit{lyric}, which may change their expectations.”\footnote{Culler, 12-13.}

One can imagine a further edition of \textit{Citizen} which reproduces Culler’s failure to read \textit{Citizen}, without comment, in its text. The fact that it fits so seamlessly within \textit{Citizen}’s argument should prove how this way of reading is part and parcel of the American tradition that produces readers like Culler and Hoagland. But this is not solely an academic problem. It produces readers like the tennis star Caroline Wozniacki, who “stuffed towels under her skirt and in her top to mock Serena Williams’s physique.”\footnote{Farred, 100.} It produces an ethics of Otherness, where the personal is separate from the social and the racial, which is the domain of others. It produces readers like George Zimmerman, Darren Wilson, Daniel Pantaleo, Derek Chauvin, etc., ad infinitum. Why would Rankine want to be read in the tradition that would produce such a reading? Lord love a duck.

No, \textit{Citizen} is not to be read in any such way, but in an old/new way which provides an interpretive lens onto the routine misreadings that occur in its pages and outside of its pages. Where “lyric” hides behind the private, Rankine puts all in the public. Where “lyric” hides its Whiteness behind the first person, Rankine exposes the Whiteness acting on and around the second person. Rankine finds in the moment of interpretation the connection between persons, which is the hope and activity of the poem. It is a work of criticism and a method of criticism, a kind of Socratic method of
leading the White imaginary into such a double bluff that it recognizes itself, or at very least becomes recognizable.

This activity is done on the event but also the reader, including me, including you.

Don’t Get Mad, Get Organized

In 2018’s *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*, Italian Marxist Franco “Bifo” Berardi begins his analysis of poetry and “the escape from the corpse of capitalism” with these lines:

I suffer from asthma, so perhaps I was affected by a sese of asthmatic solidarity with I saw the video of Eric Garner’s assassination. Garner was killed on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York City, when a New York City Police Department officer put him in a chokehold for about fifteen to nineteen seconds while arresting him. The words ‘I can’t breathe’—which Garner panted eight times, less and less audibly, before expiring—have been chanted by thousands of demonstrators all over the country in the months since.\(^93\)

The affective, immediate reaction to witnessing Garner’s death, replayed over and over on television and social media, does not seem like a place to begin a talk about the comparatively unimportant subject of poetry. But maybe here, in the extremis of speech and action, we can see where the poetic can and cannot breach into action. Garner’s repeated speech, “I can’t breathe,” could not save him. Can repeating his speech, in protests across the country, save us? I have been in protests where hundreds of people knelt in silence as an organizer cried into the night, “I can’t breathe.” I counted up to eleven with everyone as they repeated the cry over and over: “I can’t breathe.” There is no poetry I have witnessed that has matched either the power or the hopelessness or the

\(^93\) Berardi, 15.
hope of those three words repeated, seemingly interminably, but terminably. At the same time, those three words were poetry.

Berardi writes about poetry’s place in the noise of modern life and under the noise of modern power. In the past, he writes, “Modern power, was based on the ability to forcibly impose one’s own voice and to silence others.” But today, “power emerges from the storm of inaudible voices.” Against the intellectual, neoliberal ideals of free speech and a robust public sphere, Berardi reminds us that in the modern world, “Power no longer consists in eavesdropping and censoring. On the contrary, it stimulates expression and draws rules of control from the statistical elaboration of data emerging from the noise of the world. Social sound is turned into white noise and white noise becomes social order.”94 The noise of voices down each other out, leaving only the aggregate, which is the product of power. “White noise,” Gorin’s “specifically racial” subjectification, is not a by-product of technology and hegemony: it is the product. It is not separate from the robust public sphere; it is the public sphere. White noise is not concealing the murder of Black bodies, it is the murder of Black bodies.

White noise looms over Hoagland “Dear Claudia” letter, even beyond the question of instrumentalizing the Black body for White enlightenment. White people should not censor themselves, Hoagland argues, because poetry should show the uncomfortable truths in human nature. Poetry is radically honest. It brings things to light. Free speech is always a good; the alternative is self-censorship, which is repression. But repression and censorship are not the problem in modern technological culture. The problem is noise. The problem is how Hoagland’s piece is of a piece with

94 Berardi, 27.
the forces that he is supposedly exposing. The problem is in how “the boundaries of one's imaginative sympathy line up, again and again, with the lines drawn by power.” How is Hoagland's honest and self-critical voice any different from the millions of other White-supremacist voices, less honest and less self-critical, crowding our culture? What responsibility does Hoagland have for the consequences of his own imaginary? How does Hoagland's position in the intelligentsia not amplify and form sympathetic vibrations with White supremacy everywhere? How does it not all become White white noise? How could Blackness even exist in such a White Whiteness?

While Berardi is concerned with imagining language outside of financial capitalism, the “white noise” of commodity and exchange, Rankine, by contrast, is engaged with the “white noise” of the White imaginary. Both begin by recentering the subject position, which is an acknowledging Wittgenstein’s maxim, “the subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is the limit of the world.” In Citizen, the subjectness and subjectionhood of Whiteness is revealed as the limit, which is indefinable because it the everything. Berardi defines poetry as revealing the “unseen horizon of signification: the possible” through a “semantic overinclusiveness.” “The poetical act is a semiotic excess hinting beyond the limit of conventional meaning, and simultaneously it is a revelation of a possible sphere of experience not yet experienced.” It is “precisely the excess that goes beyond the limits of language.” For this he has an interesting metaphor:

People are constantly sheltering themselves under the umbrellas of their limited languages, and their worlds are written on the undersides of these umbrellas. Poets cut the fabric of the umbrella and their incision discloses the unbearable vision of the true firmament. The poet’s action in literally apocalyptic, and it

95 Wittgenstein, 68-69.
96 Berardi, 20
97 Ibid., 21.
begins the unchaining (or disentanglement) of the hidden possibilities lying there since the beginning, since the cosmic primeval origins of human history.⁹⁸

Poetry and literature in general can act to discomfort and trouble the discursive systems of language that are the social order. In this way, the umbrella is also the comfortable worldview of the White or White-adjacent person, with a limit that goes only as far as the shelter it provides. Rankine’s casual “Lord Love a Duck” is a rock that tears a small but obvious hole in it, revealing the White supremacy at the true limit. It reveals what Christina Sharpe calls “the weather,” the pervasive-as-breathing quality of violence that Black people, unsheltered, live under. The casual White or White-adjacent person might then blame the thrower of the rock for causing them discomfort. They might get angry.

However, Berardi’s metaphor does not take into account how poetry, like all language, also builds up as well as tears down. The metaphorical umbrella, which hides the average person from the racial consequences of their actions, is itself made of language, some of which is poetry. And the poetry that is part of oppression today was perhaps revolutionary and subversive when it was written. There is a contradiction in the strain of theory that overvalues poetry, specifically “lyric” poetry, as definably subversive and defamiliarizing. This theory tasks poetry with tearing down but has no theory for what is built up in its wake. It is only a reaction; it has no responsibility for the future.

Berardi, much like Moten, sees poetry as that which can “go beyond the limits of the world” in language of uncontrollable excess. But Rankine has no interest in excess or escape. When we stop defining “poetry” as “the excess that goes beyond the limits of

⁹⁸ Ibid., 48-49.
language” and start asking ourselves what poetry does as language, we can better see how Citizen, and other texts aligned with activism, work to re-organize the “prelinguistic matter” of the social imaginary. To say that Citizen is less “poetic” than the traditional lyric is to deny the organizational power of poetry. It is to say that the “poetic” can only work outside power, and therefore has no civic utility. I argue, and Citizen argues, that despite two centuries of lyricization poetry is civic power. Furthermore, it must be civic power. (Even traditionally “lyrical” poetry enacts power in the form of cultural capital.)

By seeing poetry as an organizing rather than simply a destabilizing activity, we can see how poets like Rankine work in counter-structuring and counter-ordering.

Chanting “I can’t breathe” on the Manhattan pavement in 2014 was a deconstructing of the police state that all Americans live under, yes. But it was also a counter-structure, one where solidarity was a real, bodily thing, where the people stood together, where the white noise of the city was stunned into silence, and the voice of Eric Garner rose out of the noise, even if just for a moment. We chanted “Say her name” to re-structure a society where Black women were not erased from life and from the record. We chanted “No Justice, No Peace” not just to show how justice is ruled by White supremacy, but also to build a new concept of justice, born out of a responsibility to the bodies on the pavement, the bodies that were actively reimagining society, actively building a new world with their words and actions.

Idusuyi’s read of Trump, in this sense, was not just a destabilization of the theater of the political rally. It shows how it is possible to see the 45th president in a specific framework, one where Idusuyi, protesting or not protesting, is not simply an object

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99 Bourdieu.
behind the American president, subjected to and by him. It shows Idusuyi and Rankine as subject, as actively seeing, hearing, reading, interpreting, signifying, living, breathing. It imagines an imaginary capacious enough to hold the White imaginary inside of it, and to see it for what it is: so small, so fragile. Citizen, either as a text or cultural object, has not completed this imaginary, not yet. (If it did, we would need a new, even more capacious imaginary.) But it is trying.

Citizenship

There is an open question of why Citizen is called Citizen. In the final section of the book is dated “July 13, 2013,” the day that George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin by reason of self-defense. Rankine writes a long analysis of her day and her feelings of feelings, which I will quote at length because it is important to recognize the work she is doing:

A friend writes of the numbing effects of humming and it returns you to your own sigh. It’s no longer audible. You’ve grown into it. Some call it aging—an internalized liquid smoke blurring ordinary ache.

Just this morning another, What did he say?

Come on, get back in the car. Your partner wants to face off with a mouth and who knows what handheld objects the other vehicle carries.

Trayvon Martin’s name sounds from the car radio a dozen times each half hour.

You pull your love back into the seat because though no one seems to be chasing you, the justice system has other plans.

Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on.

Despite the air-conditioning, you pull the button back and the window slides down into its door-sleeve. A breeze touches your check. As something should.
What feels more than feeling? You are afraid there is something you are missing, something obvious. A feeling that feelings might be irrelevant if they point to one’s irrelevance pulls at you.

Do feelings lose their feeling if they speak to a lack of feeling? Can feelings be a hazard, a warning sign, a disturbance, distance, the disgrace? Don’t feel like you are mistaken. It’s not that (Is it not that?) you are oversensitive or misunderstanding.

You know feelings destabilize since everyone you ask is laughing that kind of close-the-gap laughter: all the ha-ha’s wanting uninterrupted views. Don’t be ridiculous. None of the other black friends feel that way and how you feel is how you feel even if what you perceive isn’t tied to what is . . . What is?

And so it goes until the vista includes only displacement of feeling back into the body, which gave birth to the feelings that don’t sit comfortably inside the communal.¹⁰⁰

The day for “you” begins with a sigh—the continual sound of numbness that has become no longer audible even to the person making it. Then, the memory of another microaggression, another encounter with the failure of language, “What did he say?” “Your” partner wants to get in a fight, not with a person but just a mouth, not even a fellow citizen but the constant yelling language of harm. But “you” know such mouths also carry guns. “You” know it because of the name on the radio, another mouth, another yelling that interpellates you into the world as a future victim. Yes, and this is how “you” are a citizen. To be a citizen is to excuse these things, let them go, move on. Like the sigh “you” don’t even hear anymore, a continual sound of exasperation. “You” move on the pure physical feeling of the wind on your cheek. But this feeling, and the dwelling in this feeling, which of themselves are the pure lyrical expression of feelings expressed in solitude, miss out on something important. This is a feeling that feels to not

¹⁰⁰ Rankine, 151-53.
feel the pain, the numbness, the fear, the “disturbance, distance, disgrace?” The lyrical feelings destabilize, they “close-the-gap,” they cover, they are safe. As Langston Hughes wrote, “Poets who write mostly about love, roses and moonlight, sunsets and snow, must lead a very quiet life. Seldom, I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties.” But “your” feelings want to see behind the “uninterrupted views” of forced laughter. But this is difficult and isolating. None of “your” Black friends feel the same way. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Their feelings are valid even if what they feel isn’t tied to the real, but then again what is real? The pained isolation or the numbed communality? The “What did he say?” or the “Let it go, move on”? And so it goes until the landscape “includes only displacement of feeling back into the body.” In other words, the world is evacuated of sympathy. The “pathetic fallacy” of lyric poetry, where the hills and the skies reflect the emotions of the poet, is evacuated. Even the sympathy of others is evacuated. “You” are left alone with only the feeling of not being “inside the communal.” Yes, and this is how “you” are a citizen.

Iton talks about citizenship and the failures and “fetishization” of citizenship in *In Search of the Black Fantastic:*

The rules and understandings according to which communities are structured and defined typically do not make explicit reference to their exceptions. Accordingly, the violence that marks the borders between the welcome and the spurned is constitutively and constitutionally unremarkable. It is as a result of these kinds of commitments and practices that broad claims regarding rights and liberties, universalities and democracy, are sustainable. Similar processes can be observed at work in the ways public benefits are allocated and beneficiaries are identified. Public goods, by definition, are available to all citizens. Obviously, the key word here is citizen, and the salient question is what value and limits we should assign to this term.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Iton, 131-32.
The “universality” of liberal democracy depends entirely on the exceptions to this universality, the structures and boundaries that make invisible borders. These borders do not exist until they are crossed. One place to see this in action is the use of “public goods,” which includes the “streets.” The streets on which Trayvon Martin walked at night on the evening of February 26, 2012. The streets on which protesters marched, night and day, in the years afterwards. And the streets on which the “you” of Citizen drives. The Public Good is a space of “freedom” but also surveillance. It is the place where one is seen, and called out, and, in Martin’s case, killed. Alternately, Iton writes on how the carceral system is a form of “denaturalization,” and how the imprisonment of Black bodies serves “as a form of deportation,” “effective disqualification from participation in the mainstream,” or removal from the public. He links the Civil Rights era with the concurrent rise in the “prison construction movement”—“given the broader historical tendency to read black agency as outside the political, as unnatural, improper, or simply criminal.”

One could ask why, if Citizen is a catalog of privations, subjections, microaggressions, and violences done on Black bodies in the public, it isn’t titled something like Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection. The title would fit fine: these are scenes, they are of subjection. But rather than highlight subjection, Rankine chooses to highlight inclusion. Citizen. Given the fetishization of citizenship with regards to policing, both domestically and at the borders, why is it important for Rankine to remind us that, yes—this is how you are a citizen?

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102 Ibid., 138.
Perhaps the recognition of the failures of the communal, the violences, the subjection, is necessary for “citizenship.” Perhaps Rankine’s “you” is a citizen and the White man at the airport is not, because “you” recognize the difficulties of existing as a subject within a polity—a “multitude” rather than a “people.”\(^{103}\) It is to recognize “feelings that don’t sit comfortably inside the communal,” which is the body itself, and its difficulties and illnesses that Rankine is always so concerned with. Her poetry is full of coughing, and hacking, and medication, and the discomforts of the body as well as its responsibilities. On the last few pages she quotes director Claire Denis saying “I don’t want to be a nurse or a doctor, I just want to be an observer,” which Rankine describes as being “willing to coexist with dust in our eyes.” This builds towards a realization:

And, of course, you want the days to add up to something more than you came in out of the sun and drank the potable water of your developed world—

Yes, and because words hang in the air like pollen, the throat closes. You hack away.

That time and that time and that time the outside blistered the inside of you, words outmaneuvered years, had you in a chokehold, every part roughed up, the eyes dripping.

That’s the bruise the ice in the heart was meant to ice.

To arrive like this every day for it to be like this to have so many memories and no other memory than these for as long as they can be remembered to remember this.

Though a share of all remembering, a measure of all memory, is breath and to breathe you have to create a truce—

a truce with the patience of a stethoscope.\(^{104}\)

\(^{103}\) Cf. Paolo Virno.

\(^{104}\) Rankine, 156.
“To breathe,” to continue despite memory and history and the present, “you have to create a truce.” “The “bruise the ice in the heart was meant to ice” is a nod towards the resiliency of the subjected body to survive subjection. This is a book, like all of the epics here, is not a story of transcendence but survival. And it is “something more” than merely existing parasitically within the “developed word,” the way that the White man at the airport exists unconsciously and unceremoniously. The war is fought in the denial of the war.105 To return to the “phatic,” the sound of communication being open, which is the opposite of “Lord love a duck,” is one that Jakobson describes as “typical of talking birds.”106 If birds can do it, why can’t we?

Ultimately, the “listening in detail” that Rankine proposes, the “truce with the patience of the stethoscope” is stringent and demanding. “You” must pay attention to everything, without shirking, without humming or sighing. So the book Citizen is a training in how to be in a communality. But this also exposing the usual markers of citizenship—respectability, keeping one’s head down, going with the flow—as poor reading practices.

Conclusion

Rankine described 2020’s Just Us as “not about educating white people,” but “about performing thinking,” and “opening up the conversation.” In describing her aims in forming the Racial Imaginary Institute, Rankine said, “It’s important that people begin to understand that whiteness is not inevitable, and that white dominance is not

105 Moten, Wynter.
106 Jakobson, 238.
inevitable.” However, she does not imagine a world without White people. Like Idusuyi, she keeps coming back to the rally. She keeps sitting down. This is, in her words “an act of love.” She certainly loves some White people, including her husband John Lucas. She has said she can’t imagine a world without White people. And so, she does the work of confronting Whiteness, almost heroically, for the sake of White people.

Rankine’s imagination is incremental and pragmatic. She, a well-to-do woman from Jamaica, puts up a mirror to race from an established position in class, or, in Isabel Wilkerson’s terms, uses her position in class allows her to better examine caste. Rankine’s bourgeoisie position is then ideal for examining a specific type of noirporia that is economic as well as social: the Black woman who has enough money to fly first class but still is not accepted by White men; the White man who has enough money to fly first class but still has to encounter a Black woman. There is a drive toward comfort as well, as Hannah Black writes in her review of Rankine’s *Just Us*:

> Although Rankine sees clearly that rich-white-liberal comfort is made in hell, she wants this uncomfortable comfort for herself. “I want the world for my daughter,” she repeats—perhaps the daughter will make a more convincing claim on the hell-made, humorless world that Rankine only half inhabits. Perhaps she will grow up to answer all the unanswerable questions.

Black desires more from Rankine, wants her to be more “savage,” pointing out a lack of the joy in Rankine’s work that may have its roots in the fear to expose one’s own complicity in the political wrongs that need to be righted. Complicity is as a part of the Black experience as resistance, and, to Black, Rankine does not examine herself enough in her examination of the structures around her.

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107 Rankine, “Why I’m Spending $625,000 to study whiteness.”
108 Interview with Cathy Park Hong.
109 Wilkerson.
110 Rankine, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”
But despite all of this, *Citizen* is more visible than perhaps any book published in this political era. It cleared space, in the manner of all epics, for its culture. It demanded Black stories and Black subjectivities to be told and offered a radically Black point-of-view to gaze upon those subjectivities. It contains history and contains futurity. It is also, in the manner of all epics, not enough. What *Citizen* has provided is a new ground upon which further work can be done. It is a necessary clearing-space in which one can pause for a moment and see, with greater clarity, the human beings on either side of the utterance, of the bodies on either side of citizenship.
Step Right Up: Tyehimba Jess Stages an *Olio*

“To the university I’ll steal, and there I’ll steal,” to borrow from Pistol at the end of Henry V, as he would surely borrow from us. This is the only possible relationship to the American university today.

Harney & Moten

To me, it’s about entering the master’s house and taking over his shit to tell my story. I am taking over this building, this structure. I don’t see it as a prison to keep me in, I see it as a structure to build out.

Tyehimba Jess

The Luncheon

In May of 2017, “valued member of the Pulitzer Prize board” Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia University, had the honor and distinction of handing out that year’s Pulitzer Prizes at the annual Pulitzer Luncheon. In the video taken for the Pulitzer website, Bollinger, the “longest-serving president of Columbia in three quarters of a century,” is a gray-haired older White man wearing a nondescript blue suit with matching blue tie. The prizes that he delivers are not the oversized gold medallions that show up in publicity photos, but nondescript blue binders.

The “Class photo” of the event shows the 2017 Pulitzer cohort, like Bollinger, wearing nearly-matching shades of dark blue or black, huddled close together and

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1 Harney and Moten, 26.
2 Tyehimba Jess, Brooklyn Library workshop.
3 Columbia is over 250 years old, so the distinction is less than impressive.
4 “The 2017 Pulitzer Prize Luncheon,” video.
smiling. Distinct in the photo are a few prominent Black writers and journalists: Hilton Als of the New Yorker, wearing a bright green kerchief, Lyn Nottage, winner in drama, wearing a flowing blue dress, Rob Moore of the *New York Daily News* in a distinct white vest and blue tie, and Pulitzer-board chair Eugene Robinson on the side, smiling next to Bollinger. Nearly central in the second to last row is the beaming face of Tyehimba Jess, winner in poetry, wearing his characteristic black flat cap. (The remaining Black winner, Colson Whitehead, was not present.)

![Figure 5. 2017 Pulitzer "Class Photo," Pulitzer website.](image)

Als, Nottage, Moore, and Jess are visually distinct in this photo, being among the scant half a dozen people of color attending this event for the elitest of the elite in American letters.

This distinction is also audible. In the video of the event, Bollinger introduces each winner by name with a short description of their work. When Jess’s turn comes around, Bollinger mispronounces his name not once but twice. Bollinger opens with,
“The prize goes to *Olio* by Tee-im-bə Jess.” He ends with, “Congratulations to Tee-em-boo Jess.”5 “Tyehimba” is pronounced largely how it’s spelled: “TYE-him-bə.”

In the video, Jess takes his time reaching the dais, leaving Bollinger to wait blankly for several seconds. Eventually Jess bounds onto the stage like an athlete, smiles quickly at the camera and at another “congratulations” from Bollinger, collects his binder, then attempts a quick exit. The photographer calls out for him to stay—they still need a picture. Bollinger chuckles at the faux pas and Jess, with seeming reluctance, turns back. The two freeze for the photograph that now graces the Pulitzer website: Bollinger with a grin of casual condescension, Jess turned neither to him nor to camera but somewhere in between, a toothy smile on his face like a mask.

*Figure 6. Bollinger and Jess at the Pulitzer luncheon, May 25, 2017, Pulitzer website.*

The text of Bollinger’s short introduction is worthy of attention:

The prize goes to *Olio* by Tyehimba Jess, for a distinctive work that melds performance art with the deeper art of poetry to explore collective memory and challenge contemporary notions of race and identity. Congratulations to Tyehimba Jess.6

5 “The 2017 Pulitzer Luncheon.”
6 “The 2017 Pulitzer Prize Luncheon,” video.
Firstly, Bollinger calls poetry a “deeper art” than performance, which must have come as a surprise to Du Yun and the other performance artists at the luncheon. But more curious is his line about “contemporary notions of race and identity” being “challenged” by Jess’s book. On its face, Olio is a long work, best described as a lyric epic, about Black artists, musicians, and entertainers of the late 19th and early 20th century, the “first-generation freed” generation that came up just after slavery’s abolition, and how their contributions to culture were largely lost to popular memory. Their efforts were lost not because they had no impact—quite the opposite. The contributions of these artists and entertainers were routinely stolen, co-opted, and appropriated by mainstream White artists, managers, and producers. Because of this, they formed a large and lasting part of the hodgepodge we now think of as American culture. On its face, this project doesn’t challenge “contemporary notions of race and identity,” unless one were under the impression that Black artists are not a foundational part of the American artistic and musical landscape.

I don’t know if Bollinger had even read Olio. I suspect he didn’t—Olio is not a book many people have read in its entirety. While I know many poets and academics who anecdotally admire the book and extoll its merits, I know of few, if any, who have read it cover to cover. When I mention it to other poets and academics, the modal response is something like, “Yes! if any book deserved a Pulitzer it’s Olio!” followed by, “I haven’t actually read it.”

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7 Jess, Olio, 3.
8 Which recalls Moretti’s definition of epic as “an almost super-canonical form, yet one that is virtually unread.” Moretti, 4.
There is an air of obvious difficulty and clear achievement about the book that is at once a signal of merit and a barrier to engagement. The book is ambitious, intricate, finely crafted, and meticulously researched, and so it is also perceived as cold, formal, and overly historical. Many readers I know typically prefer Jess’s previous, more personal and intimate (yet still historical and well-researched) work *Leadbelly* to the more ambitious *Olio*. Here Jess occupies a similar place as Claudia Rankine: even though *Citizen* has more awards and popularity, fellow poets tend to prefer her more personal and intimate previous book *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. The perceived intimacy of *DLMBL* is curious considering that it is a composite piece as much as *Citizen* is, composed of anecdotes taken from multiple sources and points of view. But *DLMBL* is presented as a first-hand account while *Citizen* is presented in a documentary style, which makes the former more acceptably “lyric.” Similarly, both *Olio* and *Leadbelly* are entirely composed of persona poems; but while *Leadbelly* is presented in a linear and “lyric” style, and the point of view stays close to its two main characters, *Olio* is vast, multitemporal, multivocal, choral, contrapuntal epic with a cast of hundreds that is intricately formal, almost oulipoan in the constraints it sets itself. Its central register is not intimacy but spectacle. It is a self-consciously performative endeavor, a vaudeville variety show, a hodgepodge, an “olio.”

The fact that there were six Black artists at the 2017 the Pulitzer winning cohort was an improvement on the Pulitzer’s history of exclusion. African American artists swept the prizes for fiction, poetry, drama, and criticism, and an American African, the Libyan-American-British writer Hisham Matar, won for memoir. And yet Jess’s
appearance on the Pulitzer stage with only two other Black people is typical for America’s premier literary prize. As of 2021, only eight Black poets have won the Pulitzer for poetry since the first award was given in 1922. These are Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, Natasha Trethewey, Tracy K. Smith, Jess, Gregory Pardlo, and, most recently, Jericho Brown. (Non-Black writers of color fare even worse, with only Vijay Seshadri and William Carlos Williams, who was half Puerto Rican.)

Three of the Black poetry winners were book-length poems that could be called epics: Brooks’s *Annie Allen*, which contains the mock-epic “The Anniad”; Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah*, a sprawling decades-long love story told in persona poems; and *Olio*.9 Komunyakaa’s *Neon Vernacular* is a “new and selected” work, so includes a number of his earlier books, some of which are thematically linked.10 Trethewey’s *Native Guard* is almost a book-length poem, being a mix of personal and family lyric with reflections on the Louisiana Native Guards, an all-Black regiment in the Civil War composed of freed slaves.11

Notably, the majority of these wins occurred after 1988, when an open letter and statement signed by 48 prominent Black artists and intellectuals published in the *New York Times Book Review* decried the snubbing of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critic’s Circle Award. Signatories included nearly everyone in Black letters: Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Amiri and Amina Baraka, Angela Davis, Nikky Finney, Lucille Clifton, Alice Walker, Hortense Spillers,

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9 Gwendolyn Brooks, Dove.
10 Komunyakaa.
11 Trethewey.
Despite the international stature of Toni Morrison, she has yet to receive the national recognition that her five major works of fiction entirely deserve: she has yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. We, the undersigned black critics and black writers, here assert ourselves against such oversight and harmful whimsy.\textsuperscript{12}

This “harmful whimsy” also prevented James Baldwin from receiving a Pulitzer, and his recent death in 1987 haunts the statement for Morrison. “Alive, we write this testament of thanks to you, dear Toni: alive, beloved and persevering, magical,” write Jordan and Baker.\textsuperscript{13} The lack of recognition for Black artists in their lifetime is a long and storied tale, and also one that is taken up in \textit{Olio}. But the campaign worked; \textit{Beloved} was then nominated for and then awarded the Pulitzer that year. Some years later she won the Nobel prize in Literature. Still, one has to wonder if any of that would have happened if Jordan, Baker, et al had not \textit{made} it happen.

Every book of poems must in some way prove itself worthy to be included on a Pulitzer shortlist, so the fact that these books by Black poets are more historically ambitious than the average published book of poetry is not surprising. \textit{Olio}’s 2017 win, for example, was over two similarly ambitious finalists: Campbell McGrath’s \textit{XX}, which retells the whole 20\textsuperscript{th} century in one hundred poems; and the collected poems of the late Adrienne Rich (which included an introduction by Rankine).\textsuperscript{14} But there is something distinctive in the work that has to be done by African-American poets to be picked for the highest prize in American poetry. Notably, this is an award that was never offered to

\textsuperscript{12} McDowell, New York times.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} “2017 Pulitzer Prize Winners & Finalists.”
Black luminaries like Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka, or June Jordan, or even (as of 2021) contemporary writers like Elizabeth Alexander, Patricia Smith (nominated 2018), Terrance Hayes, or Claudia Rankine. And although awards are meaningless in themselves, they are representative of what a community or in-group has decided to value, commemorate, and memorialize. By evidence of the winners and nominations, Black poetry is not valued by the American poetic establishment as much as White poetry (and non-Black POC poetry even less). The Black poet must be more than just a poet, but also more than just a Black poet. The Pulitzer-prize winning Black poet must write not only themselves but also history, in a way that speaks to “all” (read: White) audiences. That is, these books of poetry must perform the role of Pulitzer-prize worthy even before they approach the Pulitzer committee.

Some books fall into recognition, usually at the end of a long and storied career; others win accolades by accident of time and circumstance. Olio, by contrast, has done neither of those things. It didn’t win the Pulitzer; it took that thing. Olio didn’t wait for acclaim, it crowbarred in through the roof and rappelled down the skylight. It didn’t wait for a letter signed by 48 luminaries; it gathered its cast of forgotten and undervalued Black performers and broke the hell in. Which is to say that the book didn’t simply “deserve” the Pulitzer, it actively worked to make itself an object that could not be ignored by White gatekeepers.

This speaks to a long tradition of Black artists having to contend with and adapt to White forms in order to survive, both economically and culturally, and also having to take up space to be noticed. Raymond Hedin writes about how the Black American “written narrative tradition” was “enclosed” from the very beginning “by literary forms
bequeathed to it by whites.”¹⁵ This applies to the slave narratives of the 19th century, always prefaced and afterworded by White testimonials to the Black narrative’s accuracy and worth. But it also applies to how “form always sends signals of its own, signals which may or may not be compatible with other elements of a narrative.” The presence of received forms “signals the unavoidable presence of the white audience, the power that resides in that audience’s standards of approval (and disapproval), and the fact that form can be both instrument and sign of that power.”¹⁶

But writing in these inherited forms is not enough—Black artists must excel at them, while at the same time containing their emotions. To Hedin, “Anger has held a central, difficult position in this tradition.” These writers understand that anger is “a risky emotion,” one that is “especially problematic for black writers,” given how it plays into the stereotypes of the White audience. This leads artists towards the “emphatically structured,” a “tradition of intense but controlled emotions” manifest in strict formalism:

Emphasis on form implicitly conveys the rationality of the writer; and that context of rationality allows him to express his anger, or the anger of his characters, without suggesting an overall lack of control. Structure, that is, takes on a doubly argumentative function, asserting a desirable (because culturally questioned) trait and counterbalancing a more dangerous one without denying its existence or validity.¹⁷

This “structure” can be experimental or conventional, but Hedin argues that the Black tradition is more often one of “emphatic” conventionality:

I am convinced that the black narrative tradition has been characterized more by the emphatic presence of seemingly conventional means of organizing than by the obviously experimental.... black writers have tended to shape conventional

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¹⁶ Ibid.
forms to their own strategic uses rather than merely to imitate them in acts of cultural homage.\textsuperscript{18}

So we can see in Jess’s \textit{Olio} not a work in the “experimental” tradition of Jean Toomer’s \textit{Cane} (continued today in such poets as Will Alexander, M. NourbeSe Philip, Nathaniel Mackey, Ed Roberson, etc.) but rather one in the tradition of emphatic conventionality, that uses the conventional in a way that both demonstrates a mastery of craft, “rationality,” and “intense but controlled emotions,” but, on the other hand, also allows for transformation: a strategic de-formation of form for explicitly Black purposes. As Houston A. Baker writes, “mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee.”\textsuperscript{19}

As “the university” and “the poetic establishment” have become near-synonymous in the post-Iowa era,\textsuperscript{20} what Harney and Moten write about the university is also true of poetry:

\begin{quote}
[It] cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

The subversive intellectual is also the radical poet, and given how closely tied poetry as an institution is to centers of power—capital, cultural, and racial—using poetry as both a refuge and a place of (illicit) opportunity is a prime strategy of epic Blackness.

\textit{Olio}, as a self-styled epic of underappreciated Black expression, uses the whole architecture of the White literary establishment against itself—its obvious intricacy, the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{18} Ibid.
\bibitem{19} Baker, \textit{Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance}, 50.
\bibitem{20} Cf. Kimberly Quiogue Andrews.
\bibitem{21} Harney and Moten, 26.
\end{thebibliography}
difficulty of its craft, its unignorable bigness, smuggles, with “love and theft,” these forgotten Black voices back into the centers of cultural power. Its form challenges American poetic culture in such a way that slyly invites praise while undermining the entire basis of that praise. Yes, Olio deserves awards. But so did “Blind” Boone, Henry “Box” Brown, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Ernest Hogan, Sissieretta Jones, Scott Joplin, Millie and Christine McKoy, “Blind Tom” Wiggins, Bert Williams and George Walker, and Edmonia Lewis—the “cast” of this Olio who “summon tongue to wit-ness.”

By writing about these artists undervalued by America in a form that demands valuation by America’s cultural institutions, Jess has epic’d, and Blackified, the Pulitzer.

Olio is such a work of obvious formal difficulty, historical breadth, and contemporary resonance that it is harder to imagine it not winning than winning a Pulitzer. Its visibility as a master class in form and execution put a spotlight on the gatekeepers. Either they could give it awards (finalist for National Book Critics Circle awards, the PEN book award, and the Kinglsey Tufts book award as well as the Pulitzer), or they would otherwise have to explain why they didn’t.

The formalism in Olio—the crowns, the double golden shovels, the poems that must be read sideways and across and down—acts as proof of Jess’s bona fides, of his deserving of recognition. Olio is only the latest in a long line of Black artists, much like John Henry, having to out-do the dominant power at its own game. In America this line starts with Phyllis Wheatley and goes through Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Countee Cullen, to the early Brooks of A Street in Bronzeville and Annie Allen, which won the first Pulitzer prize for a Black poet. But to

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22 Jess, 1-3.
23 In this way, Olio’s exception proves the rule. Plenty of notable works of poetry by Black Americans did not win a Pulitzer; Olio’s win tells us that they could have. And so, why didn’t they?
Jess this line also contains a long history in music, sculpture, and performance, the Black performers rounding out the olio.

A bank vault is designed to be easy to put things into but difficult to remove them; recognition and acclaim, by contrast, is a space that is difficult to get into but easy to take out, to view and disseminate. The bank vault restricts access; acclaim provides it. In either, the line between inside/outside is a membrane that goes only one way, and the selection of what is on the inside and what is on the outside—gatekeeping—is part of the preservation and maintenance of this membrane as much as it is about the contents. But it is a discursive membrane, and so is changed not only by changes in gatekeeping but by its contents. The bank vault loses meaning if all the notes are taken out, but it also loses meaning if the bills themselves lose value, through inflation or, say, a small but deliberate fire. The contents and the keys to the vault are both the meaning of the vault. Just so, the books inside the circle of Pulitzer prize winners, in addition to the members of the committee and the jurors, is the meaning of the Pulitzer prize.

Thieves steal things out of places; Olio has stolen into a place. It has been smuggled into acclaim. Given that the American literary and artistic establishment is built on appropriation of Black expression and minstrelsy, the entry of Black voices into such spaces works, in however small a way, to change the notion of the American subject. To say that Olio has stolen the Pulitzer Prize is to say that it has stolen into the circle of recognition that is the Pulitzer Prize. This reminds us that this circle was already stolen away from the things it has excluded. Historically, it has excluded

24 Michael North, Matthew Hart
Blackness, while also *stealing from* Blackness. $^{25}$ *Olio* is part of the work of stealing Blackness back into the centers of power where it has been stolen from. But it is also about revealing the Blackness already present: the stolen Blackness in the noise of American culture.

In this chapter I will listen in detail to the mess and noise of *Olio* as well as the craft and music of *Olio*. I begin with a survey of the form and structure of this lauded but underread epic book of poetry. I attempt to describe the scope of its practices, such as counterpoint, noise, vaudeville, and the mask, and how each works to animate the overlooked and underserved Black artists in the noise of popular culture (which includes literary culture). The “mask” is the artificial burnt cork of the minstrel show but it’s also a living representation, and Jess works to find the face hidden not behind but within the mask—representations of Blackness hidden within the hiding of Whiteness. I read several of the main sections of *Olio*: on the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Henry “Box” Brown, Edmonia Lewis, and, finally, Scott Joplin, whose life becomes a guiding metaphor for Black expression and creativity under oppression and appropriation. While Joplin died penniless, the “pauper king of piano,” Jess shows how the richness of his life and music have lived on, becoming the richness of American music. $^{26}$ Repackaging that richness into the intricately crafted puzzle-box of *Olio* is a small way of returning that richness back to its original owners, while also forever ensconcing it in literary history.

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$^{25}$ Ibid.
$^{26}$ Jess, 8.
How does one even describe *Olio*? On the one hand it is largely linear, conversational, and apprehensible in a way that more experimental texts are not. It doesn’t have the deliberate illegibility of sections of Philips’ *Zong*, or the more experimental language of Nathaniel Mackey, Fred Moten, or Will Alexander, part of what Shockley describes as “innovative” poetics in the Black aesthetic tradition. On the other hand, *Olio* has a largeness, a boundlessness that is difficult to pin down. Simply describing it as an “epic” does not capture its multigenerity.

Everything in *Olio* is presented in triplicate, from the “Introduction / Cast / Owners” to the end matter “Appendix or Interlocutor or Barker’s Brief Notes,” from the title on the cover, three “O”s arranged in a triskelion surrounding “LI,” to title as it appears in the interior—on the first page in cursive, on the second page in capital block letters, in the interior in the triangular glyph that also graces the cover:

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O  O
LI
O
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Inside the book are three visually distinct modes of presentation (aside from the front matter/end matter, headers/footers, and occasional interruptions from the Barker): epistolary prose sections telling the story of the fictional Julius Monroe Trotter’s quest to learn more about Scott Joplin; verse poetry, all of which is in some type of form and

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some type of persona; and ethereal line illustrations made by Jessica Lyne Brown. The poetry itself is also given in three separate and visually distinct modes: 1) a crown of sonnets, 2) diverse yet formally inventive poems that form the bulk of each of the seven sections, and 3) special fold-out poems that take up two- or four-page spreads, and interrupt the flow of reading. The front matter gives three definitions of the word “Olio”:

_olio_ \(\text{\textbackslash 'o-le-o}\)  
  a : a miscellaneous mixture of heterogenous elements; hodgepodge  
  b : a miscellaneous collection (as of literary or musical selections)  
  also: the second part of a minstrel show which featured a variety of performance acts and later evolved into vaudeville.\(^{28}\)

![Figure 7. Jess, Olio, cover.](image)

Even the cover image is in threes. Three Os arranged in a triangle give the word, “Olio” with a textual fluidity and superfluity that is at once meaningful and meaningless.

\(^{28}\) Jess, frontmatter.
In reading the cover, any of the two “O”s can be read as “OliO,” but there is always a final “O,” the remainder. The third O reminds us of what remains, the inability for two eyes and one mind to read all of the possibilities of one set of letters at once. But the third O also forces us to read the “LI” around again, which forces us to read “OLIO” over again, and again. Another remainder leads to another Olio, so we read “OliOliOliOliOliO” around in circles. The triangle becomes a spiral, locked by the rules of grammar into endless spinning. But those Os are also eyes. They are seen but also seeing, two Os being eyes and the third a mouth, the “LI” boxing out a squarish nose. This makes a minstrel mask, a linguistic and visual black-and-white face that both is and is not there. Which O is mouth and which are eyes? Depends on how we see. Depends on who sees. Or, it depends on who speaks.

The book’s conceit is that it is not a text but a public performance.29 This makes it not something to be “read” but rather “a doing and a thing done.”30 The first page after the table of contents is not a preface but an “Introduction / or / Cast / or / Owners of This Olio.” This three-page cast list names each of the personae in the book as if they were performers on a vaudeville stage, written in a sly yet insistent carnival barker voice—an unnamed narrator/emcee who returns over and over again in the book’s 235 pages. This barker voice guides us through the entire epic event, or rather, it guides us to guide ourselves through. The register is not declarative but imperative—“Fix your eyes,” “weave your own chosen way,” “Step right up!” This turns the declarative mode of history into the volitional mode of spectacle—you are invited, not compelled, to make

29 Which is and is not the resistance of the object, as Moten writes and doesn’t write in In the Break and Black and Blur.
30 Diamond, 1.
your own way through this event, and, like with the overstimulation of three-ring-circus, you must decide what to view and how to view it. The voluntariness, the *freedom* of reception that the viewer experience stands in stark contrast to the unfreedom of the performers.

The first entry, for example, is “John William ‘Blind’ Boone (1864-1927)”:

Sprung from a Yankee Bugler and a newly freed mother, his sight was sacrificed to encephalitis at the age of six months. Possessed by a prodigious memory, perfect pitch, and a particular partiality to piano, from which he sees and he sees and he sees...\(^{31}\)

The sensationalism, the alliteration, all indicate that this is not poetry but grand spectacle, where Boone is reduced to the sort of grotesque particularity common to carnival “freak show”—a place where fellow *Olio* performers Millie and Christine McKoy, conjoined twins, got their (involuntary) debut. But couching this sensationalism in formal poetry—*Olio* is nothing if not formally adventurous, with crowns and double crowns of sonnets, double golden shovels, poems to be read up and down and sideways—transforms this carnival stage into the stage of poetry. While vaudeville is typically considered “low” art, and the artists and entertainers thereon exploited, coerced or outright trafficked (as in the case of the McKoy sisters), Jess plays with the contrasts between low and high, freedom and unfreedom, performer and spectator, as he uses his poetry to monumentalize the struggle and dignity of his performers. Take the introduction to Millie and Christine McKoy (1851-1912). While a contemporary barker might dwell on their anatomy, Jess’s barker uses the introduction to detail not their bodies but their self-emancipation:

\(^{31}\) Jess, 1. Ellipsis in original.
The Creator consigned the McKoys with the grace and grit to be conjoined twins. To be born into slavery. To be regularly inspected by physicians to verify their combined condition; to be leased to traveling freak tours at the age of two. When kidnapped to England at the age of three, their owner took their mother there as receipt to retrieve them back—and away from British liberty. Upon emancipation, they famously travelled the world until they bought their own plantation.\textsuperscript{32}

The McKoy’s physical condition is secondary to their condition as enslaved; enslavement, not anatomy, was the privation they had to overcome. The further privation of the vaudeville stage was then their path to economic liberty, an unfreedom turned into a sort of emancipation, the satisfaction of owning the plantation where they were once owned. This marriage of economics and emancipation is not without its complications (see the backlash to Beyoncé, or any Black artist who makes bank), but in Jess’s retelling it is not so much the process but the drive, recreated in poetic form, that is worth telling and retelling. These are not stories of Black success to be emulated, but stories of Black struggle to be remembered and not forgotten. The Introduction is after all also the Cast but also the “Owners of this Olio”: these disenfranchised Black artists “own” this story and this performance in a way that they did not own their own persons or the products of their own art. This is further expanded upon in the section of the book dedicated to the McKoy twins, with its twinned and entwined “star sonnets”—unfreedom made, from a certain perspective, beautiful.

At the end of the Introduction or Cast of Owners of this Olio, the barker voice returns to give a final call to the audience before the show:

Fix your eyes on the flex of these first-generation-freed voices:
They coalesce in counterpoint, name nemeses, summon tongue to wit-ness.
Weave your own chosen way between these voices…\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{33} Jess, 3. Ellipses original.
Followed by the stylized glyph of the title that graces the cover, the word “Olio” with three Os. The barker’s catalogue of verbs imbues his cast with agency they flex, coalesce, counterpoint, name, summon. The viewer fixes their eyes, weaves their way. The verbs leap physically and rhetorically—their movement, after all is a “counterpoint,” which describes both music/dance and the rhetoric of argument. Contrast and counterpoint is in the “name nemeses” and the “tongues” summoned both “to wit,” a legal/formal idiom preceding further evidence, and “to witness.” But this to-wit/witness is further witnessed by the spectator, who now becomes, in addition to the reader of a book and the audience of a vaudeville show, members of a jury, one capable of passing judgment on the testimony of the wit and the witnesses.

Forming the backbone to the olio are sonnets: fifteen choral sections, each titled (save for the last) with some variation on “Jubilee.” The first and last two are adjectival: it begins Fisk Jubilee Proclamation and Jubilee Blues and ends with Jubilee Indigo and Jubilee Mission. The central ten “Jubilee” poems are given names, “Jubilee: Isaac Dickerson (1852-1900),” “Jubilee: Eliza Walker (1857-?)” etc. These are nine members of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, in 1871-72, and the bandleader, George White.34 These poems are all sonnets, and there are fourteen of them, forming a “crown” where the last line of one is a loose repetition first line of the next, and the last poem “We’ve Sung Each Free Day Like It’s a Salvation” is a compilation, repeating each repeated line in backwards order, ending with a repetition of the first.

34 Andrew Ward; Fiskjubileesingers.org.
Surrounding the “Jubilee” sections are lines of miniscule text that might escape the reader at first glance. These are given no context until the appendix, in a section titled “On the Fisk Jubilee Choir Testifying Through Fire…”:

The names of our burned and bombed black churches enfold the spirituals sung by our Jubilee choir. Inside each flame burns hum, prayer, and holy book. Each hymn inhabits heat and smoulder; each biblical spark is kindled with story. There is no complete record of all such attacks upon the black congregational body, no complete accounting of all the pulpits, pews and psalm books rendered into fire—these 148 stand in testimony to all the unnamed churches lost to arson and TNT, the slats and nails and sweat the doubled as schoolhouse and underground passageway, the pyres of pine and oak and cedar steeples and sheltered baptisms and home-goings, the silent crucifixions curled into ash. The AMEs and the Graces, the Tabernacles and all the many Firsts; the hand fans, tambourines, mourner’s benches and collection plates; they rise in smoke like the songs that soaked through them and up to heaven’s blued, eternal door.35

The textual names become metonymy for all the physical objects of the church, as well as all the sacraments, events, songs, and people within their history, lettings them rise in smoke to heaven’s “blued” door, both the blue of the sky and the Blues. By surrounding the “Jubilee” poems, which are a circular double crown of sonnets (where the last line of each poem is repeated as the first line of the next), these names are allowed to ring out eternally, even if the reader is not always aware of them.

Seven sequences of persona poems make up the bulk of the book. The sections are each bookended by a pair of sonnets sandwiching an epistolary prose section. The pattern goes: sonnet, epistolary prose, sonnet; then an illustration, followed by a group of twenty or so main poems (usually including a perforated, fold-out two-page poem); then back to sonnet, epistolary prose, sonnet, followed by the next illustration and the next group. In total we have fifteen sonnets—seven pairs + one final “master sonnet”;

35 Jess, 221.
seven main poem sections—Blind Tom, Millie and Christine McKay, Mirror of Slavery/Mirror Chicanery, John William “Blind” Boone, Bert Williams/George Walker Paradox, Sisieretta Jones, and Wildfire; and eight epistolary prose sections, plus introduction and appendix.

The main sequence sections are between fifteen and thirty poems long, and center on a figure or pair of figures from the cast: pianist “Blind Tom” Wiggins, singers Millie and Christine McKoy, escape- and performance artist Henry “Box” Brown (paired with the specter of John Berryman), pianist John William “Blind” Boone, minstrel show performers Bert Williams and George Walker (with a cameo duet by Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Booker T. Washington), soprano Sisieretta Jones, and sculptor Edmonia Lewis. Each of these sections has their own form. The Blind Tom section, for example, has a seven-poem crown of sonnets intertwined with seven syncopated, “contrapuntal” poems, which is Jess’s signature form, appearing in his first collection Leadbelly: two voices telling a single poem in stichomythia or in harmony. These poems mesh together two personas in a way that can be read left-side only, right-side only, or left-side then right-side. He describes the form in an interview with Anne Rasmussen:

The syncopated, contrapuntal poems were written with two basic purposes in mind, always focusing on critical events, decisions or themes in a subject’s life.

1. To provide a voice for those who have been left out of the dialog of history. In some cases, a quote is provided from a public figure or outlet, and I have written an adjoining or complimentary voice that adds the subject’s point of view. In these cases, the objective is generally to create a syllabically symmetrical counterpoint to the quote, to inform the historical record in a way that is matched breath for breath with the original quote. Such is the case with Irving Berlin, John Berryman, and various newspaper quotes on the coon song craze of the early 20th century.

2. To imagine a conversation between two historical figures that are otherwise silent. In this case, the two figures may be in accordance with each other (McKoy Twins, Williams/Walker) or in opposition with each other (Charity
Wiggins v. Bethune). In these cases, the dialog opens up a host of issues that are germane both to the individuals and ourselves—issues of freedom, choice, morality, love, courage and cowardice.36

These poems formally making conversations out of the one-sidedness of history, imagining or improvising a counterpoint or harmony out of what he calls “the dialectic of history.” This adds dimension to history, sometimes a physical one, as in the fold-out two-page poem in the “Bert Williams/George Walker Paradox,” which the appendix instructs to cut out from the book and make a cylinder or pianola roll, demonstrating “the way that Williams and Walker transformed a two dimensional form into a three dimensional vehicle for their humanity.”37

The double- or triple contrapuntal poem is the formal heart of Olio and is repeated in different ways. The McKoy sisters’ section is a series of contrapuntal “star sonnets,” arranged in a star or butterfly pattern, that, like the Blind Tom poems, can be read doubly or triply. As the appendix says, “Syncopated sonnets sometimes sing in circles to allow recitation that’ll roll interstitial, antigravitational and diagonal, with voices splitting to each side but joining in the middle.”38 The poems in the McKoy sisters section are interspersed with short, center-aligned sentences, seemingly in prose, seemingly in the voice of the sisters speaking in unison. These short sections tell the narrative of the McKoy’s journey, from infancy to ascension, which gives the reader two views of their narrative, one in (fragmentary) prose and one in (contrapuntal) poetry.

Next is “Mirror of Slaver/ Mirror Chicanery.” The first page brings back the Barker, who describes the contents of the section, once again in triplicate: block type

36 Rasmussen.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 221.
title, cursive subtitle, block italics sub-subtitle. This is followed by three quotations from the mid-19th century, one contemporary account of Henry “Box” Brown’s art installation “Mirror of Slavery,” the second the text of a minstrel song by Stephen Foster, and the third a rewriting of that minstrel song by Brown himself. The poems in this section all take after John Berryman. The first is a double-poem mixing Berryman’s introduction with the imagined voice of Brown. The rest are pastiches/parodies of Berryman’s Dream Songs, with its notorious Blackface minstrel character “Mr. Bones.” Each poem takes the form and content of one of Berryman’s poems and rewrites them the way Brown rewrote Foster.

The next section surrounds pianist “Blind” Boone, and it intersperses relatively simple free verse with short, large-text interstices titled after the notes of the blues scale in C: C, Eb, F, F#, G, Bb, C. The “Bert Williams/George Walker Paradox” has the Barker voice come back to tell in triplicate “All Coons look alike to me / A Chant of Merry Coon Song Melodies / Guaranteed! All Titles Historically Accurate! Guaranteed!” What follows are lists of actual “coon songs” from the era, headed and footed by quotations from Scott Joplin and others, each followed by a double poem that puts the text of a minstrel song against the persona voice of Bert and George. The section of Sissieretta Jones imagines prose letters from one “Eva Shoe” about working with Jones, followed by prose or verse in the voice of Jones herself, titled after some of her famous arias. The final verse section is about sculptor Edmonia Lewis, and alternates between prose descriptions of “Wildfire”’s life and work and free verse titled after her most famous pieces. This section opens and closes with first-person declarations in large, center-aligned text, taken from Lewis herself.
There is a third form, a special poem that takes up an entire perforated, double-sided page, designed like a centerfold to fan out into three dimensions. These act almost like broadsides, shifting the occasion of poetry from the mechanical flipping of pages to something different. The reader has to deal with the materiality of the page and the question of the page’s direction, orientation, and interactivity. They are doubled and triple poems, so how should they be read? Should they be cut at the site of perforation, and displayed? Which side should be displayed? And in what direction? In the appendix the Barker gives instructions on how to remove these pages and treat them as three-dimensional objects. In photos they become a cylinder or a Möbius strip—their three-dimensional form informing how to read them. But most readers will not tear out pages of their precious (and expensive) book, so the pages serve almost as an admonition to the reader, of how far the reader won’t go to read these stories. But above all the cut-out pages give an extra dimensionality to the work, they make it larger, physically and conceptually, than a book, which is understood as a rectangular object of two-dimensional sheets of paper. Olio is three dimensional. It is, like the Möbius strip, an impossible object, telling impossible stories in voices impossible to fully hear.
There are five of these three dimensional poems. The first is the “The McKoy Twins Syncopated Star,” reprinting the McKoy star sonnets on their own spread, while on the reverse is the Barker’s breathless, punctuationless invitation to “step right up ladies and gents boys and gals and see the two headed nightingale the McKoy Twins.” The appendix invites the reader to “Strike your own path through their lines. Circle round their stories to burrow through time.”39

39 Jess, 222.
“Freedsong: So Long! (Duet)” puts “Box” Brown and his Slave Catcher in two sonnets inscribed within two heads, one black, one gray. This thematizes the moment that Brown mails himself to Philadelphia, with the Slave Catcher in pursuit. The two sonnets together can be read separately but also contrapuntally, first line to first line, making one giant sonnet. Or, making multiple giant sonnets, as the appendix tells us:

One faces the other—but then they face away when you liberate the page and attach them back-to-back so H can stare away and then again straight into the hate that seeks to read him up and down and can’t wait to box him up. In the meantime this duo do their duet, unknowingly arguing through it diagonally, back and forth, up and down, and circlin’ round with prayers of liberation and swears against emancipation: Witness their syncopation!40

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40 Ibid., 218.
An illustration shows the pages cut up and taped together in a cylinder with the two faces facing each other on the front, the other side of the cylinder showing the sonnets stitched together, the Slave Catcher’s lines first, then Henry’s. But the Barker is telling us to further “liberate” this page, to physically cut it and reattach it in such a way that the faces are facing away and the lines of the sonnet are reversed, Henry’s lines then the Slave Catcher’s. The implication being that this extra-dimensional intervention is the only way that Henry can actually be free from the gaze of his Slave Catcher. A further formal Easter egg is also revealed in this appendix: “And, dear friends, a blended amended quote form John Berryman’s mind plays double shovel backup at the stichomythic end of every line.” The “Double Shovel” is based on the “Golden Shovel,” a form devised by Terrance Hayes in his poem of the same name, in which every line ends with the words, in order, of Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” (the first two lines—or subtitle, depending on how you read it—of “We Real Cool” is “The Pool Players /Seven
at the Golden Shovel.”) Hayes uses this as a form that both pays tribute and builds off of a prior text in a way that feels multivocal. While an homage or “poem after” may overwrite, intentionally or not, the original text, the Golden Shovel as a form preserves that original. But it preserves it by encoding it in the later text, an encoding that can be read only by those in the know. This speaks to both the dineffable and to the hidden legacies of Black thought and expression.

Jess used the Shovel several times in *Olio*, often doubling it to include two Golden Shovels over facing or contrapuntal poems, each poem encoding part of a single text, making the contrapuntal poems sing one univocal song. The Shovel behind “Freedsong: So Long! (Duet)” is a modified line from Berryman’s Dream Song 2. The original goes:

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Henry are
Baffled. Have ev’body head for Maine,
utility-man take a train?

Arrive a time when all coons lose dere grip,
but is he come?41
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The ending words for the 28 lines of Jess’s double sonnet read: “Henry ain’t baffled have myself, head for Philly— Utility—man take a train” and “arrive a time: when all—coons lose their grip. and it’s now come...”42 Henry is no longer baffled. He’s gone for Philly. It’s now come.

The Williams/Walker section has two such foldouts. The first is the “Bert/Williams / George Walker Paradox,” which the Barker describes as “Bert and George step out the minstrel box with paradox. These verbal contortionists correlate and

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41 Berryman,
42 Jess, 77.
syncopate to emancipate themselves from two-dimensional postulates of blackface fate." On the reverse is text from the “Whitmark Amateur Minstrel Guide,” teaching would-be blackface performers the how-to’s of minstrelsy and burnt cork. So Bert and George “turn their backsides to Witmark’s Minstrel Guide to hawk their hustle in this ‘syncopated ghazal,’ singing line by line, forward, backward, or on the diagonal.” Then we are instructed to remove the pages on the perforation and to find new ways to put the paper back in three-dimensional forms: a lengthwise cylinder, a width-wise cylinder, a torus, a Möbius, the words playing off each other in ever-more complicated “Euclidian half-twist” ways.

Then there is the Dunbar-Booker Double Shovel, animating the argument between Dunbar’s vernacular and Booker’s “uplift.” The words to “We Wear the Mask” are Shoveled in the end words. The appendix once again tells us to “cut them loose along the dotted lines” so “our speakers break out of their x/y axis grind.” In Jess’s three-dimensional reading of Dunbar-Booker, both figures are “masks” that fold into each other, and their endless discussions stand “back to back against the stacked lynch mobs they hold inside”—on the reverse are two tables: “Black Victims of Lynchings Per 100,000 Black s by State, 1802-1930” and “The Reasons Given for Black Lynchings.”

Jumbled Up and Making Sense

Jess’s interest in semantic and linear ambiguity he traces to his mentor, the poet Sterling Plumpp, author of *Blues: The Story Always Untold* and *Ornate with Smoke*.

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43 Ibid, m 215.
44 Jess., 215.
Plumpp is a historian of the blues and a master of the surprising line break—breaks that force the reader to contend with multiplicities of meaning, which become a focal praxis in *Olio*. Jess describes meeting Plumpp for the first time at the University of Illinois Chicago, in a class called “the Black Aesthetic” that he was only taking to fulfill some final credit requirements for a degree in Public Policy:46

My first day in class, found out the professor was a Mississippi accent with a Latin versed tongue, dressed in casual jacket, leaning all over the podium while he preached a mix of song and history and poetics and politics. Up until that time, I’d had only one other brotha teacher in my entire academic career from kindergarten through college—and no one had known the Blues like Sterling. Dude was talking about one’s work as an extension of one’s culture.47

What struck Jess about Plumpp was “how he could fit the feel and intent of the music into a political context, and synthesize it up into an explanation of sorts in his poems.”48

Politics is tied up with music and the form of poetry. He writes, “Sterling also taught me about the magnificent meaning that a poet can wring from a line break,” how “each line can carry its own meaning independent of the poem as a whole.” This is the beginning of his thoughts on incompatible/compatible line readings through the use of lineation and breaks: “When I read Sterling, I am learning how to make the language work double-time, I am discovering how to get two shifts out of the mind’s factory for the price of one.”49 In his article on Plumpp in “The Sterling Plumpp Issue” of *Valley Voices*, he offers multiple readings of Plumpp’s lineation and his use of backslashes (the infamous “blackslash”), offering re-“translations” of sections to show how different reading

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46 Jess, “A Literary Father’s Day.”
48 Jess, “A Literary Father’s Day.”
choices (in lineation and in word meaning) offer simultaneous visions of the same subject.

Reading Jess write about Plumpp is a primer in how Jess wants to be read, “the ways that the printed word can carry music,” “the importance of silence between the notes,” how Plumpp “uses line breaks the way an accomplished singer adds meaning between words and even in the middle of the word by using unexpected silence.” Jess’s reading of the poem “Bessie Smith” sounds like a description of his own project:

Sterling’s image of language "blooming from a back" may give us the image of scars from whippings and backs bent over in cotton fields, an image which transforms into the sequestered, segregated birthplace of the music. (34) The lines "its history/ bleeds from sound as/ the citizens/ come out to get/ baptized in/side their pain" equate the music with the life force of the people, the "citizens" who may or may not be de facto citizens to the country they were born in, but have an immediate birthright to citizenship in the heart of the Blues (36-41). This very Blues is a religion that baptizes the folk in their own pain in order to find release in the music of Bessie’s open wound of music, mouth and voice that heals as it gives voice to that pain. And finally, while these second class citizens may not enjoy all the privileges of those who do not share their hue, they still own the music that emanates from their bodies and the instruments they play, from guitar and harmonica and voice to the bedsprings that sing the carnal songs of ecstasy that relieve loneliness.50

The use of the blues informs Jess’s first book, Leadbelly; substituting Ragtime for blues gives us Olio. But Jess’s reading of the multiplicities in Plumpp’s work speaks more to the impossible reading/listening practices of Olio. “This was the kind of graceful combination of history and music and politics and ecstasy,” he writes, “that made me understand for the first time how everything could end up jumbled up and making sense all on one page,” which is as good a description of Olio as any. “Everything jumbled up and making sense” describes what Douglass Kearney calls the “dineffable”: “A state

50 Ibid, 39.
which something, often because of extremis or intensity, can only be described via signal that seems noise.”\textsuperscript{51} The semantic multiplicities of Plumpp and Jess feel overwhelming, the cast of history too large to hold in your mind. But that’s the point.

Plumpp also taught Jess a sense of community responsibility through art, via his frequenting blues clubs around Chicago. Jess describes his presence in the audience as more than mere reception, but being an important part of the artistic process that Jess would strive to emulate:

He was not playing on stage with them; he was witnessing their lives in a way that would live in another dimension beyond the record deals and the performances. He would reach another audience in another way that they respected—because he did not embellish the pretty, he did not wince from the ugly side of the music—his telling would always reside in the soul of the truth. That was and is an important lesson for me—how to be of a community and to serve it in the Griot way, and it is one I am still looking to fulfill every time I pick up the pen.\textsuperscript{52}

Being part of a community means being responsible to the multiplicities of that community, and communicating it wholly and truly, contradictions and all. And so we can see in Jess’s epic a different way of communicating struggle by going deep into it, dwelling in its noise and contradictions—Kearney defines the Blues as “getting over / just getting over it / by going down / to get down with it.”\textsuperscript{53}

This strategy is reflected in the Plumpp-adjacent “contrapuntal” poems that are the signature form of \textit{Olio}. The act of reading forces the eye to choose between at least three alternatives, as you choose between Blind Tom’s voice or that of his owner, or a strange mashup of the two. Or you read double voices, like “Box” Brown’s voice melding with his “Slave-catcher.” In the sonnets that make up the section on the section on Millie

\textsuperscript{51} Kearney, \textit{Mess and Mess and}, 33.
\textsuperscript{52} Jess, “Sterling Plumpp,” 42.
\textsuperscript{53} Kearney, 13.
and Christie McCoy the columns converge and diverge in patterns that mimic the shape of a star or a butterfly, like the butterfly line art that prefaces the section. The form here not only mirrors the physicality of the conjoined sisters, but the act of reading the poems mirrors the intrusivity of the audience’s gaze. The eye probes, analyzes, sees, somehow, both inside and outside. This recalls how audience members at the McKoy sisters’ early “freak” shows were invited to “examine” the sisters.

Jess has said he was not interested in reproducing the bodies of the sisters:

I did not want to go into the particulars of the Mc Koys’ physicality. I just wanted to say that they were examined and leave it to the reader’s imagination how those examinations happened. I think I was trying to go into that project wanting people to know that they had had to endure this, but not wanting to re-exploit the twins in the process. The way the poem ends up coming out is that the reader is invited to scan over the poem inch by inch, line by line, backward and forward and diagonally, and in the process they are examining their story. What I was looking for was the kind of contrast between the grotesque nature of the freak show and the idea of examining a life story instead of the body. 54

The text becomes the body, and the fraughtness of approaching the body, especially the female body and especially the Black female body, become the fraughtness of reading and interpretation. The “close reading” interpretive style taught in academic workshops since the 1920s (since Jim Crow) is questioned. Framed in this way, the question of how to read a poem or how to interpret a line become not some academic question with no consequences, but tied up inextricably with questions of autonomy, exploitation, and the body itself.

The double and triple poems toss out linear reading, with its inflexible rules of one-then-another, and of an interpretive singularity or individual thought that the reader is tasked with uncovered. Instead, we get a multiplicity of interpretations and a

54 Lanay.
multiplicity of choice. We get spatial reading—where semantics is treated as a topographical, not a syntactical problem. The reader is not forced or lead by the rules of grammar. Rather, a multiplicity of paths is presented, and the reader is invited to make their way through it, as the Barker voice invites the reader to “Weave your own chosen way between these voices. . .”55

In Moretti’s “modern epic,” the non-contemporaneity of history becomes geography: time is treated like space to be explored and colonized, and because history, being history, cannot be harmed, the epic hero is allowed to innocently plunder antiquity the way that the West innocently plundered the non-European world. Reading topography and free choice in Olio gives it a strange affinity to those modern epics. But even so, the choice given the reader/spectator by Jess to examine multiple ways and avenues of reading/seeing history does not excuse them. There are stakes here, as Jess continually reminds us. The reader is continuously implicated in the spectacle they are witnessing—these artists are performing, are struggling for you—which is both you, here, the reader, and you the Pulitzer Prize committee. Your free choice in reading neither frees these artists from exploitation nor frees you from the position of exploiter. All it does is allow space for the double- and triple-consciousness endemic to Black life (of self, perceived-self, and contrapuntal or transcendent self), and the double- and triple-complications of performing that Black life. Like the other epics I am discussing, Olio is not a singular story, and its formal inventiveness is an explicit encoding of the multiplicities of the Black experience.

55 Jess, 3.
“Choice,” then, is made manifest by the form of the book. However, the pathing, like the wheel of O’s that makes the cover image, is circular—there is no end. In an interview with Cave Canem, Jess talks about this explicitly:

The book has a circular motif, one that is expressed through a double crown of sonnets for the Fisk Jubilee Singers and a series of interviews about the life of Scott Joplin. That circular motion is echoed in the contrapuntal poems that employ stichomythia. The mixture of forms throughout the book mirrors the interchange between personas.56

“Stichomythia,” the act of different voices alternating lines of verse, becomes a central theme as well as a central textual practice. Alternating voices do not meld into one, but produce a third, hybrid voice, that is distinct from but necessarily composed of each prior voice. So too the book produces itself as a composite third (and that third composes a fourth, fifth, etc.) of its historical voices.

This carnival barker voice, which Jess inhabits with gusto at public readings, is our only stable guide down these paths. The voice is tricky and trickster-y, signifyin’, leaning into the assonance, puns, wordplay, and “wit” that are characteristic of the fast-talking figure. The voice, saying “step right up,” leads us on and certainly leads us astray. The things it asks of us veer towards synesthesia: we must “fix” our “eyes” on the “flex” of “voices. Voice is encoded in text, but it is not the text to which we affix, but the “flex” of the voices: that is, where the voice exerts itself performatively (flex your muscles), but also changes (flexibility). We must “fix” our eyes not only on the invisible voices, but to the precise moment in which the invisible voices change and perform, where they “coalesce in counterpoint,” speak their antinomies, name their negatives, “summon” themselves and others for humor and verification. It is through this jungle of

56 “Cave Canem: Tyehimba Jess”
interpellation and verification that the reader/participant must “weave your own way” through what Jess has called a “multidirectional comprehension” of the contrapuntal poem.57 The way through is not either voice, or even “between” voices but, to use Moten’s phase, distinctly “not-in-between.”58 The “Appendix” points this out directly, giving as example, three readings of one of the “Syncopated Star Sonnets,” “Millie and Christine’s Love Story.” In the text, the poem is center aligned with alternating lines separated by a caesura, with a final uncaesuraed couplet. Here are the first eight lines:

Here—this is our story I want you to hear—our own duet. Listen to how we’re bound in unison. Listen to the grace we have—one body crooning two notes. By God, we’re like sympathetic strings. Each sung sound ringing within me and my other half; airborne, shook and shimmering through my head, with Christine’s voice at my side. I have sung with Millie’s embracing contrapuntal in a way very few could comprehend—with souls ablaze. This is how I know love—so you can see my life is brimmed. It’s full—with every breath we’ve got. I’m filled completely.59

In the appendix, Jess instructs us to read “up/down, back/forth, and diagonal,” and then gives three different lineations. The first:

INTERSTITIAL...

Here—this is our story I want you to hear—one body crooning two notes. By God, we’re airborne, shook and shimmering through my head, in a way very few could comprehend—with every breath we’ve got. I’m filled completely.60

Reads only the single lines, not the duets. The second:

INTERSTITIAL/ANTIGRAVITATIONAL...

with every breath we’ve got. I’m filled completely,

57 Fitzgerald.
59 Jess, 53.
60 Jess, 53.
in a way very few could comprehend—
airborne, shook and shimmering through my head,
—one body crooning two notes. By God, we’re
Here—this is our story I want you to hear—

Reads the same lines backwards (or down/up). The third:

OR
DIAGONALLY DOWN AND THEN INTERSTITIALLY/
ANTIGRAVITATIONALLY UP...

Here—this is our story I want you to hear—
our own duet. Listen to how we’re bound
—one body crooning two notes. By God, we’re
ringing within me and my other half;
airborne, shook and shimmering through my head,
like sympathetic strings. Each sung sound
our own duet. Listen to how we’re bound.

Which reads the first line, then the right hand of the second, then the third line, then the
right hand of the fourth line, then the fifth line, then back up to the left hand of the
fourth line, then skips up to the left hand of the second line. The reading path is circular
and clockwise: down the right then up the left. These are not the most obvious ways one
could think to read the poems: one would think the easiest three reading paths would be
unison lines / left hand lines all the way down, then unison lines / right hand lines, then
everything together. But Jess does not present us with the obvious. He forces us to think
outside of linear reading practices.

The overall feeling of the contrapuntal poems is one where each voice melts into
the other in something greater than harmony, into something like a harmonic non-
identity. To Jess, it is impossible to reach back through history to hear one story. Rather,

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
we are given a mélange, a hodgepodge, an olio of performance. Ela Kotkowska describes the effect in a review:

When a coiled thread is unwound, laid straight & split into strands, it loses its form, and the meaning that’s tied up in its architecture; so to speak of this poem in linear terms is already a misreading, a misaligning. But perhaps you need to unwind it, to hear the rag rhythm slowly grind to the span of a note, to tell the many voices apart, before you can listen to it again and understand the complexity of the composition. It is no coincidence that to speak of it, I have picked musical metaphors. OLIO is a songbook, a ragbook, a history of rag music.

Reading Olio does feel like a coiled thread unwound or trying to read a slinky back into shape. It someone doesn’t fit with our expectations of technology, because it revels in the deformations and reformations of the technology itself. Like Vazquez’s “listening in detail,” the music of the page “is not merely a receptive exercise, but also a transformative one that enables performative relationships to music and writing.” “Because of music’s capacity to walk to be many places at once,” she writes, “it walks through the academy’s walls,” or any intellectual attempts to make it singular.

In Alexander Weheliye’s Phonographies, a corollary is drawn between the technologies of sound production and reproduction and the “the ways in which black culture has utilized and created the technological innovations that now characterize sound technologies' central features.” The physical technologies of sound—the record player’s pin, the skip button on the CD player, the recommendation algorithm on Spotify—become sites of intervention and invention. Olio, I argue, does this for the technology of the book. I don’t mean to suggest that Olio’s spatial architecture and

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63 Kotkowksa.
64 Alexandra Vazquez, 17.
65 Ibid., 94.
66 Weheliye, 7.
contrapuntal form will become the beginning of a new era of perforated, garden path-y, double-voiced books. But it could.

This is perhaps why Olio feels so strange and sui generis. It doesn’t feel as if it is written from the future or the past—it’s very much of its time. But it does feel different, in a way that feels almost temporal, as if this were a visit from a parallel universe (contemporaneity become spatial). Perhaps that is because it is using technology differently than the way we receive technology, like opening a gif as a jpeg, or poorly transferring a record onto an mp3, or vice versa. Something is received, but something is unreceivable, and what we are left with is equal parts possibility and frustration.

Voicing the Noise

In his interview with Jess, Fitzgerald comments, “Song is not simply this great cultural artifact. Song is the historical path towards freedom and reinvention of blackness in a way. You use ‘blues’ as a verb, as in to blues blackface of the Berryman sonnets.” When Nathaniel Mackey remixed (“versioned”) Amiri Baraka’s formulation of “Swing—from verb to noun” in his essay “Other: From Noun to Verb,” he defined the process of “verb to noun” as “the erasure of black inventiveness by white appropriation.”67 Black originality, a verb, becomes noun-ed by the culture of cultural appropriation. This process sees a figure like Benny Goodman buy, cajole, and outright steal from Black musicians the concept of “swing” (verb, music that swung, which is a physical sense of the beat, that has a physical a/effect on the body of both musician and auditor), in order to create “swing” (noun, a specific and historic style of music, a best-

67 Mackey, 52.
This nouned music has a two-pronged effect: “on the aesthetic level, a less dynamic, less improvisatory, less blues-influenced music and, on the political level, a containment of black mobility.”

This White culture of appropriation, for better and worse, includes poetry, which reminds us that Jess’s catalog of appropriators includes not only Benny Goodman and Irving Berlin, but Pulitzer-prize winning poet John Berryman, the poet exemplar of a certain strain of mid-century American intellectual. Berryman’s sustained use of blackface minstrel tropes in his highly acclaimed *Dream Songs* becomes, to Jess, a way to indict and invert/subvert the technology of the American literary establishment in order to put Black voices, and his own voice, into the centers of power. Incredibly, he does this exactly 50 years after *Dream Songs* itself won the Pulitzer.

I will return to the extended exhuming of Berryman later, but for now suffice it to say that *Olio* contains multiple narrative threads concerning Black artists, mostly entertainers and musicians, struggling to keep their originality in an era (from the Civil War through World War I) that routinely saw the artistic actions of Blackness turned into White nouns (things made *things*, which can be owned), a process that resulted in scant recognition or remuneration given to the original Black innovators. But as a book of poetry, *Olio* is also engaged in the subject of what poetry is and can do—how it is tied up with appropriation as well, and the ways that it can serve as remuneration. In this, *Olio* goes from “noun to verb,” taking the noun of “poetry” (or, what dominant White culture has coded as the noun of poetry) and the static noun of the poetry book (or, what dominant White culture has coded as the noun of the book of poetry), and recasting

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68 Ibid.
them as action—a performance. Mackey describes verbing the noun as an “othering, black linguistic and musical practices that accent variance, variability—what reggae musicians call `versioning.’”69 While Mackey’s own poetry performs this on a linguistic level, Jess puts this versioning in the domain of interpretation—giving us poetry that by its very form and style denies the very idea of a single reading or a singular witness. Poems cannot be read linearly from first word to last word—they must always be encountered as a non-comprehensive “version” of themselves. This versioning forces the act of interpretation to expose itself as an action—and as a consequence exposes the work of poetry as action, one that has both aesthetic and political effects.

Both Mackey and Jess use sound as the way in/to this verb of both creativity and Blackness. Music and sound (“both a hermeneutics of race and a marker of its im/material presence”)70 is crucial to any reading of Black poetics, and in particular popular music. Jess is defining a poetics that is both about defining ideologies and bringing forth (verb-ing) political action, that deals with what Weheliye called “the mechanics by which (technosonic) blackness came to be fashioned as antithetical to modern structures.”71

Importantly, Olio positions its history on the cusp of mechanical reproduction of sound. “All the people I was writing about in Olio were never recorded, and for the most part people don’t know who they are, and that is where I like to roam,” said Jess in an interview with Jessica Lanay. Joplin has no surviving recordings beyond a handful of (edited, indirect) pianola rolls.72 As such Jess is exploring how to recover sounds, and by

69 Mackey, 52.
70 Stoever, 11.
71 Weheliye, Phonographies, 4.
72 Edward A. Berlin, King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era, 237.
extension lives, that are lost from the technology of the archive (the sound archive which is Weheliye’s subject). Poetry, to Jess, then becomes an alternative technology for approaching the inapproachable lost, for “playing” history like a pianist plays a sheet of music. There is much similarity here to what Anthony Reed calls the “broken witness” of Black experimental poetry: poetry that is “not ‘giving voice’ or speaking on behalf of another or the self but rather voicing the silence. This poetry speaks where conventional language fails.” But while the subjects of the experimental poetry that Reed discusses are places where witness is impossible, Olio seems to focus on the opposite problem. While none of these artists were recorded in sound technology, there is no shortage of other recordings of them. Pamphlets, biographies, retrospectives, eye witness accounts, newspaper articles—all sorts of contemporary media are collected in Olio’s bibliography, and the bibliographies of that bibliography. It is not a lack of witness but an overabundance that is the problem. Joplin’s legacy is drowning in the distorted and appropriated echoes of his own music, in media not made in his own voice, his sound taken and reproduced by Berlin and others so many times that it is, unless you are trained to hear it, unrecognizable as Black. The problem is not silence but lack of silence: it is the noise of history that Olio is contending with. Olio is not, as in Reed, “voicing the silence”; it is voicing the noise.

This makes the encounter with Olio much like an encounter with an old am/fm radio, dialing the knobs through a hodgepodge of stations, statics, and signals. Or perhaps it is like listening to the recently discovered pianola roll that may be our only contemporary recording of the Scott Joplin, a roll that shows evidence of being edited by

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73 Reed, Freedom Time, 28.
other hands. Can we hear past the (White) editor’s hands physically cutting and altering
the text? Can we hear through the noise to his Black hands on the keys? Are we hearing
them at all? Or are we hearing crossed signals that are impossible to disentangle?
Perhaps the signal is so corrupt that it is degraded beyond disentangling. But history is
corrupt and degraded and corrupting and degrading and entangling. Voicing the noise
accepts that there is no “purity” of signal, and yet there are hands, somewhere, in the
sound, in the mix. The impossibility of locating one clear signal exposes how in the mix
are hidden possibilities of history in the wake. By voicing this noise, Jess hints at all the
hidden signals of history that exist, unheard, in the static overload that makes such
hearing impossible.

The task that Jess sets himself in Olio is twofold: on the one hand he has to make
a melody out of the cacophony of contradictions and tensions of history; on the other
hand, he has to trouble, to cacophonate, the received melodies of history. The dominant
narrative of the early 20th century is too easy, too pat; it incorporates Black voices, but
the arranger has a White face under the burnt cork. To confuse these signifiers can lend
us a mask which speaks, a Black face of the blackface, inseparable from the
appropriation and the artifice, lost to history, but somehow, impossibly, in there.

Jubilee Blues

I will go to listening in detail to certain melodies in the “mess and” of Olio,
knowing these are incomplete, piecemeal, and personal, my “temporary version of
things,” but also knowing that, as with all the works I am covering in this study, it is worth all the sustained and detailed attention that we can lavish upon it.74

The first lines of verse in the book, and the poems we keep coming back to fifteen times in the span of the performance are the sonnet crown. Jess’s technology here is received forms, which he uses, paradoxically, to tackle the problems with received narratives. Form, to adapt Murray, is to “stylize,” which is to conventionalize, to make “a pattern which becomes a way of seeing things and doing things,” which is to turn noise into action.75 That these poems are all so strictly defined in form—sonnet crown, syncopated star, golden shovel, etc.—forces patterns into the chaos. That’s what a sonnet does, it forms patterns, it manufactures sense—a technology for making poetic sense of experience. In this it is a cultural machine with a long history in European letters which is brought to bear on whatever data is fed into it.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers are central to the themes and the structure of Olio and are themselves figures of the difficulty and contingency of Black performance. As Jennifer Lynn Stoever writes, the Singers “fashioned a new musical form from slave songs and European concert technique that functioned as an aural image of slavery that challenged the harmonious strains of plantation nostalgia.”76 This choir of Black singers was organized in 1871 by Fisk University, a historically Black college founded only five years prior. Fisk was in financial crisis, and the success of the choir, mainly to White audiences, was a godsend for the university. But even from their first inception the group was a compromise between Black traditions and White tastes. As Jennifer Stoever

74 Vazquez, 5.
75 O’Meally, 112.
76 Jennifer Stoever, The Sonic Color Line, 133.
writes, “The group fashioned a new musical form from slave songs and European concert technique,” one that served not to change the opinions of their White audience, but “functioned as an aural image of slavery.”

The way that Stoever describes the Jubilee Singers as “technique” (a pre-recording-technology technology) reminds us that as a technology, the metaphorical system of *Olio* is not mechanical, it is biological: Jess writes constantly about eyes, ears, mouths, and roots, the organs of perception, communication, and sustenance. This is another way that Jess highlights the pre-recording-technology nature of the music he is re-creating (as well as the poetry he is creating). Who needs recording technology when music is written on, in, and through the body? It’s written on not just the individual body but the whole of American culture.

Stoever uses the same imagery of performance as Jess to describe the difficult, liminal work of these performers before their White audiences:

> In publicly pairing their visibly black bodies with audibly “black sounds” forged in slavery, the Jubilee Singers performed the sonic color line as a tightrope for black performers, a site of agency and potential empowerment where negative constructions of blackness could be ‘inverted’ but only though dangerous performances that risked affirming the listening ear by constructing new sonic representations of “blackness.”

This tightrope walk, one full of racial danger and risk, has the potential of empowerment for the performers only insofar as they work with and off of the audience’s “negative constructions of blackness.” Stoever locates this work in “a ‘technique of the self,’” one that lets the singers “reproduce and conserve the echoes of slavery within modernity’s call and to craft a sonic citizenship that neither erased black cultural traditions nor

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
depended on white male citizenship standards.” The “technique” of the Singers depended on its White audience while also subverting it.

This difficult task is staged in *Olio*, where the Singers perform their continually circling double crown of sonnets, declaring, as in the title of the final poem, “We’ve Sung Each Free Day Like It’s Salvation.” This singing, or having sung, walks the tightrope between *mistaking* each free day for salvation—they were still not free, they still are not free—and *making* each free day *into* salvation. This is to invert their bodily and artistic bondage into the possibility of a truly authentic representation, while understanding that the process is itself inauthentic.

As stated earlier, the fifteen Jubilee poems form a heroic crown of sonnets, also called a Sonnet Redoubleé, a form invented in the 15th century in Europe. In English, the sonnet crown owes much to John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” *la corona*, a sequence of seven interlocking sonnets (which is why Jess calls his heroic sequence a “double crown.” Marilyn Nelson describes her own heroic crown, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, as such:

A crown of sonnets is a sequence of interlinked sonnets in which the last line of one becomes the first line, sometimes slightly altered, of the next. A heroic crown of sonnets is a sequence of fifteen interlinked sonnets, in which the last one is made of the first lines of the preceding fourteen.

The fifteenth poem reperforms every repeated line in order to make a final sonnet. This is also called the “master sonnet.”

The repetition in the crown of sonnets is repetition with variation. For example, the first line of the first “Jubilee” poem, and the first line of poetry in the book, is “O,

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79 Ibid, 134.
80 Ibid, 134.
81 Jess, 203.
82 Marilyn Nelson.
sing... undo the world with blued song.”\textsuperscript{82} This is a clear reference to the epic device of the “invocation to the muse” in the Western tradition. But it is unclear who the imperative is directed to—“O sing” seems like it is directed at the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and the description is of their singing and their songs. But, as a persona poem, it is written from the point of view of the singers themselves—“Behold—the bold sound / we’ve found in ourselves that was hidden, cast / out of the garden of freedom.” This suggests that the imperative is directed outside of the singers themselves, while also being a description of what they are doing in the moment of singing—“each note bursting loose from human bondage.” This is in keeping with the “invocation to the muse” in the epic tradition, which is usually a simultaneous call outward and inward. But when “undo the world with blued song” is repeated as the last line of the final sonnet and the last line of poetry in the book (following it are the final epistolary prose section and the “Appendix”) it reads “each note bursting loose from bondage / to sing unto the world a new song.”\textsuperscript{83} The repetition moves from blue to “new,” which suggests that the “O sing” was directed not only inward, but toward the future, and the “new song” is repeated not only in the 1872 of the Fisk Jubilee speaker, and not only in the 2016 of Tyehimba Jess’s \textit{Olio}, but in the present of the reader/spectator. By calling back to the past through received forms, Jess is effectively using the weight of the history against the future, singing the blue into a new song.

\textsuperscript{82} Jess, 7.  
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 203.
Mirror Chicanery

As I have written about previously, Kamran Javadizadeh has shown that Rankine’s *Citizen*, despite its post-lyric or documentary style, is haunted by Robert Lowell’s confessional lyric exemplar *Life Studies*. This bit of competition with the White poetic establishment is surprising to find in such an uncompromising and unsentimental poet like Rankine. Javadizadeh finds in this callback “an unblinkingly open form of ‘letting in,’” of holding the microaggressions and interpellations of history in attention and to rise to meet them, rather than shirking from them. “Rankine calibrates her language to meet and recognize the language that surrounds and indeed permeates her own sense of being,” he writes. This language is “hurtful,” it carries and perpetuates oppression and trauma. But, in Judith Butler’s words, “Our emotional openness... is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.” To Javadizadeh, Rankine’s use of language is about recording the openness of vulnerability, of Black people’s particular addressability in the world, so that “the very form of her book records this vulnerability.” One of the ways that she is addressed is in the language of artistic history, of being un-visible or hyper-visible in the work of Lowell or in the painting that forms the final page of *Citizen*, Turner’s *Slave Ship*.

Jess engages most directly with literary history through the inclusion of a surprising figure, who is, like Lowell, a lauded mid-century White “brahmin” of privilege and confessional poetry: John Berryman. The third section of *Olio* is titled section

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84 Javadizadeh.
85 Ibid., 487.
86 Qtd. in Rankine, 49.
87 Javadizadeh, 486-87.
“Mirror of Slavery / Mirror Chicanery.” This is a conversation between Henry “Box” Brown, who escaped from slavery by mailing himself to the North, and Berryman’s (in)famous blackface character, Henry Bones. Or, rather, it is a deliberate “versioning,” or remixing, of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* in the persona of Box Brown, who was born a hundred years before Berryman. But it is also a conversation between Brown and his “Slavecatcher,” with the implication being that Berryman is just another catcher of slaves. The title is a reference to Brown’s travelling panorama *Mirror of Slavery*, which depicted the abjections of slavery for abolitionist White audiences all over the North.88

![Figure 11. Brown, Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown.](image)

The inclusion of Berryman also lends literary weight to the project, adding a sort of drunken, suicidal Virgil to Brown’s epic pilgrim. Which is to say it is a way for Jess to wrestle with the idea of literary indebtedness as well as the racism and appropriation inherent in the poetic tradition that Jess is now a part of. The inclusion of Berryman is further hint that the project of the book is to show how Black arts have, throughout

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88 For more on Brown and his Mirror, see Daphne Brooks, *Bodes in Dissent*. 
American history, been engaged in a constant fugitivity with the White establishment. Black artists are always fleeing, never freed, with the slave catcher just behind, as the slave catcher’s nearness is part of the performance of fugitivity. Even Jess’s position as a Black poet writing in an American tradition is tied up with the blackface poetics of writers like Berryman and Lowell (who wrote of “The Congo in heart of Boston”). But the whole tradition of American poetics is tied up with blackface, as North has shown in his *Dialects of Modernism*. As Adrienne Rich has said, “for blackface is the supreme dialect and posture of this country, going straight to the roots of our madness.” For Jess to engage with Berryman then is much like the performance of Bert Williams and George Walker, taking the blackface and doing it back, better and Blacker.

“Box” Brown is an interesting figure to place against Berryman, as his claim to fame is not any musical or artistic prowess, as in all the other figures rounding out the olio, but for his personal narrative, summed up succinctly in the title of his (semi)autobiography, *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns*. Brown was “conveyed from Richmond[,] Virginia, to Philadelphia in a box,” writes Stearns, “For twenty-seven hours he was enclosed in this box.” But what makes Brown a sure fit for this olio is not simply his successful escape attempt, but the fact that that he kept doing it. As Brooks details in her chapter “The Escape Artist: Henry Box Brown, Black Abolitionist Performance, and Moving Panoramas of Slavery,” Brown was not content to

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89 Javadizadeh, 134.
90 Rich, 127.
91 Henry “Box” Brown and Charles Stearns, etc.
merely escape, but continued on escaping and escaping for the rest of his life. Soon after freedom, Brown travelled to the U.K. to repeat his “boxing act” in an “encore presentation” where Brown was shipped from Bradford to Leeds. There, “he was taken out in the presence of spectators.”

This “repetition of the boxing act” turns the act of escape art into “twice-behaved behavior,” which Richard Schechner’s original definition of “performance.” The movement from action to performance, and from escape to “escape artist” ties Brown to what Brooks calls “cyclical patterns of performative resistance” and “increasingly spectacular and creative means to attack slavery.” Escape was not enough; the escape had to become art. Brown’s whole career is then seen by Brooks as “self-representation,” “a sprawling, epic text, one which Brown the author, artist, and performer might leap through, escaping one art form into the next in his quest for emancipation.” This epic performance is on a tightrope, however, risking what Moten calls “the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator.” Witnessing the “obscene” spectacle of Black abjection quickly turns to the “more obscene,” the “demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body,” something which Brown’s “moving panorama” exhibition Mirror of Slavery both risked and exploited. The abjection depicted in the traveling panorama, equal parts “social dystopia, fugitive escape, and Gothic apocalypse,” risks the ravenous eyes of its White audience, but it also depended on them for ticket sales. To Moten, this “specter of

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92 Brooks, 66.
93 Bial, 7.
94 Brooks, 66, 68.
95 Ibid, 69.
96 Moten, In the Break, 3.
97 Brooks, 68.
enjoyment” turns representation into repression. Despite the artistry of Brown’s continually fugitivity, in a sense “Box” Brown has never left his box. Brown is still there, repressed into his simultaneous coffin, prison, and stage. This is the paradox of the work of performance. As Moten writes, “the conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is performance’s condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production.” Brown leaped through genres to tell his story but in the process re-constituted established White representations of Blackness. He recreates not only the conditions of his escape, but the conditions of his enslavement. Which is to say that Brown brings his slavecatcher with him.

Jess’s frontmatter to the “Mirror of Slavery / Mirror Chicanery” is once again given in triplicate. First is “Mirror of Slavery / Mirror Chicanery” in block letters, then in cursive “The Freed Songs of Berryman/Brown,” then in small italics, “In which the escaped slave and traveling mesmerist Mr. Henry ‘Box’ Brown blackens the voice of poet Mr. John Berryman’s ‘Henry’ from The Dream Songs and liberates him(self) from literary bondage!” This recasting of “Henry” as not just a stand-in for Berryman’s self-abnegation is interesting: it is to take “Henry” not as just a blackface character but as a Black character. “Henry Bones” as a caricature, a stand-in for Berryman’s self-loathing is replaced by “Henry Brown,” historical figure and central character.

Following this are three introductory quotes. The first is a description of the Mirror of Slavery by a contemporary White abolitionist (“almost, if not quite, a perfect facsimile of the workings of that horrible and fiendish system.”) Then come two snippets

98 Moten, 5. Emphasis original.
of song lyrics.\textsuperscript{99} The first is from Stephen Foster, the White “father of American music” and “Originator of Minstrelsy.”\textsuperscript{100} Foster, who died in 1864, was a contemporary of Brown, whose (first) escape was made in 1849. The lyrics quoted are from 1848’s “Ol’ Uncle Ned,” a sad minstrel song that tells of the death of old Uncle Ned, who “had no wool on de top ob his head—”; “No more hard work for poor Old Ned, / He’s gone whar de good N—- go.”\textsuperscript{101} The reader may be confused as to why Jess has decided to quote this language, which has no apparent connection to Brown or to anything else in \textit{Olio}. Then the reader turns the page to see the next quote: “‘Song Composed on His Escape from Slavery’ (sung to the air of ‘Ol’ Uncle Ned’), 1849” written by Henry Brown himself. Brown sang this song at his public appearances, and the lyrics and music were distributed to the audience as song sheets. These sheets, with an engraving of his famous box on top, were included in the 1851 reprinting of the \textit{Narrative}.\textsuperscript{102} The lyrics show how Brown was “Blackening” popular representations of Blackness in 1849, using the public’s familiarity with Foster as part of his own political-social-artistic performance.

\textsuperscript{99} Jess, 71.
\textsuperscript{100} “Stephen C. Foster as Man and Musician.”
\textsuperscript{101} Adam Soroka.
\textsuperscript{102} Narrative, Introduction, 28
Similarly, Jess could have written anything to commemorate Brown, but he has decided to rewrite, of all people, Berryman. Literary homages are typically done to esteemed priors or other figures that have so passed into general positivity that they become part of the literary landscape—Virgil and Homer, Dante and Virgil, Eliot and Dante, etc. Berryman as Jess’s interlocutor was not that. In an interview with Adam Fitzgerald, Jess talks about how the book engages with, in Fitzgerald’s words, “white artists who have had a dominating influence on the narrative of American cultural history” but who have a legacy of anti-Blackness and appropriation. Jess says that it is
difficult to talk to a modern audience about people like Mark Twain, Irving Berlin, or Berryman, esteemed White artists who nonetheless have demonstrably terrible opinions about Black people and demonstrably terrible effects on Black artistry. “The only way you can really convince the audience of their disposition,” he says, “if you use their own words. Really, I can say it until I’m blue in the face, but if I have their own words in front of them, then hey, they can speak for themselves!” And so Berryman emerges as a primary source, an “own words” record of White anti-Blackness that Jess can use as a counterpoint, a negative through which “to see a side of history that needs to have alternating voice, a callback.” “Mirror Chicanery” is then a response, a callback, a ‘clapback” to White artists perpetuating anti-Blackness while also appropriating Blackness. Which is all to say that Jess does not have a very high opinion of Berryman:

I’d encountered his Dream Songs before; and, I’m just gonna say, I’m not the biggest fan. OK? And I felt that the kind of use of minstrelsy that he employed in the Dream Songs was something that needed to be responded to. I’ve tried to find as much literature as I could about him and his perspective; and I never found anything that really convinced me that his uses of minstrelsy were... much more than a prop. A very convenient, well-worn prop. And I’m just not as convinced that his uses of this cultural prop, that’s been used to the detriment of my people, was worth what he was doing.

Jess says his goal was to address the “Berryman mystique,” the way that his “prop” of minstrelsy continues to be used in poetry, and “the best way to address Berryman’s use of minstrelsy is to do so using the craft. [italics original],” “something that employs his voice, that turns this voice back around on him.” Jess uses Berryman’s craft against it, which in its way is using the literary establishment, built out of the words of folks like Berryman, against itself. This is not to dismantle the establishment but use its own

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103 Fitzgerald.
104 Ibid. Ellipses original.
105 Ibid.
discourse to point out, trouble, and enlarge, the gaps. The master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house, as Audre Lorde says, but maybe it can put some good holes in it. Maybe then someone can use those holes to escape:

How about using the mask/voice with someone who really was a slave... and really worked as an entertainer in the era of minstrelsy, and had freed himself? And now he’s smuggling himself out of the crate that really is the mask that John Berryman wears in his blackface. And to tell the real story behind the woe of the blackface.106

Jess is finding that behind the fracturing of the lyric “I” that is Berryman’s claim to fame, behind the psychoanalytic multiplicities of persona and voice, the puns, the racist caricatures, the postmodern nonsense, is a brown body: Brown’s body, Box Brown’s boxed body, visible in its occlusion, masked/boxed, non-visible (not invisible) in its presence, a “spectacularly present absence.”107 Or rather than “behind,” Blackness is put in front: a mask, hyper-visible, instrumentalized, metaphorized, used to excuse or hide the White man’s bad behavior.

Brooks writes that “Brown is present and discursively entombed” in the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, which is to say that he is continually and repetitively entombed in history (the box), performance (the stage show), and literature (the *Narrative*). Brown continually entered and exited his namesaked box (is he named for the box or the box named for him?) in performances all over the US and UK, and he continues this performance of discursive entombment over and over, in literature and memory. In bringing Brown to Berryman, Jess is showing that this performance of escape persists even within Berryman’s misuse—Berryman can *use* Blackness as a mask,

106 Ibid.
107 Brooks, 74.
but even that Blackness will try to escape. Brown’s “escapology” now comes not from a cement coffin or water tank, but from the text of the American literary canon. Will he escape? Watch to find out.

After the preface, “Mirror Chicanery” goes into a series of poems riffing off the exigencies of Berryman’s language in the Dream Songs, one by one. The first is a contrapuntal poem with the left-hand side being from Berryman’s introduction. The rest mirror the form and language of the Dream Songs themselves, each titled “Freedsong:” and epigrammed with a quote from Brown’s *Narrative*.

The poems do not follow the order of the *Dream Songs*, instead bouncing around the first 77 (the collection *77 Dream Songs* won Berryman the Pulitzer exactly fifty years earlier) and ending with the iconic “Dream song 1.” This oft-anthologized poem ends with the lines “Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed.” This is at once a nihilistic turn from the playfulness of the first few lines of the poem (“Huffy henry hid the day, / unappeasable Henry sulked.”) and an encoding of the author’s personal feelings of loneliness and impotence onto the length and breadth of the American landscape.108 Jess rewrites this as the final lines of “Mirror Chicanery”: “Here, in this land where some strong be, / let Box Henry grow in every head.”109 The vague land and sea of Berryman become this land, this country, and the strong is not the external, natural “sea,” but Henry himself—like his eponymous box he is “pried / open for all to see”—growing not with frustration and White privilege, but in memory “in every head,” freighting himself not to Philadelphia but to the minds of every reader.

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108 Berryman, tk
109 Jess, 85.
Fitzgerald asked Jess, “Do you see this book as a way of taking back minstrelsy?”

Jess responds at length:

I wouldn’t say “take back minstrelsy.” What I would say is I want us to have an understanding... I think that George Walker and Bert Williams were in the act of really saying, “I will reclaim minstrelsy.” They really were about that, even the name of their act, “Two Real Coons,” was a kind of taunt at the white supremacy at the core of the concept. Instead of seeing these fake white “coons” dressed in blackface, you’d see some real “coons.” You know what I’m saying? This sly, late 19th-century wink was happening all the time between them and their audience. They were laughing wryly through this construction that they were performing. My task is to recognize their task. Because the same issues they were dealing with are the ones that we are really dealing with, in different ways, today.110

Jess’s “task” is not to “reclaim” minstrelsy but rather to “recognize” the places where Black artists did the work. *Olio* is a performance reperforming their performance for a new audience. It is to stylize this time-tested strategy of survival, to carry it forward into the future. Which is why it is so important now that we in the future “recognize” *Olio* for the work it does, not simply as an epic to be lauded and not read, but as active in the struggle for Black empowerment.

While talking about form at an event at the Brooklyn library, Jess said, “to me, it’s about entering the master’s house and taking over his shit, to tell my story. I am taking over this building, this structure. I don’t see it as a prison to keep me in, I see it as a structure to build out.”111 To many marginalized writers, the American literary establishment is a prison. To some the answer is to avoid it altogether, to work towards alternate means of solidarity and artistic communities that are not beholden to the traditional seats of power. In more recent years these lines have blurred, as more and more marginalized writers have been allowed into “traditional” centers—largely because

110 https://lithub.com/tyehimba-jess-on-excavating-popular-music-through-poetry/
111 recorded by me at a 11/21 workshop at Brooklyn Library.
younger poets of color are now leading a boom in poetry production and consumption that is too lucrative for the literary establishment to ignore.\textsuperscript{112} These poets make a praxis out of not writing for a White audience at all, and instead foster their own radical communities of readers, bolstered by social media. But the generation that is slightly older, which includes poets like Jess and Rankine and Philip, have not chosen this route. They choose to not ignore or sidestep the master’s house. Rather they engage it with its own words. These are works that demand accountability as well as recognition, that take seriously the racial imaginary at work in culture.

Wildfire

Ultimately, it is a toss-up whether we believe \textit{Olio} was offered the Pulitzer because the committee realized that it was salient and culturally pertinent to recognize more work of Black poets, or because it snuck into the master’s house to take over his shit to tell his story. Four of the eight Black poets given the Pulitzer for poetry were so awarded in the last decade— and this trend did not start with \textit{Olio}. Perhaps Jess capitalized on a trend, but this shouldn’t take away from what a strange and ultimately confrontational book \textit{Olio} is. Its high-flying trapeze act of difficulty and ambition is ultimately a distraction for the subversive responses and callouts within it. Like a reverse pickpocket, Jess passes through the crowd putting things \textit{back into} people’s heads, songs and images of Black bodies obscured under makeup and masks, hiding behind and in front of and propping up all of American culture.

\textsuperscript{112} Ross, “For a Diverse New Generation, Poetry Is a ‘Growth Industry.’” Ferguson, “Poetry Sales Soar as Political Millennials Search for Clarity.”
The final section of *Olio* is perhaps the only one with a happy ending, where the sculptor Edmonia “Wildfire” Lewis finds artistic, personal, and monetary freedom in her self-exile in Greece. The section on Lewis revolves around the image of wildfire, a natural untameableness that drove Lewis from the confines of her country. But the work that Lewis does is opposite in form. It is not wild and free but hard chisel against stone, cutting and banging works “hammered out of a mountain” and “shattered then broken.”\(^{113}\) Her hands “cut dark witness,” “one / mallet against history’s / pale fist.”\(^{114}\) Lewis, who was part Ojibwe and part “Maroon,” carved figures of oppressors as well as the flight of the oppressed: Col. Robert Gould Shaw, Hiawatha, Minnehaha, Hagar, Cleopatra. Each poem is paired with a prose section telling the story of the life of Lewis. How she goes to Oberlin college to learn sculpture, how she is never accepted by the White ladies around her, who treat her like an outcast or an oddity, with her Native and Maroon tales of living off the land. Later she is accused of drugging two young women at the behest of Union soldiers, assaulted, and then tried (the soldiers are never charged). The charges are cleared (due to the work of “a young brown lawyer”—John Mercer Langston, the first Black lawyer in Ohio). She escapes to Europe, to Rome and Greece, where she lives in relative freedom. Her work, however, is still engaged in the difficult work of searching and survival, which the last prose section narrates:

> She was in search of a place to feel the earth sing its bonework of stone into her hands. And right now she can feel the muscle and tendon beneath the hardening clay. She holds I tup to the daylight falling through her small studio. She has listened to the earth sing its story—she has listened with every inch of her body ready to break. She knows that mercy is hard and shining and distant, and she will pound and scrape and tear at the world until it sings its shape into her hands.\(^{115}\)

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\(^{113}\) Jess, 195.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 198, 201.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 196.
The pound and scrape and tear of her tools is in service of “mercy,” a mercy denied to her in life but a one that she is willing to sweat and pound and hammer away at until she works it forth herself from stone.

Jess’s poems to Lewis are not personae poems from Lewis’s perspective but from the perspective of her creations, like this voice from the Native American heroine Minnehaha (Edmonia Lewis, Marble, 1868):

What part of me is mine that was not mined from the mind of poets, artists rewriting the past blow by blow till it’s pulverized past the barely recognizable? I was born when I was written, then hammered out of a mountain. I was shattered and then broken, then sharpened to the human.¹¹⁶

These words and the work they commemorate is made against “those people / who crave a ruling monarchy / of fictions,” where “History is their favorite lie.” The voices of Lewis’s sculptures represent both the permanence and the fragility of resistance: permanent in that they are set in stone, but fragile in how much hard, violent work it takes to make it.

If “Wildfire” is the closest Jess gets to imagining escape or utopia, it is a difficult utopia, one of distance, stone, and effort. Perhaps this is part of the coldness that some audiences feel with respect to Olio as a whole. It doesn’t imagine futures where Black people can live and enjoy themselves in peace on their own terms; it depicts a continual struggle for final self-representation under the threat of erasure. Before the final poem is a single line centered on a blank page: “The land of liberty had not room for a colored

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 195.
sculptor.”

That Lewis made room shows that she has reconceived liberty outside the (national/artistic) bounds of this “land of liberty” (the United States).

The final poem sees Lewis’s whole body both becoming and creating the natural forces that shape rock:

I will
my hands to my mother’s
finger-weave, to all its angles
and the gods within each angle;
my eyes to river water
sculpting Time’s ripple-smooth
face to boulder and shale;
my feet to my father’s maroon,
broken bondage. I’m possessed
in the way of a warrior
feather, carved to sharpen
wind that weathers stone,
claiming the crown of all glory
that is myself, my own.

This is a vision of self-creation and escape that travels both to the future and to the past (the mother’s hair, the father’s bonds) and ends with a crown, like the heroic crown of sonnets that runs through Olio and ends on the next page: “We’ve Sung Each Free Day Like It’s Salvation.” The crown becomes and emblem of continual self-creation, made of both “wind” and “stone,” the land and the forces that sculpt the land, the hardships and the overcoming of hardships—as well as being made of every curve in the “finger weave” and the “gods within each angle,” which are the embedded and embodied Black heritages that survive through erasure. The “crown” as both metaphor and form reminds us that even though Lewis’s medium is visual (and the Fisk Singers’ medium is audio-visual), Jess’s medium is literary, visual/semiotic, and above all, formal. Both

\[\text{\footnotesize 117 Ibid, 200.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 118 Ibid., 201-02.}\]
Lewis and Jess have made lightness of the heavy stone which is their medium. The syntactical ambiguity swirling through the poem mimics the multiplicities and triplicates of the book at as a whole, culminating in this “warrior / feather” that is both carved and carving, wind or stone, Lewis or the tool she uses. Once again, we see the influence of Plumpp on Jess, with a line break in “warrior / feather” that forms a hermeneutic bifurcation, a garden path that forces the reader to contend with multiple readings. This semantic ambiguity and formal innovation is essential to Jess’s vision of a transgressive, contingent Blackness both contained within and emancipated by constraint.

Rags to Rags

While the Fisk Jubilee Singers form the spine of the body of the book, the central, spectral, figure in Olio is the composer Scott Joplin, who died young, penniless and largely forgotten while the music he popularized, “ragtime,” and the concepts within it—syncopation, synthesis, improvisation (techniques that Murray calls “primary survival technology”)—have become a major part of American culture.\(^{119}\) While Joplin faded into obscurity, White imitators like composer Irving Berlin won money and accolades for stealing his sound and appropriating it for White audiences.\(^{120}\) Joplin’s magnum opus, the opera Treemonisha, which is central to the story of Olio, remained unproduced in his lifetime. Decades after Joplin’s death in 1917 there was a resurgence of interest in his music, but only after White artists and journalists like Joshua Rifkin and Harold C.

\(^{119}\) O’Meally, 111.
\(^{120}\) Jess,
Schonberg did the work of “reviving” the ragtime canon in the 1970s. This was the age where Joplin’s music was adapted for the score of the movie *The Sting*, which is where many modern listeners heard it for the first time. This would go on to win the Oscar for Best Musical score—but not for Joplin, for the White composer Marvin Hamlisch, who adapted the music into a movie score. Finally, in 1976 Joplin was awarded a Pulitzer—not in music, but a “special citation” given “in this Bicentennial Year, for his contributions to American music.”

The “rag” in “ragtime,” like “swing,” is a verb made noun by repetition. The “rag” is a ragged rhythm, describing the syncopation in the left hand and how different the rhythm was than the traditional march that formed its basis. “Rag” and “jig,” describing a dance, were originally synonymous. The “Rag” appeared as a genre in 1897, and quickly became an intrinsic part of what William J. Schafer calls “a genuinely national music”:

Ragtime became the basis for the whole modern popular music industry. Its infusion of fresh African American musical styles and practices turned the nation away from European models and provided a basic matrix of syncopated, contrapuntally voiced, rhythmically sophisticated music from which followed jazz and rock and roll. It was identified in the public mind with black southern culture, especially through widely popular ragtime songs, which continued the old minstrelsy imagery of the idyllic South of carefree easy living on magnolia scented plantations. Ragtime also transformed popular social dancing, especially in the years after 1910.

From the ragged rhythm we get jazz and rock ‘n roll, we get minstrelsy, we get dance and dance music, and we also get the whole “modern popular musical industry”: “after 1899

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121 Terry Waldo, 184.
122 Ibid., 187.
123 1976 Pulitzer Prize Winners & Finalists.
124 Van der Merwe, 63.
125 Ibid., 114.
the nationwide popularity of Joplin’s ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ opened a lucrative market for piano rags, piano rolls, and ragtime ‘professors’ as entertainers.” As Schafer writes, “The impact of ragtime on America—and world—culture is hard to overstate.”

The story of Joplin’s reception and revival is the sort of “too little, too late” tale familiar to anyone who studies Black artists in America, and one of the reasons the Toni Morrison letter in 1988 was so important. Olio, in addition to Joplin, tells in persona form the stories of numerous Black artists and performers of the late 19th and early 20th century, all of whose work are in one way or another exploited, appropriated, or misused by White culture. The artist with the most positive outcome (besides the McKoy sisters buying their own plantation, which is a dubious victory) is the self-exile Edmonia Lewis, who achieved in Greece the freedom that the others could not find in the US.

If there is an ethics behind Olio, it is not of confrontation but survival. This is shown in the fictional figure of Julius Monroe Trotter, the narrator of the prose sections of the book, whose epic journey takes him on a tour of America “to portray the memories and last days of one Scott Joplin, piano player.” Trotter’s first letter is addressed to “Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, Editor / NAACP Crisis Magazine,” and in it he offers to Crisis (the premiere Black intellectual magazine of the 20s) a series of interviews about Joplin: “Enclosed are the testimonies to the pauper king of piano, who gave his last concert to his fellow infirmed just before his death on April Fool’s Day, 1917, in the Manhattan State Hospital.” This letter is dated ten years after Joplin’s death, April 1, 1927.

126 Ibid., 116.
128 Jess, 8.
It is important to recognize that these letters are meticulously researched but also entirely fictional, and many of the conclusions that Jess/Trotter comes to are counterfactual. But as I will discuss more in my chapter on Robin Coste Lewis, the facticity of such a project is beside the point—the project is about writing counter-narratives out of the mess of history and historical sources, counter-narratives which offer alternatives to the “facticity” of history. These alternatives expose history as just another narrative.

Figure 13. James M. Trotter, Music and Some Highly Musical People, 10.

Trotter’s name references one of Olio’s source texts, 1876’s Music and Some Highly Musical People, a survey of Black music by James Monroe Trotter (1842-1892). This historical Trotter was a former slave and Union officer turned amateur musical historian. Trotter collected the biographies of Black musical performers across genres and presented them in one large book, “sketches of the lives of Remarkable Musicians of the Colored Race, with Portraits, and an appendix containing copies of music composed
by colored men.”129 Included in these sketches were “Blind Tom,” the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and many others. Trotter’s sketches and portraits were a part of a concerted effort in “racial uplift” typified by the writings of Booker T. Washington. Lawrence Schenbeck describes the book as “advocacy wrapped in conciliation, which is to say representation.” “Although Trotter’s Music breathed the optimistic air of Reconstruction, it also anticipated in some ways the fearful strategies to which black elites would resort in the years to come. Like the career of the Jubilee Singers, it may be said to appropriate cultivated white discourses on music in order to vindicate black capabilities.”130 Take Trotter’s writing on “Blind Tom,” which begins with hyperbole, “He is unquestionably and conspicuously the most wonderful musician the world has ever known,” “He remembers and plays a full seven thousand pieces,” “No one lives or, as far as we know, has ever lived, that can at all be compared to him,” before likening the pianist to Shakespeare’s Ariel, “child of fancy, who on Prospero’s island constantly gave forth melodies of ever-varied, ever-enchanting sweetness, filling the air with delicious harmony.” “Some persons… have had the temerity to say that ‘Blind Tom’ is an idiot. Out with the idea! … Let us call him the embodiment, the soul, of music, and there rest our investigations.” But these investigations do not rest. Following this praise and the pianist’s biography is a whole litany of articles and testimonials from White doctors and professionals that Trotter has included, commenting on Tom’s aptitude, his passing of myriad music “tests” and “examinations,” proving himself and his mental capacity over and over to the White scientists’ satisfaction.131

129 Trotter, Schenbeck.
130 Schenbeck, 38.
131 Trotter, 140-156.
Jess’s Trotter may have begun searching for uplift, but he ends in a much different place. Julius Monroe Trotter lives much later than the historical one, his first and last letters both marked April 1, 1927 and his fictional interviews dating from 1925-1926. Trotter is a veteran, like this historical Trotter, but fared much worse. Jess’s Trotter was disfigured in the Great War, and now wears a facial mask to hide the disfiguring injuries, highlighting a little-known tradition of medical facial masks in the early 20th century, before the advent of plastic surgery. These masks were both medical and artistic—in other words, technologies, specifically technologies for (social) survival.
But Trotter wearing the mask also brings into figuration Dunbar’s 1896 “We Wear the Mask,” a physicalization of the double consciousness of the Black experience. Gates calls the dialect poetry of Dunbar a kind of “mask-in-motion,” equating it with Yoruba mask practices, which are not about “illusion” but “inner essence”:

The Western concept of mask is meaningless to, say, the Yoruba, precisely because the doll in wood cannot of itself signify. Once in motion, once the signification is effected, the misnomer “mask” becomes “mask-in-motion”...

Once effected, the mask is a vehicle for the primary evocation of a complete hermetic universe, one of force or being, an autonomous world... The mask, with its immobilized features all the while mobile, itself is a metaphor for dialectic—specifically, a dialectic or binary opposition embracing unresolved or potentially unresolvable social forms, notions of origins, or complex issues of value.

The mask does not hide (like “Optic White” hides); it reveals, which is a bringing-forth of the dialectic of fixity and mutability, mask and motion, Blackness as performance and as social construct. In the prose interview with “Della Marie Jenkins, RN,” the nurse comments on how the mask does not hide but extenuates Trotter’s Blackness. She says to Trotter, “That is excellent craftsmanship there, friend. They got your shade just right.”

Trotter has crossed the country trying to piece together the story of Joplin through interviews with people who were in contact with him towards the end of his short life:

I’ve heard the same sooty, snapping rags turned inside out all over the globe, polishing it slick as a patent letter boot that’s born for more marching. Upon hearing it all over the country, I’ve been moved to find out what happened to the one who knew so many of those ragged secrets and had given them up so readily. The one I’d missed by moments years ago—how had he passed? How had he lived? Had he truly as so many said, lost his faculties and his mind? What had he to say about the root of his music?

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133 Jess, 31.
Via my employer, I travelled the country in search of what Mr. Joplin was smuggling inside himself when the end came for him. And what I found is what you read here. I found a man in the mouth of turmoil, torn between the jaws of past and future. He was ripped apart by the thunder he heard in his work and the weakening squall he could make of his body onto ivory and wire. It is something more and less than what I bargained for.¹³⁴

He finds less than a singular “root” for this music, and more of that “squall” that he describes as an internal storm made external. The first interview, with Jenkins, a nurse who took care of Joplin in hospice, describes his final performance in similar language, as if the dying composer had internalized all the music of the Black tradition and was expelling it simultaneously:

Yes sir, it was ragtime alright... And then it was just plain raggedly. All stitched together; loose in some parts and painful tight in others. Heard a cakewalk in there, but then the walk started to lean too hard and got drunk off its own sway. Heard some spirituals ... but they wore too much pride to be prayerful. Heard a hint of that new blue music, but he let the keys sing too free to be truly sorrowed. It was a true mix up, boy, I’m tellin you.¹³⁵

But this great cacophony of non-contemporaneity results not in dissolution but a sort of apotheosis: “he was just...glowing...with something I ain’t never seen before. Almost like he was listening to it and smiling deep inside himself.”¹³⁶ As if the noise of history, played all at once, was finally being heard all at once.

Trotter goes on to interview more people in Joplin’s orbit, learning, for example, how the composer burned all of his last compositions and let the night air take the ashes away, saying “It’s all in the wind.” He learns how he lost his second wife, Freddie Alexander, to pneumonia after only two months of marriage, and how this figure haunts the composer through pieces of music like “Bethena.” “Blind” Boone describes Joplin’s

¹³⁴ Ibid., 10-11.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 34.
¹³⁶ Ibid.
later compositions to be like standing in the eye of a hurricane, like a house “had been picked up in a storm of his own making and destroyed—but then it was like all the pieces had landed someplace else upside down, folded into itself and then expanded into something bigger than itself at the same time.” From Joplin’s third wife Lottie, Trotter learns how the dead Freddie, and her unborn and never-to-be-born child Monisha, lives, literally and figuratively, in Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha*, which he played for himself in the boarding-house Lottie owned:

[H]e’d held a whole concert just under his breath, telling a vision that had Monisha as alive in his voice as if she’d been sitting right there with us.

*So, Treemonisha was the rag he played that night.*

I keep telling you, boy. She wasn’t just a rag...

*Yes ma’am. She was alive.*

Write it down, now. You write that *down.*

Lottie’s imperative, repeated several times, for Trotter to “write that down” keeps bringing us from music to text, and the technology of recording in words even the failures to explain history. Lottie goes on to say that Joplin’s talent in the end was to not be afraid of fear, which she commands Trotter to write down twice: “You write that down, son. Write it down for forever. You write, ‘He was not afraid of fear.’”

Joplin’s story in the end turns towards not Joplin’s life, but of this haunting. Lottie tells Trotter of how the White composes Irving Berlin stole the finale of *Treemonisha*, “Real Slow Drag” for one of Berlin’s biggest hits, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” Lottie describes Joplin’s reaction: “Said she’d been kidnapped. Said he felt like

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137 Ibid., 150.
138 Ibid., 168.
he could hear Treemonisha “rambling drunk all through Tin Pan Alley.” How she’d been “smeared with burnt cork.” Berlin, “Took her home in his head and swapped her clothes up. Changed her name and fixed some face paint on her.” Once again the themes of blackface and appropriation come to bear, now on the hauntological figure of Joplin’s lost daughter. But rather than sue or otherwise fight against appropriation, Joplin rewrites the finale. Lottie details a conversation that Joplin may have had with his own “haunting”:

She told him to let it be—that he ain’t have time to chase after the shadow of the creation they’d sung together. She told him he only had a few years left, and that if he spent time chasing after what was stolen off him, he’d never be able to see her dance tall in the world. If he went chasing in the courts for white folks’ justice, all he’d see was a hard and lost time, and that he might as well just change her dance ever so slightly and sharper and move on. So that’s what they did.

This acquiescence to let the stolen be stolen sparks a crisis in Trotter, which I will quote at length because it is the climactic crisis of the book, which is also a meta-critical crisis on the project of the book:

*It seems to me that this is part of the problem with us, ma’am. That we don’t make it our business to get paid fully what we are owed. Who will we have to blame when what we have is stolen if we don’t at least try to wrestle it back?*

You really ain’t been listening too hard have you, boy? that man spent all his life wrestling with the music and the piano and his ghosts...

*And he wrestled it all that time just to let it go? To let Berlin walk away with the last of his work?*

To let go of something he was never going to get back no way. Don’t you tell me you ain’t never lost something ain’t worth trying to get back. I know you must know about that, seeing how you wear your suffering all over your face.

*Mrs. Joplin...*

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139 Ibid., 170.
140 Ibid.
I’m sorry for that. I truly am.

But just like you ain’t getting your face back, Scott wasn’t going to get that part of his song back. Ain’t nobody going to get nothing back from the past except stories you can wear to put your life straight. You’ve got to know that if you know nothing at all.141

*Olio* as a book is attempting to get back stories and songs that Black performers have already *let go*: these are things that cannot be reclaimed or returned. They are, like Joplin’s final compositions, “in the wind.” Lottie’s advice to Trotter, Joplin, Jess, and through Jess to the modern audience is, “Let them have [it]. I know where he came from. I know who his daddy was and how he came to be.” Despite the privations and disinheritances of history, Black expression still lives on, even if unreclaimable, even if it lives not under a mask but *as a mask*. Treemonisha, now named “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” “Got his face and his name changed, but I know he still one of us. He knows it too.” The experience of hearing Black expression is that of listening for lineages that are lost in the noise yet still living, even thriving, there. Joplin’s hauntology has “been stolen off, but that ain’t nothing new for Negroes—and he’s doing a whole lot better than most of other song spirits I’ve known.”142

Trotter’s final letter, which is dated the same as the first letter, is addressed not to Du Bois but to his sister, Paula. His story here is different than the version of himself he presents to Du Bois. Here, he quits his job as a railroad worker and walks off. He hears sounds like shouting and follows lights until he comes across a rustic performance, the *North Star Travelling Negro Troubadours*. With this travelling olio, Trotter ends his

141 Ibid., 171.
142 Ibid.
story as an itinerant musician playing piano. His playing is crass, commercial, and exploitative, but it is also personal, pure, and truthful:

I play for the contortionists when he bends himself to fit the smallest of corners, and I play on to bend a waltz into tune with our singer’s Georgia-bred ear. And through every note, I’m singing beneath my breath inside my mask, low enough for only me and my mask to hear. I sing while I play until the last of the last customers leaves.\(^{143}\)

Trotter’s relationship to his mask is that of another entity, one that “hears” the same music he does, and, presumably also speaks and sings. But in the company of these epic travelers in history-as-geography, travelers not in innocence but in consequence, he can let the mask come off:

And then, because my fellow travelers have seen life far more twisted than what I have left for a face, because they seem to be able to see what was there before the mask was ever needed, I let the mask slip off beneath the starlight. After the shows are done, I bathe my naked face in their vision. I let them see what’s left of me, and they know there’s more to this battered scrap of flesh than meets the eye.\(^{144}\)

There are three faces now: the mask-face of artifice, the face that was there before, and the face that is here now. But there is also another face, one that is “more than meets the eye.” A face that can, perhaps, only be seen by seeing all three faces at once. Or perhaps it can never be seen. Perhaps it can be heard.

In this concluding letter, Trotter realizes that his quest to reclaim Joplin’s legacy, the quest that forms the central narrative of \textit{Olio}, was itself a mask: a desire to “wear his face inside the stories I found for him.” Trotter was “chasing [Joplin’s] spirit, trying to make it my own, wanting to make the world the way it was. But it won’t be like that again.” Trotter, in the end, learns to treat song like Murray treats the blues, as music

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 207
\(^{144}\) Ibid.
that is “a strategy for acknowledging the fact that life is a low-down dirty shame” and for “improvising or riffing on the exigencies of the predicament.”

In an interview, Jess says of the project as a whole is an exploration of expression in the greatest of darknesses:

[T]o be able to fully express oneself—and singing is such a full and total expression of the soul—to be able to do that and then to really have that sustain you, through the darkest times of slavery. And the two are inseparable. To be able to sing under that kind of oppression I think, in a lot of ways, is the very essence of survival, of a people, of the ability to have to the hope to make something beautiful amongst so much wretchedness. That’s critical to the concept of human survival. And in this particular context, of African Americans working through slavery... that’s what we had. I was trying to make a line like that with the Fisk Jubilee Singers: “Often, we owned the song more than we owned ourselves.”...

Importantly, this being able to sing in spite of oppression is a strategy that is not reducible to allegory or metaphor:

It’s not a metaphor! To carry that essence into these various artistic endeavors—from comedy to the instruments to the sculpture—is trying to think about what it means to imagine oneself free enough to imagine, through the context of brutal slavery. It is signifying that you are still alive and you still have some human potential.”

To imagine oneself free enough to imagine, to sing despite hardship; to sing both because of but also through and past hardship, is the legacy of Black performance that Jess is cataloging. It is not mourning, as Sharpe writes: “How does one mourn the interminable event?” It is the singing of and in wake work.

It is somewhat ironic that Olio as a book is not content to sing in obscurity, or to “let the mask slip off beneath the starlight,” but is rather a very visible and public work of Black epic. But this again speaks to the many faces within Olio and the many faces on

145 Murray, Blue Devils of Nada
146 https://lithub.com/tyehimba-jess-on-excavating-popular-music-through-poetry/
the cover of *Olio*-as-a-book: those spectral, indeterminate eyes-as-o’s. *Olio* is not the face beneath the mask, which is lost to history, but it is also not the impossible fourth face that cannot be seen—the face that is only presented to fellow travelers, to those in the know. The physical book and text of *Olio* is not these faces but the mask itself, or rather an attempt to *sound* the mask. To let the mask, like Trotter’s, hear, and sing. Which is to look with clarity and understanding at the performances Black artists have made for survival, but without trying to dig toward some truth, trauma, or authenticity beneath them. It is to take seriously the artifice of Black performance *as a strategy*. Baker calls this use of the mask “phaneric.” “Rather than concealing or disguising in the manner of the *cryptic* mask (a colorful mastery of codes),” he writes, “the phaneric mask is meant to advertise. It distinguishes rather than conceals.”

The “truth” of these stories, like the truth that Trotter hoped to find in Joplin, is both forever lost to time and a convenient fantasy that never existed. But the mask, the survival technology, the artifice and artistry are present, palpable, and worthy of recognition.

In this way, the coldness, the distance, the abstraction that some readers feel when confronting *Olio* as a book is an essential part of its epic performance. It’s no accident that Jess spends his “appendix” keying the reader into all the strange and difficult things he’s doing. While a White modernist would leave it up to posterity to tease out all of the intricacies and concordances encoded in their work, Jess does not have that luxury. He needs you to know that what he’s doing is difficult. Because the stakes could not be higher. *Olio* performs desperately and self-consciously, the way a dancer moves faster and faster to prove their feet, or a singer belts higher and higher to

prove their voice, or the trapeze artist swings further and further to prove the limits of gravity. These are things that performers do to make the audience pay attention, to make them know they are worthy of attention. They are phatic gestures of performance-as-performance that are semantically meaningless but essential for communication. Like a signal of danger, they set the stakes and boundaries of the spectacle. What is communicated is the necessity for communication, an emphatic: Listen to this. Step right up. You won’t believe your ears.

Conclusion

Erica Hunt writes about diasporic works that “aspire to be monuments, to commemorate through telling that which has been suppressed or might be construed as betrayal.” To Hunt, “The monument achieves its effects through moves that occupy space, by recovering lost territory, that is the body.”148 Recovering space from the noirporias in both poetic history and cultural history is the monumentalizing effort in Olio. The book works to make itself the marker and the body of this memorialization, just like how Edmonia Lewis, monument maker, performs her own body as monument for her sculptures, and the poems that Jess makes of her sculptures. Lewis’s monuments become solid even as they disappear into figuration, and what survives is not her body but figuration, made of not black but specifically white marble. Somehow though, these figurations “recover” the territory of her body and her color, which is suppressed and exiled in her art, but also recreated, self-created, in the space of her opposite: the loving, detailed sculptures of White figures.

148 Erica Hunt.
Similarly, *Olio* is a monument to the lost lives and bodies of these “first-generation-freed voices” built out of the things they did to survive, their contradictory performances of bondage (which both repress and represent), their appropriated songs, blackface, minstrelsy, parody, and abjection. These performers are honored through and despite this continued abjection and re-abjection, reproduced contrapuntally, like Brown’s constant escapology—just like Jess himself is honored through and despite the shit-eating grin he had to wear at the Pulitzer luncheon, while the head of the Pulitzer committee board mispronounces his name—twice. All at a ceremony that was supposed to be a monument to diversity but only served to further appropriate the efforts of Black artists. The laugh of the Pulitzer committee, Jess’s grin, the blue suits, the money, the power, these are all noise through which we can try to hear, feel, hold the hands of the underserved Black artist who is caught in the storm, weathering it, riding it out, hyper-visible but unseen. These artists are reaching out to us through Jess’s work, haunting all of American culture, and they deserve to be listened to.
Losing the Floor: The Voyage of Robin Coste Lewis

somebody/ anybody
sing a black girl’s song
bring her out
to know herself

Ntozake Shange¹

History is a myth

Robin Coste Lewis²

The Archive

The archive is not dead. It lives and moves and changes with the human hands that craft and shape it and the human lives that live in its wake. By the same token, art is not fully alive. I have been writing from an understanding that art is a present-tense action in how it impacts publics, as a performing for the moment and unto the future. However, the performance of art as a history (which is to say art as it becomes past tense) is an archive, a repository of tropes and modes transmitted and repeated, curated by historians and other artists. Even the present-tense of art is an archive-in-becoming. It’s got one foot in its grave. So, for all the transformative possibilities of art and its importance to the cultural imaginary in its kaleidoscopic evolution towards futurity, art carries a past-ness with it: sometimes vestibular, sometimes necrotic, always present. This vestibular body is what all the writers I have been writing on have been expressly

¹ Ntozake Shange, 18.
² Lewis, Instagram.
dealing with—taking the weight of history in poetry and using it, misusing it, reappropriating it, and resisting it. It is to take the weight of history as it weighs on the present and to use it against the weight of history as it weighs on the future.\footnote{Cf with Emily Greenwood’s take on M. NourbeSe Philip in “Middle Passages”: “they preserve the antithetical idea of the classic as a Western form or possession while at the same time exposing the contingency of hegemonic classical traditions.” Emily Greenwood, “Middle Passages,” \textit{Classicisms in the Black Atlantic}, 29.}

But so far I have not dealt with gender in the archive specifically.\footnote{Claudia Rankine has the Black woman and her experience in a White-dominated culture as her subject, but I was not analyzing \textit{Citizen} in a specifically gendered way.} If a writer like Tyehimba Jess had given himself the difficult task, in \textit{Olio}, of excavating Blackness from the archive of popular music, where it has been buried under layers of appropriation, erasure, exclusion, and dismissal, then the question must be asked: can this action be done for the Black woman? In the archive of the Western cultural imagination Black people have been many things, most being negative, infantilizing, and/or caricatured. But the Black \textit{woman} has been less than that. She has been non-existent. The history of this is documented in the work of scholars such as Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Farrah Jasmine Griffin, Daphne Brooks, and Alexander Weheliye.\footnote{Sylvia Wynter. Alexander Weheliye, \textit{Habeas Viscus}.} Each of these writers has different aims and methods, but all share a conversation that begins with this: that the Black woman in the Western cultural imaginary is somewhere outside of the human.\footnote{Weheliye’s work is built out of readings of Spillers and Wynter. He, Sharpe, and Hartman frequently cite each other and each other’s language while pursuing their individual aims.} The middle passage is an archive not simply of erasure and appropriation but of unspeakable violence and abjection. In history the Black woman is “ungendered.” She is “accounted for as quantities of greater and lesser mass,” victim of sexual violence but never herself possessing sexuality, “relegated... to the marketplace of the flesh,” her body transformed “into a factory,” both
a commodity and the continuation of that commodity, “reproducing blackness as abjection and turning the birth canal into another domestic middle passage.” Why would a Black woman in the present turn to this living archive of violence—and let’s be clear, this archive of violence is alive, present, and above all *weighty* in the contemporary cultural imaginary—in an attempt to craft a self-representation?

If Western culture is by default White and by default male, and the archive in Western culture is a product of Whiteness and, regardless of the gender of the curators, a product of maleness, then the archive, for all that it has been called a “womb,” for all that it contains representations of Blackness and womanhood, is itself a White male instrument. So why would and how could a Black woman like Robin Coste Lewis use this White male organ to birth a gendered sense of self?

The epic poem at the heart of Lewis’s 2015 debut book of poetry *Voyage of the Sable Venus* is a long “found poem,” the text built entirely out of the titles and descriptions of visual and sculptural art objects found at various museums, all having some depiction of a Black woman. Importantly, Lewis is not engaging with the whole of human history in art, which given the long history of humanity in Africa should be full of African figures and artists, but with the record of the whole of human history as represented in the Western museum system. This is a record that was made in a time, by individuals. This time and these individuals were White Europeans, usually men, starting in the 19th century and up to today. While some of the artworks she curates

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may pre-date chattel slavery, and the denigration and subjugation of Black Africa in the European imagination may predate chattel slavery, the artworks and the denigration as represented in the museum archive were, at best, contemporaneous with slavery. The history of the representation of the Black female body goes back, as Lewis writes, “thirty-eight thousand years,” but so does the denigration, abjection, and erasure of the Black woman as a subject of art.8

The “how” of the poem’s engagement with the figures of the archive is most easily described with José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification.” As Muñoz defines it,

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.9

To Muñoz, disidentification is a “practice of transfiguring an identifactory site that was not meant to accommodate” the subjectivity of the viewer. The viewer is presented with a representation, such as Marga Gomez woman viewing a group of stereotypical butch gay women presented for ridicule on daytime tv, or Wayne Kostenbaum studying opera divas.10 The viewer cannot identity with these representations—something about them is “not for you.” Still, they cannot to look away. This causes a “friction,” where the viewer is simultaneously drawn to and pushed away from a negative representation. While not

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8 Lewis, tk
9 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications, 12.
painless for the developing subject, this friction nonetheless becomes “powerful and seductive sites of self-creation.”

In the absence of positive representations, even negative representations can become productive sites whereby the queer subject can re-imagine itself outside of the normative. But rather than “sanitizing” the negative representation or re-transmitting it without interrogation, disidentification engages while also mediating it, “like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life.”

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.

In other words, disidentification functions like the Black epic, of rerouting representations that would have the power to diminish the minoritized subject. This “leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics.” To “enable politics” is to work towards futurity, a horizon the disidentifying subject can imagine for themselves. But it is also to invite criticism, creativity, transformation, trans*formation, and change. It is not an easy identification; it is the hard work of crafting a self.

However, the racial component of Lewis’s archive complicates even the messy frictions of disidentification. “Queering” the archive is one thing, but Blacking the archive and femming the archive, simultaneously, demands, to riff on Spillers, a new

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11 Ibid., 3, 31, 4.
12 Ibid., 12.
13 Ibid., 31.
14 Ibid., 9.
verb. This is a different problem and a different strategy even than, for example, Jess’s adventures in the archive of Black entertainment. While Jess had much reclaiming to do with the archive of Scott Joplin, Joplin was still represented in the archive as a self—even if only as a possibility. Jess could see himself in that self because that self, though in erasure, had existence. Lewis, by contrast, is presented with thirty-eight thousand years of the Black woman being used, abjected, denied even a self.

Daphne A. Brooks has written on “afro-alienation,” where Black women must other themselves into performances of self-creation, essentially using their own alienation as passage into being. She writes, “Having little access to the culture of property, to the culture of naming, or to patriarchal wealth, the mythically rendered black body—and the black female body in particular—was scripted by dominant paradigms” to have what Spillers called “no movement in a field of signification.” She describes a strategy of self-alienation that has its roots in performance:

Just as Brecht calls for actors to adapt “socially critical” techniques in their performances so as to generate “alienation effects” and to “awaken” audiences to history, so too can we consider these historical figures as critically defamiliarizing their own bodies by way of performance in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies. By using performance tactics to signify on the social, cultural, and ideological machinery that circumscribes African Americans, they intervene in the spectacular and systemic representational abjection of black peoples.

Afro-alienation, when added to disidentification, describes the strategies by which Black bodies that have historically been disallowed subjectivity find non-realist methods of

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15 “Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, misseen, not doing, await their verb,” Spillers, I Interstices, 153.
16 Brooks, Bodies in Dissent, 4.
17 Ibid..
self-creation. She describes this as a “battle to reverse the crisis of representational
timelessness projected onto Blackness.”  

Visual art in particular has a proliferation of barriers to Black expression. As
Michele Wallace has said:

If black writers had had to rely on the kinds of people and developments that
determine the value of art, if writing had to be accepted into rich white people's
homes and into their investment portfolios in the manner of the prized art object,
I suspect that none of us would have ever heard of Langston Hughes, Richard
Wright, Zora Neale Hurston ...  

The visual archive’s close proximity to power, capital, and cultural capital, is difficult for
Black artists, but it also puts Black art-lovers in a position of having to navigate the
reproduction of their own abjection in search of representation. As Edward Said has
said, “the act of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves
violence of some sort to the subject of the representation.”  

“The action or process of representing,” he continues, “implies control, it implies accumulation, it implies
confinement, it implies a certain kind of estrangement or disorientation on the part of
the one representing.”

Many of the depictions Lewis found in the archive were not even subject-less,
they were ancillary to the subject or function of the art. She describes these figures at
length in a New Yorker article from 2016:

Everywhere I went, I found them, just off, just to the edge, just beneath: pieces of
black female bodies buried in plain sight. A small black female carved into the
handle of a tool. Miniature black women who could fit into your palm. A three-
inch-long black female carved into a knife handle, so you could hold on to her
body tightly whenever you sliced your daily bread. A palm-sized black woman in
your hand when you brushed your hair at night, looking absently into the mirror.

18 Ibid., 6
19 Wallace, 41.
20 Said, 40.
21 Ibid., 41.
A spoon handle, a drum, a hammer, a flute—black bodies sculpted into the wooden frame surrounding a heroic painting of a White male on top of a White horse, riding triumphantly into war. Black female bodies ornamenting the tripods, the base of a table, sleeping inside the frame, selling, offering, tending in the background of innumerable paintings. Bending, standing, waiting. Our whole artistic history crawling with the decorative bodies of black women.  

These figures have no subjectivity. They are not even non-human; they are less than non-human; they are fully instrumentalized. How could Lewis see her-self in such figures? How could she disidentify with the impossibility of a self, in the figures that open the poem:

Four-breasted Vessel, Three Women
in Front of a Steamy Pit, Two-Faced
Head Fish Trying on Earrings, Unidentified.

Young Woman with Shawl
and Painted Backdrop, Pearl
Of the Forest, Two Girls.

These figures are all for something, yet they are something, and what they are is searching for their long-awaited verb.

“Instrumentality” is to say that the Black female figure in the archive is presented as a means to some end, be that end physical: the labor (work) and labor (reproduction) of the slave becoming the labor of the razor of the comb. But it is also abstract: the Black female figure used for the ends of the artist, or the curator, or the museum itself. Sharpe locates in this tension the central tension of Black being defined within and without the slave hold:

We must think about Black flesh, Black optics, and ways of producing enfleshed work; think the ways the hold cannot and does not hold even as the hold remains in the form of the semiotics of the slave ship hold, the prison, the womb, and

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22 Lewis, Broken, Defaced, Unseen.
23 Lewis, Voyage, 38.
elsewhere in and as the tension between being and instrumentality that is Black being in the wake. At stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate.  

“Total climate” describes how the whole universe of things is aligned into anti-Blackness. Spillers identifies the source of this in the definition of the human. To her, the Black woman was instrumental for the creation of the category of human. The over-sexualization of the Black female form. for example, “did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all”:

She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and the “other.” At this level of radical discontinuity in the “great chain of being,” black is vestibular to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for the society around her what a human being was not.

Against the immer shon of Heidegger or Althusser, who writes that “individuals are always already a subject” under capitalism, Spillers and Weheliye argue for opposite position for the Black woman: a never not-yet, a noch nie nicht, excluded both spatially and temporally from subjecthood in ideology. Black women in the archive are never not-yet subjects: they are instruments, tools for the goals of White men, whether those goals are commercial, sexual, or simply a wall-shaven chin. The Black woman is nothing more than an elegantly carved pineapple: an emblem to distract from the shame and ethical bankruptcy of Whiteness. “Instrumentality” should also remind us that these figures as well as the museum system make up a technology. This technology is linguistic, what

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24 Sharpe, 21.
26 Luis Althusser, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.
27 For the pineapple as emblem of race and colonialism becoming one also of gender and sexuality, see Susan M. Schultz. Also see Rickey Laurentiis’s Boy With Thorn.
Spillers calls “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” the many things written on the body and written into the body as violence.

If the Black woman is never not yet in history, then there is nothing for Lewis even to disidentify with. Is the narrative of her Sable Venus even of a Black woman? A White woman? A White man? Is it the ungendered, de-raced woman that is the mask of the White man of History? Is it the pre-gendered, pre-raced woman that is the flesh of the slave hold, “culturally unmade” in “the anomalous intimacy of cargo”? Can the archive perform racialized gender? Can the archive perform racialized gendering? Can Lewis use History to find her “other self”?

The archive is a metaphor for the devouring abyss of history, which is a metaphor for the slave ship. As Glissant writes, “For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out.” And this abyss is gendered, as Hartman writes, echoing Spillers and Glissant: “The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. Partus sequitur ventrem—the child follows the belly.” This “belly” reminds us of the additional labor that the Black female slave was subjected to. As bell hooks writes, “The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of White male sexual assault.” The abyss of the slave ship is metonymized, linguistically

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28 Spillers; Stephanie Smallwood.
31 bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 22.
and physically, into the body of the female slave. Her reproductive organs, her capacity to nourish, to generate, become an extension of the technology of slavery. To Hartman, this female labor is erased from the archives of Black resistance because “labor” (as in birthing and reproducing) is not seen as “labor” in the language of material resistance, striking, and revolts. Gendered “labor” is not material, in the historical materialism sense. In Marx’s original terms, “labor” is the “continuous intercourse” between Man and Nature, of “life-engendering life,” whereby each produces the other. It is described in the language of sex but not of sexuality; it en-genders without gender. The female is merely flesh without agency or social life, the conduit through which the life-engendering process of thrusting and producing takes place. To Hartman, Black women have not escaped the slave ship because their labors and their bodies are not and have not been severed from the body of the slave ship. The archive and the slave ship and the womb of the female slave are each the same archive of violence, which pre-dates her existence. It is the violence done on flesh, which Weheliye reminds us is not a utopian unity of gender and race but the technology of violence where gender and race are made.

Building off of but diverging from the work of Hartman in Lose your Mother and “Venus in Two Acts” and NourbeSe Philip’s Zong!, Lewis’s “Voyage of the Sable Venus” is an epic narrative of absence where the subject-position is the impossibility of the archive. While Voyage was rightly praised and awarded on its release, little has been written on it critically yet, and typically the focus has been on the “lyrical” aspects of the book and not the epic contained within. But what Lewis’s epic as epic is adding to the

32 Ibid.
33 Marx, “Estranged Labor,” 76.
34 Evie Shockley’s “Going Overboard” is another important critical precursor.
35 Some who have written on it include Claire Schwartz, Dan Chiasson, Kate Daniels, etc tk.
canon (and canonization) of the Black woman is a new strategy for making a narrative out of absence. This begins with disidentification but carries disidentification to the level of signification. By this I mean that while her material is the archive of the museum, the subject is language: the language of the archive, the language of poetry, the language of language. Or, more specifically, the breakdown of this language. Lewis finds self-representation, and gender, not in words but in punctuation and line breaks and arrangement, phatic moments of breath and grammar.

Lewis’s position as a poet working with the non-raw materials of both the English language and the poetic tradition but the visual language of art and the tradition of visual representation puts her in a (subject-)position to, as Shockley writes, “productively activate both looking and reading in tandem.” Shockley was writing on the strategies of contemporary Black poets to productively and formally “investigate, ignore, momentarily elide, or attempt to explode the constraint that White supremacy places on the production and reception of their works.” This comes specifically out of the visual/semantic qualities of poetry:

Given poetry’s unique position as an art made with words that is also fundamentally and self-consciously concerned with imagery (including appeals to our sense of sight) and importantly, in the era of print culture, spatiality (the arrangement of the words on the page), this argument should not surprise. Poetry thus recommends itself formally for the aesthetic project of rendering black subjectivity as image-text—and, perhaps, epistemologically as well, to the extent that poetry is almost as impossible to pin down generically as blackness is conceptually or experientially.36

36 Shockley, “On Seeing.”
The generic fluidity of poetry, matched with its visual and semantic ambiguity, leaves Black poets like Lewis in a “unique position” to de- and re-enact notions of Black subjectivity through text.

The subject “Voyage of the Sable Venus” dwells in the space where signification and language fails on contact with the horrors of history (a state which I have termed *noirporia*). This place, which Glissant calls “the abyss,” Hartman calls “the belly of the world,” or Sharpe calls “in the wake,” is a space where race, gender, and self are made. This the battlefield for Lewis’s epic journey, which is not a journey of Black women at all. She instead animates the lifeless representations of the Black female figures, marionette-style, in a performance of liberty through enslaved and instrumentalized figures. And it is a performance that is ultimately staged only to be discarded: at the end of the poem is not an Odyssean return home (Lewis, like Douglas Kearney, is based in L.A.) but a casting-off of these failed representations and a stepping-into the poem. Dan Chiasson locates this stepping-in in the second-to-last section of the epic, which ends with a flourish: “— Venus of Compton.” He calls the effect “magical,” “a little like Hermione’s abrupt transformation, at the end of "The Winter's Tale," from statue to living woman. All those women made into serviceable, mute paddles and spoons, missing their limbs and heads, are, by the miracle of verbal art, restored.”

This authorial insertion is announced with a punctuating slash—punctuation being one of the few additions Lewis allowed herself to make to the found text of the archive. But the reference to Shakespeare also puts the poem in the realm of performance—the “magic” of performance that can bring the dead to life. In the final

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37 Dan Chiasson, “Rebirth of Venus.”
scene of *The Winter’s Tale*, Hermione, thought dead by the main characters, appears on stage as a statue of herself. In other words, the (male) actor playing Hermione is playing (female) Hermione playing a (neuter?) statue of Hermione which magically becomes the “restored” female Hermione. The audience would clearly know that the statue is not a statue; however, the audience does not know if they are *supposed* to believe that the statue is a statue. Audience engagement demands that the audience goes with the fictions on stage (suspension of disbelief), but here the realities behind the fiction of the stage (a real actor playing a false statue playing a fictional woman) subvert disbelief. It is to use of the tropes of performance against the tropes of performance. The effect is miraculous.

In this sense, Lewis is using the tropes of the archive, which are the tropes of history and of sex, to “restore” a figure that was never really there to begin with: the Black female subject. It is to go into the unspeaking space of the archive, the undifferentiated mass of history, to emerge not only as a speaking subject, but a gendered one. By animating the lifeless figures of representation, Lewis conjures a third party, not herself and not the figures. This fictive Venus is not Robin Coste Lewis but is the author of the poem. She is the guiding intelligence, the genius of the new shore, more real than any History, alive and living, not free but not dead yet. She is framed in the magic circle of the poem just as the poem is framed by two “lyrical” sections in the book, and, I argue, it is the process of restoring this fictive figure that allows Lewis the stance to write the subjective “I” of the lyrics.

However, the first poem following the epic, called “Frame,” reminds us of the limits of representation. The frame can also be the lynching tree. The metaphorical
framing of art can be the unmetaphorical frame of violence. The archive is also an abyss.
To enter the archive Lewis risks falling.

**The Hole**

There are certain moments in a poet’s biography that critics will latch onto as critical metaphors through which to understand the poet’s work and life. These moments are typically overextended; a single aspect of an artist’s biography cannot summarize or metaphorize the vast assemblage of words and acts that make up a single person’s life and experience. No metaphorizing could be more total than the totality of life. And yet critics keep coming back to these inciting and insighting moments as lenses through which to understand an artist’s actions. This is particularly problematic when discussing Black suffering. As Christina Sharpe has said, “The death of Black people is not symbolic.”

This was in response to a thread and article by the poet Eunsong Kim, who writes about the tendency for White thinkers to turn Black suffering into abstract metaphors for their own ends. The article in question was on the poet Susan Howe, whose work *My Emily Dickinson* tries to claim the famously a-political Dickinson as an abolitionist. But the language that Howe uses, to Kim, does the opposite: it metaphorizes the Civil War and the struggle of Black soldiers to win freedom and turns that into a vehicle to think about Dickinson’s writing and her toils in obscurity. To Kim, this is an unconscionable severing of Black suffering for White ends. Metaphor, to Kim, severs the human lives out of history and turns the visceral, sensorial, individual, particular experience of real human lives into signposts. This turns the archive of history

38 Sharpe, twitter, https://twitter.com/hystericalblkns/status/1342910764928040962
into an instrument for the White researcher to use for their selfish ends. Kim relates this to Sharpe’s edict that Black being exists “in the tension between being and instrumentality.”

This is all to say that one must resist abstracting Black suffering for any purpose should be treated with suspicion. There is a moment in Robin Coste Lewis’s life that I keep coming back to, however. I’m afraid I will be guilty of turning it into an overextended metaphor. In my defense, it is a moment she also keeps coming back to in interviews, so it’s an important moment for her as well in thinking about her own poetic career. While no metaphor is total, I don’t want to be afraid of the usefulness of metaphor, though we must never let metaphors abstract away from lived experience. Suffering is not abstract. Suffering is total.

In 2001, Robin Coste Lewis fell in a hole.

She’s yet to come out.

Before getting an MFA in poetry and a Ph.D. in Creative Writing and Literature, Lewis first received a master’s degree in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, where her research was on Sanskrit epic. Setting aside the difficulty of being a Black American woman in a field with serious racial and nationalistic tensions, it was in her capacity as a Sanskrit scholar that Lewis attended a conference in San Francisco in 2001.

One night, Lewis and a friend were having dinner at a restaurant. She was cold. She asked for her coat. A restaurant worker led her down to a dark room where her coat

39 Sharpe, 21.
was hanging on a wall. The worker gestured to the coat. \(^{40}\) A chain of signification lead from the worker to the coat, to warmth, to the familiar. But between her and the coat was dark. Between her and the coat was a hole.

She describes this in an interview with Hilton Als on The New Yorker Radio Hour:

Hilton: I know that you began writing poetry because of something that happened. Would you mind talking about it?
Robin: I was in what they call a catastrophic accident. I fell through an open stairwell.
Hilton: What does that mean? There were no stairs?
Robin: There was no rail.
Hilton: There was no rail.
Robin: And I didn't know and it was a dark room, and I was going to get my coat in a restaurant, and they failed to tell me there was a hole in the middle of the floor, and I walked into air. \(^{41}\)

The result of the fall was catastrophic, an almost unimaginable bodily trauma. “I had all kinds of injuries all over my body,” she said. Some injuries took years to heal, some never did. She was told she could no longer have children. “I still have so many surgeries to have that I'll be going into soon,” she said. “But the most kind of devastating part of it was the brain injury.” As a result of “traumatic brain injury,” she had sustained “permanent mild to moderate brain damage.” \(^{42}\) According to the interview, it took “a year just to relearn the alphabet.” After the injury she felt herself split into two: “What does it feel like to have one self?” she asks. “I don’t know if it’s quite a death, but something happens and then another self emerges and they have a relationship, but they’re not the same person.” The fall was a fall out of language but also out of identity.

\(^{41}\) Als, The New Yorker Radio Hour.
\(^{42}\) Ibid.
The brain damage fundamentally and permanently changed the way her mind works. During her recovery she said, “I could feel language, but I couldn’t get to it.”

At some point, I couldn't read or write and I was very—they call it exquisite hypersensitivity. Everything triggered some kind of symptom, talking, walking, seeing, hearing, smelling you name it, anything that has to do with the senses would send me into a spiral where I would end up sleeping for days upon days. My memory. I fought really hard for a year to teach myself the alphabet again, I took a year just to do that because the language center of my brain was badly damaged.

This exquisite hypersensitivity manifested as an over-attention to signs and symbols with a simultaneous loss of sign and symbol systems like the alphabet. The “exquisite” in “exquisite sensitivity” is a medical term for “intense, acute, or keen.” However, its more common usage is that of “carefully elaborated; brought to a high degree of perfection” or “of such consummate excellence, beauty, or perfection, as to excite intense delight or admiration.” Delight and pain come together in one word, along with craft. “Exquisite” is almost too much to bear, but it is also almost too much to make. It is delicate, fragile, fine, intentional, crafted to give pain, like Spillers’s “Hieroglyphics of the flesh.”

This process of “exquisite hypersensitivity” matched with a slowness to reacquire language (as if language can ever be “caught”) was, as she describes in the interview, “a blessing in disguise.” “I call brain damage the gift that keeps on taking,” she said, hinting at how the injury has helped her process as a poet while also shortening her life expectancy. What the “gift” gave her was an attention to signs and sign systems and the necessity of spending time with them:

[T]he doctors told me I can only write one line a day and I could only read one line a day. That, of course, spiraled me into an incredible depression for several months, and then at some point, you know how that voice of grace just comes

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43 Fleishman, “Voices of the city”
44 Ibid.
45 OED.
Language was a focal point as well as a source of discomfort. “I couldn’t hold a pen after it happened. A nurse taped a pen in my hand, and I fell madly in love with her at that moment.”47 The simultaneous attention to and discomfort with language is what, she claims, lead her to poetry.

Lewis jokes that *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, her debut poetry collection, “is actually about brain damage.”48 Lewis begins her poetic journey with a deep distrust of language, much like Philip, whose 2008 book-length poem *Zong!* was also an epic of the archive.49 Lewis, rather than falling “out of” language, as it seemed in the early days of her brain injury, is describing her poetics as a falling *into* language. Hypersensitivity to auditory stimuli and hyperawareness of signs is a hypersensitivity, if not to language itself, then to the *sound* that language makes. One can read Lewis’s fall out of language as a falling *through* language, into the stuff that language is, which is the things that language does. Without the logic of normative grammatical codes, the brain out-of-language is too cognizant of the language-ness of language. It is uncomfortable. It doesn’t fit with stable identity, or stable narrative. It has no bottom.

Lewis, in describing her poetics, keeps circling around the image of the hole or the abyss, or what she calls “the gap.” She describes this in an interview with Matthew Sharpe:

> I love it when you’re traveling in London, when you get on the train there are all of these signs that say, MIND THE GAP. I always laugh to myself because I feel

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46 Ibid.
47 Fleishman.
48 NPR interview
49 “I deeply distrust this tool I work with — language.” M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* 197.
like that’s what I do, constantly. That’s where I am. My work is in the gap, that
dark place that we can’t see—if we fall through—where the bottom is. I like that
place; that is a narrative for me. You can’t tell what’s going on? Well, no shit.
Neither can millions of other people! We haven’t been able to tell what’s been
going on for millennia with regard to the majority narratives about black people.
What has been projected onto us is so insane, so pathological, that we don’t know
either.  
This “dark place we can’t see,” to Lewis, was not only between her and her coat,
seventeen years before winning the National Book Award. This dark place is also the
daily experience of Black people in Western culture. This is a maelstrom of signification,
what Sharpe calls “dysgraphia,” an overabundance of narratives defining and undefining
Black people as simultaneously negative and impossible. The abyss of language and the
dark hole and the storm of over-signification is also the place where Blackness lives.
Shockley writes about this in “On Seeing and Reading the ‘Nothing’” asking, “what can
we articulate about blackness in a colonial language, particularly English, that is not
encrusted with Europe’s ancient equation of blackness with evil and fear, now wedded to
the modern era's demonizing discourses of race?” She goes on: “How can black
subjectivity—not the object seen as black, but what black-identified people see through the lens of
their blackness—be expressed in a language developed over the past few centuries precisely to
facilitate, legitimate, justify, and downplay the commodification and devaluing of the bodies who
might speak ‘in the first person’ about this perspective?"  

Édouard Glissant, on board the Queen Mary II in 2009, was interviewed by
Manthia Diawara on what it was like to be on a luxurious ship crossing the same ocean

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50 Sharpe, “Robin Coste Lewis.”
51 Sharpe, In the Wake, 33.
52 Shockley, “On Seeing and Reading the ‘Nothing’: Poetry and Blackness Visualized.”
that his ancestors crossed years before in different circumstances. “What does departure mean for you?” he asked. Glissant responded, “It’s the moment when one consents not to be a single being. In other words, for me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity.” His use of “consent” is important and echoes Lewis’s sense of both “the gap” and the fall. This passage also provides the backbone for Moten’s critical trilogy *consent not to be a single being*. But I want to highlight a moment earlier in the same interview. When asked “Why a ship?” rather than a faster flight, Glissant, who was nearing the end of his life, responded:

> Ever since I started having heart trouble, I’ve been unable to take long-distance flights. And since it’s eight and a half hours from Paris to Fort-de-France, I’m obliged to take the boat, and this one is pretty much the only one that makes regular trips. It’s all quite ambiguous, because you’d think that a boat is a sign of comfort and ease, but in my opinion it’s quite the opposite. It’s a sign of catching up the time lost; the time that you cannot let slip away or run away, the times that you become caught up in things – you can’t flee or run anywhere. It seems to me that on any kind of boat you can be closer to yourself, while in a plane you’re really detached from yourself—you’re not yourself, you’re something else.

Glissant’s body demanded the voyage. While the voyage is also a departure, which is a departure from the known into the unknown and also a departure from a naïve sense of singular self into the multiplicity, the voyage across distance is also one through time, and to Glissant this experience of time is the experience of the self in all of its multiplicities. He goes on:

> It’s also a paradox, because this is an ultra-comfortable, super-luxurious ship... and when you lean over the ship’s railing, you can’t stop thinking about the Africans at the bottom of the sea. ... It seems to me that it’s another way of meditating on what’s happened in the world. Christopher Columbus had left for what was called the New World and I’m the one who returned from it [laughter]. And being on this boat—well, it’s not exactly revenge, which would be the

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53 Diawara
54 Ibid.
stupidest thing to say—but it’s a turn of events to know that my ancestors had left for the New World in terrible conditions very much unlike these.55

There is much in this small passage—Lewis will echo the seduction and dismissal of “revenge”—but for the moment let’s turn to one small thing which is present here for Glissant and his troubled heart (which would have its own say only three years later) and not present for Lewis: a railing. Glissant leans over the railing. This leaning, both precarious and safe, dangerously near to but resisting the abyss, is the posture or stance from which he “can’t stop thinking about the Africans at the bottom of the sea.” The stance is a metaphor; the sea is not. But the stance is also a repetition, cast in the indefinite present perfect of a “can’t stop thinking about,” which implies an endless future recirculation. This repetition of memory is a form of performance, the work of memory that keeps working even without monuments.56 But it is still a posture of safety.

Many years earlier, Glissant wrote about the sea in Poetics of Relation:

Navigating the green splendor of the sea ... still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.57

In Poetics, the sea is the middle of three abysses, the first being the slave hold and the third being the future which is the long imagination of the New World. But what does it mean for the ocean to be “a tautology”? For something to mean only itself it would have to be removed from the infinite chain of signification. Or the reverse: Derrida describes the tautological phrase “tout autre est tout autre” in The Gift of Death as being

55 Ibid.
56 Roach, etc.
57 Glissant, 6.
semantically insignificant (“It doesn’t signify anything that one doesn’t already know”) before showing that what was initially a tautology actually hinges on two very distinct semantics of the words “tout” and “autre.” Here, the tautology is not something which means itself but, upon reflection, something which differs from itself. This is, in Derrida’s terms, both “antinomy” and “aporia.”58 The infinite chain of signification, instead of stretching to the horizon, swirls around itself like a whirlpool of self-différance. Moten riffs on this in The Universal Machine when he writes, “It is terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable in its own autodislocation.”59

But “time” in Glissant’s sea of self-differing, exists, linguistically, as “punctuation”: the uncorroded monuments of the chains that the perishable bodies of murdered Africans cast off in their passage out of the world of memory. These hard, uncorroded things are not the “sand,” which is both the beginning and endpoint of the ever-destroying and ever-beginning sea. Time, if anything, is a human intrusion on the maelstrom. Time is not self-différant. But “time” is what Glissant wants, and has, on his timely voyages aboard the Queen Mary II. As he leans over the railing he can observe time in the remnants of unspeakable violence, and this difference of time brings him closer to his multitudinous (self-différant) self.

But Robin Coste Lewis had no railing. She fell in.

It’s hard not to read gender in this différance. While Glissant is separate from the ungendered flesh of the African bodies cast into the sea, a “vast beginning,” meditating

58 Derrida, somewhere toward the end of gift of death
59 Moten, TUM, 199.
on the balls and chains “gone green” as the punctuations of time, the same time which
he, in relative ease, gets to spend on this luxury liner—the gendered and racialized
female subject cannot not be of history, cannot not separate her body from the tautology
that is the sea and flesh and sand, cannot take time to look because “time” is marked by
the chains that have dragged down her own body dissolving into history. And yes,
Glissant is also the bodies at the bottom of the sea; that is part of “consent not to be a
single being.” But “consent” is a coy verb to use when so much of the ungendered flesh
at the bottom of the sea, as well as the flesh carried onto the New World and carrying
the New World in their bellies, was and is the subject of unspeakable sexual violence.
Spillers calls this the “unprotected female flesh” and “female flesh ungendered,”
stripped of agency and claim to body or issue. The archive may be male, but the abyss is
(made) female.

As Spillers writes, this violence is linguistic. It is made through the “hieroglyphics
of flesh” that are part of the “American Grammar.” To her, the “not to be a single being”
for the Black female subject is even more multitudinous than Glissant’s
living/dead/present/absent. It is to be positioned within multiple schemes of kinship
both apparent and denied. These relations are, in her words, “representational”:

1) motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time
that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; 2) a dual
fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's banished name and
body and the captor father's mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the
female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This
problematising of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics
of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social
subject.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Spillers, 228.
“Mother and mother-dispossessed” and (White) father and (Black) father dispossessed are present in the single flesh: the body of the Black woman. This subject position as kin and not-kin, mother and not-mother, father and not-father, gendered and ungendered, takes her out of “the ranks of gendered femaleness” and makes her inherently “monstrous”: “a female with the potential to name.”61

The semiotics of the abyss, in other words, is gendered, but in that gendered self-difference—and only in it, deep in it, falling into it—is the possibility of a gendered representation. This representation is the possibility of writing a self.

The Book

*Voyage of the Sable Venus* is Lewis’s debut book of poetry. Despite being a debut, it was near-universally hailed as an instant classic on release. The book received the National Book Award in 2015. The New York Times described the book as a technical achievement: “Ms. Lewis arranges this material with genuine technical ingenuity, until its incremental emotional force begins to make you feel you have an elephant lowering itself onto your chest,” even though the article’s headline describes the book as simply “poems on race.”62 The New York Review of books called it “Beautiful and Horrible.”63 Jay Deshpande at Slate called the book “a powerful and era-defining poetic achievement,” that “represents an important shift in how the mainstream literary world is considering the work of black poets.” The poems “speak out of lived experience and a palpable, emotional I, but they are also ingeniously experimental, crafted using brilliant

61 Ibid., 229.
63 NYRB
constraints and brilliant formal turns.” To Deshpande, the National Book Award win showed an erosion in the color line between “confessional, identity-based poetry and conceptual poetry.”

_Voyage of the Sable Venus_ is not itself an epic poem. It has three sections, the first and third being series of “lyrical” and personal poems. The central section is a long poem of 78 pages titled “Voyage of the Sable Venus.” Originally Lewis had planned to publish the long poem as its own a book-length object, but was persuaded otherwise by her editor, Deborah Garrison:

At first, the book was just going to be the long poem, “Voyage,” an idea we both liked. Then Deb asked me, with a tenderness that changed me a little, how I might feel about adding some poems before and after “Voyage.” She said that “Voyage” made you want to know more about the person who wrote it. This, of course, made me horribly uncomfortable because I didn’t want to be known more. And so over the year we had discussions about representations of the self. What is a poem, after all, what work can a poem do?

The play between revealing and hiding should remind us of how fraught the idea of representation is. The self as revealed in the archive, even the archive of the book of poetry, becomes subject to the viewer—becomes singular in the sense of being an object of study. We should remember that the poetic self, to Lewis, is multitudinous both linguistically and, due to her brain injury, neurological. But this is how Lewis has arranged her book. The sandwich-y format has its benefits and detriments. On the one hand it allows more sides of Lewis as a poet to shine through, sides of her which may be considered more “authentic” in the traditional sense of “lyrical” (i.e. personal and subjective). In her words, “I did not want to hide from my reader, and I do not want to

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64 Deshpande.
65 Nicole Sealey.
waste my reader’s time by strutting before them in a mask. If the reader is going to be generous with their attention, I mustn’t just pretend to feed them, I must give them something real to eat.”66 In this formulation, the epic poem is all “mask,” the sandwiching lyrical sections are “food.” On the other hand, if the poem had consisted of solely “Voyage of the Sable Venus,” there would be no such binary. The “mask” of the epic, with its attendant self-consciousness and self-importance, would not be allowed to “hide” under the “real.” This is why I focus on the epic poem (though the “lyric” poems are important, and I will bring them in from time to time.) The epic reveals most clearly the artistry and artifice of what Lewis is doing. Or, to put it another way, the “real” self of Voyage of the Sable Venus would not have been possible without the work of the “mask” of “Voyage of the Sable Venus.”

The vulnerability of the lyric subject is on display in the first poem of the collection, “Plantation,” which manages to touch on many of the themes of the book: representation, enslavement, complicity, artifice, reincarnation, survival, consent, womanhood. In it, the lyric speaker and her partner wake up in a hypnagogic cage, that is at once domestic and violent, surrounded by evidence of torture and rape. The partner shifts in age and sex and attitude, but the speaker retains a sort of bemused distance, desiring the partner but also deeply conflicted. Early in the poem she makes a confession:

Because you had never been hungry, I knew

I could tell you the black side
of my family owned slaves.

I realize this is perhaps

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66 Ibid.
the one reason why I love you,

because I told you this
and you—still—wanted to kiss

me. We laughed when I said plantation
fell into our chairs when I said cane.

There were fingers on the floor
and the split bodies of women

who’d been torn apart by horses
during the Inquisition.

You said, *Well, I'll be damned!*\(^\text{67}\)

The Black side of Lewis’s family owned slaves in Louisiana, a hard truth that will come back over and over in *Voyage*, especially in the final poem which I will discuss later. Here, this idea of owning people, women specifically, since women are all over the poem, even the partner becoming a young girl and his mother, is made the background for living, the dwelling that the speaker and her partner engage in. Though the speaker has desire, she is broken, “You pulled // my public bone toward you. I didn’t / say *It’s still broken*; I didn’t tell // you, *There’s still this crack*.” There is love and sex despite the pain (in her bones). The partner admires the decorations on the bars. This dreamlike scene sets the present-tense of *Voyage*, of a woman finding herself an inheritor of a legacy of women and violence, violence both done and done to, and surviving, even loving, on in spite of it, and finding beauty in the seeing.

Beginning 32 pages into the book, “Voyage of the Sable Venus” the poem is, in Lewis’s words, “a narrative poem comprised solely of the titles, catalog entries, or

\(^{67}\) Lewis, 3.
exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present.” Lewis gave herself a number of “formal rules”: “No title was repeated,” with one exception. “No title could be broken or changed in any way,” except in the cases where she “re-corrected” places where the curators removed words like “slave, colored, and negro” for more “sanitized” terms like “African-American.” For her archive, “Art” could be anything from paintings and sculpture to ornamental objects such as “combs, spoons, buckles, pans, knives, table legs.” She sometimes uses description instead of titles (“especially true for the colonial period”), and sometimes “chose to include female figures I believed the Western art world simply had not realized were black women passing for White.” She also includes titles “by Black women curators and artists,” especially in the modern era. Lewis describes her research process, like Jess, in the language of theft:

My duty was to find them, to find each one, to bring the broken bodies aboard. I hid the sculpture in my hair. I hid the paintings in the baby’s stroller. I became a very accomplished international art thief. It was easy. By writing down the titles only, I was able to steal all of the art by leaving it there. Not the object but the title; that was the grand theft, not the art. I’d write down the title in my notebook, bring her aboard, wrap her in blankets, clothe and feed her. By the end, the ship was full.

The dedication to the book is a simple line: “for BEAUTY.” This describes the book as a whole but also anticipates the epigram to “Voyage of the Sable Venus” poem itself, which is a single line from the gay Black poet Reginald Shepherd: “And never to forget beauty, however strange or difficult.” This is the one-sentence final section of

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68 Ibid., 35.
69 Ibid., 35-36.
70 Lewis, “Broken, Defaced, Unseen.”
71 Lewis, Voyage, 33.
Reginald Shepherd’s essay “Why I Write,” from his 2008 essay collection *Orpheus in the Bronx*. The first line is “I write because I would like to live forever.”

Shepherd died on September 10, 2008, at the age of 45, less than two years after this essay was published. There is a genre, an accidental genre perhaps, of occasional writing written at the end of one’s life. Not so much the grandiosity of “late style,” this would be small, pre-posthumous missives, accidental epitaphs, forward-looking farewells, like Glissant’s. I bring this up only to say that in this genre of pre-posthumous text, “and never to forget beauty, however strange or difficult,” is a pretty good one. Lewis must have felt a particular resonance to it, given her knowledge of her own mortality, both because of having survived trauma and because of that trauma’s effect on her lifespan (“My brain won’t last as long as most people’s brains will last. I know that.”)\(^{72}\) If the work of poetry is to fully live life in the brief time one is allowed in it—inhabiting all shades and shadows of it, “not flinching into disguise or darkening” or turning one’s gaze from the difficult or strange or awful—then “And never to forget beauty” is a good first and final line of this painful work. With her gaze trained on the ugliness of thirty-eight thousand years of human history, the inclusion of Shepherd reminds her, and us, that the ugliness does not necessarily preclude beauty. This recalls yet another Venus, Suzan-Lori Parks’s 1996 play *Venus* about Saartjie Baartman, the “Venus Hottentot.” Baartman became an anatomical sensation of the early 19th century when her body was dissected and displayed for European audiences. In the play, Baartman and the “Baron Docteur,” who will dissect her flesh after her early and avoidable death, engage in a complicated but passionate love affair. Parks tells every

\(^{72}\) Als.
new staging of the play: don’t downplay the love story. Don’t ironize it. She insists that the love story be played as “real,” despite all the ugliness and complication. To never forget the love is real, even if the history is awful.

Earlier in the essay, Shepherd writes of “the possibility of suffering being redeemed by art, being made meaningful and thus real (as opposed to merely actual, something that happens to exist, happens to occur).”73 Like Parks, Lewis is engaged with the “actual” material of history, and the efforts to make it “real” through art (though neither Parks nor Lewis would use the term “redeemed.”) History’s “merely actual” is not foregone, it is made continuously through actions, and these actions are muddled and complicated. Parks’s Baron Docteur is a lover as well as a curator; he makes history through both love and (racist) science. This is all to say that Lewis, Shepherd, and Parks are each attuned to the joy even in utter abjection. That Lewis can depict the smile on the face of the enslaved Black woman is not an attempt to recast history in a positive light, like some 19th century slavery apologist. But it is also not mere suffering, like the scenes of abjection depicted in the abolitionist paintings of the “Mirror of Slavery” of Henry “Box” Brown. There, Black suffering was over-emphasized for an audience of northern Whites. It was an instrumentalized suffering for a liberal audience, which erased personhood as much as the “happy slave” trope did (and does) in the South. Lewis instead works to find the smile inside the instrumentality, the beauty in the tool of death.

73 Ibid.
The cover of the book is a photograph by White Southern gothic author Eudora Welty titled “Window Shopping.” It is a street scene in sepia tones dominated by a lone Black woman. She is wearing in 1930s garb, standing on the sidewalk, looking into the mirror of a shopfront. Her right hand is placed on the small of her back and her left up to her chin in a posture of concentration. Whether this concentration is serious or bemused, whether she is looking at the contents of the window or her own reflection, the viewer can’t tell. The stark contrast leaves her face and skin as silhouette, like a 1930s version of a Kara Walker cutout. On my edition, the big “National Book Award” sticker imposes itself somewhere beneath her gaze. The title is enjambed in small White letters at the level of her knees: “VOYAGE of the / SABLE VENUS” with the subhead “and / other / poems.”
Figure 15. W. Grainger after T. Stothard, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies," 1801.

This cover can and should be compared to the etching that was the inspiration for the collection, Thomas Stothard’s “The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies.” This formed the frontispiece to noted slavery enthusiast Bryan Edward’s 1801 book *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. In that, a Black woman, nude except for a scrap of loin cloth, is displayed frontally to the viewer, riding on a shell, invoking Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*. While her posture and body are directed at the viewer, her eyes and head turn slightly to the side, to her right hand, which holds lightly the reins by which she is being dragged through the sea by sea-serpent-like dolphins. Surrounding her are White cherubs, seemingly celebrating her with ostrich plumes and peacock feathers. She is being led by more cherubs riding sea serpents, and two adult men. On the right, a man dressed as Triton bears the Union Jack flag of the British isles stares at the Venus. A Cupid overhead aims at him with his
love’s arrow. On the left, a male figure turned away from the viewer, toward the Sable Venus, or beyond.

Lewis describes coming upon this image in a random book on “a banal day,” seeing this “celestial black female, standing where she has never stood before, throughout thousands of years of Western art: right in the middle of the canvas.”74 She compares her to other European portraits:

Instead of pointing to her breast, like the Virgin, or covering her breast or heart, like Botticelli’s Venus, the Sable Venus has a pair of reins threaded through both of her hands. The reins are harnessed to two dolphins, dolphins that pull her chariot-shell through the sea. Unlike Botticelli’s pure and naked Venus, the Sable Venus wears one article of clothing: a pair of what can only be called colonial panties. And, unlike Botticelli’s Venus, the Sable Venus is strong, curved, muscular: a woman’s woman. Her form is twice as wide, with girth, her muscles: cut, lean. She is the embodiment of strength—no fragile anything in need of anyone. Her dark skin is adorned with jewels. All eyes are upon her and at her service—finally.75

The joy at finding this image of celestial and muscular Black womanhood was immediately tempered by the stark, awful irony: “In 1801, her scallop shell could only be a metaphorical slave ship.” She asks herself, “Did the Sable Venus enjoy her trip across the Atlantic, gliding along the Middle Passage, guided by a White male celestial harem, destined for slavery?”76

To Lewis, this moment of irony, of “disidentification,” was an awareness of the “game” of history and art and the art of history. It became the thought and question that grew into her epic poem. In her own words:

It wasn’t merely the Sable Venus’s iconicity that grabbed me by the neck. Nor was it that deeply satisfying but ultimately simple delight in seeing the White Venus replaced by the black—as delicious as all that is, and it is!—that gesture was too undemanding, of myself, of history. Which is to say, ever since Rome, we keep

74 Lewis, Robin Coste. “Broken, Defaced, Unseen”
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
replacing the statues but continue playing the same blinding games. When perhaps the real neurosis is our desire for monuments of any kind. Perhaps, instead of looking up for an icon, we need to look down and cherish and adore, even worship, the people working quietly right beside us, or, even more subtly, working—via memory—right within us. Real beauty isn’t tit for tat, as fun and even justified as revenge can be. So “The Voyage of the Sable Venus,” for me, is something more than a visual sleight of a historical hand. That something more is in its title. “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” is an epic written in one line.\footnote{Ibid.}

The “game” of monumentalizing, like the “game” of representation, can be “delicious” in its vindication and revenge. But this is ultimately unsatisfying, much like Glissant’s revenge. But what makes “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” an “epic written in one line” is not its history but how it “contains the story of all our histories.” She goes on:

Could it be, I wondered, that, instead of the intellectual propaganda we call “history,” the more honest, simple, and accurate narrative of art, of perception, was hiding right there in plain view—not, however, in the imagery but simply in what the image is called, within the signs, within the words? If we went back, if we went all over the world and looked at every object, every statue, every painting that included a black female figure in any way, and wrote every title down, what would art’s epic sing then?\footnote{Ibid.}

Lewis is attempting to escape the icons of history—the nouns—by letting them move, by giving them action, narrative, \textit{story}. “What would art’s epic sing” is a string of modifiers that shows us the levels of signification. “Art,” which is, at least in mimesis sense, the representation of lived experience, or in the sense of poiesis, a making or revealing. “Epic,” which is the story of history. And “sing,” which is a verb, which is sound, sound which, at least to Hartman and Moten, is at once outside of historical representation and in/anterior to the Black subject’s sense of self. So “Art’s epic song” is not representation or narrative. It is the an/interior sound of the narrativization of history which is a representation or making of experience.

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}}
In other words, this is a Black Epic. The Western epic genre conventions are touched on in this poem. There is an “invocation.” There is a catalog (“The Ship’s Inventory”). There is a voyage, clearly. The “setting if vast, covering great nations, the world, or the universe.” For Hegel’s definition of epic, *Voyage* has as its object “an action which in the whole breadth of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch.” The “total world” is the world of the Black female subject, or rather the world of Western culture with the Black female subject presented, like in Kara Walker, as a subject-in-negative. As the “deeds of great valor or requiting superhuman courage” demanded by Holman and Harmon, the writing of an epic out of archive texts is both self-consciously difficult and itself a reparative act.

Lewis’s background in Sanskrit epic poetry and comparative religious literature informs her sense of “epic song.” While she is not particularly religious herself, Sanskrit religious literature was a way to think about narrative outside of the confines of a single body:

In Sanskrit epic, the ways in which karma is played with, and reincarnation and transmigration is played with, are so fantastic and fabulous that I couldn’t resist—that’s why I studied Sanskrit epic in graduate school. That two lovers could fall in love and then never see each other again, but then meet again eight lifetimes later, and they’re enemies on a battlefield, and just as one is lifting the sword to cut the other’s head off, they remember. Right? That’s fantastic narrative drama that you don’t see in Western epic or scripture because our ideas of the body are so limited, I think.

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79 Holman and Harmon, 189.
81 Holman and Harmon, 189.
82 “I am, on a good day, an agnostic.” Sharpe, *Bomb* magazine.
83 Ibid.
Because Western ideas of the body are so limited, Lewis wants narratives that explore the multiplicity of the body. However, in contrast with the Sanskrit epics she describes, where stable identities span multiple bodies, Lewis is interested in how both identity and the body can be multiple. She describes how, in her poetry, “people are reincarnating in their own body many, many, many times within one lifetime.” Or, the narrator of the poem “Sri Bhuvaneshwari,” who “becomes every being”: “So then one body can become many genders and many ages and be, on the one hand, a paradise, and on the other hand, a total hell, all within one lifetime, or one moment, or one encounter.” She finds a strong connection between this and the contemporary: “My training as a Sanskritist and theologian finds its way into the postmodern context of desire and race. That identities can move even if the body stays static (which is to say repressed).”

The play with body and identity recalls the difference between “body” and “flesh,” and the artificiality, the crafted-ness, of each. Weheliye writes that “flesh, while representing both a temporal and conceptual antecedent to the body, is not a biological occurrence, seeing as its creation requires an elaborate apparatus.” 84 These are Spillers’s “hieroglyphics of flesh,” “the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet.” 85 This is, to Spillers, a “semiosis of procedure” that produces the racialized female body, a “phenomenon of marking and branding” that is often “hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color.” 86 Pragmatically, these are the “context” of the flesh. The context of Lewis’s flesh, for example, is that of being Black, female, and

84 Weheliye, 39
85 Spillers, 207
86 Spillers, Peters Pans,
raised in a Christian household, which she describes as writing on her flesh certain majoritarian narratives:

All these years, my whole life, since as long as I could remember, I’ve been walking around with this horrid, disgusting illness in my body that is race, just thinking that something was really intrinsically wrong with me. Add, of course, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and their whole gender thing—I was deeply religious as a child. So that means all my life, from representations of race, and religious representations of women, as a girl, I was like: Okay, then, God says I’m disgusting triply. I was born disgusting. The fact that I have ovaries makes me disgusting. Everything about me makes me disgusting. We tell this to children, we actually expose them to these so-called narratives. For me, that’s not a narrative either! God only knows what is going on in the psyches of our children because of our inability to integrate these so-called master narratives.87

Lewis’s ovaries, as well as the color of her skin, marked her with the hieroglyphics of flesh, which left her with a fundamental “inability to integrate.” Her subjectivity could not integrate itself with the “triple” objectification of her flesh, her skin, and her gender, leaving her, like many Black children, in a state of noirporia and gynoporia.

Lewis, in an interview with Nicole Sealey, describes how the process of writing the poem was a sort of authorial abandonment, a giving-up of these multiple contradictory narratives of the self to the singular figure of History:

“I felt as if I wasn’t the narrator, but History was. History was writing her own confessional poem. What I thought about it, or what anyone else thought about it, became insignificant. Her story was far more compelling than anything I could add. Indeed, the confession was so profound, the titles were so complete, my compulsion to comment would have been a great offense…. I felt that if I inserted my own commentary, in addition to the titles, I’d be interrupting History’s sorrowful, visceral confession.”88

In this formulation, “History” is not the White male archive but the Black woman within History, whose stories have yet to be fabulated. This is a figure who has existence and social life outside of and beyond the White male archive. This is similar to Philip, who

87 Sharpe.
writes in the afterword to *Zong!*, "I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself."  But in Philip’s telling this process has a measure of spirituality. She begins every public reading of *Zong!* with a small ceremony and invocation to the ancestors. She describes her book as “a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present.”  Lewis, who describes herself as “on a good day, an agnostic,” is attempting a secular version of Philip’s sacraments. Instead of the language of haunting she uses the language of contemporary lyric (a sort of secular spiritualism). The “confessional” poem we must understand as a specific genre of American poetry that began in the mid-20th century, usually attributed to Robert Lowell. It privileges a personal, honest, and self-revealing lyric “I,” which is lyric subjectivity. This “I” aspires to universality, but unlike in the modernist lyric or even the Romantic lyric, the lyric “I” of the confessional attempts this universality not through impersonal, detached, or abstract language, but through the particular. The confessional poet is ever-more specifically themselves, through the act of the confessional poem. The reader is invited to empathize with their specificity. As Kamran Javadizadeh and others have written, the confessional poem is historically a White genre, and the particularities of the “lyric I” that invite empathy are those of a privileged, upper-class White person, as the “Boston Brahmin” Lowell.  Lewis’s framing of her epic poem in the language of the White confessional lyric does two separate but simultaneous things. First, it hijacks the cultural apparatus of the confessional poem or

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89 Philip, 199.
90 Ibid., 201.
91 Javadizadeh, tk.
contemporary lyric in general, to tell a specifically Black and female story. This puts her in the ranks of many contemporary Black women poets who used a historically White form to their own ends.\(^9^2\) But while also taking on this cultural apparatus for a work that is distinction not personal, not private, and not “lyrical,” Lewis places at the central podium of the confessional poem not a White man, and not a Black woman in a White man’s outfit, but, rather, absence.

Lewis’s response to the feeling of not being a main character in her own story is to embrace a sense of absence-as-main-character:

One of the things that is intrinsic for anyone within this period, but especially for people of color, or anyone who’s been repressed, people in exile, anybody that’s lost the floor in some way, whether nationally or culturally, is that we learn that absence is as much a presence in our lives as anything else—if not the greatest presence of all. So I tried very deliberately to have absence be the main character in that so-called story. And it’s very important to me that fragmentation be something that’s not only present, but that I also celebrate. I don’t accept the idea of my history as tragic. I refuse that in every way that I possibly can. And in order to do that, I have to embrace and celebrate situations that many people quite understandably renounce.\(^9^3\)

The attempt to “embrace and celebrate situations” that others “renounce” is a form of disidentification. Lewis refuses to identify with tragedy but instead disidentifies with the figures of tragedy. Much like her own suffering and fall, the metaphor of “losing the floor” is a strategy not to find a new floor, but to find a new sense of self rooted in absence. It is to build a representation, an “I” out of the lack of a stable identity. And it is to understand that this lack or absence is itself the proximity to violence (past and future) that is Black subjection (a \textit{being-toward-death} that Heidegger would not have

\(^{92}\) Beyoncé’s \textit{Lemonade} has also been called a confessional poem.

\(^{93}\) Sharpe.
imagined). That this strategy might be misconstrued as an acceptance of history is the dilemma that many contemporary Black artists have put themselves in. Kara Walker, for example, is often accused of recreating scenes of violence or inviting stereotypical representations in her work. However, this risk is necessary to Lewis’s strategy for survival—through dwelling in violence and absence and fragmentation, in “losing the floor” (like “losing your mother”). It is to risk crafting self-representations that are not unconscious repetitions of violence.

Rather than using the whole of Western art as archive, Philip’s Zong! is a nearly 200-page book constructed from only from the words in the two-page court report for the 1783 case Gregson v. Gilbert. The slave ship Zong (originally called “zorg,” Dutch for “care”), owned by the Gregson slaving company, embarked from Accra in 1781 with 442 slaves en route to Jamaica. After errors in navigation, the ship ran low on supplies and drinking water. On the 29th of November, 1781, the captain ordered the crew to start throwing the slaves overboard.

First to go were women and children.

In total, 142 slaves died. On returning to Liverpool, the shipping company sought insurance claims against the lost slaves. What followed was a long court case that ultimately found that this destruction of “cargo” was in fact legal. This finding would be overturned on appeal, but only because of new information placing the blame for the

94 TK
water shortage solely on the captain’s navigational errors. The status of Black Africans “at the bottom of the sea” was still no different than cargo.

Philip, who is a trained lawyer, did not want the language of law to be the final say on the Black suffering. “While a concern with precision and accuracy in language is common to both law and poetry,” writes, “the law uses language as a tool for ordering.” Poetry, by contrast, is a tool of “disorder” and “mayhem.” The original sin of Gregson v. Gilbert is “its erasure and forgetting of the be-ing and humanity of the Africans on board the Zong,” which she describes as “a fugal state of amnesia,” the “fugue” being a “state of amnesia in which the individual, his or her subjectivity having been destroyed, becomes alienated from him- or herself.” Zong! the poem “fragments” and “re-writes” the text of Gregson v. Gilbert, writing a “fugal palimpsest through which Zong! is allowed to heal the original text of its fugal amnesia.” In other words, Gregson v. Gilbert is already alienated from itself by its erasure of Black be-ing. Zong! is thus an attempt not to just heal the victims of the Zong massacre, but Western modernity itself.

Philip describes a move of multiplicity that is similar to Glissant but purged of any sense of a stable self-position:

In allowing myself to surrender to the text—silences and all—and allowing the fragmented words to speak to the stories locked in the text, I, too, have found myself “absolved” of “authorial intention.” So much so that even claiming to author the text through my own name is challenged by the way the text has shaped itself. The way it “untells” itself. And, by refusing the risk of allowing ourselves to be absolved of authorial intention, we escape an understanding that we are at least one and the Other. And the Other. And the Other. That in this post post-modern world we are, indeed, multiple and “many-voiced.”

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96 Oldham, tk
97 Philip, 199.
98 Ibid., 204.
99 Ibid., 204-05.
This “risk” of absolution, of “challenging” her own name (NourbeSe Philip, like Saidiya Hartman, gave herself her own name, her African, “given” name) exposes the vulnerabilities of the flesh even in the metaphor of language. This “many-voiced” sense of self is a consent to not be a single author—the book is subtitled “as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng.” Boateng is listed as its official co-author. This name is not fictional though it doesn’t apply to a historical person: as Philip writes, “Setaey Adamu Boateng is the voice of the ancestors revealing thee submerged voices of all who were on board the Zong.” This shows how seriously Philip takes her responsibility toward the ancestors. The text of a legal statement about the book reads: “During the 7-year process of composing the work [Philip] sought permission of the Ancestors by visiting Ghana, departure point of the slave ship Zong, and speaking with traditional elders and spiritual leaders. She also visited Liverpool where the Ancestors of the crew would have come from to pay respect to those people.”

Philip not only gives Boateng co-authorship but gives each and every lost slave on the Zong a name, listed on the footer of every page of the first section of the poem, titled “Os,” Latin for “bone.” This fictive non-fiction is what Hartman, in “Venus in Two Acts,” calls “critical fabulation.” She defines this at length in the language of narratology:

“Fabula” denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience and event.

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or

100 Philip statement for legal opinion against Rana Hamadeh.
authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.\textsuperscript{101} “Critical fabulation” is thus a de-centering of the event of the narrative of history—less historical fiction than a fictioning of history. Hartman, importantly, does not believe that simply challenging history or seeking to rewrite it, despite how seductive it might seem to give voice and name to the lost of history, is enough. This is because of the inevitability of reproducing the violence of history: “Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?” she asks.\textsuperscript{102} Such counter-factuals serve to reify the master narratives of History. Instead, the fabulist must disrupt and de-center History as a narrative and provide a “subjunctive,” “speculative” argument and narrative. As Hartman writes, “I intend both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.”\textsuperscript{103}

Hartman also has her historical “Venus,” a slave girl mentioned in the trial of the captain of the slave ship \textit{Recovery}. She writes:

\textbf{One cannot ask, “Who is Venus?” because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstance have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.\textsuperscript{104} In her “Venus,” Hartman writes that the “scandal of the archive” is how it is full of Black women and girls, robbed of both life and speech. The puzzle is in how to recover them without recreating the violence tied up with their historical existence. Hartman’s}

\textsuperscript{101} Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 7, 5.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{104} Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 2.
Venus has no story, no etching, no representation. Her existence in the archive is no more than insult and scandal. Hartman’s question is then how can the Black artist, especially the Black female artist, ever make new stories out of “infelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands.” If it is not possible to undo the violence that inaugurates the sparse record of a girl’s life or remedy her anonymity with a name or translate the commodity’s speech, then to what end does one tell such stories? How and why does one write a history of violence? Why revisit the event or the nonevent of a girl’s death?”

“Infelicitous” is also a term from linguistics, which denotes that an utterance has failed in its context. A pragmatic statement, such as an oath, is not true or false, but fulfilled or not fulfilled by its context. There are many ways a statement can fail pragmatically. It can be improperly formed. It can be insincere. There can be a misreading of intentions. When Hartman calls the utterances of the archive “infelicitous,” she is first is talking about the illegible cries of the slave that fall on deaf ears, rendered infelicitous by the slavers’ inability to ascribe equal humanity to the Black flesh—the sound which itself is heard generations later by Frederic Douglass in the scream of Aunt Hester. This hearing and its felicity interpellated Douglass’s existence as a slave but was also the fundamental sound of Black resistance, which both Hartman and Moten have written on. But the “infelicitous utterances” also mark the failures of the archive in other ways. Even the name “Venus” is infelicitous. The name is brought up in trial of the ship Recovery trial only as a corollary to the flogging to death of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{105}}\text{Ibid., 6.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{106}}\text{Ibid., 10.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{107}}\text{Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 3; Moten, In the Break,}\]
another, unnamed, slave. The captain was acquitted of this other murder charge after a lengthy trial, and this trial is the sole archival existence of “Venus.” “There was another girl on board the Recovery... whom they named Venus, and she too had the pox.” “As there was no evidence to support the second indictment, than what supported the first, the jury also acquitted the prisoner on it.”108 The death of the girl named Venus was found non-severable from the death of the other unnamed girl, thus the captain was acquitted of both. To the archive, the two slave women were completely undifferentiated. She wasn’t even a person. If the slaver would call out into the ship’s hold “Venus!”, whose head would turn? They are undifferentiated, “ungendered flesh.” Any story is every story.

Hartman’s answer to this noirпорia is her “critical fabulism,” which both does and does not seek to name the undifferentiated flesh of history but rather displace the “event”:

By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.109

Hartman is here privileging not the “elements of the story” but the process of fabulation, of displacing the narrative of History and the subject-positions of narrator and speakers. What makes her fabulation not just another reification of the master narrative of history is that it performs “history”: not just as a counter-history alongside “real” history but as

108 Hartman, 8.
109 Ibid., 11-12.
a new “present.” The event is not even of history, of “transition from one state to another,” but the present-tense act of writing itself. This is a transition, yes, but a transition between states of knowledge. Before, knowledge of history was singular, indicative, authorless. In the other, knowledge is multiple, subjunctive, and authored. Its authors are multiple: some of them are shadowy historians that fabricated the “master” narrative taken as fact. But at least one of the authors of history is (now) Saidiya Hartman. Hartman cannot re-write the narrative of history, cannot go into the archive and differentiate the undifferentiated. That would, again, be to recreate violence. It would be to interpellate the uninterpellated, to subject to the violences of history someone who perhaps can be said to have escaped it. Fabulation instead makes all narratives into fables. It calls to Venus, not in the interpellating singular voice of History, but with the multitudinous voices of the possible and impossible.

Philip writes that in 2002 she decided to immerse herself in all the information about the Zong massacre she could find in preparation for writing. “I began reading a novel about it, but am uncomfortable,” she writes. “A novel requires too much telling,” she writes, “and this story must be told by not telling.”110 Philip doesn’t mention what novel it was, but it is likely 1997’s Feeding the Ghost, a historical novel by Fred D’Aguiar. This novel relies on the account of a single slave who, after being thrown overboard, swam back to the ship. History knows of this, again, not from any Black witnesses, but from a stray line in a trial report.111 In D’Aguiar’s novel this slave is a woman and has a

110 Philip, 190.
111 Rupprect, tk.
name, Mintah. But what possibilities are lost in D’Aguiar “telling” the story of this unnamed slave? What is lost having an author ventriloquize the dead, that would make Philip so uncomfortable?

“Critical fabulism,” at least in my reading of it, narrates not what could have occurred but is itself the process of making the myth of the possible. The woman named Venus was not “saved” from oblivion by the scribe’s pen when she showed up in a single scandalous line in a court case. And she was not “rescued” by Hartman when she located and extrapolated on that scant, condescending line. She was, before that line. She had be-ing. And she has been, since that line. If anything, Venus was nearly snared into history by that interpellation. She was nearly pulled out of the abyss of being and into the Word, the word “Venus,” the word “pox,” and “flogging.” The White man’s writing nearly caught her. But he hasn’t caught her fully. Not yet. We must imagine that she slips away. She slips into the place which both is and is not death. She slips out of history but not memory, which is the imagination. She slips. We must imagine D’Aguiar’s slave had no name. We must imagine. She, if she is a she, swam back to safety. The safety of the slave ship. Swam back into history, which is the safety of the slave ship. This fact of history is an interesting fact. But facts were made by White men on slave ships. What makes her story more important than the 142 others, tallied but unnamed, story-less? What makes a fact? Because it “happened”? 112

A fact is a metaphor is a slave ship. One slave swam back. This is a fact. There should be songs about her. But there should be songs about every lost African. What is a fact? One slave swam back. Another left the wood of the ship, left the iron and sinew of

112 All of this is talked about in Xavier Lee’s chapter on D’Aguiar.
the arms that held her, left the hemp and jute of the ropes that bound her, left the gravity of the ship for the air, the brief air before the long water. At that moment she did not fall but floated. She floated up instead. She floated, like the moment in the Hebrew bible when the waters were separated from the waters, and the spirit of God moved there. She floated in the insubstantial air between two graves. This is a fact. She is not called there but calls. She is not named but names. She gives herself a name there. Her name is Venus is Mintah is Setaey. Her name is Saidiya is NourbeSe. This name is lost to history and that is her freedom. She is no one.

The Voyage

I will listen in detail to some of what Lewis is doing in her art’s epic song, paying attention to the work being done in and around her use of text and the silences between.

After the title page and initial epigram from Shepherd, “Voyage” has the two-page “Prologue” of the poem, where Lewis stipulates the “formal rules” of the erasure.

Following this are two more epigrams, both epigraphs remind the reader that the archive of the poem is not an abstract universal, but one created at a specific time and place by specific (White) people. The first, from 1936, is an invitation to “The Metropolitan Museum of Art Employees’ Association Minstrel Show and Dance.” The second is a short request from a “Mrs. B. L. Blankenship” of Nottoway Co. House, Virginia: “I am anxious to buy a small healthy negro girl—ten or twelve years old, and

\[113\] Moten reads a slave narrative written by historian Marcus Rediker similarly: “Her name is Hortense. Her name is NourbeSe. Her name is B. The black chant she hears is old and new to her. She is unmoored. She is ungendered. Her mother is lost. Exhausted, exhaustive maternity is her pedagogical imperative.” Moten, The Universal Machine, 200.
would like to know if you can let me have one.” This message comes from the archive of the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester, Massachusetts, dated March 29, 1863, which is to say in the middle of the Civil War. Lewis doesn’t quote the entirety of the message, which ends with: “please let me hear from you (—I would like a dark Mulatto)—describing the girl and stating the price.”

The first two sections act as a sort of preamble, “The Ship’s Inventory” and “Invocation.” “Invocation: Blessing the Boat” was written first and contains the direct address that one would expect from an “epic.” Instead of “Sing, o Muses” the poem begins as an address to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Untitled</th>
<th>Anonymous</th>
<th>Clay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prehistoric</td>
<td>Cow</td>
<td>Bone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of a</td>
<td>Balsarium</td>
<td>Glass Moss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragment</td>
<td>Untitled Gelatin</td>
<td>Silver Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Paper</td>
<td>Stucco On Canvas</td>
<td>On Concrete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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115 Lewis, 40.
This is not an invocation to a goddess at all but to the “Anonymous / Clay,” the medium or “Silver Print” which may or may not have captured her. Absence drips from these lines: we are shown all the places she could be: “On Paper On / Stucco On Canvas / On Concrete,” but where is she? Lewis reminds the reader that art is a series of empty vessels into which we read living beings. They are also vessels out of which may have escaped living beings. The vessels are “Anonymous” but not featureless:

Heads and Busts  
Headless—Footless—Armless

But with a Strongly  
Incised Vaginal

Opening:

\textit{Harp}^{116}

Even absent of heads and feet and arms, the limbs of reason and movement and craft, the figures are still sexed. And this sexing is important, even for the “ungendered female flesh” of the archive. To return so strongly to the “Vaginal Opening” is to refuse the denial of sex in the archive. It is to refuse the unsexing of the Black woman that Spillers has written about extensively. Spillers calls out specifically Judy Chicago’s 1970s art installation \textit{Dinner Party}. In this piece, often called an “epic” installation, place settings are made for thirty-nine historical or mythological women with ornate symbolic representations of their vaginas.$^{117}$ While the Egyptian Hatshepsut had a place, the only

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{116} Lewis, 41-42.  
\textsuperscript{117} Pbs, Brooklyn Museum.}
Black woman featured was Sojourner Truth. However, Truth was the only woman not represented by a vagina. Instead of a vagina, Truth had three faces. Spillers writes:

The point of the example is self-evident. The excision of the female genitalia here is a symbolic castration. By effacing the genitals, Chicago not only abrogates the disturbing sexuality of her subject, but might well suggest that her sexual being did not exist to be denied in the first place. Truth's femaleness, then, sustains an element of drag. In fact, she is merged here with a notion of sexual neutrality whose features, because they have not been defined, yet could assume any form, or none at all—in either case, the absence of articulation. Ironically, Sojourner Truth's piercing, rhetorical, now-reputed question on the floor of the second annual Convention of Women's Rights in Akron, 1852—“Ain't I a woman?”—anticipates the “atmosphere” of the artist's deepest assumptions. The displacement of a vagina by a face invites protracted psychological inquiry, but it is enough to guess, almost too much to bear guessing, that if Sojourner, in the female artist's mind, does not have the necessary female equipment, then its absence might be expressed in a face whose orifices are still searching for a proper role in relationship to the female body.118

The lack of sex allowed to Black women in the mind of the Western feminist speaks to a confusion of “orifices” and their proper role. This is a confusion of verbs: to speak, to eat, to fuck. The symbolic castration of Truth in Dinner Party not only “abrogates the disturbing sexuality” of the Black woman, but also denies her place in the category of “woman,” as one who can both speak for womanhood and contain a sexual interiority. She is something else perhaps, certainly not a man, but certainly not a woman. Lewis's “Strongly / Incised Vaginal // Opening” not only reclaims what might have been “disturbing” to the curators and White feminists—the existence of Black woman’s sexuality—but focuses on it as a foundation. Any part may be lost from the figure, except the vaginal opening, which is foundational not only to the Black female figure, but to the archive as a whole.

This apotheosis is not uncomplicated. The poem continues:

The vaginal opening becomes the romantic “harp,” symbol of art and music and beauty. But through repetition we should also recognize that the harp is an instrument, it is played on, it is manipulated, tortured, to make song. The “Harp” becomes a “Gong,” repeated three times. The gong is not simply played on, it is beaten. It becomes mallet. It becomes rattle. Finally, the vagina becomes “Drum,” symbol in the West of Africa and African dance and music, which has become so important to Western popular culture. But Lewis show us how this drum is synonymous with sex and sexual violence. The silence of this page, with all of its italicized objects and no sounds, no music, no voice at all, should remind us of the unreproducible sound of Aunt Hester’s scream.

The poem proper proceeds in a series of eight numbered “catalogs,” ordered chronologically. Each title is followed by a colon and a subtitle, starting with “Catalog 1:

119 Lewis, 42.
Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome” and ending with “Catalog 8: The Present / Our Town.” The subtitles are set in small caps. The poems in individual catalogs are separated by roman numerals but also separated within the numerialled sections by single offset colons, sometimes with their own subtitles—such as the third sub-section of numeral I of Catalog 1, sub-titled “Element of Furniture Decoration.” There doesn’t seem to be any structure as to why some numerialled sections include multiple sub-sections and some do not, but the total number of numerals is twenty-two. The final “Catalog 8” is a single page with no roman numerals.\textsuperscript{120}

I list these small details with the understanding that punctuation and typography is the main avenue of Lewis’s craft. As she writes in part 1 of the “Prologue,”: “While the grammar is completely modified—I erased all periods, commas, semicolons—each title was left as published, and was not syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented.” This makes “Voyage” a different sort of piece than the typical found poem, which most often fragments and distorts its source texts in order to achieve poetic ends. This is seen in 

\textit{Zong!}, for example, which fragments and particulates the text of Gregson v. Gilbert over and over, sometimes just repeating a single syllable or letter, or, by the end of the book, palimpsesting the text over itself to the point of illegibility. Or in Srikanth Reddy’s \textit{Voyager}, where the source text of Kurt Waldheim’s memoir \textit{The Eye of the Storm} is picked apart into new syntaxes. Reddy never changes the order of Waldheim’s words, but by removing the words from their contexts he effectively cuts them from syntax. In both of these texts it is intentionally difficult to reverse-engineer the process, to re- or

\textsuperscript{120} Twenty-two seems such a specific number as to invite some reference, but I haven’t found one. For example, 22 is the number of major arcana of the tarot deck, but other than the final section including the line “Her Absence Filled the World” I can find no good reason to think this is important. Perhaps there is something in Sanskrit epic around twenty-two/eight, or, more likely, it is arbitrary.
dis-cover the original sense and context of the words. Lewis on the other hand makes sure to preserve the original syntax. Each of the titles or descriptions is re- and discoverable. The effect is palimpsestic: the reader can easily retrieve the original sense of the titles and descriptions, while also reading them as incorporated into the epic narrative.

Often the titles are presented as is, with only lineation added, such as this “IV” section of “Catalog 1: Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome”: 

Standing

Female Figure with Child Kneeling
Female Figure with Child Standing
Female Figure Head
Rest Supported by Seated
Female Figure Kneeling
Female Figure with Bowl Standing
Female Figure with Bowl and Child Standing
Female Figure Seated
Female Figure (Pipe)
Female Figure Undated
Female Figure Mask
Female Rhythm Pounder

Standing121

The particularities of Lewis’s source material leave precious few verbs in the text. There are many participles, both present and past, but no verbs in action. Here the “Female Figure” is repeated visually and textually, always capitalized in title case, which makes her identity as a proper noun only of equal weight as other nouns like “Bowl” and “Pipe.” The lineation breaks the participle “standing” from the female figure, putting her verb in doubt. She is both “Standing // Female Figure” and simply “Female Figure,” with

121 Lewis, 53.
“Child,” or “Child Kneeling.” The repetition of “Female Figure” at the beginning of every line puts all the anaphoric weight on “Female,” rather than her participle, be that “Standing,” Kneeling, Seated, or Undated. “Female” is anatomical, biological, not necessarily human. “Figure” does not necessarily mean human, as in its first definition of “Form, shape,” or even in the abstract sense of “figure of speech.” But at the same time “figure” is gendered in modern usage, as in “watch your figure.” “Female figure” then becomes abstract but human, visually signalling not “woman” but sexual characteristics associated with “woman.” “Female Figure” is both under- and over-determined. It means “woman” but does not mean “woman.” And where is the verb in “Female Rhythm Pounder,” a line where every word is sexualized?

Other times, as in the fifth section of Catalog 4: Medieval Colonial, “XIV,” the descriptions are each given their own stanzas, with enjambment coming as a surprise:

A Negro Slave Woman
Carrying a Cornucopia
Representing Africa

A Negro Slave Woman
Holding a Plate of Tropical Fruits
Including a Pineapple

A Negro Servant Boy
Brings in a Tray
Of Filled Glasses Winged

Female Figure of Hope
Leaning
On an Anchor

The “Slave Women” carry food “representing Africa” or “Including a Pineapple,” itself a representation of colonial wealth. Then that “winged” enjambs across to the “Female

\[122\] Lewis, 75.
Figure of Hope.” But again, the Female Figure is arranged on the line in a position of command. The “Female Figure of Hope” is separated from her verbs and presented, for a single short line, all alone. The section continues the description of the scene in greater detail, ending with:

   Above to Their Side
   Is a Ballot

   Box and Behind
   Them a Loco
   Motive.\textsuperscript{123}

The pun on “locomotive” should remind you of Lewis’s characteristic gallows humor. All the objects in this scene, from boxes to arms to feathers and wreathes, have their significations, and behind them is this machine of industry and commerce, which is also the loco motive—suggesting that the “Slave Women” and “Negro Boys” are not just bearing the fruits of colonialism and capitalism but that capitalism and colonialism are signifiers of a deeper motive of power and domination. The “Slave Women” are not bearing goods but are the good.

   In all these titles and the punctuation puncturing them, Lewis reminds us to pay attention to the silences off the page. As she says in the interview with Sharpe:

   Someone said to me recently, “It’s so sad what your book exposes about what’s been done to black women.” And I said, “No, what it exposes is White pathology. It exposes a failure of white imagination, and the need to fetishize that failure to the point where we’re carving black women into the handle of our razor blades.” Why would a person need to hold a black woman’s body in their hand while they shave their face? That’s not a black sadness, to me. That’s a white, pathological, tragic sadness that has really nothing to do with me.\textsuperscript{124}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123] Ibid., 76-76.
\item[124] Sharpe.
\end{footnotes}
This “White sadness” and pathology speaks to the biting irony that drips off every page of “Voyage.” She talks about this in terms of “narrative”:

That to me is a story: in this poem there is a handle of a cistern with a black woman or a handle of a razor with a black woman, and I’m hoping that the reader goes, “Wait a minute. Someone actually carved that? Someone held that? Someone desired to use that? Well who was that someone? And why?” And I don’t need that story to be present on the page—in fact, I think it’s better if it’s not. That’s where I like silence, that’s why I like silence so much.125

This highlights why it is somewhat misguided to “read” a poem like “Voyage” with any sort of New Critical close reading lens. The words themselves are not only signifying on a traditionally poetic (or “lyrical”) level of semantics along axes of selection and combination. They also signify (as in signifyin’) the human hands that fashioned, bought, owned, sold, curated, arranged, and cataloged. And they signify the hands that lightly scratched the chins of museumgoers standing at a respectful and contemplative distance from a curated and arranged piece of art. The figures in the poem are not the subject of the poem. Like Rankine’s signifyin’ on her audience, Lewis’s performance of the archive signifies every single (White) person who had a (White) hand in the creation, sustaining, and continued existence of such an archive. Not that Lewis wishes to burn down the whole museum system. That would be to forget the strange and difficult beauty of the archive. But, as Nina Simone would say, God Damn.

“Restoring” any sort of agency to these instrumentalized female figures is fruitless. They are figures of a White pathology, a symbol of the greed of colonialism and the Other of an Enlightenment universalism. Lewis’s task is then to reveal, for these subjectless figures, represented solely by nouns, verbs: their own hidden or silent

125 Ibid.
126 cf. Jakobson.
actions and activities. Their be-ing. To return to the first poem of the epic, “The Ship’s Inventory”:

Four-breasted Vessel, Three Women
in Front of a Steamy Pit, Two-Faced
Head Fish Trying on Earrings, Unidentified.

Young Woman with Shawl
and Painted Backdrop, Pearl
of the Forest, Two Girls

with Braids People
on a Ship with Some Dancing
Girls. Our Lady of Mercy, Blue.

Nude Iconologia Girl
with Red Flower Sisters
of the Boa Woman Flying a Butterfly.

Kite Empty
Chair Pocket
Book Girl

in a Red Dress with Cats and Dog’s Devil.
House Door of No Return. Head-of-a-Girl-
In-the-Bedroom in the kitchen.

Contemplation Dark-Girl Girl.
In the Window Negress with
Flower Sleeping Woman

(Negress with Flower Head
of a Woman-Nude in a Land
scape)—Lybian Sybil: Coloured, Nude-High

Yellow Negro Woman
and Two Children—The Flight
of the Octoroon: the Four Quarters of

the World, Holding
a Celestial Sphere.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{127} Lewis, 38-39.
The poem begins in a catalog of sexualized bodies, four-breasted, “steamy,” that devolves into monstrousness, “Fish Trying on Earrings,” and finally “Unidentified.” It as if Lewis keeps trying to center on one Black female figure, one woman in the crowded hold of the ship, but the figure keeps slipping away, her body keeps morphing and combining with other bodies, some human, some not. The figuration slips. Lewis tries again to refocus with the next stanza, beginning with “Young Woman with Shawl,” but the same slippage happens as the single woman becomes two girls becomes the symbolic Pearl becomes “People / on a Ship Some Dancing” and “Dancing Girls.” “Our Lady of Mercy” seems singular but that “Blue” is a modifier without antecedent, dangling there as “Unidentified” does in the first stanza. Following “Our Lady” is a stanza with sexual imagery: “Nude’ and “Girl with Red Flower” “Sisters of the Boa,” perhaps emblematizing a Madonna/Whore dichotomy made further abject by the multiplying bodies and Black “ungendered flesh.”

Figure 16. Nellie Mae Rowe, Woman Flying a Butterfly Kite, 1981.
And yet, in this line and the next contains “Woman Flying a Butterfly Kite,” which is the title of a 1981 painting by Black artist and Atlanta native Nellie Mae Rowe. It is a self-portrait of a Black woman getting up from a chair and ascending a road, being led by a bright blue kite whose wings seem more that of a swallow than an insect. The figure in the painting is smiling and looking upwards; beneath her are various unidentifiable animals. The barefoot Black woman is clear and outlined, her head almost haloed by the negative of the “phallic” plants, her hand almost touching the geometric road/railing. The collection Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South describes this figure in both spiritual and sexual terms: “She is barefoot, but as the spiritual has promised her, she will get her shoes in heaven. She leaves the empty chair behind, walks past the water, heads toward the green pastures and the heavily fruited trees (phallic, with testicles—shall heaven provide Rowe with a compatible mate, and children, things life denied her?).”128 While instructive on what her contemporary peers were thinking about her work, a passage like this should reflect the problems of close reading, and how, even when done by a sympathetic Black audience, any reading carries with it the weight of implicit biases and ideologies.

Lewis does not let this image/title sit comfortably in the stanza, however. Concatenating the woman to the previous title and severing the “Kite” over the line, the woman becomes a “Boa Woman Flying a Butterfly,” an animalistic, almost totemic image. The poor “Kite,” however, fares much worse. The “Kite” is left alone with six bare words, singled, “Empty.” If there was a myth of flesh in the first four stanzas, here it

fails, and the reader is left with neither figure nor verb and has to reckon not with a narrative but a series of empty objects. The reader knows that these objects all must contain a Black woman, but how? How does “Pocket / Book” contain a Black female figure? Or “Empty / Chair”? “Empty Chair” is another 1981 pencil, crayon, and pastel work by Rowe. Souls Grown Deep describes it as such: “In Empty Chair, the adult Nellie Mae Rowe, dressed in red, turns away from a celebratory tree of life surrounded by birds and animals. She looks toward death, summed up as her past and future: above the empty chair is the specter of young Nellie Mae in the green pasture, flanked by two nose-diving birds. Below the tree of life a bird plucks the berries from a potted plant or fruit basket.”

There is not only one Black female figure in this work, but two, the living and the dead Rowe (she would die in 1982, making both of these paintings part of the genre of pre-posthumous art). But the reader is presented with only “Empty” and “Chair.” Both the living and the dead Rowe exist around this lately-vacated and soon-to-be vacant chair. They are a silence and an absence, a hauntology for these bare words.

The silences and absences of this inventory build toward their verb, or the image of their verb, in the final lines of “The Ship’s Inventory”: “The Flight of the Octoroon: the Four Quarters of / the World, Holding / a Celestial Sphere.” “Flight” and “Holding” are as close to verbs as the titles/descriptions will contain, and they combine to emblematize the work of the poem: flight and holding, escape and preservation. That is, the Black female figures are shown in flight, escaping the archive. But they are also holding up the archive. They are the material out of which the archive is built, the “Four-Breasted Vessel” (a Black female body consenting not to be a single being) becoming the

129 Ibid.
“Four Quarters of / the World, Holding.” The “Celestial Sphere” may be a heaven to which the “Octoroon” can flee, but the reader will never know, since she is frozen in the noun of “flight.” Maybe the “Celestial Sphere” is the closest the archive will get to the Black woman’s verb. Or, maybe, it is the ironic heaven of the curators, a perfectly proportioned world of light that nonetheless is so heavy it must be held aloft by Black women.

The Black female figure’s ubiquity even in the world of European art, is striking. Take “Catalog 3: The Womb of Christianity,” where Lewis locates this Christian womb in the “Black Madonna” who appears in the iconography of so many Medieval European towns. Many of these Black Madonnas have pre-Christian roots, either in autochthonous Earth goddesses, or as imports from classical and archaic Middle East and North Africa. Lewis narrativizes this as a biblical tale:

Rainy-Night Sarah is brought to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh gives Sarah back to Abraham—Wild Men and Moors. Melancholy Moses fighting in the Land of the Blacks where he finds a wife, historiated. Bible between two captives, three fates:

Fontana dei Quattro Mori Group of the Elect Group of the Damned.

A god on the left, a prince on the right, Back to Back 130

130 Lewis, 64.
“Moses Fighting in the Land of the Blacks, where he finds a Wife, ‘historiated bible’ fol. 107r” is a 15th century illustration from a German “historiated bible.” It depicts two images of Moses and his Hebrews encountering a group of Black Africans, first a group of soldiers and second a group of female courtesans. As with most of the illustrations of the time, both sides are depicted with the contemporary dress and hairstyles of the artist’s culture, in this case 15th century Rhineland. In the first, Moses with his ram’s horns leads an anachronistic High Medieval army complete with plate mail and cross-guarded broadsword. They battle dark-faced soldiers in equally medieval accoutrements. One of the Black soldiers has, perhaps, curly hair, but another has a distinctly European tonsure. In the second image, Moses is presented a Black woman as a bride. She wears a flowing European red gown and has the high forehead of European noblewomen. She has three courtiers with her, mirroring the four soldiers of the previous image.

This biblical story makes Moses’s wife Sarah a Black woman, in a time when Black traders were present in many large European ports (“black / laborers on the quays // of Venice”)—but before the start of the Atlantic slave trade proper, which is typically dated around 1525. This is a pre-chattel slavery woman presented as spoils of war to a European-looking Moses. But it is hard not to read chattel slavery into this, and the arrow of Stothard’s Cupid in his *Sable Venus* etching (“but never to forget the possibility of real love, no matter how strange or difficult”). But reading this against the grain, anachronistically in the collage of Lewis’s myth of History, the figure of Sarah becomes the hero, a Black woman placed centrally-framed in this Early Renaissance text. It is her land, the Land of the Blacks, that Moses is intruding upon, after all. She is the one voyaging to and with this anachronistic European.
Later in this same poem Lewis permits a rare and strange first-person:

O Lymp!
I, a miracle of the Black-Leg-Birth of the Virgin

The Black Bride of the Song of Songs—
Black African Diana the Good

Woman of Color Saint Lucy Before
the Magistrate, Pregnant

Eva the First
Lady\textsuperscript{132}

“O Lymp! I, a” is another ironically tortured pun, using punctuation to dissect “Olympia” into a first-person cry of despair (\textit{Oh! Limp!}) at the less-than-functioning member of our European patriarch (perhaps). This “I,” a rare first-person in the poem, names herself as a goddess would: born of a leg like Diana, given a litany of titles including that of Eve, the “First / Lady,” the pregnant “Womb of Christianity.” This “I” is now situated in the female iconography of both pagan and Christian representation, but above all, names itself as such.

Later in Catalog 3, Lewis uses repetition to remind us over and over of the Black female figure’s repeated presence and importance to Christianity:

Our Lady
of Presentation

Our Lady
of the Confession

Our Lady
of the Rule

Our Lady
of Plain Light\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{132} Lewis, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. 67.
This goes on for a page and a half, and includes “Our Black Virgin / of Recollection,” an icon and performance of memory. The next page locates this Black Lady all over Europe: “—of Vladimir —de Lourdes —de Guadalupe— / Nossa—Nuestra—Norte—Nera— / —di Oropa —de Antocha—de Guingamp— / Rublev Black-Madonna Marija Bistrica.”134 This too goes on for a page and a half, ending with “Black Mary Magdalene of Palestine / Black Madonna Czestochowa, Queen of Poland.” All of these repetitions drive home the presence of the Black female in the Western imaginary as a positive figure (even though often one dissociated from African-ness), even as the seeds of the Atlantic Slave Trade were being planted—the womb of Christianity in the womb of the slave hold.

Turning to the ending few poems, part XXII, “A Refusal of Time / Her Absence Filled the World” ends with “Catalog 7: Modern Post.” This catalog sees the unnamed anonymous absent Black female heroine through the modern and contemporary world. At the bottom of section XXII we read:

Black Girl in a stream.
The Waving Girl seen

from anatomies of escape.
Home by dark, over her le Cake.

Walk (Economical Love Pussy Control)!
Tous le soirs Les Zoulous, Stargazer!

What on Earth have you done
to this coffee, Black Blossom?

Pour vous, Madame,
Paso doble as I am.

The Aftermath: underwear

134 Ibid., 69.
Here the doubleness of the “Black Girl” becomes an almost joyous play in language and landscape. She dances *Paso doble*, she shops for underwear, she is seen “from anatomies of escape.” The “Aftermath” takes us back to the cover of the book, Welty’s “Window Shopping.” This melts into an idyllic “Sunday / morning” with animals and shade. Then a leading em dash. The next page opens on: “Silence. / Poise. Prayer:” then a list of thirteen Venuses in a central column, surrounded by white space:

*Tinted Venus*  
*African Venus*  
*Dolni Vestonice*  
*Magdalenian Venus*  
*Ram Mal’ta Venus*  
*Venus from Laugerie-Basse*  
*Venus of Hohle Fels*  
*Venus of Monruz*  
*Venus of Willendorf*  
*Venus of Verekhat*  
*Venys of Lespugue*  
*Venus of Hradok*  
*Venus of Tan-Tan*

(Thirteen ways of looking at a black girl)

Ending this list is a reference to Wallace Stevens through a reference to mixed-media artist JoAnne McFarland. McFarland’s exhibition “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Girl” also centered on a reference: her 2011 painting “Mis Meninas,” which faithfully recreates Velasquez’s “Las Meninas” in a massive, large-format frame (72” x 54”), with a young Black girl replacing the original’s infanta. On her website McFarland

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135 Ibid., 107.  
136 Ibid., 108.  
137 The nod to Stevens at this moment is also telling, given Stevens’s known racist proclivities.
describes this as a self-portrait: “to put myself at the center of the story, in the center of my own life. To, in a sense say—'See world, I too am worthy of this attention. Who I am and what I do matters.'”

Both Lewis and McFarland feel the need to remix or repaint prior representations, or representations of the lack of representation. To them, the most forceful exercise of freedom is not creation but modification, fragmentation, transformation, and destruction.

The inclusion of “Thirteen Ways” also leads to Foucault’s long digression on Las Meninas in his The Order of Things. To Foucault, the Vasquez painting represents a fundamental shift in how representation is represented in Western thought, the tension between seeing and seeing.

[W]e are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us. A mere confrontation, eyes catching one another’s glance, direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross. And yet this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints. The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter’s gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity.

The play and game between painter and viewer, and between viewer and subject, and between the subject of the painting and the viewer, and triangulated between the painter, the subject, and the viewer (the subject never seen, like lyric apostrophe), becomes doubled and tripled for McFarland and Lewis: adding the racial and the female

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138 McFarland.
139 Foucault, 5.
onto this description of the 16th century episteme. The Black painter painting a Black female subject in a reproduction of a White painting, and a Black poet reproducing this, calls out the homogeneity of Whiteness in the scene of Vasquez as well as the scene of Foucault.

Following these lines comes a few lines in italics making up their own page:

*I send you these few lines in order
To bring you up

On what has been
Happening to me.

—Venus of Compton

(Young Woman and Hope, Holding Photo of Pearl)\textsuperscript{140}

The em dash swoops in to declare this author, “Venus,” writer of “these few lines.” “Pearl” brings us back to one of the first titles, “Pearl of the Forest,” but also hints at another representation within this representation. The authorial figure has an “I” here, and her verb, “send”—but the subject of this sending is simply “what has been / happening to me.” The present perfect tense of this describes something that is long ongoing and not about to end anytime soon. But the woman is with hope, and holds a photo, which carries representation and self-creation forward into the future, past the end of the poem and the turn of the page.

\textsuperscript{140} Lewis, 109.
This is not the end of the poem, though, as there is one more “Catalog” as a coda: “8: The Present / Our Town.” This single page makes sure the reader doesn’t misinterpret the authorial appearance as triumph:

Still:

Life

(of Flowers)

with Figures—

including

a Negro servant.\(^{141}\)

“Still,” we are reminded, there is life. There is life (of flowers). There is life, and lives, including: that of a Negro servant. And this is where Lewis must leave the poem. The “still life” is “still: life” and is also “still” life, unmoving, dead. The Black female figure in these representations will always be the “Negro servant,” the figure etched in a shaving blade or holding up a basin. There is no escape in the archive. But still, there is life.

By closing the book, as they say, on the archive, Lewis can move forward out of the poem accompanied by her absent Venus, her angel of history, looking back on the destruction of her own body and sex, and take that into the future.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 110.
Disembarking

If *Zong!* is a loss of self and authorship in the abyss of language—the abyss that is the trace, the specter, of the name of the lost, the name that is found only as the lost—then *Voyage* is the opposite, a losing the ground in the ungendered, undifferentiated flesh of the archive and emerging, with a gendered self in tow, “Holding / Photo of Pearl.” This is not a “true” or actual self in any sense, but a representation of the self, a mirror self—not a representation of self but a representation of the mirror. She is not a “transparent I” but a “monstrous” entity: a representation that represents. She is more than what has been written about her body. She is always-to-be in the never-not-yet of her interpellations.

More concretely, this figure is the opportunity to write poetry. Which is to disentangle representation from the telos of instrumentality, that is to take the Black female figure out of the comb or the razor and ask her what she sees, what she feels, to see how she acts if she were to act of herself. This is not an easy task by any means, since there is a whole pragmatic chain of contextual meaning tying that figure to the world in which she was created. There are the historical circumstances for the crafting and purpose of the razor (whole systems of hygiene, health, fashion, masculinity, the military, the aristocracy, etc.) but also the context for the need of a Black female representation on this razor: mercantilism, conspicuous consumption, capital, cultural capital, colonialism, patriarchy, exoticism, eroticism, etc. The figure is literally made of the matter of all of these systems. Both *Voyage* and *Zong!* work against the condescending notion that this figure can be easily severed from these contexts or easily recontextualized as a heroine, as in historical fiction. These are narratives not of
“telling” (which implies a safe and separate narrator-position) but of dissolving, dissolution, “trace,” absence, the gap, falling, slippage.

To return to linguistics, I talked of “infelicity” in relation to Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts.” To Hartman, utterances about “Venus” from the archive are “infelicitous,” which describes speech that, although grammatically well-formed, fails in some way to be pragmatically well-formed. These failures involve conditions or pre-conditions of convention and intention. For example, J. L. Austin’s go-to example of “I declare thee wed” could fail to be a felicitous (successful) declaration of marriage for several reasons: the person speaking it may not be a judge or may be a judge but not at a wedding (the conventional participant and place for a marriage), or the person speaking it may not be sincere or the words not binding, as in a wedding rehearsal. John Searle identifies fiction as a specific type of infelicity, which he calls “non-serious” speech, or alternately “parasitic speech,” in that it depends on well-formed speech but does not itself have independent life. Paul Grice later extended and simplified Austin (who was often intentionally self-contradictory) into what he called the “cooperative principle.” This is the simple principle that utterances between two people “only work because both people are trying to be cooperative—trying to make their contribution appropriate to the conversation at hand.”

That is, conversation can only have meaning because each speaker assumes the other’s words are intended for a cooperative purpose.

I have digressed into these matters only to point out that the cooperative principle implies a cooperative game that speakers are engaged in, one with feints and moves and countermoves, but one that is both social and cooperative. When Hartman

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142 Birner, Introduction to Pragmatics, 42.
says that the “characters” in the archive are “birthed” by “infelicitous speech,” this implies that these “characters” were not part of the game. They were not part of cooperation. They were not part of the conversation. Black women were not part of the language game. They were the game. There is no chance of recovering Venus from a scrap of speech like “There was another girl on board the Recovery ... whom they named Venus, and she too had the pox,” because the implication is that she is neither an independent subject nor severable from the “other girl.” She was flesh. To ascribe humanity to her would be contrary to the language game—it would be infelicitous. Her unseverable, uncancellable flesh (“And there was no evidence to support the second indictment, than what supported the first, the jury also acquitted the prisoner on it.”) implies a severed, cancelled spirit.

Still: life (of flowers). With the entire canon of Western visual and sculptural art as her archive, Lewis has sculpted a linguistic epic journey in which the Black woman who is present in absence, nameless, speechless, and storiless in depiction, “hiding right there in plain view,” gets to send us this poem, is allowed to sound the sound that stories her story. But, much like how the subject of Rankine’s *Citizen* is its grammatical object, Lewis’s narrative subject emerges in spite of and in resistance to the universe of Western depictions of her. Her relationship to the archive is the relation of the metaphorical figure to the artistic frame, which is the metaphorical relation of the non-metaphorical slave to her non-metaphorical chains. But more than Western depictions, Lewis’s struggle is not simply with the archive but with language itself, the swirling abyss of over-signification on which some sail and others drown. The phatic, the infelicitous

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moments of connection where language reveals the personages behind the words, self-
reflexively, is her playground and her battlefield, her forum and her garden (with real
toads). The “Voyage” is not to imagine the figure free from the razor in a
decontextualized utopia, but to make a new game: to dwell in this uncomfortable space
of signification, to perceive the infelicities and instrumentalities and severances of
ungendered flesh, and to listen to the silences in this speech. To lose the floor and find
the girl, not as name, but as the sound of sounding, of “art’s epic song” made woman.

But the effect on the poet is reverse. In documenting the swirling significations
hiding behind works of art, Lewis finds herself, on exiting the poem, becoming art. She
describes the process of researching and writing the voyage as itself a voyage:

When the voyage ended, I was—of course—the last one to know. I am convinced
that every figure onboard knew our time was ending, but each agreed to hide that
fact from me. Again, perhaps I was enjoying being with the dead too much.
Perhaps, while documenting their slivered testimonies about how they came to be
just a dot of a woman standing off to the side of a canvas, or a table leg, or
fragment of a figure, I myself was turning into a statue.

It was my turn this time. How could I not have anticipated this?

Instead of going onshore and returning with more images, more forms, I was the
broken body who would be getting off and not coming back. I was the one who
had been rescued. Now I was the object, the image.

A whole ship of them, an invisible ancient ship of black females, on which I had
lived for thousands of years. Just like that: gone.

It was done.\footnote{Lewis, “Broken, Defaced, Unseen.”}

Lewis’s voyage ends not with her own liberation, but with joining the ranks of the
represented. And this makes sense. In becoming an icon of a poet and winning things
like the National Book Award, Lewis herself is joining the list of “Our Lady”s that dot the
archive. But it is not the archive that both is in danger of not surviving and yet surviving.

Houston A. Baker Jr., in writing about Black women’s exegeses from the archives of history, writes that “literary histories are not fundamentally products of discovery procedures grounded in history.” They may begin there, as in his example, two collections of Black women’s stories compiled by Mary Helen Washington out of things she found at the Boston Public Library. But “what was preeminent, then about her collection” was not the archive or the discovery, but “the founding poetic intuition that led Washington to go in search of an indomitable black women’s expressivity.”

Lewis describes the experience of finishing the poem as a “mal de debarquement,” a sort of seasickness on land. The abyss is not left; it travels with you. “You never stop hearing the ship’s bell,” she writes, reminding us not only of the stormy waters but also of the bell that tolls for Lewis and her traumatic injury. As she explained to Als, “I think that’s also why I pushed myself so hard to write. And there's a certain urgency, like I feel I’m fighting the clock until my brain starts to rot.” This sense of mortality, calcification, of becoming art is terrifying; she feels herself, in real-time, becoming history, of becoming another one of the figures in the archive, Venus of Compton. The displacement from representation of the archive and the displacement of flesh of the staircase both lead to a reckoning with the body, with the body-as-a-body, organic, fleshly, historical, contingent, and above all singular. The body in history is a single being, even as it may coast in multiplicity while alive, even as it may dissolve into mass as it decays from the archive.

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146 Als.
For Lewis, mortality is intimately coupled with motherhood. After her accident, motherhood was one of several things she was told she could no longer achieve:

Hilton: Were you a mother when you had this accident?
Robin: No, no, no. They also told me I couldn’t have a kid [laughs]. They told me I could never write again, teach again, read again, and not become a mother.147

Writing, teaching, reading, and motherhood were the four things that her fall were supposed to take from her, as if language, creativity, and pedagogy were equal with the ability to bear children. “Teaching” and “writing” were her profession, and so her disability struck at both her intellectual labor and the labor of her body, or the labor potentiality of her body, Sharpe’s “factory producing blackness” (or Moten’s description of “exhausted, exhausted maternity” being the unnamed enslaved woman’s “pedagogical imperative”)148 But she managed to reclaim each of these things, which makes one wonder if a person can “re-learn” the body as she can “relearn” language. Womanhood and motherhood are not co-terminus, but it is interesting that Lewis chose motherhood after all, in spiting of her mental and physical injuries, doing the reproductive labor of the flesh. It was not an easy process. It took years to finally achieve pregnancy and was once again tied to mortality: she says that found out she was pregnant “four days after my father’s funeral.” In motherhood there is a different type of multiplicity, of not being a single being on a biological level. And the joys that Lewis expresses in raising her son, despite her disability (“it’s like mommy’s brain is in a wheelchair” she tells him), reminds us of the beauty and joy of merely surviving. Of surviving as, as Hartman describes all the lost and forgotten Black women of history, “one who was never meant

147 Ibid.
148 Moten, TUM, 200.
to survive.” Her body may one day join the “invisible ancient ship of black females,” all of them “singing and cackling.” But for the time being there is beauty.

The final lyric poem in the book *Voyage* is called “Félicité,” and is epigraphed “for my mother, / and her mother, / and hers, ad infinitum.” In it, Lewis talks about “a grandmother of mine,” a free Black woman in Louisiana. She owned a plantation. And she owned slaves. Lewis talks about the shock of finding this out in research, but also how familiar this felt:

Perhaps she is the answer
   to this sensation
       I've had for years:

that of another body
       hovering inside me
            waiting for address.

What can History possibly say?

This haunting-in-body of an ancestor far removed but present, existing clearly in the archives of History, gives another doubleness to Lewis’s struggle. Lewis found in her research that this woman gave to her son Théodule “her ‘favorite’ slave: a girl named Félicité. / They were married.” Félicité became Lewis’s great-great-great-great-great grandmother. She muses “How / does one name a slave Happiness?” But that’s not the end of the story:

Happiness had a twin sister.
       Françoise. I don’t know
           what happened to her.

Perhaps she is still
       out there, like us, her throat

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149 Hartman, In the Belly, 171.
150 Lewis, “Broken, Defaces, Unseen.”
151 Lewis, 134-35.
glistening a silent red.\textsuperscript{152}

She ends the book here, musing on this lost twin, absent, lost, named but forgotten, “like us.” She is severed from history but lives on like the Mississippi hummingbird:

\begin{quote}
the only one still flying
  backwards, over the Gulf
  without landing.\textsuperscript{153}
\end{quote}

This is a vision of liberty free from representation and memory, but present, impossible, vulnerable but surviving, flung far out over the sea.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
Coda

This project has been an attempt to read and listen in detail to the Epic Black strategies of Black artists in the wake of the politics and culture of the 21st century. It is not the only reading/listening possible. It’s a start. More reading and listening is necessary, but also more writing, playing, dancing, singing. More performing, headlining, award winning. Black-ing. Epic-ing.

Between writing the first and last lines of this project many things have happened that have made me have to add to, rework, change, or completely rethink my attitudes towards this project. In the last year something seemed to happen every week that forced me to rethink everything. Awards were given, tweets were tweeted, politics were made or stalled or unmade, Black people were failed on scales small and large. It is important that I recognize that this text is as historical and historicized as the texts I’m commenting on. This would have been a different work if done in a different time.

The bulk of the writing was done in the wake of the Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. This might have been considered the second wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, but to the people on the ground the struggle never ended or abated. The 2020 protests were just another instance in a long history of struggle, made more visible this time by a number of factors that had little to do with Black people or police violence. The problems with formal politics had not changed, even though the White House had changed hands. Today, on the near side of the far side of 2020, it’s impossible to predict where politics and culture will go, or what political and poetical strategies will prove necessary in response to these events. Certainly, Whiteness
has fashioned itself into a visible and malignant force in a way that perhaps hasn’t been seen since Jim Crow. The good news is that it is visible. We can see it. The war of denying the war is not the war. The bad news is, well, everything else.

In the meantime, people have still been writing and reading, performing and listening. A number of things have happened in the artistic world that reenforced or undermined the points I have been trying to make here. The Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, after passing over finalists Patricia Smith and Evie Shockley in 2018, came back to Black in 2020 with Jericho Brown’s *The Tradition*. Brown is known for his invented forms, including the “duplex,” a blend of Langston Hughes’s blues form, the ghazal, and the repetitions of the villanelle. *The Tradition* is unabashedly lyrical while also being formally adventurous. But despite this inventiveness it has little to do with the ambitions and anxieties of the epic as I have been describing it.

In 2018, Kendrick Lamar’s *DAMN* won the Pulitzer Prize for music—an unexpected win in an award almost exclusively given to classical and jazz. The Nobel Prize in literature going to Bob Dylan (who was singularly ungrateful for it) opened up the idea that popular music could and should be considered alongside “high art.” However, the Pulitzer Prize in music typically goes to the sort of music that, for better or worse, is taught to music students in higher education, jazz and contemporary classical. For that, it skews White. But the biggest question I had about *DAMN*’s Pulitzer was not so much why a rap album, but why this rap album—Lamar has a string of albums of epic scope and narrative, each one worthy of artistic and aesthetic attention.

The fact that *DAMN* won a Pulitzer and not, say, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, was apparently a matter of timing. Farah Jasmine Griffin was on the Pulitzer board in 2020 and writes that the reason that Lamar was in the running in 2020 and not 2015 was
simply because he was nominated in 2020 and wasn’t before. According to her, *DAMN* was the only hip hop album presented to the jurors in 2020. Not to diminish Lamar’s “accomplishment” and “genius,” Griffin claims that “in any given year it could have been someone else.”¹ This is despite Griffin’s clear admiration of Lamar, and her admitting she is a fan of both *DAMN* and *2PAB.*²

Still, it is worth taking the selection seriously and asking why Lamar and *DAMN* were particularly acceptable to the Pulitzer committee. Firstly, Lamar in general crafts his work in a way that demands to be *read*, analyzed, or, in Cuchna’s terms, “dissected.” They are works in the tradition of exegesis, which has more to do with Lamar’s adjacency to the Black church than any affinity with the academy or with “close reading.” New Criticism and close reading come out of the same sort of tradition, albeit in different sorts of churches.³ But this shared hermeneutics, for lack of a better word, means the people behind the Pulitzer (not just the award committee) can find in Lamar’s work something that they, with a little ear training, already have the vocabulary to read. Other things make *DAMN* recognizably epic. There is a reckoning with media in *DAMN*, with the music industry and 24-hour cable news, and how these skew and distort Black expression. In the fashion of Epic Black, Lamar uses this establishment against itself, starting the album with clips of Fox News anchors expressing disgust at a track from *2PaB.*⁴

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² Ibid.
³ For this, Joe North, etc.
⁴ For all this and more I am indebted again to Cole Cuchna’s *Dissect.*
The album explores the question, asked in the first seconds of the first track, “Is it wickedness? Is it weakness? You decide. Are we gonna live or die?” “Wickedness” is a sort of original sin, something in the legacies of slavery and oppression that pushes people like Lamar towards “sex, money, murder.” “Weakness” is a Christ-like humility that denies these legacies their power. This shares a lot of thematic ground with *Lemonade*: Beyoncé finds “wickedness” in her husband’s drive towards sex and power, and while she contemplates violence and revenge, ultimately she chooses the path of “weakness”: forgiveness.

The dipole in *DAMN* is exemplified in the first and last tracks. The first is “BLOOD,” which tells a short, spoken parable where the narrator, in a moment of Christian charity, offers to help a woman on the street, and is shot for seemingly no reason. The final track is “DUCKWORTH,” in which Lamar (née Kendrick Lamar Duckworth) raps the story of his own father, “Ducky,” meeting Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith. When Top Dawg held up the KFC where Ducky worked he decided to spare Kendrick’s father, because Ducky was always humble and generous. Top Dawg would go on to form Top Dawg Ent, the label that first signed Lamar. Lamar wonders what would have happened if Anthony had killed Ducky, and Top Dawg would be in jail and Lamar would grow up without a father “and die in a gunfight.” Lamar makes a counter-history of his own life (much how 2PAC also makes a counter-history where Tupac can answer his letter) to ask questions of fate, karma, and consequence, or whether Lamar was spared a violent life just because of “coincidence.” The track cuts off abruptly with a gunshot, making the listener wonder if, despite the hopefulness of the song, Lamar’s violent fate was only delayed, not avoided.
There is also a formal dimension to the album: it can be listened to as presented or, as in the “special edition,” in reverse track order. The two orderings give different readings of the narrative, either beginning with BLOOD and ending with DUCKWORTH, beginning in failure and ending in hope, or the reverse. This makes the question “Is it wickedness / is it weakness? / you decide” answered by the listener—listened to the first way, Kung-Fu Kenny lives, listened backwards, he dies.

Conversely, the Pulitzer committee may have just heard in DAMN a Black artist reckoning with Fox News and the media machine that produced the 45th president, and that timeliness was enough for them.

Other awards did not go so smoothly. Louise Glück, winner of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for The Wild Iris, won the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature, and she used her Nobel lecture to un-self-consciously praise the Blackface poetry of Stephen Foster and William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy.” She finds in these works of poetic appropriation her own spark of poetic vocation as a child. She seems to see no problem with this and also seems to see no problem in saying it out loud on arguably the largest stage for poetry in the world. Glück’s lecture praises “intimate speech” against what she calls “the voice or judgment of the collective,” as if to inoculate herself in advance from getting cancelled. To Glück, poetry must be intimate, not rhetorical; it must be between two people, not with a crowd or “an auditorium.” She praises “a temperament that distrusts public life or sees it as the realm in which generalization obliterates precision, and partial truth replaces candor and charged disclosure.” She commends “the Swedish Academy” for “choosing to honor the intimate, private voice, which public utterance can sometimes
augment or extend, but never replace.” The flabbergasted responses on the internet to Glück’s speech were entertaining, but it will suffice to say that not everyone was seduced by her declaration of intimacy.

Glück’s embrace of blackface and denigration of performance and spoken word were contrasted by the appearance in January of 2021 of Amanda Gorman at the presidential inauguration, who at 22 was the youngest inaugural poet in history. Gorman’s quick rise to poetic fame resulted in her books topping Amazon’s best seller list (Glück’s last collection, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, is ranked #61,012).

A number of artists released “visual albums” after *Lemonade*, the most notable for my purposes being Janelle Monáe’s 2018 film/album *Dirty Computer*. This marked a new Black epic that sees Monáe fully and finally embracing her queerness, while also marking the end (for now) of her previous epic, the unfinished multi-album *Metropolis* saga. Monáe’s queerness, long unspoken, has sat in odd tension with her Blackness, and in many ways the central metaphor of the *ArchAndroid*—the “android” being both racialized and queer—was a way to avoid intersectionality by allegorizing the two together. Without the safety offered by the distance of the Android, Monáe is more free to get down and *Dirty*.

*Dirty Computer*, *The Tradition*, Gorman, *DAMN*, all represent very different strategies of Black expression to the politics and culture that emerged after Black Lives Matter—strategies that differ in certain ways but not others from the strategies I have been discussing here. Maybe the difference lies somewhere between “taking” space and

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5 Louise Glück.
6 Trachtenberg, Amazon.
7 Beyoncé’s third visual album, *Black is King*, was released in 2020, but it was more an extension of the forgettable Disney *The Lion King* remake than it was of *Lemonade*.
“dwelling” in it. *Citizen* took space for poetry and for Blackness. *Olio* took space for Black excellence. *Voyage* took space for the Black woman’s representation in visual art and in poetry. But the inability for Lewis to live in the voyage she has crafted shows that this victory is hard-won. Like Dante or Tennyson’s Ulysses, Lewis-as-epic-heroine cannot comfortably dwell in the home she has fought so hard to earn. By contrast, even the name of Jericho Brown’s “duplex” implies dwelling. Brown’s homecoming brings joy as well as anger, with a tenderness and intimacy (which has nothing to do with the solipsistic intimacy of Glück) that does not feel like a voyage. Perhaps *Olio* was the crowbar that opened the place where *The Tradition* has made itself at home.
Afterwor(l)d: After the End of the World

Sun Ra, the most epic of mammals, opens his visual-musical epic *Space is the Place* with the voice of June Tyson, the only permanent female member of the Arkestra, repeating the line, “It’s after the end of the world! Don’t you know that yet?” Picking up on this, Anthony Reed questions whether “all of capitalist modernity has been an elongated coda, in the wake of impending disaster, so the final destruction is treated as an afterthought.” Reed is interested in Ra’s use of “space” as *space*, as in taking-up-space, a metaphor for the battlefield of culture/politics in which Ra and Tyler play.8

Space is not just external to the planet, it is external to *possibility*. It is unclaimable territory, land with no flag, a place imaginable but unreadable (Ra, as Reed notes, was uninterested in the actual space program, which amounted to little more than, in Gil Scott-Heron’s words, “Whitey on the Moon”). By playing in this impossible playground, Ra is claiming for Blackness the infinite realm of ineffability. Noirporia may be impassable land, but space? Space is both impassable and impossible.

John Szwed calls Sun Ra’s “space” “both a metaphor of exclusion and of reterritorialization, of claiming the ‘outside’ as one’s own, of tying a revised and corrected past to a claimed future.” This inverts and “transvalues the dominant terms so they become aberrant, a minority position, while the terms of the outside, the beyond, the margins, become the standard.”9 “Space,” as in “outer space,” is so much bigger than the space of Earth, or territory, infinitely bigger, even. Space is unimaginably vast;

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9 John Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 140.
territory is unimaginably small. The unthinkability of the former leads to an unthinking
of the latter. Reed’s calls “space” not a metaphor but a catachresis, an arbitrary and
impossible figure that signifies by the impossibility of its signified. This, paradoxically,
“makes Sun Ra, despite everything, fundamentally a political realist,” to Reed:

Space as a figure through which Ra attempted to form a community rooted in
common feeling and common dissatisfaction, a common desire to break with the
narrowly proscribed regime of the possible, in short a figure through which to
imagine freedom beyond the bounds of extant ideology.10

This political realism is not entirely a positive term, though. Reed locates in Ra’s
counter-ideology a tendency towards universalizing that “as easily lends itself to a
reactionary authoritarian politics as a liberatory one.” Space is the Place shows the
antagonism between the reborn pharaoh Ra and “The Overseer.” One may liberate Black
people while the other uses them for White oppressors, but, as Reed points out, both are
slave masters.

Queer radical Black feminist poet, “independent scholar,” activist, and non-
singular being Alexis Pauline Gumbs takes up June Tyson’s declaration/question in M
Archive: After the End of the World (2018). This is a multigeneric book-length work of
poetry and criticism, and second in a triptych of hybrid works. M Archive reimagines
the archive and the relationship between the past and the future through an extended
“after and with” engagement with M. Jacqui Alexander’s 2005 critical work Pedagogies
of Crossing. It is a “speculative documentary,” dissecting and deconstructing ideas of
history both poetic and academic. An asterisk on the first chapter, “From the Lab
Notebooks of the Last* Experiments,” tells us that “*Last is a verb”—showing how the

10 Ibid., 121.
book is engaged in verb-ing survival. It is also non singularly authored: *M Archive* is “not *not* ancestrally cowritten but also written in collaboration with the survivors, the far-into-the-future witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse.” ¹¹ One of the (many) things that “M” stands for is “Multitude.” ¹²

Gumbs builds on Sylvia Wynter’s reconceptualization of the “human,” writing that the book “depict[s] a species at the edge of its integrity, on the verge or in the practice of transforming into something beyond the luxuries and limitation of what some call ‘the human.’”

¹¹ Gumbs, xi.
¹² Ibid., 213.
In other words, this speculative documentary work is written from and with the perspective of a researcher, a post-scientist sorting artifacts after the end of the world. This is you beyond you. After and with the consequences of fracking past peak oil. After and with the defunding of the humanities. After and with the removal of people of color from the cities they built.\textsuperscript{13}

This is the perspective of “you beyond you,” one “After the end of the world as we know it. After the ways we have been knowing the world.” The world and the knowledge of the world (the \textit{word}) are identical, which points to a different sort of apocalypse than the “Nuclear War, it’s a motherfucker” of Sun Ra. The crisis is material, yes, as in fracking and gentrification and the neoliberal academy. But the crisis is also ideological. Reed cautions that “one of the most pressing challenges of any utopian imagining... is finding the means to avoid reproducing within the projected space the hierarchies and contradictions of the dominant society against which it would offer alternative.”\textsuperscript{14}

Gumbs offers a solution, which is not quite to try to make an outside future—one which is literally impossible to imagine, given that our brains and bodies are firmly located within this particular present—but to pick through the wreckage of the present \textit{as if it were past}. The object of inquiry is the present, but the perspective point-of-view is flung out to the future. The “it” is the same, it’s the “you” that becomes impossible.

This Black feminist perspective, with its narrow focus but broad scope, counters Ra’s universalizing utopia. Ra himself famously could not survive after the end of the world of June Tyson, who died in 1992 at the age of 56, with Ra following not six months later. \textit{M Archive} is a paean to survival, but not the survival of the “human” or of a people

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Reed, 118-19.
or a culture. It reimagines the parameters of survival after the end of the human and its technologies, including language. A final page reads:

and so I decided to write in salt adhered by tears adhered by spit adhered finally by blood. and it turned out the salt became quickly unreadable (or maybe it was eaten by evolving microorganisms?) and the blood was all that was left and the small indentations of my scraping.

and the language they derived from it was beautiful. i certainly never could have thought it up. it was not an abstract language where arbitrary markings were assigned to sounds and those sounds meant words just symbolically with no felt relation....

instead they read the blood as blood. and it meant everything at once. it meant there was water. it meant once there was birth and possible birth. it meant there were ancestors and that someone had survived. it meant life was precious and could spill. it meant spirit was sticky and could stay.

and actually that’s all I was trying to say.15

Blood, merely blood, is language enough, meaning both that life is precious and that life can spill—both the violence of “shedding blood” but also the positive: blood as writing, blood as birth, blood as giving and being given, blood as in “blood, sweat, and tears,” which are all important yet painful expenditures of life.16 Despite how much blood is spilled, the blood survives. Blood is stronger than pride. Don’t you know that yet?

In Moretti’s terms, Ra equates time with space, making his epic self range from ancient Egypt to the far-flung future. But he also equates space with time, depicting the future as a place: outer space, which is not the fantasies of Whitey on the Moon but the territories unclaimed by Earth, approachable only by the Solar Arkestra and the P-Funk Mothership. But this runs the danger of just being another modern epic in the tradition of the “ideology of progress.” All territory will one day be colonized, and Black men

15 Gumbs, 212.
16 Spill is the title of the Gumbs’s previous work, the first book in the triptych.
(specifically men) will get their separate-but-equal share. In *Black and Blur*, Moten calls instead for “our mother’s movement,” as opposed to “our father’s” movement, the masculinist civil rights movement writ large. The “mother’s movement,” like Black Lives Matter in its original, Black Queer feminist form, is “a movement of contact (improvisation)’s small differences, its hand-to-hand rituals of study, its constant practice of the haptical poetics of entanglement.” Gumbs revels in an apocalypse of both space and time, and what survives is the feminist, maternal care of futurity-as-archivist.

None of the epics I have discussed in this study are particularly apocalyptic. Lewis’s sunset voyage is an apocalypse of sorts for her cast-off Black female representations. Like Aeneas, Lewis sails away from a cataclysm to find a not-yet-home. Jess’s *Olio* dances in the wake not of slavery but emancipation, and the long waves that the institution of slavery has made of its own collapse, continuing to own and to seek to own Black souls. As with stately ruins that dominate a cityscape, this supposedly past thing is more real than the present. *Citizen* lives in the wake of several tragedies—Trayvon Martin most specifically—but focuses instead on the everyday cataclysms of daily life, the quotidian apocalypses that the Black woman must daily survive. This is exemplified in the everyday apocalypse depicted in the Turner painting that closes the book. Not only does the ship continue to sail while the Black body thrashes, more importantly, but Turner himself continues to paint. Living in the wake of this painting (both the noun and the verb) is a wake work after the end of the world.

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But these epics are politically realist in a way that Ra or Gumbs aren’t. So it is necessary to ask if, by lacking a utopia, they are also lacking a necessary component of political imagination. This speaks perhaps to the difference in politics between the time of either Ra’s 1973 and Gumbs’s 2018 and the 2014-16 of Beyoncé, Rankine, Jess, and Lewis. The first wave of Black Lives Matter was a declaration that political change was possible in a direct and affective way. This was change not in the far-flung marble halls of congress, surrounded by White-haired White men, which is the realm, still, of formal politics. This change was on the streets, surrounded by neighbors, allies, and activists. Similarly, the epics of this era were about political possibility rather than impossibility. If the apocalypse as a genre comes from when “it seems easier to imagine—or desire—the absolute end of the world than any radical change in the present conditions,” the first wave of BLM was a time when it was okay, even if briefly, to not desire the end of the world.18

Things might have looked different after 2016 with the failure of progressive politics on the Left and the rise, on the Right, of outright fascism. And it might look different in 2021, at the time of this writing. Events are too close to see fully or clearly, but it seems that some perverted version of grassroots community activism, the kind championed and exemplified by BLM, stormed congress on January 6. Would the Proud Boys have stormed the capitol in 2021 without the BLM protest of 2020? I do not presume to have an answer to that, but I am interested in how the rise of the White militia movement in the ’90s was or was not a response to the post-civil rights era and to

18 Reed, 119, drawing on Zizek and Jameson.
organizations like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, and how the current rise of
White supremacy is tied intimately to BLM and the movement for Black Lives.

Which is to say, appropriators keep appropriatin’ (to liken small violences to
large ones). And Black and other people of color have to keep moving to keep ahead of
the slave catcher.

Ra’s thematic line from 1982, “Nuclear War, it’s a motherfucker,” is both a poetic
and a political statement. Ra calls out something cataclysmic which continues to persist
as a possibility, despite its malignancy, despite its consequences, despite its effects. It’s
not singular, not just “nuclear war,” but is a part of a whole continuum of cataclysms of
many flavors and faces. “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” is also a poetic and political statement.
So is “Defund the Police.” They call out a cataclysm that persists, despite malignancy,
consequences, and direct effects. And 2020 and its aftermath has shown that the
American imagination cannot conceive of a world without the policing of Black bodies—
it would rather imagine a world without them.

Which is to say, George Zimmerman, he’s a motherfucker. Darren Wilson, he’s a
motherfucker. Daniel Pantaleo, he’s a motherfucker. Dereck Chauvin, he’s a
motherfucker.

It’s a motherfucker.

At the end of the day, after the end of the world, the political and aesthetic actions
of Epic Black may have changed the territory of the now for what Gumbs calls “the loud
not-yet.”19 It may have claimed small bits of space—not Outer, not Inner, but here and
now—for Black futurity in whatever entangled, relational, anti-patriarchal forms it may

19 Gumbs, 213.
take. It may have used the hypervisibility of Blackness as a weapon against erasure and oppression. Or it may have not. Poetics, like politics, is a place where failures can speak as loudly as success. No one can say what resonances will carry to the future, real or imagined (resonances real or imagined but also futures real or imagined). All we can do is get in/formation. All we can do is prepare the stage and perform our part in the olio. What survives is what survives. It is precious and can spill.
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