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Totalizing Identity:
From Afro-Pessimism to Black Lives Matter

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Abstract

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The thesis explores blackness as a collective identity category in order to interrogate the problem of identitarian exclusions in contemporary theories and political movements. Tracing totalizing blackness in afro-pessimism, the analysis raises questions about gendered exclusions in contemporary black thought and links those questions to the pragmatic concerns of movements such as Black Lives Matter.

Starting with the theoretical works of Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall, the thesis argues that collective identity is a dangerous concept because it tends to result in the totalization of identity: the assumption that all people within one identity category are the same. Specifically, the thesis critiques Frank Wilderson's afro-pessimistic conception of antiblackness – a racial structure that degrades all black people as nonhuman – for missing the nuanced complexity of multiple black experiences influenced by gender. Reading the work of Hortense Spillers against Wilderson, the thesis articulates a gender-based challenge to afro-pessimism's totalizing construction of antiblackness. In doing so, the thesis argues for a more fluid conception of blackness to describe the plurality of black experiences.

Finally, the thesis connects this critique of antiblackness to the pragmatic concerns of racial politics. Examining the Black Lives Matter movement, the final chapters explore the differential relation of various black subjects to racialized oppression and police brutality. The thesis argues that an analysis of antiblack police violence requires looking beyond a generic black subject in order to rearticulate how the vulnerability of particular individuals is not only geographically and temporally contingent, but also embedded in a gendered world.

The project concludes by asking about the creation of theories and movements that are attentive to the differences within identity. With the work of Judith Butler, the thesis suggests that political theories and movements are radically contingent, and that we ought to base our theories and politics not on the identitarian notion that people are the same, but rather on the idea that people contingently share shifting vulnerabilities around which they can temporarily organize. The rearticulation of identity as self-difference suggests that the bonds we form are necessarily fleeting and unstable, giving them flexibility to deal with changing political landscape.

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Table of Contents

A Brief Preface: The Birth of this Thesis about Race	p. i-iii
Chapter I: The “Essential” Subject of “Cultural Identity”	p. 1-13
Chapter II: The Afro-Pessimistic Subject in Frank B. Wilderson	p. 14-25
Chapter III: Understanding Hortense Spillers as “a Marked Woman”	p. 26-33
Chapter IV: What is this ‘Black’ in Black Lives Matter?	p. 34-45
Chapter V: Some Concluding Thoughts on Where to Go From Here	p. 46-53
Works Cited	p. 54-57

A Brief Preface: The Birth of this Thesis about Race

Nothing comes from nowhere, and I doubt I am the first to tell you that. I did not come up with that theorem, but I cannot tell you how I know it. It is just something that people have always said to me, and I continually find it to be true. Every work I have produced, every thought I have had, everything I have brought into being has come from somewhere. That is not to say that these works are simply reproductions, but rather that they are all strange diffractions of something else. This piece is no exception.

No idea appears without pretext, as all knowledge is the cultivation and synthesis of other thought. Why, you might ask, do I begin with this? Where does *this* paragraph come from, if everything must come from somewhere? To be blunt, this paragraph comes from a need to explain the fraught material I explore in *this thesis*. I am attempting to give you a sense of where it began, to create a ground for the discussion to follow. In the chronology of this thesis, this preface is not the start of my writing, but the end. It was written retrospectively, as a look back at where I have been over the course of struggling through these issues. You can read it now, when you are done with the thesis and curious about how I arrived here, or not read it at all. This is not an attempt to forecast what is to come, but rather to explain why I wrote it.

If you are just starting this thesis, you are about to dive into a dense critique of Critical Race Theory, written by a twenty-something year old white, male, college student – although as I expect you to realize, that does not tell you all you need to know about me. If you are like most other people I have met, you must be wondering why I have written this. What interest do I have in the subject matter? And more specifically, what stake do I have in high theory discussions of Afro-Pessimism and Black Lives Matter? My path to get here is neither obvious nor particularly

logical. I entered into the literature of race through strategic discussions in a very strange activity: Policy Debate.

To be honest, I probably had no interest in racial justice when I started – or at least not one that I remember. Let me be clear, I both thought that racism was bad and that justice was good, but I am not sure if I could have told you what racial justice was. I must have been in eighth grade – possibly younger. I just wanted to play with my friends and have fun. However, I was hyper-competitive: I wanted to win everything. And, through some indescribable turn of events, I ended up becoming a debater. While that story may interest some, it could go on longer than this preface necessitates and I will save it for another time. The same is true for the story of how debate took up issues of Critical Race Theory – specifically Afro-Pessimism – although I am not sure I could tell that story as well others. But what really matters is that I ended up in this activity where people were interested in arguing and one thing that continually came up was race.

From there, I began to do research. I wanted to figure out what these race-based arguments were so that I could understand and respond to them. I wanted to compete. But I also became interested in the theories in and of themselves. That is not to say that I was no longer competitive: I love to win. But I began to read texts out of sheer interest in them, beyond the confines of competitive debate. These texts include the afro-pessimist writings of Frank B. Wilderson III, a project I end up critiquing in this thesis; it also included precursors and responses to Wilderson such as the texts written by Frantz Fanon, Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman, Jarrod Sexton, Fred Moten, and many others. I began to read other theorists of race, including George Yancy, bell hooks, and Stuart Hall. Some of the thoughts I read intrigued me, some scared me, but few bored me. Meanwhile, I was living in an intellectual community where

these names were held in great esteem and became the topic of fierce contestation. I remember going to judge a high school debate where tenth graders were arguing – or what we might call yelling – about Wilderson, social death, and structural antagonism, some clearly unsure of the gravity of what they were saying.

At the same time, I began taking part in conversations about the current political environment, exchanges that often unfold very differently from anything in debate. The news has been covering Black Lives Matter for a few years now. Facebook is constantly replete with racial discussions. I have been in conversation with colleagues about campus forums on racial injustice, as it is impossible to speak of equality in this episteme without considering racial police brutality. Political campaigns have highlighted racial issues that are now front and center in this election cycle. And, all the while, I have been taking classes where questions of race keep arising, such as when I have studied the histories of slavery and civil rights.

This thesis, then, is a response to many overlapping conversations that I have been participating in for some time. This is a conversation across disciplines and activities. I am writing from my own position, one that involves constant learning and changing through interactions with friends, colleagues, and professors. I have gone back many times and added other texts into my own, or rewritten paragraphs after hearing new points of view. That is to say, this is not a final product I consider it to be a complete text only in its engagement with you, my reader. This is an attempt to improve current thinking about race and identity more generally by allowing our theories and movements to be more reflexive. This piece is as much a conversation as it is a response to the conversation.

Chapter I: The "Essential" Subject of "Cultural Identity"

> There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence … – Stuart Hall

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall outlines the underlying assumption of "all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world," finding the static "oneness" of identity as the driving force (Hall, "Cultural Identity," 223). As marginalized groups have looked to challenge the hegemonic order, they have often formed around the unity of a shared experience forming a collective identity (Hall "Cultural Identity," 223). Whether this happen with Caribbeanness, as Hall theorizes, blackness,[1] as is prominent in Critical Race Theory, or any other defining feature of culture, identity often shapes around sameness and unity. This thesis will ask a seemingly simple question: are struggles formulated around collective identities truly counter-hegemonic (or even anti-hegemonic) or do they reentrench the very same hegemonic norms they intend to challenge into our analysis? While the question of "cultural identity" would ideally encompass all of its historical uses, this thesis will tailor the question to the identity of blackness, specifically as it relates to the frame of antiblackness and how it relates to the current Black Lives Matter movement. I will, thus, ask: should those of us who are interested in preventing oppression – which I hope is all of us – use the strategic notions of collective identity as they relate to blackness, or would this be a problematic frame? In order to answer this question this chapter will paint in broad strokes, being more theoretical than

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[1]I use the term blackness rather than "African American" because of the prevalence of the term in afro-pessimism and the Black Lives Matter movement.

practical and explaining the tools that will be used for further analysis as the thesis progresses. In other words, I wish to create a framework for analyzing counter- and anti- hegemonic movements that begins with a Foucaultian understanding of power as productive.

Before going into a critique of counter- or anti- hegemonic movements that form around collective identity, it is necessary to define the terms of this debate. Hegemony, as a popular term in this context, emerges from Antonio Gramsci's famous *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935. For Gramsci, hegemony is the process of domination that rests on ideological agreement; as William Carrol and R.S. Ratner note, for hegemony to function, "relations of domination need to be sustained with the consent of the dominated" (Carroll and Ratner, 5). As such, Gramsci conceives of hegemony in terms of a continued set of "ideological struggles" for control (Carrol and Ratner, 5). Through these struggles, "collective identity is constructed" as a process that "unites the dominant and subordinated alike as members of the same political community" (Carrol and Ratner, 5-6). In creating a collective identity, hegemony can mask difference in order to create ideological consensus. Hence, hegemony can be seen as something like a power that both represses and incorporates: it turns the dominated into consenting members of the community, yet keeps them vulnerable to exploitation.

Counter- and anti- hegemonic movements are constantly – and according to some naturally – created in "resistance" to hegemony (Carrol and Ratner, 6). These movements show that ideology is not stable, but rather constantly in flux, arising and dissipating based on changing opinions. These two processes, counter- and anti- hegemony, function differently. Counter-hegemony is a process of working against the current hegemonic order for the purpose of creating a more just order. These movements challenge the current ideological working of the world in order to find "new ways of thinking about ourselves and the world around us" (Carrol

and Ratner, 6). In doing so, however, counter-hegemonic movements do not attempt to abolish ideological consensus; they attempt to change the content of the consensus. Counter-hegemony would, thus, characterize movements that attempt to create new legal regimes or new ideological movements to protect those who are subordinated. These movements could be characterized as attempting to produce a new form of hegemony – meaning ideological consensus – that is not based in domination. Anti-hegemonic movements, in contrast, would be those that do not wish to create a new system of hegemony, but rather to abolish hegemony altogether. As such, they have no aspiration "to build consensus around an emancipatory project" (Carrol and Ratner, 6). Rather, anti-hegemony wishes for a world without hegemonic structures. Hence, anti-hegemonic movements attempt to rid the world of power rather than rearticulate power positively.

The reason that I will default to describing the movements and thoughts against racial domination as counter-, rather than anti-, hegemonic, is because the process of movement building is inherently a project of consensus building. Those writing or marching to convince others that they are correct are engaging in a process of hegemony creation. That is why, in conventional rhetoric, a movement is defined as "a group of people working together to advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas" (Oxford Dictionaries, "Movement," n/a). According to social movement experts such as Alberto Melucci, movements are collective identity are "a learning process that leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor," hence making them part ideological, hegemonic tools (Melucci, 49). Hence, talking about anti-hegemony in the context of political or social movements be fundamentally impossible. However, as the idea of counter-hegemony is based in building new consensus, it is important that this new hegemony not be based on domination and subordination. While there is a large debate on the ethics of counter-hegemony, that debate goes beyond the scope of this

paper. I will, rather, take up counter-hegemonic movements on their own ground in order to engage in a more in depth debate. That is not to say that the ethics of hegemony ought not be debated, just that they are not discussed in depth here.

This reading of hegemony as consensus building that is always in process works well for the purpose of this thesis for two reasons. First, it works well with Foucault's conception of power, as the power of hegemony works by incorporating its members into "the same political community," using "the coercive apparatuses of the state *and diffused* across other institutional sites such as the church, the family, and the school" (Carrol and Ratner, 5-6). We can therefore see power working in non-sovereign ways, as individual interactions producing hegemonic consensus. Hence, power works through all of "civil society," not just the state (Carrol and Ratner, 6). This challenges the juridical model of state power that Foucault critiques throughout his work on biopower. The reading of hegemony as a continuous battle also prevents ideology from being understood as unchanging and insists that ideology is constantly being contested and changed. This addresses many Foucaultian's criticism of ideology as being assumptive of a stable subject, by creating the possibility for a self-differential subject that both acts upon and reacts to hegemony. Hence, Carrol and Ratner's understanding of Gramscian hegemony gives us an analytic tool to speak of Foucault's conception of power as working diversely through processes of incorporation.

The second reason that hegemony makes sense to use as an analytic for discussing power is because the conception of power working through "collective identity" makes Gramsci's thesis of hegemony central to questions of how groups identify and create ideology. Hegemony, after all, functions through the erasure of aspects of one's identity and the creation of a false collective unity. Furthermore, hegemony constructs the very identity that we have: every day we deal with

"hegemonic practices that legitimate class, gender, sexual and racial inequalities" (Carrol and Ratner, 6). By dictating what is culturally normal and correct, hegemony tells individuals how they may act. Hence, if one wants to speak of the politics of collective or cultural identity, they must talk about processes of identity formation.

After defining the relevant terms, the first question that arises is seemingly obvious: how could a counter-hegemonic movement around identity recreate hegemonic domination? Despite the counter-hegemonic nature of many anti-racist movements, notions of static identity may result in coercing and violating marginalized groups in a different, yet equally painful way as before. However, instead of being forced to conform by some exterior force, "the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm" becomes the new form of oppression (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 226). Rather than having the norm imposed by some abstract governing body, the norm is now enforced by those whom we care most about and love the most. The devastation of being told by those whom we consider the most important that we are not normal is more depersonalizing – and possibly more painful – than being told that you don't meet some abstract norm. Hence, the "inner compulsion" and inner normalization of identity-based movements may be more devastating than the original hegemonic power that is being fought against.

The norm, here, functions as a way to order this new identity. All who have the "one, shared" characteristic of an identity must act as if it is their only characteristic, or they become abnormal within their own movement. If one is black, one must first and foremost be black; if one is a woman, one must first and foremost be a woman. What is lost here, and what will be explained in depth by Hortense Spillers, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie as this thesis goes on, is those whose deviance is instrumental to identity formation: the black woman

disappears. The unity that allows many groups to struggle for freedom, thus, ends up trapping its members in a static position, and, ironically, reducing their individuality for the purpose of the group: the violence of normalization – derived from the Foucaultian idea that power is normalizing – is perpetuated within these post-colonial struggles that attempt to pin down the subject as part of a group and disallow identities to be defined by flux.

In order to understand the violence of normalization, it is first necessary to understand how individuals are marked as abnormal and thus systematically mistreated – the thing post-colonial struggles are protesting. Cultural discriminations, whether they be racism, sexism, or ableism, all share the common feature of being framed as abnormalities; they are connected by the fact that they are all seen as deviant in comparison to the universal subject of humanity, who is spoken of by the abstract "view from nowhere" of science, philosophy, and law. With a universal subject that is white, Christian, able-bodied, middle class, and male (as well as many other things), deviants from the norm are often deemed as less worthy, or ignored altogether, in the name of the greater good of the group. This is, after all, the goal of utilitarian thought that drives policy (Santos, n/a). The universal subject is considered the norm and, thus, treated as the prominent member of society: an unraced subject is white; an unclassed subject is in the middle class; and an ungendered subject is male.

In such a grammar, every way of thinking about the subject is changed. This is most easily exemplified with conventional national security issues. For, even when political scientists (or other political scholars and newspaper writers) have called for security that accounts for human subject positions, questions are raised, such as: security for whom, from whom, and at whose cost? For example, in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, security was concerned with protecting Americans, from terrorists, and at the cost of the Iraqi population (Santos, n/a). In a subtle shift,

the norm is substituted for the human, meaning that the ideal American became the ideal human, while all non-ideal Americans were considered less than perfectly human. This means that the white, middle class, male subject must be protected and the deviant is not considered within the formulation of security. In fact, the constructed risk that deviants will de-normalize the norm, that they might skew percentages or corrupt the human, means policies often securitize from, as well as at the cost of, the deviant. Hence, the calculus for societal protection is already a rigged game: "it is a socially constructed phenomenon, in which some people have a greater capacity to define risks than others" (Shaw, 97). While this example might show how the terrorist is constructed as a risk in one instance, it is not unique. Foucault shows that the Darwinian logic of the Malthusian couple, for example, allows racism and ableism to justify counting some and discounting others, often through policies of eugenics: "the family organization … was used to support the great 'maneuvers' employed for the Malthusian control of the birthrate, for the populationist incitements, for the medicalization of sex" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 100). As such, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination can be read as being biopolitically calculating those who are "abnormal" (Foucault, *Abnormal*). Furthermore, as the norms – and hence the process of normalization – are intrinsically tied to the abnormals, it is seemingly impossible to study Otherization absent normalization; they represent two sides of the same coin.

Once this premise is established – that normalization is the process by which control takes place – one can return again to, and quickly critique, the concept of using collective identity. As the term "collective" commonly means "as one group or whole," the term collective identity must refer to an identity shared by the group: the collective identity is their unquestionable similarity that bans them together as one (Merriam-Webster, n/a). This is even

seen in the term identity, coming from the Latin word *idem* meaning "the same" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n/a). Hence, there must be a stable identity, or an essential stable portion of one's identity, that can describe every person within the movement, with no exception. This could be a cultural, biological, or ideological identity. Absent such characteristics, the movement would simply not fall under the definition of a "collective identity" movement. Additionally, the collective must be able to generalize the subjects in their movements by this attribute, giving the collective a unified voice. In combining the search for group unity with identity, people get reduced to the common characteristics that they have, with the understanding that there is some essential feature that will stabilize the movement in spite of any contingency. Hall explains:

> [T]he discourse of identity suggests that the culture of a people is at root … a question of its essence, a question of the fundamentals of a culture. Histories come and go, peoples come and go, situations change, but somewhere down there is throbbing the culture to which we all belong. It provides a kind of ground for our identities, something to which we can return, something solid, something fixed, something stabilized, around which we can organize our identities and our sense of belongingness. (Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," 4)

The search for essence, stability, and fixity exemplifies the issue of normalization. Difference, it is said by these counter-hegemonic identity groups, should be totally erased, time completely frozen, and only stillness should remain. No matter what historical contingencies effect your life, the discourse of collective identity suggests that there must be an ontological status that supersedes all contingency. This position, however, seems unable to describe individual subject positions. How can so many people of different gender, race, religion, economic position, and history have the same, solid, fixed identities if they have experienced different lives? As the experience of one large group is told by a counter-hegemonic movement, other stories are hidden away, those being the stories of any remaining internal abnormal groups or individuals. For anything that is not essential and shared – that is to say any experience based on contingency,

which is every experience – is neither stable nor stabilizing; it is a crack in the ground that collective identity so would like to stand on, destabilizing the central point of analysis.

Contrary to popular belief, destabilization and disruption are not always bad, and in this case they are very important. In fact, these fractures provide the texture of life, the very practice of living and changing. This is exemplified by the logic that to get to the essence of a thing, specific “histories,” “people,” and “situations” that change must be discarded. Since each of these aspects of life is constantly variable, and hence cannot be essential, each is regarded as deviance by activists demanding collective action. Anything that is defined as experiential is considered disrupting. These aspects of life are perceived as destabilizing the perfect, or rather imperfect, norm of identity. As such, all people who do not act in the still, unchanging manner – and that is to say all people – are “unintelligible,” discarded to the outside of the collective identity group (Hayward and Watson, 21). They are then marked as abnormals, causing them to be threats to the norm – quickly subjected to violence, regulation, and some type of perverse incorporation (Hayward and Watson, 21-22).

It is, of course, this violence and regulation that collective identity movements are trying to fight against. How is it then possible that they end up recreating and justifying the view of abnormality as negative? While the goals of these movements may be useful, it is important to realize a broad goal is not enough: “[T]he difficulty lies in the very words and concepts we use …. In part, the difficulty lies in the fact that men [particularly white, able-bodied men] so often prove the categories within which everybody experiences things” (Hall, “New Times,” 226). In other words, we are dealing with a methodological issue that must question the very foundational formation of subjects, groups, and identities. In this way, we are dealing with a question of frameworks: this is a problem of our very theories of the social and the political. Rather than just

rearranging the groups, or the ways we choose to biopolitically include and exclude people from analysis, an altogether different thought process is needed. We must radically question the very ideas of subjects and subjectivity.

For example, while our universal subject is ungendered, unclassed, unraced, and overall disembodied, the specified subject is not much better, as it perpetuates more issues than it resolves. If we look at the gendered subject, we might ask: what is the class or race situation of the theoretical “woman?” Or we might ask a Marxist, is capitalism’s “worker” able bodied or disabled? Or what might this person’s religion or language be? And what is the gender or sexual preference of the “black body” or “black flesh” about which much of race theory speaks? Are any of these subjects born legal citizens of the country they inhabit or are they fighting against an immigration system (or choosing to live as so called “illegal immigrants” or even “illegal aliens”)? Even the intersectional subject that attempts to aggregate social science data to describe its subject cannot speak of the personal experience that effects any individual, only of some abstract ‘normal’ person created by the “subject-making power-knowledge” machine of anthropological statistics (Huffer, 18). These are not simply omissions, or questions that have not been answered; they are perpetuations of the universal subject, as they creates a “voice that claims to speak for all,” claiming to know everything about the identity that they speak of (Harris, 588).

This problem is made even clearer when one examines the implementation of counter-hegemonic policies to protect one of these identity groups against systematic violence. For, when one evaluates systems of exploitation, such as Marx’s critique of production, there is a tendency to reduce the structure to one social practice that determines the outcome. If one reads labor as the only – or most important – form of subordination in play within production, then one cannot

see the interplay of racial hierarchy, gendered assumptions, immigration statuses, and many other things as being equally important to looking at employment rights. The analysis is already flawed by "reading off the different kinds of social contradiction at different levels of social practice in terms of one governing principle of social and economic organization" (Hall, "Signification, Representation," 91). Hence, an evaluation that begins with a singular, overarching structure cannot accommodate difference.

While it is problematic to define identity-based on a totalizing system, it can be just as problematic to define identity-based on the self, or to define identity at all. The issue is that, if identity is based on the contingency of life, there is no static self to speak of. Even when trying to speak "'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place" (Hall, "Cultural Identity, 222). Because of the constant fluctuation of experiences, moods, and daily life, we are never the same subject as we were at any other point. So called 'life changing' events could occur at any time, radically changing our outlooks on life. Thus, even if it were possible to, somehow, describe ourselves, it would be a fleeting description, as our very constitution is constantly changing. Hence, the very way we think of identity must be changed: "[I]nstead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, "Cultural Identity," 222). If we were to take this view of identity seriously, there would be an ethical obligation to radically question "the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim" (Hall, "Cultural Identity," 222).

If identity is production, change, and instability, then one might wonder what, if anything, cultural identity should be. Hall, luckily, provides us with a different way of conceiving of cultural identity. Finishing the introductory quote, Hall notes that there is a second choice, one that allows identity to be reconceived of:

> … There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side - the ruptures and discontinuities. (Hall, "Cultural Identity, 222)

The important shift here is that the stable subject, as well as the constant group identity, are thrown into question. As Hall later explains, "We can no longer conceive of 'the individual' in terms of a whole, centred [*sic*], stable and completed Ego or autonomous, rational 'self'. The 'self' is conceptualized as more fragmented and incomplete" (Hall, "New Times," 225). The very theory of the subject has been reworked, to a position of indescribable flux. From this theoretical critique of the stable subject, we can get the first and most important assumption of this thesis. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's famous axiom from *Epistemology of the Closet*, "Axiom 1: People are different from each other," we can create our own axiom: Axiom 1: People are radically different from themselves as well as from each other (Sedgwick, 22).

While this theoretical turn, of changing the subject, as well as identity, to one that is inessential and thus indescribable may sound purely abstract, it is central to modify many theories of oppression, domination, subordination, and power that currently exist. This change allows us to understand the nuances of power; to speak of the internally subjugated groups that are so often ignored. Thus, with the theoretical tools that I have given us in this chapter, the following sections will display an applied analysis of this critique of identity to the afro-pessimistic turn in Critical Race Theory and then to the movements that arose from Critical Race

Theory that are currently effecting society. As such, this thesis will move from the theoretical groundwork to the practical application. Chapter Two will evaluate Frank B. Wilderson's work, focusing on ideas of gender in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Chapter Three will then explain why a static understanding of identity is the wrong way to read Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," a widely cited black feminist text in afro-pessimism, although Spillers did not consider this to be an afro-pessimist text. Chapter Four will then apply this analysis to ideas of identity in Black Lives Matter, mainly through Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie critique, and Chapter Five will finally conclude the paper by evaluating how theories of identity should proceed into the future, focusing on Judith Butler's critique of subject stability.[2] While the area of black studies is clearly not the only field to which my analysis of identity might apply, this thesis offers a departure point for similar critiques that engage other identity-based movements.

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[2]While Wilderson does take issue with Butler's work in *Gender Trouble*, his criticism is not about her understanding of "provisional unity" that I will draw on (Bulter, 15). Wilderson critiques the notion of "destylization/re-stylization of the body" in Butler's articulation of performance and gender performativity (Wilderson, 416). This critique, as articulated by Wilderson, is not apparently applicable to Butler's notion of "provisional unity." Therefore, I will not go into that discussion in this thesis, despite the rich content available there.

Chapter II: The Afro-Pessimistic Subject in Frank B. Wilderson

> Return Turtle Island to the "Savage." Repair the demolished subjectivity of the Slave. Two simple sentences, thirteen simple words, and the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled – Frank B. Wilderson III

Frank B. Wilderson III, one of the foremost, founding thinkers of afro-pessimist theory, places one of the most extreme demands on society, making his writing appear ideal for ending injustice. However, even with a call to give the land back to Native Americans and reevaluate the western subject, I can't help but wonder: is Wilderson asking enough? Is he making the *right* demand? While it would appear that Wilderson is obviously making the most extreme demand, as he demands "the end of the world," a counter-intuitive wish for more is the basis for this chapter (Wilderson, 101). The reason, as shown throughout this section, is that his demands are ungendered, unclassed, and overall disembodied. Hence, through an analysis of his work, it is possible to see the issue of abstract racial analysis. In other words, Wilderson needs to rethink the idea that blackness is an identity that is perfectly self-identical for all blacks at all times.

In *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Wilderson describes the world as being composed of two antagonisms: Savagery and Slavery (Wilderson, 8). For Wilderson, the Savage, whom Americans would commonly refer to as the Native American or Indian American, is a victim of land theft, and the Slave, commonly referred to as the black or African American, has the ontological imprint of slavery on the black body. Slavery, importantly, is not the event of labor. Rather, for Wilderson, slavery is the culmination of social death, as described by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study*. What Wilderson, in short, takes from Patterson is that slavery becomes ontological because of a three step process: "natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence" (Wilderson, 28).

The most prominent author for Wilderson in proving that social death is empirically real, and humanity is ontologically separated from “the Black,” is the famous postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon. As Fanon explains in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the black is a “slave not of an ‘idea’ that others have of [him] but of [his] own appearance” (Fanon, 87) Fanon also claims that because of his blackness, he is “an object … [s]ealed into that crushing objecthood” (Fanon, 82). Because he can only be seen as an object and lacks the ability to obtain subjectivity, Fanon claims that “[o]ntology … does not permit us to understand the being of the black man,” or his being (Fanon, 82). Thus, for Fanon and Wilderson, blackness is the essential feature that creates “a paradigm” beyond “experience,” as one becomes a slave simply by appearing black and the mark of blackness removes the ability to understand existence, or ontology (Wilderson, 36). Hence, Wilderson states that blackness cannot be addressed as “a contingent, rider,” but must be seen as the antagonism of the world; blackness is, for Wilderson, “more essential to our understanding of the truth of institutionality than the positions,” or “identities,” of subjects (Wilderson, 37). In short, Wilderson understands the world as fundamentally opposed to the black. Antiblackness makes up the foundation of the world, structuring society through opposition and subordination. For Wilderson, antiblackness thus forms a hegemonic structure that subordinates and dominates blacks.

In Wilderson’s totalizing understanding of blackness, or what he often times refers to as the paradigm of antiblackness, there are a few themes that are necessary to understand. First, the black position that Wilderson speaks of has a singular experience, described as the experience of “the slave” or “the Black.”[3] Along these lines, the black is both essential and theoretical; it is

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[3]Although both terms are used by Wilderson and he may even prefer the term “the slave”, this paper will use the term “the Black,” as it makes clearer the application of other texts that use the terms Black and blackness. This is done for the benefit of clarity, not to make a value judgement on terminology.

void of specific experience. The second theme is that blackness, and only blackness,[4] is "ontological, rather than experiential" (Wilderson, 35). A black person is incapable of being considered as a human, left outside of the concept of ontology. Antiblackness is the unique antagonism that excludes its marked population from having experience. As such, according to Wilderson one cannot legitimately consider questions "such as freedom from gender or economic oppression" within the same realm as antiblackness, as these are questions of experience, not paradigm (Wilderson, 35). According to Wilderson, gender is somehow different than race, as gender is a contingency, not an ontology. Thus, a paradigmatic analysis, the type which Wilderson advocates, requires erasing gender and creating what Herman Gray calls "a homogeneous, totalizing blackness, a blackness incapable of addressing the differences, tensions, and diversities" amongst black folks (Gray, 88). That is to say that Wilderson demands a blackness that cannot account for difference.

This starting assumption, that gender exists in a different paradigm than race, is challenged throughout feminist theory. If one goes back to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, it becomes clear that gender can work on the same level as race. Just as a black body is always marked by blackness, Beauvoir notes that she is always marked by her woman-ness. Hence, she states "[i]f I want to define myself, I first have to say, 'I am a woman'; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth" (Beauvoir, 25). Furthermore, all things that she thinks are attributed primarily to her womanhood, as when she engages in discussion, she must always answer the attack that she "think[s] such and such a thing because [she is] a woman" (Beauvoir, 25). Furthermore, just as Wilderson and Fanon define the black as being antithetical to humanity, Judith Thurman notes in the introduction to *The Second Sex* that woman, according to Beauvoir,

[4]With the possible exception of Savagery.

is antithetical to the human: "humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself" (Beauvoir, 11). Hence, one could describe woman in Fanonian terms as being overdetermined by her woman-ness, "she is sex, so she is it in the absolute …. She is the Other" (Beauvoir, 26). Beauvoir also defines woman in Spillers' term, as "she who is the flesh" (Beauvoir, 196). While the accuracy of Beauvoir's text is not in question here, it demonstrates that there is clearly not a pragmatic, absolute difference between race and gender. After all, Beauvoir makes the argument that "'[t]he eternal feminine' corresponds to 'the black soul'" (Beauvoir, 32).[5]

However, even if we could agree with Wilderson that gender is a contingent rider – something that I am not willing to accept, but will argue on the grounds of for the purpose of academic work – there would still be a gendered issue in the way that Wiliderson does not conceptualize gender as effecting blackness. The first issue at stake is conceptualizing "the Black" in those terms. Since we are working with a critique of "ethical grammar," or the ethics of rules that formulate thought, it is important to see what this language means and how it sets up a rule for analysis (Wilderson, 6). "The" preceding black is, in and of itself, a totalizing word, and does the work of erasing specific, contingent riders. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "the" is "[u]sed with a singular noun to indicate that it represents a whole species or class" (Oxford Dictionaries, "the," n/a). The idea here is that there is a singular black. Wilderson is not describing a possible black experience, but what he perceives as the *only* possible black experience. He understands the singular experience as one that can speak for all blacks, making

[5]This is one of the more controversial aspects of the Beauvoir's text that I bring up to show that there is a rich debate about the comparison of gender to race, rather than to take a position on it. Another text that spurs this rich debate is Cheryl Clarke's "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance" where she states that "[s]exual politics, therefore, mirror the exploitative, class bound relationship between the white slave master and the African slave" (Clarke, 131).

it a paradigmatic analysis. This, of course, eliminates the possibility of anyone who is black being anything other than black, making it the type of "cultural identity" critiqued in the first chapter by the work of Stuart Hall. One cannot, in such a paradigm, be a black woman, a gay black man, or anything other than black. Furthermore, even if we could accept those different positions as possible, each one of those identities is assumed to have the same experience, therefore invalidating the need for further specification. As such, Wilderson's work functions within an "assimilationist paradigm," where power dynamics such as class, gender, and ability are "obscured" to uphold the analytical tool of antiblackness (Gray, 88).

This is, of course, extremely depersonalizing and denies the lived experience of many people. For many people, black "is not a category of essence," but one of difference (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 111). According to Stuart Hall,

> [I]t is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention … to recognize the other kinds of difference that place, position, and locate black people. The point is not simply that, since our racial differences do not constitute all of us, we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences — of gender, of sexuality, of class. (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 111-112)

The foundational downfall of essentialism is that there are an infinite number of "different positionalities" that are constantly being negotiated by each individual (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 112). In the face of Wilderson's singular black experience we might ask what happens to survivors of domestic violence, antisemitism, or ableism who are black. Are all of these experiences, ones that Wilderson excludes from analysis, the same? Furthermore, what position do we assume is "the Black?"

As difference disappears within Wilderson's understanding of the black, a very specific subject is left. In turn, "the hetero-normative black man becomes the universalised subject of blackness" (Lelliott, 16). One thing that might be lost to many readers is that the hetero-

normative black man is Wilderson's black subject. The largest experience that is shared, and the place where an ontological divide comes from, is Franz Fanon. Wilderson universalizes Fanon's experience and says that if Fanon experiences an ontological divide, this must be the transcendental fact that defines blackness. In fact, Wilderson says that he and others like him "are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence" on antiblackness as a structure that erases the concept of ontology (Wilderson, 79). Because this is true for Fanon, Wilderson says that it is true for all black subjects. Thus, the black subject, for Wilderson, is Fanon and Wilderson's theory shares his male epistemic location.

It is, of course, important to interrogate what it would mean for a theory to be written from the perspective of Fanon. To begin, Gwen Bergner notes that "Fanon, like Freud [and other psycho-analysts of the time], takes the male as the norm. For the exemplary colonized subject, Fanon uses the term le noir 'the black man'" (Berger, 76) Hence, when Fanon states, and Wilderson repeats, the foundational sentence, "the black [man] has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man," we can read the black as the black man (Fanon 83; Wilderson, 52). In fact, Fanon's reference to the mutual gaze that is missing "is precisely the mutual patriarchal gazing—the competition for the status of 'real' man—that creates the blind spot in the liberatory analysis of those white and black men who cannot see 'the female' and thus cannot theorise an inclusive vision of freedom" (hooks, "Feminism as a Persistent Critique," 84). Fanon is looking to reify the structure of gendered domination and apply it to black men. Hence, it appears that "gender [already] structures how we think about being black," because being a black man is defined, by Fanon, as missing the power of patriarchy (Stephens, 35). This makes Fanon's lack of gendered interrogation, and to a further extent Wilderson's denial of gender, troubling. Even the grammar that Fanon is building on is implicated in power structures, such as patriarchy.

Hence, the very thing that Fanon claims he is missing is the power of patriarchy, a power that should be in question to start with. Once Fanon notes that he needs the patriarchal power of male domination, an important shift takes place in Wilderson's work. If, as I suggest, Fanon is foundational for Wilderson's text, and Wilderson even quotes this passage, then Wilderson's universal subject is a man seeking patriarchal power. Bergner insists further "[t]hat Fanon's 'universal' subject describes the colonized male" (Bergner, 76-77). Hence, the lack of ontological resistance that is so foundational for the theory of antiblackness is based on an analysis that only evaluates the unique position of a black man, namely Fanon. From a methodological perspective, this troubles the entire definition of antiblackness, throwing Wilderson's schema wildly into question.

While it may be tempting to say that Fanon's assumption of masculinity does not affect his work, masculinity is the starting point for his theory of domination and subordination. Fanon asks the psychoanalytic question: what do black men want? This is a flipping of Freud's question – "what does woman want?" – but with the new object as black men (Bhabha, 134). Hence, "in transposing Freud's question of the other from gender to race, Fanon excludes black women. … Fanon opposes black men to white men" in order to find what is different (Bergner, 78). Homi Bhabha explains that when Fanon speaks of "man," he "ignores the question of gender difference" (Bahbha, 147). Fanon assumes that in analyzing the desire of the black man, he can understand the overall psychology of blacks. The same is true when Fanon demands an equal patriarchal gaze or asks for the ontology of the black man. Both are gendered desires, ignoring the gendered differences that exist between black men and women. Therefore, Fanon is only looking from the position of the colonized man and his sexual desires, ignoring the views of black women.

For Wilderson, however, the problem is not just the masculine position of Fanon. The other major theoretical work for Wilderson, *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study* by Orlando Patterson, is also based on a universal masculine subject. Patterson's book is so important for Wilderson because Patterson's conception of social death allows the articulation of anti-humanism or, as Wilderson says: "no slave, no world. And, … no slave is in the world" (Wilderson, 18). In other words, Wilderson uses Patterson's work to prove that there is a structural antagonism between the human and the slave, meaning the black. Patterson gives Wilderson the ability to say that the slave can never be incorporated into the social world of the colonized. Patterson's thesis is that slaves are cast radically outside of humanity. Patterson's argument, however, is based on "the relationship between adult male slaves and adult male masters," taking each as the norm for their respective groups (Menzel, 52). This, of course, ignores how non-males can function in their respective roles as slaves or masters. In fact, each of the three portions of Patterson's definition of social death – violent domination, dishonor, and natal alienation – relies on gendered norms.

The first thing that Patterson describes is "the total pervasiveness of physical violence in general" (Menzel, 54). The description and totality of this general violence, however, comes at the cost of any particular violence experienced, such as sexual violence or rape. Nowhere in Patterson's definition of social death does sexual domination come up; it is neither evaluated "as a primary instance [nor] reinforcement of perfect submission" (Menzel, 54). When Patterson does speak of sexual violence, he uses the term "'sexual exploitation,' a term specific to the boss/laborer relation" (Menzel, 55). This is, clearly, significant for both Wilderson and Patterson, as they are working in a post-Marxist vocabulary. In fact, Wilderson cites Patterson as "go[ing] to great lengths to delink his three 'constituent elements of slavery' [which are violence, general

dishonor, and natal alienation] from the labor that one is typically forced to perform when one is enslaved" (Wilderson, 23). Patterson's understanding of rape, and thus Wilderson's view of sexual violence, would, then, be read as an issue of capital formations, something that both claim exists entirely outside of the paradigm of slavery and antiblackness. Rape would not be understood as an absolute, immoral form of violence, but would rather be understood as a form of labor. Hence, if one wanted to use Patterson's work to do a paradigmatic analysis, the thing that Wilderson concludes is necessary, that analysis would have to exclude historical instances of rape and all other sexual violence. This is why Wilderson can call both capital and sexual violence contingent in contrast to the constitutive violence of race.

The second part of social death, the thesis of general dishonor, is seen as being demasculinized. For Patterson, the equation is simply power creates honor, and manhood is the defining feature of honor: "The real sweetness of mastery … [is] one's power, as a living embodiment of one's manhood and honor" (Patterson, 78). The goal of obtaining "one's manhood" places both the master and the slave "as male. In accordance with this gendered vision of honor, internalized dishonor is characterized as a feminine lack of resistance … while honor is equivalent to manly dignity" (Menzel, 57). Again, the patriarchal gaze that Fanon spoke of is clear, as the slave loses the ability to show resistance and becomes feminine. Hence, the metric for determining general dishonor cannot deal with any female subject, making it a problematic presumption to universalize.

Natal alienation, the last part of social death, is also tied to female subordination through praising the paternal order. For Patterson, the most important aspect of this alienation is that since the slave has "no natal claims and power of his own, he had none to pass on to his children" (Patterson, 9). The slave, here, is only alienated for the lack of inheritance, a

traditionally masculine metric, as only men could inherit. Furthermore, favoring ancestry over subject position assumes that our parental claim "is sufficient to differentiate between people" (Ang, 5). This, however, is based in the politics of "internal ethnic sameness," as it would assume that all who were alienated ended up in the same position (Ang, 5). Again, a non-experiential, theoretical subject arises. Hence, the writings of Fanon and Patterson that Wilderson relies on are heavily based in universal male subjects.

The creation of a "universal black subject" is, in fact, deeply embedded in the grammar of Wilderson's writing. Throughout the book, the word "black" is used as if it were "sufficient in itself" to describe this position; it is "as if we don't have any other politics to argue about except whether something is black or not" (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 111). By creating a singular focus, the world can become described by it, often leaving other "unexamined politics" in place (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 112). Hence, when claiming antiblackness is the antagonism that describes the world, Wilderson misses the point "that these antagonisms refuse to be neatly aligned; they are simply not reducible to one another; they refuse to coalesce around a single axis of differentiation" (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 112). There are too many forms of power working simultaneously to reduce them to a single thing.

This should be particularly terrifying for Wilderson, as if the fatal flaw of humanism is the inability to understand the subject position of the black (Wilderson, 6) and thus an insistence upon a universal subject, Wilderson's insistence on "the Black" creates a "universal black subject;" one that can only understand a single element of any person (Gray, 88). Hence, even in an attempt at resisting power, Wilderson recreates structures of domination. As Kitso Lelliott explains:

> [The universal black subject] homogenises and subsumes difference within the black community. Thus, as white sovereign subjectivity excludes it's [*sic*] 'other' from full humanity, defining black people as objects, void of subjectivity, the universal black subject, in turn, excludes women from subjectivity. (Lelliott, 16-17).

This exclusive black subject has, historically, been highly problematic. According to bell hooks, the resulting "[s]exism has diminished the power of all black liberation struggles" (hooks, Yearning, 16). Countless black women, such as Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and Kathleen Cleaver, were "subjected to a sexism that was fierce and unrelenting" while in black liberation movements (hooks, Yearning, 16). Hence, movements for equality ended up "abusing" women and forcing them "to cultivate 'virtues' that if listed would sound like personality traits of slaves" (hooks, Yearning, 17). This clearly is not a solution that can work, at least not if one wishes to move to a non-dominant form of hegemony.

The universal subject is not, however, the only gendered issue of *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. When Wilderson claims that the black is the only ontological divide, he maintains "a discursive space" that is both created by and recreates a "hegemonic order" of normality (Gray, 88). Wilderson creates a hierarchy of importance, where blackness is the most – and often only – important issue. While it is true that Wilderson does, at times, say that there are other struggles that exist, he makes the move of separating issues such as "class struggle, gender conflict, [and] immigrants rights" [*sic*] into "conflicts" while antiblackness is an "antagonism," making it the only structure worth evaluating (Wilderson, 8). This is a denial of sexism, classism, or other non-racial politics as structural ontologies. In such a theoretical move, patriarchy cannot be understood as a systematic form of exclusion, and ending it would not be a goal worth achieving, as sexism could not hold any antagonistic categories. In fact, by thinking that matters of sexism are nothing more than "conflicts" that we could "busy ourselves with" after antiblackness is eradicated, Wilderson "enables black males to assume no

direct accountability for a politics of sexism" (hooks, Killing Rage, 86). Hence, readers are left again in a position where the lives of actual people who are affected by other issues are ignored, as their issues are seen as small "conflicts." Thus, we can see that Wilderson's afro-pessimistic understanding of antiblackness both denies and footnotes the lived experiences of gender and other forms of difference.

Wilderson does, however, speak to the ungendering in his book. In fact, he claims that Hortense Spillers' conception of the slave as flesh justifies the use of slaves without gender. Wilderson, referencing Spillers, says that "Africans went into the hold of ships as bodies and emerged from the holds of those ships as 'flesh'" (Wilderson, 417). Because the slave is flesh, which comes before the body, the slave cannot be gendered, as gendering happens to bodies (Wilderson, 417). The next chapter will evaluate Spillers understanding of the flesh, the body, and gender in order to respond to Wilderson.

Chapter III: Understanding Hortense Spillers as “a Marked Woman”

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium:" I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. – Hortense Spillers

Hortense Spillers’ 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” is one of the most influential black feminist texts to be taken up by current strains of afro-pessimist thought. Quoting Spillers’ famous essay on slavery, Wilderson says, “[u]nder these conditions, [meaning the condition of slavery,] one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities” (Wilderson, 418; Spillers, 72). Applied to his own thesis, that the black is always in the position of the slave, he concludes that an interrogation of the gendered subject “is a political project the Slave [, meaning black,] can only laugh at, or weep at the thought of,” meaning that the black flesh is ultimately ungendered and gender politics should not be considered as relevant for black revolutionaries (Wilderson, 418). How, from Spillers’ essay, does Wilderson get to this conclusion, that gender is irrelevant? While Wilderson’s reading of Spillers makes this argument appear fairly clear, I will argue that Spillers’ text should be read as deconstructive of normative gender categories, instead of destructive of gender as a category of analysis. Spillers should, thus, be read as a critique of gender that assumes some stable universal category of women, what I will call white feminism, not an abolition of any concept that gender could implicate subjects, what I will call gender analysis. In other words, she does not abandon the idea that gender could affect individuals, but critiques the idea that it affects everyone in the same way.

The deconstructive method that Spillers undertakes is one of critiquing conceptions of gender to expose hidden, contradictory meanings. The purpose is not to find stable meaning in

the world, but to show how texts are indeterminate and should be treated as such. From the beginning of the text, Spillers is deconstructing gender categories. On the first page, Spillers claims that she is "overdetermined" by the combination of her blackness and gender (Spillers, 65). Overdetermination means that she is defined in excess, to the point at which she cannot define herself. The co-constructive systems of gender and race that define Spillers do not work separately, but are rather deeply mixed into stereotypes that cannot, and most likely should not, be easily disentangled. One cannot attribute her identity to being black plus being a women, as the two traits are inseparable in how others define her (Hall, "What is this 'black,'" 111). Hence, she is called "'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium'" (Spillers, 65). These terms, while generically applied to black women, hold specificity that would not be applied to 'blacks' – meaning the universal, male, black stereotype – or to 'women' – meaning the universal, female, white stereotype. Neither black men nor white women would be referred to as "Sapphire" or "Earth Mother," as neither are black women. And there is definitively no chance that either would be called a "Black Woman at the Podium."

While each one of these terms is specific to black women, insofar as each term is a stereotype that would not apply to others, these stereotypes are also incredibly generalizing, defining no specific historical black women. As such, the terms of black womanhood recreate normative power structures by naming and categorizing black women. Thus, while supposedly being specific to black women, they oversimplify many black women into the same categories. The names that Spillers is called are "so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no way for the agents buried beneath them to come clear" (Spillers. 65) No individuation can be made, she is always over coded, with presumptions made about her prior to her being or acting. Similar

to the racial position that Frantz Fanon experiences as a black man in Algeria, Spillers is "given no chances. [She is] overdetermined from without … not of the 'idea' that the others have of [her] but of [her] own appearance" (Fanon, 87). Hence, even before communicating meaning or ideas, Spillers is already identified and defined. That is why she "must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order" (Spillers, 65) In other words, she must deconstruct what is understood as black female identity.

For Spillers and those who follow her work, the critical question is what meanings she "must strip down," or deconstruct, in order to reveal herself. What are the "layers of attenuated meanings" (Spillers, 65)? Spillers instantly argues that it is not the universal 'female' or what I have called white feminism that has described her position. In fact, she says that in slavery's "historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity" (Spillers, 66). The terms of 'female' and 'male' that are loaded with racial, economic, and social presuppositions about how gender was constructed within Western society are clearly unable to explain the effect that slavery had on gender. In this light, Spillers aggressively insists that "it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender" (Spillers, 66). For even if 'male' and 'female' have some theoretical utility, they cannot insist on static, universal meanings, or meaning of "integrity." From here, the question arises: is Spillers at all affected by her position as a black woman or would her position be the same as a black man? In other words, does the lack of stable "integrity of female/male gender" mean that there is no effect of female/male dynamics?

To resolve these questions, one can return to Spillers' text. There are two distinct ways of reading Spillers' words. One could either see them as destructive or as deconstructive: one could

either see a disagreement with any use of gender or a disagreement with the static ways that gender has been described that insists on its "integrity." Where Wilderson reads Spillers as dismissing gender, I would insist that Spillers is dismissing the universal understanding of gendered analysis, or white feminism. Her issue, as this chapter will argue, is that the gendered positions of the 'male' and 'female' master do not describe the gendered positions of the 'male' and 'female' slave. Hence, Spillers does not call for an abolition of gender, as Wilderson seems to suggest, but rather an "undressing [of] these conflations of meaning" in male/female dichotomies (Spillers, 66). As such, gender should not be abandoned as a tool of analysis or as a paradigm, but uncloaked in order to look at specific situations and histories. In this analysis, "[w]e would gain, in short, the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture" (Spillers, 66). A deconstructed gendered analysis might allow critics to see how people actually live within ideologies of racial and gendered oppression without overstating the role of gender as an unchanging structure.

Spillers thus dives into a process of deconstruction, looking specifically at gendered politics within the capture of slaves. For her, slavery is a theft of the individual and reduction to flesh. Rather than being seen as a person, the slave is seen as an object to be used, an impersonal object to be exploited. Spillers states that "[u]nder these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific" (Spillers, 67). In other words, the capturing community, or in this instance European slave traders, see the slave, or African, as genderless.

Yet, while the slave is seen as genderless in the abstract, the politics of reproduction create a new form of gendering. The politics of partus sequitur ventrem, "meaning [t]he offspring follows the mother," labels children of female slaves and white men as slaves while the children of male slaves and white women are not cast as slaves (The Law Dictionary, n/a). As Harriet Jacobs notes in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, if the father is black and the mother is white, "the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history" (Jacobs, 50). In contrast, "if the white parent is the father, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market" (Jacobs, 50). It is as if the black woman marks the child as non-human, while the black father marks the child as deserving death. While it could be debated which one of these is worse, what is unquestionably true is that these two scenarios are different and the difference is based on gender.

The difference given by the slave owner, however, is not the only side of the story. There is another perspective: that of captives. If we return to Spillers' text, it is clear that "this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join" (Spillers, 67). In other words, within the slave community there is a clear differential that the captor is attempting, at times successfully and at other times unsuccessfully, to disrupt. Thus, even if there are some instances of slave owners getting rid of gendered divisions, there are also instances of slaves and slave owners developing new gender roles.

From the politics of captured slaves, Spillers moves to the politics of transportation. She takes us to the hold of the slave ship, an analytical movement that is also taken up by Wilderson to say that gender does not exist. Spillers quotes, at length, the rules of "The Brookes,"

something that is missed in Wilderson's analysis. When discussing the positions of males and females in the hold of the slave ship, we are brought to a strange position of simultaneous gendering and ungendering. The "Brookes Plan" states: "[l]et it now be supposed . . . further, that every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four, every boy five feet by one foot two, and every girl four feet six by one foot . . ." (Spillers, 72). Spillers further notes that the "Brookes Plan" recommend "five females be reckoned as four males" (Spillers, 72). In these plans, males and females are given specific worth in space and in the translation of five females to four males. While not in the traditional sense of gendering, the body is given value based on its gender.

Despite the clear placing of value on gender, Spillers goes to great lengths to point out that this is not gendering, or rather this is not *universal* gendering that would be explained by white feminism. It is not as if gendering takes place equally for every person. Rather slaves are gendered differently than citizens. This process of turning people into spaces is considered, by Spillers, as a form of "dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing" the Africans (Spillers, 72). It is a project of removing humanity from the slave, but simultaneously basing their objecthood on different gender positions.

From this analysis, Wilderson claims that the black flesh is ungendered, as he explains that one cannot evaluate the politics of gender "[u]ntil one can demonstrate the corporeal integrity of the Black has been repaired" (Wilderson, 418). In other words, if the slave is not a human, the slave cannot have gender. If the slave is non-human and the non-human cannot evaluate gender, there is no way for the black to have gender, or so this is how Wilderson reads Spillers.

However, just because it is an act of ungendering – or removing traditional gender assumptions from a thing – does not mean that it is not an act of regendering – or assigning a value to a thing based on gender. It is, rather, both: a classical argument of deconstruction. Gender is both taken away from the slave and new gender formations are expressed. As Annie Menzel notes,

> Spillers … does not mean that masters and overseers ever failed to differentiate between breasted and unbreasted, unpenised and penised forms of embodiment among the enslaved, but rather that nothing in "the traditional symbolics of female gender" (80)—i.e. the norms that attended white womanhood—could be counted on to curb or mediate the brutality to which this flesh was subject. (Menzel, 56)

Hence, Spillers points out that "these measurements do reveal the application of the gender rule to the material conditions of passage, but [she] would suggest that 'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic" (Spillers, 72). Here, we should read the use of the word 'gendering,' put in quotations by Spillers, as her saying universal conceptions of gendering did not exist, much as Menzel reads it. This is the only way that one can be affected by "the gender rule" without being gendered.

Spillers is, rather, insisting that the black woman is not gendered in the *same* way that a white, or western, woman would be. While the white woman would undergo gendering in the domestic, the black woman is gendered in the slave ship. With this understanding, her quote would read: "[*White feminist*] 'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic." This reading would suggest that the slave is gendered; the male slave is differentiated from the female slave, even as the ship is not in the domestic field and is not gendered the same way as the Western woman. Thus, Wilderson's reading of Spillers as ungendered misunderstands the deconstructive moves being made by Spillers. This, of course, holds critical importance because it means that Wilderson cannot diagnose the ways that gendered violence has affected

counterhegemonic movements and even slave-based societies. As the next chapter will show, without looking at gender, current racial movements will ignore gendered difference and allow gender violence to continue.

Chapter IV: What is this 'Black' in Black Lives Matter?

> The resurgent racial justice movement in the United States has developed a clear frame to understand the police killings of Black men and boys, theorizing the ways in which they are systematically criminalized and feared across class and irrespective of circumstance. Yet Black women who are profiled, beaten, sexually assaulted and killed by law enforcement officials are conspicuously absent from this frame even when their experiences are identical. And they remain invisible when their experiences are distinct—uniquely informed by race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation – Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie

While this thesis has, thus far, focused on conceptions of power, I will now make a shift to focusing on political movements in order to create a departure point for political change. While I am not claiming that movements are the *only* way to challenge current political formations, I would like to take seriously some of the premises of current political movements in order to critique them on their own grounds and bring to light the political implications of the critiques raised in chapters Two and Three. Therefore, this chapter will look at the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the Say Her Name response. I will specifically consider the idea that power operates largely as *sovereign power* (or state based power that functions through repression) even though that model of power is not one that I or Foucault would agree with. I am making this theoretical move both because of writing limitations and because it will give me the ability to go in depth on the politics of these movements where they are most developed. In other words, I believe this will give us the richest depth of analysis.

At stake in this chapter, then, are the pragmatic applications of a theory of identity and historical contingency. While it is nice to conceive of how things ought to be, and this is clearly a necessary step in any political project, it is also necessary to evaluate what will happen to individuals and groups as a result of our political thoughts and actions. If we take seriously the ways that race, gender, class, and other power relations effect people, then there is an important question to answer: how can we help change the embodied experience of individuals to be less

painful? Instead of asking simply what the world ought to look like, this chapter goes one step further and asks what we ought to do in order to achieve such outcomes. Thus, we will use this section to evaluate the politics of movements and how they affect the individuals who are striving for justice.

When one talks about political movements that fight for racial justice, especially in the current episteme, there is one particular movement that should come to mind: Black Lives Matter. This phrase comes across all forms of social media, popping up in newspaper after newspaper and blog after blog. Black Lives Matter is one of the most popular social movements to pursue social justice before the law, specifically focusing on the politics of police brutality and how they relate to race. Hence the phrase, Black Lives Matter, as well as the movement's politics, have gone "viral," catching attention and spreading "like wildfire" with no intention of stopping (Los Angeles Times, n/a). But, what exactly does the term Black Lives Matter – which may be referenced in popular media as BLM or tweeted as #BlackLivesMatter – mean? According to supporters of Black Lives Matter, the movement finds it necessary to explain that black lives are uniquely oppressed and, hence, it is necessary to challenge the systematic operation of antiblackness.

In other words, the advocates of this movement object to the idea of colorblindness, or the idea that the legal subject is unaffected by their race and that their race should thus be ignored. Writing for the *Stanford Law Review* in 1991, Neil Gotanda notes that colorblindness "limits the conceptualization of racism to simple, individual-centered prejudice," effectively "downplay[ing] the persistence of systemic racial subordination" (Gotanda, 44). From a political perspective, this is problematic because it limits legal response to individual based cases rather than communal changes. As such, systemic issues such as employment and education cannot be

targeted: "[e]ven if one admits that large numbers of the unemployed and undereducated youth in the inner cities are black, unconnectedness hinders the government's ability to use that correlation as a basis for attacking social ills" (Gotanda, 45). Black Lives Matter draws on this same logic to critique the ways in which black bodies have been uniquely vulnerable to police violence. They claim that it is necessary to change the structural way in which black bodies are targeted by the police, rather than looking at individual cases. To quote the official Black Lives Matter website at length:

> [w]hen we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity." (Black Lives Matter, n/a)

Hence, the movement stresses blacknesss, as blacks have been dispossessed by the "state apparatus" and have become more vulnerable to police and other forms of state violence (Black Lives Matter, n/a).

This movement is, in current media assessments, placed in direct opposition to the claim that "All Lives Matter." The All Lives Matter movement[6] asserts that all humans are equally valuable, and, implicitly, states that all lives are equally suspect to violence. From this point, proponents of All Lives Matter conclude that all lives should be afforded the exact same protection by the law and there should be no special treatment for individuals based on their embodied racial experiences (although the rhetoric would also call for a prohibition on any embodied experiences). As such, the All Lives Matter movement assumes that humans should be looked at as generic subjects that are all, fundamentally, the same. This would be a colorblind

[6]If movement can be used to classify the rhetorical move of "All Lives Matter" is a question that will not be addressed within this paper. Many have stated that this is not a movement and only exists as a rhetorical move used to fight against the changes asked for by "Black Lives Matter." While this is debate is important, it is not directly relevant to his paper. For the purpose of grammatical moves, I will use the term "movement," although it is not to state that the term "movement" is either correct or incorrect.

approach to dealing with police violence, as it says that racial appearance is irrelevant. The Black Lives Matter movement takes issue with this rhetorical move. Speaking on the All Lives Matter movement, the Black Lives Matter's website says:

> When we deploy "All Lives Matter" as to correct an intervention specifically created to address anti-blackness,, [*sic*] we lose the ways in which the state apparatus has built a program of genocide and repression mostly on the backs of Black people—beginning with the theft of millions of people for free labor—and then adapted it to control, murder, and profit off of other communities of color and immigrant communities. We perpetuate a level of White supremacist domination by reproducing a tired trope that we are all the same, rather than acknowledging that non-Black oppressed people in this country are both impacted by racism and domination, and simultaneously, BENEFIT from anti-black racism.
>
> When you drop "Black" from the equation of whose lives matter, and then fail to acknowledge it came from somewhere, you further a legacy of erasing Black lives and Black contributions from our movement legacy. And consider whether or not when dropping the Black you are, intentionally or unintentionally, erasing Black folks from the conversation or homogenizing very different experiences. (Black Lives Matter, n/a)

In other words, without a specification of the subject, there is an implied universal subject. Given the existence of a universal subject, there is no need for racially based police reforms (or any racially based reforms). Furthermore, this universal unraced subject is actually raced. Given that All Lives Matter sees all lives as the same, it must assume that there is some *normal* person that describes the race, gender, ability, class, and other embodied experiences of all people. Problematically, however, the *normal* lives are white lives, as "whiteness is deemed the transcendental norm" (Yancy, 3). This is why Black Lives Matter insists that All Lives Matter continues "White supremacist domination," by masking the history of stolen labor (or slavery) and claiming that we are all on equal footing. In such a move, the differences that have been created by America's social discriminations, such as slavery, Jim Crow, and the racial police state, are erased. As Gotanda notes, "the metaphor of the 'equal starting point' … ignores historical race and the cumulative disadvantages that are the starting point for so many Black

citizens" (Gotanda, 45-46). Rather than seeing the differences that make up experience and history, specifically the way that black bodies are marked as killable and have historically been marked as property, All Lives Matter presupposes sameness – an active advocacy that proposes the erasure of history, experience, and difference. In criticism, the Black Lives Matter movement concludes that it is necessary not to end up "homogenizing very different experiences," but rather to look at the ways in which raced bodies uniquely experience police violence. Once this is done, policy can be created to address the unique ways that black bodies are rendered vulnerable.

The difference between the Black Lives Matter movement and the All Lives Matter movement, one might conclude, is that Black Lives Matter focuses on a more specific subject, claiming to look at the ways that specific structures of oppression operate. Or at least this is what we are told. But, I would like to question how different these two positions really are; in other words, is Black Lives Matter really fundamentally different from All Lives Matter? If we must ask the All Lives Matter movements which lives matter, then it is necessary to ask the corollary, pointed question: which Black Lives Matter? Just as All Lives Matter points to the normal set of lives, mainly white men, what set of normal lives does Black Lives Matter point to? And, what may seem more relevant to many participants of Black Lives Matter, what lives are not pointed to, left ultimately unsignified and unsignifiable? To paraphrase the title of Stuart Hall's famous essay (used to name this chapter), I want to ask a seemingly simple question: What Is This 'Black' In Black Lives Matter?

Much as I have claimed about Franz Fanon, Orlando Paterson, and Frank Wilderson, I believe that Black Lives Matter has a very particular take on the embodied experience of the subject, even though that understanding of the black subject may be hidden to many. Black Lives

Matter is, seemingly, about the normal "black" person, whatever we may deem that phrase to mean. The movement, in fact, uses the same "normalizing" language that it critiques within the All Lives Matter movement: Black Lives Matter claims to be "a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation," written with the word ALL capitalized – something that can only feel dangerous after reading an in depth critique of All Lives Matter supplied by the Black Lives Matter website (Black Lives Matter, n/a). Is the Black Lives Matter movement not, after all, a warning against this all so tempting linguistic and political shortcut of treating ALL lives in the exact same way? In other words, is the call to ALL black lives not just a call to a specific set of black lives that masks the way that other lives are effected within the normalizing schema of power? Is it not the voice that speaks for few, but claims to speak for many? If the All in All Lives Matter denotes the norm, then the ALL in ALL black Lives Matter similarly denotes the black norm. One could, for example, write the sentence "All (Black) Lives Matter" – as would have been popular in a much earlier writing style of deconstructionism. The purpose of such a grammatical move would be to trouble the distinction between saying All Lives Matter and saying All Black Lives Matter, as if to imply that they are not that different. And, once we say that Black Lives Matter assumes all black lives are the same, we can return to the original problem that the movement points out in the All Lives Matter discourse, the issue of "homogenizing very different experiences" under the scope of the norm, ignoring other experiences, and ultimately leaving large groups vulnerable to violence without the possibility of future protection (Black Lives Matter, n/a).

In order to proceed, it is necessary to both ask who this ALL in ALL black lives is and if this ALL is truly representative of ALL black folks. To answer the first question – the question of the "who" – one only needs to check the news or see the popular names that pop up when one

thinks of Black Lives Matter. The people who come up are usually the same: "Mike Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice have become household names and faces" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 1). As one newspaper contributor explains: "by now, the names Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray have become synonymous with the Black Lives Matter movement" (Danielle, n/a). These names are all those of black men. The piece goes on to quote the associate director of the African American Policy Forum, Rachel Gilmer, to say, "from the White House's My Brother's Keeper initiative down to the grassroots movements that we've seen rise in this country in response to state violence, men and boys are seen as the primary target of racial injustice" (Danielle quoting Gilmer, n/a).

One news example of this is the 2015 *Time Magazine* article, "From Trayvon Martin to Walter Scott: Cases in the Spotlight." In this article, a timeline of major events tells about the "controversial" racial killings that have occurred in recent years (Sanburn, "From Trayvon Martin," n/a). It names fourteen black male victims: Trayvon Martin, Ernest Satterwhite, Dontre Hamilton, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Michael Brown, Levar Jones, Tamir Rice, Rumain Brisbon, Charly Keunang, Naeschylus Vinzant, Tony Robinson, Anthony Hill, and Walter Scott (Sanburn, "From Trayvon Martin," n/a). Absent from this conversation are any of the females that died in the same period, such as Shantel Davis, Miriam Carey, Gabriella Nevarez, Mya Hall, or others (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 8-10). In other words, this has been seen as a black man's issue. As the ones who experience violence, the solution becomes to protect black men from the violence of police shootings. From this, one can conclude that the statement Black Lives Matter is really a coding for the clearly gendered statement Black Men's Lives Matter.

What is obscured by such a narrative are the lives of people who are black but not male. For example, many people do not know that "2014 also marked the unjust police killings of a

number of black women including Gabriella Navarez, Aura Rosser, Michelle Cusseaux, and Tanisha Anderson" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 1). The next year, 2015, was no better: "[t]he body count of Black women killed by the police continued in 2015 with the killings of Alexia Christian, Meagan Hockaday, Mya Hall, Janisha Fonville and Natasha McKenna" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 1). While the statistics are hard to come upon because "data is rarely, if ever, disaggregated by gender and race," when it is possible to look at both, "researchers find that 'for both men and women there is an identical pattern of stops by race/ethnicity'" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 2). In one of the only cities with a large data set, New York City, "the rate of racial disparities in stops, frisks and arrests are identical for Black men and Black women" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 2). The names of black women, however, have neither appeared regularly in intellectual conversations nor have they been recognized as important in news coverage. And this is just the tip of the iceberg; Crenshaw and Ritchie's report, "Say her name: Resisting police brutality against black women" goes through case after case of violence done to black women within and outside of the state apparatus of policing.

However, as the constant stories on Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice show, the focus is instead placed on black men and this comes at the cost of any other black group: "media, researchers and advocates tend to focus only on how profiling impacts Black men" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 2). According to Rachel Gilmer, this association of police violence with black men has "led to the idea that women and girls of color are not doing as bad, or that we're not at risk at all" (Danielle quoting Gilmer, n/a). Such an assumption, of course, leaves these groups unprotected and outside of the scope of reformative strategies such as those advocated by Black Lives Matter, despite the fact that they do experience racialized violence. As Crenshaw and Ritchie note, "this reality is erased from our demonstrations, our discourse, and our demands, to

broaden our vision of social justice" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 2). Hence, movements like Black Lives Matter often end up implicitly or even explicitly affirming the message that black female lives do not matter. That is to say the black in Black Lives Matter is gendered and that gender is male.

One counterexample that some might point to is the case of Sandra Bland. She has gained more attention than any other black woman in the Black Lives Matter movement. However, Dr. Yohuru Williams, a professor of History at Fairfield University, notes that "[e]ven in the unprecedented coverage of the case of 28-year-old Sandra Bland … she like Raynette Turner remains largely unseen" (Williams, n/a). While her death has come up, it has "failed to ignite the same degree of passion as the killings of Black men" (Williams, n/a). Even if we could assume that Sandra Bland has come up with the same popularity and had the same impact as Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray, we might ask why she is the only woman to come up. She occupies the position of the token woman, appearing only to the extent that she is a woman. Even on Wikipedia, she is the only woman that comes up in the Black Lives Matter introduction while nine black men appear: Trayvon Martin, Mikael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Jonathan Ferrell, Samuel DuBose, and Freddie Gray (Wikipedia, n/a).

Lastly, when Sandra Bland is brought up as a black woman, she is only assimilated into the frame of black men. When reading "Everything We Know About the Sandra Bland Case" in *Time Magazine*, nothing is mentioned about her gender or any possibility of sexual assault, showing that she is only looked at in the gender neutral frame of violence: through a frame that cannot look at the unique way sexual violence happens to black women (Sanburn, "Sandra Bland," n/a). As such, Sandra Bland does not open up the possibility of evaluating the way that

gendered violence is more likely to happen to nonnormative black bodies (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 5).

While much of this issue of focusing on black masculinity has to do with how Black Lives Matter is represented externally, it would be scapegoating to say that the Black Lives Matter movement holds no blame. While the movement was created by three black women, it has not problematized the way that gendered politics have been masked. According to Crenshaw and Ritchie, black women are placed outside of the discourse of police brutality even within the protesting community. They are deemed less attackable and, thus, "asked to speak only about their fears of losing their sons, brothers, partners, and comrades," instead of their fear of losing their daughters, sisters, mothers, or even themselves (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 5). Through such moves, black women remain outside of the collective discourse, which "leaves Black women unnamed and thus under-protected in the face of their continued vulnerability to racialized police violence" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 1). The result, as Kimberlé Crenshaw says in an interview on democracynow.org, is that "we know less about … how black women have experienced police brutality" and thus are unable to critique and respond to it (Crenshaw, n/a). Hence, any movement that is concerned with how specific black people remain vulnerable to violence must account for the specific ways that black women are continually left vulnerable to violence and ignored.

It is important to note that despite their invisibility in these discourses, black women remain vulnerable to police violence in many ways. Black women are both similarly and dissimilarly vulnerable to the police as black men are. As Crenshaw notes, "black women experience police brutality in many of the same ways that black men do and also in some ways that are different" (Crenshaw, n/a). The result is that the metrics for talking about black women

under the schema of black male violence – such as Black Lives Matter – can only tell a partial story, for some ways that black women are treated are fundamentally different from the way that black men are affected by police-based violence. Hence, we need a new methodology for challenging police brutality, one that "extend[s] to the ways in which women are also vulnerable to police brutality" (Crenshaw, n/a).

One experience that is unique for black women that must be accounted for is sexual harassment by the police. It is necessary to account for police rape, something that happens disproportionately to black women, especially when compared to black men. This is not to say that black men are not harassed, but rather to insist that it is not in the same scope or scale. As Crenshaw and Ritchie state: "[b]lack women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault by police due to entrenched presumptions of promiscuity and sexual availability" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 21). This is embedded in a historical construction of black women supposedly wanting – or even 'asking for' – rape that goes back to slavery's subjugation and rape of black women. Black women are seen as "chronically promiscuous," described as "'loose women' and whores" who cannot be raped because they only want "the sexual attentions of white men" (Davis, 182). Crenshaw and Ritchie go on to state that "[h]istorically the American legal system has not protected Black women from sexual assault, thereby creating opportunities for law enforcement officials to sexually abuse them with the knowledge that they are unlikely to suffer any penalties for their actions" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 21).

In fact, black women are vulnerable to being sexually attacked in almost every interaction with the police. It is noted that "[s]exual harassment and assault have been reported to be particularly pervasive during traffic stops," as a stopped black women is seen as a sexual object (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 21). Crenshaw and Ritchie go on to state that "[sexual assault] is also

reported to take place with alarming frequency in the context of responses to requests for assistance or investigation of domestic violence or sexual assault" (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 21). That is to say even when a black woman calls and reports that she is being beaten or raped, she is likely to be sexually assaulted by the police in response. She does not receive help, but is made more vulnerable. In fact, black women are often criminalized even when they ask the police to prevent a rape:

> The reflexive criminalization of Black women seems at times to foreclose the possibility in police officers' eyes that they are simply survivors of violence and not somehow as much of or even more of a threat than their abusers. As a result, Black women survivors of violence -- and particularly poor, lesbian, gender nonconforming, and transgender Black women -- find that police responses to violence all too often result in further - and sometimes deadly - violence against them. (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 18)

Hence, black women are almost always vulnerable to violence by the police. From this view on how black women are sexually harassed by the police, one would have to demand challenging the practices of sexual domination that are nearly omnipresent within the police industrial complex. Such a move asks for a criticism that calls for the importance of gender within a critique of racism. From here, we might conclude that understanding the singular position of black women would allow us to radically change politics. However, the final chapter will challenge the idea that this analytic is a move in the right direction. I would, in fact, like to critique the view of black women as a singular identity and challenge identity as an underlying concept on which to base politics.

Chapter V: Some Concluding Thoughts on Where to Go From Here

> This antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics assumes neither that "identity" is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement. Because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normative goal. Moreover, when agreed-upon identities or agreed-upon dialogic structures, through which already established identities are communicated, no longer constitute the theme or subject of politics, then identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. Certain political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view – Judith Butler

If Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* teaches us one thing about identity, it is that a stable conception of identity cannot – and ought not – exist. What, then, can we make of the conclusion that some might have drawn from the last chapter to specify the subject of the black woman? In simplest term, I would say that this attempt to pin down the subject through ever increasing modes of specification "is a trap," shining panoptic light on the subject in an attempt to arrive at perfect visibility (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200). This means that the goal of a movement for racial and gendered subjects cannot be to further specify and illuminate the subject, but must change the very way that we conceive of identity. Rather than the seeing an intersectional subject, embedded with "unquestioned stability," I will insist on an unstable, unmappable, and unintelligible subject[7]: a subject that is radically "at odds with a disciplinary conception of the techniques and discourses of knowledge–including those embraced by theorists of intersectionality–that contribute to procedures of normalization" (Huffer, 17-18).

The best way to show the problem with specification is to pick up where the last chapter left off, with Crenshaw and Ritchie's critique of Black Lives Matter. This chapter will argue that their critique, while important, ultimately offers too totalizing a view of black women. If, after

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[7]For similar criticism of intersectionality, see Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jennifer Nash's "Re-thinking Intersectionality," and Lynne Huffer's take on both texts in *Are the Lips a Grave*?

all, we assume there is a singular position of the black woman, we risk erasing the individuality of each person or “abnormal,” deviant subgroup within the broad category of black women. There are, for example, three common stereotypes[8] of black women that each hold their own meaning: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. The Mammy is seen as the “caregiving” nanny, often described as overly protective (West, 288). She is often seen by white folks as the good black women, a model that other blacks should aspire to. The Jezebel is described as a whore – often portrayed as the “sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels” (West, 288). These black women are seen as the reason that we need to ‘clean up the streets’ and regulate sexuality. Lastly, there are the “angry, combative Sapphires,” who are seen as the angry black women, yelling about anything and everything that they can (West, 288). These are seen as the scary black women that need to be fought against and contained. Each of these stereotypes are differently stigmatized and ought not to fall under the same paradigm of evaluating black femininity, as they have to interact with white people differently. If we, for example, attempted to create a movement around preventing women from being seen as caregivers, how might our misunderstanding of stereotypes of the Jezebel and the Sapphire problematize our politics? How might the focus on one of these subgroups end up standing in for all black women through the terribly seductive move of universalization? And even if we could, somehow, create a movement that cares equally for black female’s stereotyped as all three of these, what might happen to the other stereotypes of black women that do not fall along these mainstream stereotypes, such as the welfare queen or the stereotypes that Spillers is called like “Earth Mother” “God's ‘Holy Fool,’” or “Black Woman at the Podium”?

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[8]These are, of course, only stereotypes. They define no actual Black woman, yet many Black women have to deal with being treated *as if* they are these stereotypes. As such, these stereotypes create fictions that act on the world even as they lack accurate description of Black women.

Even if, however, all black women were stereotyped and treated the same way from the Others, an argument that does not appear to be true, we would still not be all to say that all black women were treated the same ways within the early black feminist movements. As Annika Ahonen notes, "[a]s Black feminism is to a great extent preoccupied with questions of gender and race, the question of class is sometimes shadowed or even overlooked by the two 'main' issues" (Ahonen, 15). Social location, economic position, personal relationships, and other embodied experiences all have the possibility of impacting the way that people are socialized, stereotyped, and treated. Ahonen goes on:

> [B]eing black, female and American today does not necessarily denote the same heritage and class, for there are black women in the USA whose ancestors were not slaves, or black women may live in many different economic situations, depending on their resources, education, work, family and the place of habitat. According to Taylor, ". . . there is not a single, monolithic black woman's standpoint, because too many variables (regional differences, skin tone, sexual orientation, age, and class . . .) divide and subdivide women" (Ahonen, 15).

Hence, a theory that totalizes the black female subject is problematic – just as it is problematic to totalize the black subject. With differing education, financial resources, or political connections, different black women might have differing access to privilege or protection. Historically, within black feminist movements, wealthy elites have attempted to separate themselves from poor, supposedly undeserving black women. The 19th century meeting group – known as the National Association of Colored Women – defined itself "apart from the poorer, lower-class, 'immoral' black women, who were mostly from the rural South. In fact, they regarded them as hierarchically lower (class) and their attitude towards them was often benevolent and elitist" (Ahonen, 15-16). A totalizing opinion, hence, risks internal classist opinion, recreating oppression that movements are attempting to oppose.

Furthermore, Ahonen mentions the difference of treatment for those who have nonnormative sexual orientations (and, therefore, can be marked as abnormals). Not surprisingly, queer, trans, or non-gender conforming black women are more likely to experience gendered or sexual violence. There is also violence done to queer, trans, or non-gender conforming black men that is not accounted for in a binary vision of black men versus black women. When evaluating gendered violence inflicted on black individuals, Crenshaw and Ritchie speak to this exact situation. They say, and I will quote at length:

> [P]olice often punish actual or perceived sexual or gender nonconformity with physical and sexual violence. These acts are sometimes accompanied by homophobic, transphobic and misogynist slurs like "dyke ass bitch," or assertions that if they want to "act like a man" they will be "treated like a man," and threats to "rape them straight." In one particularly egregious case, a Black lesbian in Atlanta reported being raped by a police officer who told her the world needed "one less dyke." Profiling of Black transgender women, along with Black nontranswomen for prostitution related offenses is rampant -- sometimes based on the mere presence or possession of a condom. Black transgender women and gender nonconforming women are also routinely subjected to transphobic verbal harassment and abuse, unlawful and degrading searches to assign gender based on anatomical features, and dangerous placement in police custody. According to the National Transgender discrimination survey, 38% of Black transgender people who had interactions with police reported harassment, 14% reported physical assault, and 6% reported sexual assault. (Crenshaw and Ritchie, 20)

As such, black transgender folks are constantly harassed, arrested, and sexually assaulted in ways that other, more mainstream black groups might not be. They face unique forms of violence that do not fall under the paradigms of antiblackness or black female violence. The disgusting idea of "raping them straight" would be nonsensical to explain the way that straight black men or women interact. This is a specific manifestation of power along the lines of identity, showing that a totalizing view of blackness would miss the nuance that exists. Instead of seeing rampant transphobia and anti-queer ideology, a focus on antiblack politics would say that these black bodies only experience antiblack police violence.

How, then, do we move forward with our political thought? What is the paradigmatic explanation that political movements and thought ought to use in order to describe black suffering? As shown thus far, it seems as if all paradigms fail: the paradigm of evaluating the black hides sexual difference; the paradigm of the black woman fails to explain different, abnormal black female subject position; the paradigm of critiquing black female stereotypes misunderstands questions of class; the paradigm of questioning black female stereotypes as sorted by class masks the working of gender. It seems that any attempt to create a paradigm to understand a set of people "inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes" (Butler, 4). A choice, now, must be made: shall we attempt to ultimately pin down the ultimate paradigm for describing human experience or eradicate the use of paradigms all together? Is the goal of critical analysis to overly specify the identity of the subject or should we change our politics toward identity altogether?

If we return to the axiom established at the end of chapter one, *Axiom 1: People are radically different from themselves as well as from each other*, then the premise of creating a paradigm will quickly collapse. If people are always different from each other, then there is no way that one person's experience will ever be able to stand in for everyone's experience. We will lose the ability to make an analytical frame for describing all subjects, as each subject is radically different. However, when we take this statement further and agree that people are radically self-different, we lose the ability to create a frame or paradigm for even explaining that singular person's experience. The individual loses the ability to be pinned down and defined at an ontological level, as change becomes the only constant. Our politics and theories must, therefore,

be radically changed in order to account for the radical proliferation of historical contingencies that shape its subjects.

At this point, however, I know some will reply that strategic essentialism is necessary for the pragmatic goals of identity politics to succeed. The ultimate flaw with this argument, however, is that it just raises the original question of this thesis: who do identity politics work for and who is excluded from the identity group? While identity politics might be able to generate some success if they function collectively, it will only be successful for the normal groups, leading the nonnormative, less important internal groups to be subjugated and subordinated. This type of political essentialism has been heavily challenged within feminist critiques of patriarchy for "its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists" (Butler, 3). Exporting this flawed model of gender essentialism outward toward identity essentialism does not seem like an ideal strategy for dealing with the unequal power relations created by ideological hegemony.

While many would like to think that the rhetoric of group essentialism can be used strategically, this misses the unintended consequences of using assimilation. When speaking about the essentialist model as it relates to gender politics, specifically the "category of women," Butler notes:

> This problem is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of women for merely "strategic" purposes, for strategies always have meaning that exceed the purposes for which they are intended. In this case, exclusion itself might qualify as such an unintended yet consequential meaning. By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation. (Butler, 4-5)

The attempt to strategically assimilate thus provides an excess of meaning that cannot be contained within any 'strategy.' Strategic essentialism always has larger political implications

than we intend, because our political strategies can be taken up by the media or other consumers in a non-strategic manner (or even in a counter-strategic manner that operates to suppress identity-based movements). In other words, the intent of our words and movements are lost once they enter into the general public. This is, after all, how many media sources reported Black Lives Matter as being only a male problem.

What is needed, then, is a politics "[w]ithout the presupposition or goal of 'unity'" (Butler, 15). That is to say, we need movements that are not always in perfect agreement or stable. Rather, we can create politics based on "provisional unities" that do not attempt to define identity, but isolate problems that multiple people might be facing at any given point in time (Butler, 15). We need politics that can critique Black Lives Matter, yet provisionally agree with the movements when it is in disagreement with color blind approaches. We need politics that point to contingent, rather than ontological, issues and make critiques as these arise; politics that see critiques as calls for improvement rather than seeing critiques as a complete rejection of the essence of a movement. In fact, if we do not have to agree upon a shared ontological, identity for politics, but can rather form these political groups around "provisional unities" that arise spontaneously, our politics will be both more flexible and effective. This is Butler's model of politics for feminism. She says, "[w]ithout the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of 'women' for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot" (Butler, 15). Hence, if we allow circumstance and contingency to define our politics instead of fixed identity, our political movements will have the flexibility that need in order to grow and survive – or even the flexibility they need to dissipate, disperse, and reform differently when, and if, appropriate.

In order to prevent the normalizing power of hegemony and identity, we need to form politics and coalitions that do not attempt to define the subject. They need to allow people to move in and out of movements based on individuals' historical contingencies and nonnormative positions. The purpose, then, is to be counter-hegemonic without recreating normalization. Hopefully, as a result, our thought "will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" (Butler, 16).

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