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April 8, 2020

Black Trans* Ontology in the Wake of Afro-Pessimism

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Introduction

The Black trans* body sparks confusion for critical theorists. Afro-pessimists know not how to describe what happens to those of varied genders. Humanists, including many queer theorists, feminists, and Marxists, place the body on the same shelf as its non-Black counterparts. All of these groups create epistemic black holes within their interpretation of violence at the point of the Black trans* body. The group that comes closest to imagining both an anti-black and anti-trans* stasis point of violence are the afro-pessimists with their broader ontological fixation. The scope of their ontological claims – though correct in explaining the origin of anti-black violence from the Middle Passage – renders intracommunal violence invisible, especially “gendered” forms of violence.¹ In this text, I will deconstruct the viability of afro-pessimism to address intracommunal conflict, reorient desire around representation, and explicate the capacity of the flesh to affirm what the body cannot.

The central problem of Black “trans*” or Black “woman” is entangled within the humanist trope of recognition through gender to the extent that my grammar to reference these identities as additives to Black is already compromised. The first category of Black consistently troubles whichever latter identity becomes an additive afterwards: “The violence of racial slavery, through which Black, queer, and/or trans identities have been forged, cannot be addressed through the politics of trans visibility. Trans (neo)liberalism and its attendant visibility and respectability politics not only obfuscate liberatory trans politics... but ultimately offer little recourse for those of us most targeted by the prison regime and white supremacy under the guise

¹ Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. 56.

of feminism.”² Gossett contrasts the inaugural matrix of violence as racial slavery (chattel slavery) against the broader goals of trans visibility. The idea of visibility as a line of freedom is a privileged ideology that assumes a causal relationship between visibility and recognition of one’s humanity. On the contrary, for Black trans* bodies, visibility is moreso a site of violence than a liberatory praxis. White supremacy masquerades as freedom when the clearest path to liberation is purely being seen.

In my first chapter, I will dissect the field of afro-pessimism from a reading of texts by its leading scholars. Furthermore, I will scour each text for direct mention of what exactly a Black trans* body means within their framework. From the works of Marquis Bey, Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Eric Stanley, Frank Wilderson, and Calvin Warren, I glance at what happens to their theories under yet another unreconcilable position. Notably, I have left out Saidiya Hartman because of her relevance to my second chapter and C. Riley Snorton because of his indebtedness to humanism. The meditative afro-pessimists cannot go beyond their theoretical imperative to only create texts; those who attempt to go a step further, such as Marquis Bey, find themselves mesmerized by the human. This problem has produced many shortcomings and more incorrect conclusions by critical race theorists and queer theorists alike. I came to a moment of enlightenment at the death of the Black trans* body at the hands of another Black body: ““But what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?””³ The answer fuses a somethingness to the

² Gossett, Che. "Blackness and the trouble of trans visibility." *Trap door: Trans cultural production and the politics of visibility* (2017): 183-190. 184.

³ Stanley, Eric. "Near Life, Queer Death Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text* 29.2 (107) (2011): 1-19.

doer, an attempt at creating a long lost subjectivity. In “Near Life, Queer Death”, Eric Stanley addresses the literal overkill and ontological capture of queer life at the moments leading to their death. I imagine, then, after those moments of ontological capture, between the act of murder and the first bubbling of rage, the life-giving potential of feelings so intense they are rendered palpable.

In my second chapter, I address Black trans* representation and visibility from a variety of scholars and alternative sources, particularly YouTube. I begin with the broader theoretical question of what it means to represent an individual. Conversely, I question the motive driving the insatiable desire to always see oneself in visual culture. By looking at the cultural critics Homi Bhabha and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, critical theorists Saidiya Hartman and Mel Y. Chen, and Youtuber Kat Blaque, it becomes clear that representation replays the crisis of non-existence. While reflecting on recreating the archive, Hartman concludes on a writing practice referred to as critical fabulation: “The intention here isn’t anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.”⁴ This impossibility of representation along with the desire to radically alter the archive through fabulation implies that her actions are futile. The anti-black machine will monitor and erase those fabulations, and the narratives lack the potentiality to alter the paradigm of the world in which they were created. Kat Blaque’s YouTube videos echo these sentiments as she answers if the

⁴ Saidiya, Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14.

world is truly getting better for trans* bodies. Despite both of their hopes for a better world, proven by their narrative production within their respective fields, representation and visibility are not the paths toward liberation for Black trans* bodies.

In my third chapter, I find a path toward freedom outside of Wilderson's conception of gratuitous freedom.⁵ I look to the distinction between the body and the flesh, and in doing so, I must trace this distinction's roots back to Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Two theorists have a particularly keen analysis of the flesh: L. H. Stallings and Alexander Weheliye. In his introduction, Weheliye explains the title of his book: "I use the phrase *habeas viscus*—'You shall have the flesh'—on the one hand to signal how violent political domination activates a fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality, and, on the other hand, to reclaim the atrocity of flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed."⁶ Weheliye departs from afro-pessimists in his philosophical starting point. He chooses Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben over other German metaphysicians in order to reach a conclusion about a lack of life bound to Black bodies. Cyclically, Agamben is indebted to the same German metaphysicians he chooses not to directly cite. In this system of domination, a constant state of exception, the only thing left is the mangled flesh created out of brutality. The only thing one can *do* is to do with the flesh is as one pleases. Liyah Badd, a Youtuber, embraces the flesh. In "TOXIC 'TRANS GIRLS' 🍆 In the Community... Let's Talk About It," she creates a discourse on the flesh in order to aptly describe

⁵ Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. 141.

⁶ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. Duke University Press, 2014. 11.

her everyday lived experience. She speaks not with the technical jargon of the academy, but with slang, a type of *furtive communication*.⁷

I want my thesis to serve as a critical intervention into the highly theoretical field of afro-pessimism. The reliance on European philosophers and theoretical conundrum of Black trans* bodies will be its slow downfall if it cannot come to grips with the discourse of the flesh. Although many scholars cite Spillers, they overlook a deeper analysis of the flesh in favor of the ontological drive toward death.

⁷ Saidiya, Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." 10.

Chapter One: Musings on Afro-Pessimism

The intellectual field of afro-pessimism ruptures the value systems of many other schools of thought because they rely on the assumption that existence within this world is possible. Afro-pessimism's centrality on the question of Black non-existence is incontestable; within its metaphysical claims enfolds the potentiality of Black resistance in a world marked by mundane violence. My project aims not to disprove the central thesis of afro-pessimism—I find the majority of its claims irrefutable—but to reorient its explanatory power away from the multifarious notion of anti-blackness in favor of one that can investigate the rich world of anti-human Blacks that connect to one another on an affective register. In this project, I will argue that the overreliance on western metaphysics has entangled afro-pessimists to the point of befuddlement. One cannot think their way out of this world, no matter how much exertion is placed upon the brain. One cannot write using a grammar whose language is, by nature of its foundation, compromised. The central claim that Black bodies are only driven toward biological death after a half-life of social death ignores the vigor that death can infuse. Ontology cannot speak to the happenings of the world of objects (the anti-human), for it can only articulate itself from the position of anti-blackness as both its tyrannical creator and benevolent destroyer. What of the difference between Black “men”, “women”, and “trans*” non-beings in their relations toward one another? The difference may not exist at the level of ontology, but it is surely leaves affective residue, evident by the rampant murders of transwomen. If at the hands of another Black, how, then, does this Black death function? The theoretical aporia engendered by Black non-being would have us dance around in thought, saying the difference cannot be addressed. This essay will serve as an answer to that question. Throughout this text, I will use the terms

“Black” and “trans*” as structural analyses of power. Black trans* bodies will function as a converging point for these theories of power.

I would be remiss not to begin this essay by mentioning the father, not forefather, of afro-pessimism, Frank Wilderson, who, along with Saidiya Hartman, coined the term afro-pessimism as an analysis of one’s structural position indebted to the academic fields of the social sciences, humanities, and psychiatry.⁸ The term “afro” doubly functions as a synecdoche representative of all Blacks everywhere, regardless of diasporic origin and also isolates hair as an essential epidermal identifier. Pessimism does the work of instantiating an unceasing negativity that does not dare look away at even the most macabre happenings. The words “afro” and “pessimism” unite to address a unidirectional origin of oppressive power, anti-blackness, that has constructed the world and effectively etched itself into the subconscious mind of those it afflicts. But I would argue the adherence to the stable categories of Black “men” and Black “women” only further reify a humanism that the category of trans* body already mutilates:

If the position of the Black is, as I argue, a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed in the world, in other words, if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject, as imagined by Marxism and psychoanalysis, then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions (as political science and sociology would have it). This banishment from the Human fold...⁹

⁸ Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

The chattel slave or the anti-human is what gives the human coherence as an individual, discrete subject of full autonomy that can act on the conflicts of the world, such as class, gender, or citizenship conflicts. The issue arises, however, whenever the Black attempts to speak the language of the human in order to sidestep the structural antagonism of anti-blackness. The question of whether or not Black “men” or Black “women” exist is moot in the face of ontological devastation; however, along with the construction of anti-blackness is the construction of a static, uniform victim of that violence that is usually done through the overrepresentation of straight Black men as the most vulnerable class. An analysis of the ontology of anti-blackness does not provide an explanatory praxis for intracommunal violence against Black “women” and “trans” bodies. And when confronted by clearly motivated murders of anti-humans to other anti-humans, trans* bodies are told they do not exist.

Being told one does not exist recharacterizes violence as if it were a strike of lightning or a cosmological oddity. Many trans* theorists attempt to reconcile the theoretical aporia of afro-pessimism and transness while sliding into the pitfalls of humanism. In “Don’t Exist”, Eva S. Hayward attempts to deconstruct the notion of a transgender tipping point by reading afro-pessimism against trans studies: “The ‘don’t exist’ of trans is not equivalent to the racist refusal of ‘the human’ for blacks—if institutionalized trans only indexes desire for change as disfigurement of, or reification of, sex/gender, then trans is still human oriented.”¹⁰ Hayward highlights that the metaphysical structure that creates a drive toward Black death cannot coexist with notions of transness; her framing of these two structures as independent and opposite further demonstrates their theoretical incompatibility because there is no grammar with which to address such non-beings. I would agree that these categories of difference are fairly meaningless under

¹⁰ Hayward, Eva S. "Don't exist." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (2017): 191-194. 192.

an anti-black superstructure when the violence that occurs from white humans to Black non-human is marked as both gratuitous and structural.¹¹ There is more than enough to go around. But I dare pose the question of what occurs when these similar forms of murder happen between Blacks? What of the trans* girls dropped in ditches or frantically murdered by lovers? Their deaths as exterior to afro-pessimism would reveal an exclusionary logic that discounts the meaning of their deaths as an iteration of epistemological erasure.

The concept of death as transcendent of its biological phenomenon is at the heart of both Black studies and trans* studies. Their parallels are uncanny; however, they diverge at the fulfillment of that moment of death. I would like to place Wilderson's conception of how social death operates, specifically the tenets of gratuitous violence, in conversation with Eric Stanley's article "Near Life, Queer Death" and his concept of overkill. In "Near Life, Queer Death," Stanley explores the gory details of the then highly publicized murders of queer and trans individuals, some Black and some non-Black, and he uses the term overkill to explain what happens to their bodies post-mortem:

A term used to indicate such excessive violence that it pushes a body beyond death.

Overkill is often determined by the post-mortem removal of body parts... overkill names the technologies necessary to do away with that which is already gone. Queers then are the specters of life whose threat is so unimaginable that one is 'forced,' not simply to murder, but to push them backward out of time, out of History, and into that which comes before.¹²

¹¹ Frank Wilderson, *Red, white & black*, 55.

¹² Stanley, Eric. "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text* 29.2 (107) (2011): 1-19. 9.

There is a clear, succinct purpose in the murder of trans* and queer individuals whose bodies have made a clear transgression against sexuality or gender. Occurring usually during sexual relations, panicking at the transgression induces a questionably rational desire to kill, to undo the situation. Killing is not enough. Fulfillment is not at the moment of death but at the moment the body is beyond human recognition and concealed from the world. Overkill is a result of one's own transgression. Gratuitous violence differs in this regard. According to Wilderson, gratuitous violence is "not contingent on transgressions against the hegemony of civil society."¹³ Upon first glance, one can easily analogize the two. However, a careful inspection would reveal the displacement of transgression. In the first example of overkill, one can articulate transgression as a moment, a performed action; in the second, gratuitous violence necessitates no transgression because the body magnetizes irrational forms of violence. One cannot answer the question of why Blacks are murdered by police at alarming rates because there is no meaning behind their deaths. A goal cannot be achieved in the murder of a socially dead body from the perspective of white on black. The perspective of Black on Black transmogrifies signification of the event of Black trans* murder, for it allows Black "men" to glance into the peephole of humanist freedom by affirming the accumulation of trans* bodies. In this process, the perpetrator asserts the normativity of their sexuality by attempting to undo the transgression, as if their sexuality previous to the event was not always already ravaged by allegations of lasciviousness and deviance. They instrumentalize sexuality in order to place their "subjectivity" back into equilibrium. The propensity for overkill to push Black men backward out of time disregards their lack of subjectivity.

¹³ Frank Wilderson, *Red, white, & Black*, 55.

Black death is meaningless; Black trans* death at the hands of other Black bodies is the affirmation of a normative sexuality. Marriott states, “Because of the legacy bequeathed to Blacks by colonial racism—that black life is meaningless and so black death is meaningless—a legacy in which death is nothing. That is neither a passage nor a journey, but simply the arbitrary visitation of a catastrophic violence.”¹⁴ The spectacle of murder is the climax of Black life, its achieved final fantasy. To search for meaning in death implies a value in living. Under an afro-pessimist framework, all death would be meaningless, but this begs the question: whose deaths are meaningless and to whom? Which affects can those deaths engender or extinguish? These questions do not “exist” inside of an anti-Black world because of the compromised grammar which I use to write. Of course, the destructive forces of anti-blackness position Blacks outside the borders of civil society, but in that plane of non-existence, ways of relating to one another supersede the importance of lacking metaphysics because of the assumed equal plane. We need a grammar to describe interplay between Black bodies and differently gendered Black bodies.

Trans* is not an identity, for it is an active refusal to play the game of the gender binary. This does not entail a reshuffling of the human gender binary that would simply shift the coordinates of the line but an effacement of the line altogether. In “The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*ness”, Marquis Bey analogizes the two by asserting their emanation from an ultimate point of nothingness and indefinability of position.¹⁵ Although I agree there are a number of superficial parallels, I would like to issue a corrective to Bey’s

¹⁴ Marriott, David. *Haunted life: Visual culture and Black modernity*. Rutgers University Press, 2007. 230-231.

¹⁵ Bey, Marquis. "The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*ness." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (2017): 275-295. 278.

framing of these two categories as metaphors that can effortlessly substitute for one another because he, again, slides into the pitfalls of humanism through a ruse of analogy. Wilderson states, “This attempt to position the Black in the world by way of analogy is not only a mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness’s grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being non-Human) but simultaneously also a provision for civil society, promising an enabling modality for Human ethical dilemmas.”¹⁶ Wilderson’s brilliant analysis functions on multiple levels. First, he articulates that the condition of anti-blackness is without parallel. Since the Black body incurs violence without transgression, the possibility of escape is impossible. Whereas a woman can play the role of a good woman and a gay man can play the role of an upstanding citizen, the idea of a Black body assimilating into hegemonic structures never has the reward of fully escaping violence at the symbolic and physical levels. Second, the use of such a parallel is a flawed attempt to produce a subject through appropriating a criterion of the human. This is not possible because of an antagonism that forecloses the human to the Black. Third, the possibility of trans* beings seeing themselves within Blackness reifies the centrality of Blackness as a category of absolute dereliction. Trans* beings (non-Black) have the agential capacity to shift in and out of their abjection; they can choose to embrace a fluid ontology of monstrosity in which Blackness is confined. Through this process, the human world’s ethical dilemmas must use Blackness as a baseline of oppression to iterate a fundamental lack of agential capacity. Trans* beings can be incorporated into the world; their conflicts can be resolved, while the Black lies in wait for its next comparison. For example, eliminating gender assignment at birth, sexed bathroom assignments, and gender identity markers are among ways to end a conflict within civil society because one can point at the gender binary as the source of

¹⁶ Frank Wilderson, *Red, white, & black*, 37.

social order. The libidinal attachment toward Black flesh is not a problem of bodily comportment but the very presence of those bodies in any space. For those in identity categories, the performance of the body is the problem; for the other, any performance of the body, even its appropriate comportment, causes disruption. Bey goes on to describe the category of trans* as “disruptive... if stars stipple the pregnant celestial void, and if ‘almost every element on Earth was formed at the heart of a star’ (‘Are We Really All Made of Stardust?’, 2016) then trans* denotes the ubiquity, the transitivity, the fundamentality of the primordial force of unfixing openness. In the beginning was, in fact, trans*—because in the beginning stars floating without laws set in motion that originary trans*ness, the fundamental openness of our world.”¹⁷ The use of an “*” with trans expands its definition, like the rapid expansion of the universe. The problem of Blackness persists when the ontology of transness is so fluid and all encompassing; it loses meaning upon encountering the obverse of a star—a black hole—for the sake of continuing the metaphor. The luminous star and centering it as the origin in this universe cannot come to grips with that which slashes a hole in the world and sucks up all forms of light. To further explicate this metaphor, if Black holes were to serve as the physical location of Blackness, Black “men” and “women” would be along the periphery of this hole with trans* bodies located at its singularity—they are still in the hole whose coordinates are outside of this world. But what of that world drenched in black? How do its inhabitants vie for escape? The problematic of comparison shortcuts a more thorough development of trans*ness because its construction thereby becomes parasitic on an understanding of blackness as a site of absolute abjection, at least within an American context. Instead, one can theorize these radically different forms of exclusion with varied epistemic grounding.

¹⁷ Marquis Bey, “The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness”, 284.

For the answer, I look to a seminal text in afro-pessimism. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers, the foremother of afro-pessimism, initiates an intellectual reset during her time. Her text coined a number of multi-layered terms overflowing with meaning that are still hotly contested by contemporary theorists in Black studies. Specifically, I will interrogate the concept of ungendering as it applies to Black trans* bodies: “This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh – of female flesh ‘ungendered’ – offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”¹⁸ She illustrates the process of ungendering undergone by Black bodies, and the simultaneous divorce of the body from the flesh. The body is corporeal; the flesh is a zone of desire with the ungendering of the body being another form of symbolic refusal of the human. Ungendering as a praxis is what the Black trans* body already embraces as a method of abjection because their bodies operate as the apex of the anti-human; they signify a complete failure of human recognition, a marked illegibility.

Black trans* as an analytic defies multiple categories of legibility, the first of race and the second of gender. The social fiction of gender, though, operates second to the racial function because a Black trans* does not have the capacity to eliminate the gender binary for the rest of the world. Furthermore, their transgression of the gender binary can be mitigated through performance; their position in the racial hierarchy cannot be changed. One cannot resist a world in which there is no capacity for recognition.¹⁹ Even if pronouns are stated and even if “gender” is changed on forms of identification, that posits the idea of addressing a simple conflict within a

¹⁸ Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book." *diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65-81. 68.

¹⁹ Frank Wilderson, *Red, white, & black*, 8

larger structure that pre-determines what a subject position may experience in the ontic world. Blackness, even after alterations of the flesh, lingers afterwards and registers at the level of the visual prior to accounts of queerness or transness whose identity markers are culturally inscribed. Affective transness, however, furthers illegibility at an intracommunal level.

In “Onticide,” Calvin Warren, performs a critical rereading of “Near Life, Queer Death” with the underlying assumption that Blacks are without ontology, thus distorting the legibility of anti-trans or anti-queer murders. Onticide, then, arises out this methodological conundrum:

This approach departs from intersectional analyses that attempt to either reconcile blackness with humanity and its difference or conceive of blackness as ontologically equivalent with features of human difference. I suggest that the intersectional approach is inadequate to the task of articulating the particularity of violence Steen experienced, and that an onticidal approach (writing with and against humanist terms of difference) enables us to contend with the humanist double bind more productively.²⁰

I agree with Warren’s condemnation of intersectionality as a possible lens with which to view white on Black anti-queer and anti-trans violence. A naming of that violence would not make it more visible; the cuts of difference do not matter when one’s existence is a being for the captor. Therefore, one becomes—or simply is—whatever the captor desires. The flesh shapeshifts to resolve that issue again and again and again and again; the type of flesh only alters the conduit toward white pleasure. The question is not what marginalized subject position is more or less prone to violence – this would assume violence as both qualifiable and quantifiable for facile comparison. No, a meaningful question would ask what that violence means to Blacks at an

²⁰ Warren, Calvin. "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger# 1, and Surplus Violence." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23.3 (2017): 391-418. 394.

intracommunal level. The theoretical tension arises at the point of difference. Regarding Black “men” as men and Black “women” as women recirculates humanist discourse and simply grafts those gendered operations onto unsuitable bodies. Black “men” and Black “women” do not exist in academic discourse or in proper grammar. But acknowledging these points of difference can be found in the tongues of Black folk on the streets, clubs, bars, cars, bedrooms, and dinner tables. Articulating these points of difference need not feed into a double bind of humanism through onticide. What occurs between Blacks already has a grammar. Instead, the answer lies with the bodies who are whispering to one another in a language the academy cannot understand but will archive instantaneously.

Chapter Two: The Construction of Black Trans* Representation

Blacks, within an American context, often lambast visual culture for its lack of representation. Since they do not see a perfect reflection of themselves when watching television, advertisements, and fashion, they experience a lack of representation, which is then politicized to cohere their sense of self. Obtaining far more forms of representation does not ameliorate this lack. With a surge of production, there are never enough fulfilling forms of representation that can counterbalance violence done to the portrayed subjects off-screen. In fact, the Blaxploitation genre demonstrates a travesty of representation. The production of many varying quality YouTube videos that attempt to create a counter-discourse around “poorly” represented subject positions also inevitably fail to access a broader audience who can alter those material circumstances. Thus, I will not evaluate the quality of representations produced for Black trans* subject positions because quality does not alter lived circumstance; instead, I will argue that representation replays the crises of non-existence.

When addressing a category of subjects, there exists a linguistic lacuna posited by the bar between the signifier and signified. Therefore, it becomes an impossibility to speak to, from, or of all these various subjects at once. All of their desires are overwritten by the intention to know them as an identity category. In “The Commitment to Theory,” Homi K. Bhabha gainsays the binary frame of theory and activism with a new conception of hybridity, a denunciation of purity. As a political intervention, he first halts to ponder the relationship between representation and the political: “This is not to state the obvious, that there is no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside representation.”²¹ He utters this phrase as a platitude without further explication; however, I would like to further investigate the moment an individual enters the political seeking

²¹ Bhabha, Homi. "The commitment to theory." *New formations* 5.1 (1988): 5-23. 33

representation. They speak, in that instance, not only for themselves but for a collective who are then similarly constructed. “Knowledge” is gained for a group, not individuals: policies affects groups of people, not individual subjects. Furthermore, this tethers the act of representation to the act of politics for the purpose of creating static referents for politicians to speak about. The idea of an “individual” seeking knowledge is an anomaly to how knowledge is produced for a collective identity category. Bhabha goes on to say:

Our political referents and priorities – the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference, the assertion of an anti-imperialist, black or third perspective – are not there in some primordial, naturalistic sense. Nor do they reflect a unitary or homogenous political object.²²

The construction of a class of people is necessitated by politics’ desire to render them fungible as voting blocks. A static referent for these groups cannot exist because of the mutability of these categories and broader implication at the level of essence. As a group of people with “priorities,” all who stumble into the aforementioned categories have a goal in their representation. Although this does not necessarily yield a conspicuous epistemic horror, when applied to non-ideology-based groups such as “black or third perspective,” amalgamation induces an imaginary purpose when there initially was not one. Moreover, a “unitary” or “homogenous” political object indicates a transfer from subject to object when articulated in discourse. Those groups now serve the purpose of cohering identities from whom to derive knowledge.

Furthermore, his quote begs the question of the possibility to represent that which is unrepresentable or, even more aptly, has been represented to the point of catastrophe, a type of cannibalistic voyeurism, a fetishistic disaster. I would like to begin with the specific question of

²² Ibid., 38.

trans* representability with an analysis of YouTube videos from two highly vetted Black transgender content creators. I have selected YouTube as a medium to collect information because it is a video sharing service that has obtained massive success from amateur videos that have now morphed into a high production spectacle. Although some videos have received widespread recognition for the interesting, zany, and random content of their videos, the website contains niches of information where marginalized groups gather. Specifically, the explication of a “trans experience” on YouTube instantiates a personal archive that differs in purpose from a state archive. In “Everywhere Archives”, Mel Y. Chen delineates a difference between state archives and personal ones by drawing a continuum between the two: “Unlike personal archives, state archives have been historically conjured and implemented for the purposes of social and resource management and control; among their more condemnable uses have been the management of colonial resources, of which human labor was often considered integral.”²³ A personal archive contains multitudes with no clear, correct direction for its intended audience. Viewers consume the experience of a content creator knowing they have intentionally selected to peek into the life of one out of many millions of people who have posted similar videos, likely even with the same title.

Difference arises, though, at the point of a bright line for a personal archive versus a state archive. A personal archive is just that which attempts to expose the self as a multiplicitous phenomenon. There are many personal archives because there is no one correct choice. There is no one way, for example, to transition. State archives, though, exist as a way to intentionally

²³ Chen, Mel Y. "Everywhere archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet." *Australian Feminist Studies* 25.64 (2010): 199-208. 150.

disseminate knowledge on how bodies operate. They selectively pilfer from personal archives to incorporate illegible, deviant bodies into the state apparatus. From the perspective of a personal archive, their one-dimensional understanding of trans* existence is limited to non-Black transgender subjects who wish to assimilate into the folds of a gender binary in order to attain normalcy. The state archive only captures legible bodies who can fit into tiny, neat boxes, not the unruly ones. A thin line between personal archives, that display narratives from multiple storytellers, and state archives, that desires tidy management of bodies, is blurred in YouTube videos with the explicit mission to inform the public.

In order to describe a contemporary wave of representation, I have chosen Kat Blaque. Many of her videos contain an explicit pedagogical function with her wanting to educate transphobic individuals who come to her channel. From videos such as “The History of Whiteness” to “Are Fetishes Okay?”, she demonstrates an honest portrayal of Black trans* life along with a firm understanding of queer theory and critical race theory. For this project, however, I have chosen her video “Why Trans People Will Never Be Accepted” because she muses not only over transgender representation in media but also over the possibility of futurity for Black trans* bodies. My analysis will present a linear progression of the video.

She begins the video with a plaintive stare, uttering, “I don’t know if we’ll ever get there,” which is cut by an empty laugh. She restates, “I don’t know if we’ll ever get there,” while reaching off-camera to the left for a glass of half-empty white wine. She continues with the formation of a smile, “But you know I guess I want to be wrong. I want to watch this video back in 30 years, like, oh Kat, you were, you were so wrong.”²⁴ Her eyes roll. She looks toward the

²⁴ Kat Blaque. “Why Trans People Will Never be Accepted | Kat Blaque.” Online video clip. YouTube, 14 January 2020. Web. 18 February 2020.

floor: “I want to be able to say that, but I’m not that optimistic.” The backdrop of the video is assumed to be a room in her home lined by technicolor paintings on the wall. A tall green lamp stands at her height. The next cut displays the words “True Tea” in white at the top left corner of the screen. Inside a white box are the yellow words, “What would transgender acceptance look like?” as she drunkenly dances in the background.

Her introduction haunts the viewer with subtle ideas of an insidious melancholia. The use of repetition indicates that she is, in fact, stuck “here” and unable to go “there” in a both temporal and physical sense. Despite time passing, the utopia she attempts to create in this video is still unachievable and unmappable. She, simply, cannot find it after pondering the question she poses for a lifetime. The desire to be incorrect would negate a lifetime of her experience meditating on the question. The viewer, too, is required to labor on the question, thus shifting active responsibility onto us as well.

But who are her viewers?

What are they supposed to do?

The midpoint of the video signals a dramatic shift in focus toward the media as Kat Blaque considers the production of trans*- related content. She says, facing the new angle of a side camera, “The media will do this thing where they will produce what seems like trans* positive content, to some of you guys but what it actually is is exploitation.”²⁵ She reinforces her speech through soothing, open-palmed gesticulations toward the camera, and the double function of the video forces itself to the forefront of the viewer’s mind. Blaque is not tactless in her act of persuasion; she is, on the contrary, extremely palatable to an assumed general audience. And it

²⁵ Kat Blaque. “Why Trans People Will Never be Accepted | Kat Blaque”.

becomes clear she is simultaneously requesting acceptance from the viewer. A few moments later she presents the example of Barcroft TV (a media corporation) that sometimes creates content around trans *people, with a section on their site for “unbelievable bodies.” Blaque states:

“As a cis person clicking through you think, oh my gosh, I see all these transgender stories. Why am I being, you know, ummm, reminded of this but when you go through a—like—what — go through any trans* video on a bar—on Barcroft’s channel, read the comments of that video. The vast majority of them are arguing against the person in the video existing and being valid, the vast, vast, vast majority of them because what a lot of you guys don’t understand is that while this media is produced to be positive, while this media is produced to seem accepting, they’re actually just... doing a freakshow.”²⁶

As a content creator on the YouTube platform, her words condemning the media is simultaneously incriminating because it brings into question, yet again, the intent of her viewers. Now, looking at the comments section of this video, one could easily observe that a vast majority—if not all— of the comments are those of praise for Blaque’s actions in producing her own personal archive for public consumption. The one difference between her platform and Barcroft’s lies with the viewer because other mass forms of media have an unstated, ultimate goal of receiving as many clicks as possible from as many people. The audiences reached are different. And though YouTube operates similarly, the goal of individual content creators can deviate toward a pedagogical purpose instead of views as Blaque has proclaimed, similar to state archives. The size of their influence, either YouTube channel or government document, affects

²⁶ Kat Blaque. “Why Trans People Will Never be Accepted | Kat Blaque”.

the instructive potential of that medium because of the continuum between the two archive systems. The folly of representation is the idea that all forms of knowledge are as easily accessible as they are productive. Blaque disproves this by stating how Barcroft TV, a much larger platform than her YouTube channel, makes trans* people hypervisible in the form of a freakshow. Views and a distorted form of “knowledge” about a trans* experience is obtained after one watched the video, but this is at the expense of trans* people who are more visible, more understood, and now more prone to violence.

Blaque closes the video on a somber note of pessimism for the future of trans* livability. She concludes, “It blows my mind that we live in a time where transgender people can document their entire transitions, right. But cis people act like there’s just not enough information out there. There’s just not enough information out there, like, transgender people can, on the one hand, produce entire web series about their personal transition, right. But on the other hand, they’re not doing enough to help cis people understand or be educated, right. ... screaming into a void hoping...”²⁷ Her final comments are filled with delicate accusations, serious hand motions, and a look of confusion upon her face. She reveals the faux crisis of information embedded within the consumers of media; information stands on every corner, but the amount is never satiating. I would like to focus on her last comment, “screaming into a void hoping...”. She affirms her own non-existence in the void where no one is truly listening, grasping the narratives produced because they do not belong to her, Kat Blaque. No matter how loudly she speaks, no one seems to understand.

²⁷ Kat Blaque. “Why Trans People Will Never be Accepted | Kat Blaque”.

Who owns representations calls into question the ability of those narratives to insert themselves into a dominant discourse of history. In "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman tells the story of a slave girl, Venus, who is currently missing from the archive; Venus, though, is a metonymy for all of the slave girls whose stories exist only at the edge of a journal, ledger, or ship log.²⁸ The rich interiority of their lives are undeserving of the archive. When speaking about representation, Hartman says, "The necessity of recounting Venus's death is overshadowed by the inevitable failure of any attempt to represent her. I think this is a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved. In retelling the story of what happened on board the *Recovery*, I have... flouted the realist illusion customary in the writing of history, and produced a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical."²⁹ Hartman openly engages in the failed project of representation not hoping to do so with any strategic wit, but in the vain hope that she is incorrect in her writing. She compels me to ask the question, at numerous sections of the text: why, then, are we writing? What grander purpose is there in cataloging the experiences of those who are already socially dead if not physically dead? What is there to be gained? I leave the text pondering the same questions with an answer she has already given us. The answer is that there is no meaning to these representations. There is no undercover grand plan, like in superhero television shows, to hijack history with counter-history because it swirls into another conundrum. The goal of counter-history is to become regular history, and in this process, the tautological system of knowledge production would persist. Counter-history becomes dominant; dominant history

²⁸ Saidiya, Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14. 12.

²⁹ Saidiya, Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." 12.

becomes counter-history. However, this change will not come because of the inability of the Black trans* non-subject's incorporation into civil society. Hartman goes on to answer her question from the perspective of a Black interiority, "And how does one tell impossible stories? Stories about girls bearing names that deface and disfigure, about *the words exchanged* between shipmates that never acquired any standing in the law and that failed to be recorded in the archive, about the appeals, prayers and secrets never uttered because no one was there to receive them? The *furtive communication* that might have passed between two girls, but which no one among the crew observed or reported affirms what we already know to be true."³⁰ The language spoken, grammar used, or words uttered between shipmates lack intelligibility within the archive. These words may not have existed according to the afro-pessimist criteria for the capacity of speech; however, the affective residue left behind by words ought to be interrogated. As indicated by Hartman's tone when writing, she contains a burning desire to make these words recognizable by all. But should these utterances become legible? *Furtive communication* implies a fear that one will get caught. These words must remain hidden, exterior to the archive, because their archived forms may only lead to the possibility of discovery and recirculation into more symbolic forms of violence. To know is to create violence. Instead of *furtive communication*, I believe *unintelligible speech* encapsulates a life of vagrancy for these words. They are elusive, mutable, and uncapturable, while at the same time preserving the lives of those who dare utter the words and phrases. Their intelligibility risks violence, but their recognition, like Kat Blaque's scream into the void, reveals nothing.

³⁰ Saidiya, Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." 10. (emphasis added).

The effect of forced homogenization is evident in both “good” and “bad” forms of representation in visual culture. In “bad forms” of representation, Blacks appear as caricatures of people in real life: their motives and desires, if they have any, are shallow enough to never escape the confines of their identity. In “good forms” of representation, these characters are three-dimensional with short-term and long-term dreams and desires. However, their presentation and consumption are not any less insidious. Bhabha states, “Cultural diversity is an epistemological object — culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification.”³¹ Cultural diversity is commensurate with statistics, such as the amount of minority characters in a television show. Cultural enunciation is the qualitative representational performance of those characters in television shows as demonstrated through their non-falsifiable authenticity to various identities. In this way, viewers become “knowledgeable” about the real-life experiences of individuals outside of their social location, and in doing so, those on-screen always become cultural objects, static referents, and sacred models of how a good member of that category live their lives. Yet, shockingly, a phenomenal representation to one person is horrendous to another. For example, *Love Simon* presents the narrative of a young, wealthy, white teenager who is coming to terms with his sexuality in what passes for a nameless suburban town but is actually Atlanta, Georgia. The film won the adulation of many critics, which can be attributed to its happy ending and feel-good message (Simon comes out to loving parents and finds a Black boyfriend). Though I will not go into the minutiae, the story did not at all capture real life. On the one hand, a “good” representation can only serve as a palliative to pre-existing negative tropes that manifest inside

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha. “The commitment to theory”, 49-50.

and outside of visual culture. *Love Simon* did this incredibly well by presenting a sanitized version of queer life for which many people aspire. On the other hand, negative representations are symptomatic of larger societal issues that cannot be fixed with an inundation of more, more, and more “good” ones. A society can produce as many representations it desires—good or bad. However, the representations with currency are ones that serve a political purpose. Many stories like *Love Simon* have already been released and many more will be produced in the near future. Yet the circulation of those stories within representational discourse erases the lives of queer children who are still suffering because their lives do not match that which is onscreen. The real agony emerges once one seeks out a representation in the first place.

Representations—good and bad—cause cognitive dissonance between a subject and the image of the self that is projected into visual culture because they always present a model of how to act at the expense of other models. We will always be in need of more, better models in order to define ourselves from the outside. This ebb and flow of permissible identity is the inevitable crisis sparked by contemporary visual culture: marginalized populations would require as many representations as there are individuals on this earth in order to satiate the desire for accurate representations. Though not realistic, this results in “a politics of struggle as the *struggle of identifications* and the war of positions.”³² “Winning” these struggles of identification comes at the expense of representing other identities. A balkanization of identities vying for control over how they are re-presented has the propensity to create new tropes that will be flattened in discourse. Since even the best characters can be summarized in a word or two such as “strong” or “perseverant,” a good selection of representations does not alter an essential message a consumer will receive after watching them because they will always be compared against an exemplary

³² Ibid., 43

specimen in one's mind. In "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women's Issue,'" Trinh Minh-Ha explains the subject as a composition of infinite differences. When applied to representations, they are flattened out by discourse, especially in context of the term "third world women". They are a category of subjects lumped together who are as different as their origins are numerous. Conflict, then, arises over representing them: "*Authenticity* as a need to rely on an 'undisputed origin', is prey to an obsessive fear: that of *losing a connection*."³³ I would like to center the question of "authenticity," which Minh-Ha seeks to destabilize. The asserted authenticity no longer exists in a neoliberal system that has transported money and culture across the world; thus, a pure representation devoid of outside influences cannot be achieved. And when subjects attempt to represent purely, it is out of a fear of "losing a connection," as if the self were somewhere out in the cosmos and not an inward construction. The self must be affirmed and reaffirmed again and again to cohere itself but only against a model of what it claims to be absolutely correct and true. However, this real image does not exist. Minh-Ha goes on to say, "The *real*, nothing else than a *code of representation*, does not (cannot) coincide with the lived or the performed."³⁴ The psychoanalytic conception of the "real" as compared with the imaginary does not exist or it at least is not achievable because of our human filtration of the world through subjectivity. Only the Black accesses the Real because of the static interpretation of Blackness since the middle passage. Because other symbols change, they cannot access the real because they fall on either side of the signifier and signified. Blackness, though, is the line from which meaning can produce itself. All these attempts at visual representation cannot be real not only because they occur in a social fiction (i.e. the fictional universe the characters reside in), but also

³³ Minh-Ha, Trinh T. "Difference:" A Special Third World Women Issue"." *Discourse* (1986): 11-38. 94.

³⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha. "Difference:" A Special Third World Women Issue". 94.

because their interpellation would require each and every instance to be performed by society. The location of their performance cannot be by the same individuals at the same times, so it is diffused across a codified identity group. Identity comes into being at the moment of discourse. In order to obtain political representation, subjects attempt to make themselves legible despite the bar between the signifier and signified disrupting the directness of their representation.

Minh-Ha posits the self as a network of infinite differences in order to explain the various influences that go into the creation of a subject. I contain multitudes that are both inside and outside of myself. This contrasts with Bhabha's conception of the self because representation, to him, serves a political purpose while the self is always combating those notions of a unitary collective. Identity categories arise from the contrast based primarily on aesthetic principles. Minh-Ha theorizes, "A critical difference from myself means that I am not i, am within and without i. I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved."³⁵ She elegantly alludes to an affective community of subjects where the "I" resides and diffuses itself into that community. Against unitary conceptions of the self, she posits an "I" who shares itself as a layer among infinite layers that can be found in other individuals. This "I" can be represented well or poorly; however, the "i" comes out of those further points of infinite difference and escapes definition. The moment a viewer sees "I" represented in visual culture is the moment of erasing the "i", who will never be satisfied by any representation. "i" craves more and more representation to no contentment because of its impossible comprehension.

Now, I would like to resolve a point of contradiction in Minh-Ha's text that appears in its latter half. First, she states, "Difference in such an insituable context is *that which undermines*

³⁵ Ibid., 90.

the very idea of identity deferring to infinity the layers whose totality forms ‘I’.”³⁶ Second, she appears to directly contradict her earlier statement, “Difference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity.”³⁷ I would like to point to the minute but extremely important difference between the “*very idea of identity*” and “identity”. Earlier in the text, she delineates a difference with I/i: the first is representable and could be understood as a communal sense of identity (unitary, coherent); the second is un-representable (indefinite, incoherent). To her, identity exists much like a photon of light: acting as both a particle and a wave, and once it is observed, it changes form. The “I” version of identity exists insofar as it can be utilized for political representation. Specifically, this is used to tether individuals to expectations of a larger collective.

The act of representation yields benefits only for those identity categories whose conflicts can be legitimately recognized. Black trans* representation only functions to make them hypervisible and, therefore, more prone to violence. Knowledge about them is accessible but not productive because of their metaphysical lack, and one should instead look inward to illuminate their interior lives. Instead, they only attain legibility inasmuch as they are members of a class of subjects, which thereby causes their homogenization. The representation of Black trans* bodies should not be reduced to a binary good and bad. Their representations—good and bad—erase these subjects at the individual level (i) in all cultural consumption mediums because a real sense of themselves can never be projected for their direct consumption. The act of representation is tantamount to the act of erasure. Subjects view themselves in comparison to a model of the self that we see in visual culture, who constantly brushes up against our ideas of an authentic self. A

³⁶ Ibid., 96.

³⁷ Ibid., 104

discourse on the flesh that can disregard desire for the body's representation is a necessary step into exploring the interiority of Black trans* bodies.

Chapter Three: The Flesh Uncovered

The body disguises the flesh. That flesh, which is ungendered, malleable, and accumulated, provides the means for Black affective relationality. Since the flesh lies on an affective register divorced from the corporeal body, it provides an agonizing solution to the question of Black existence by mutilating its antithetical conceptual origin—the human. The conclusions drawn by an in-depth analysis of the flesh provide not a mode of freedom, but a mode of relationality. Within an afro-pessimist framework, the sole route to gratuitous freedom for the Black is an ending of the world; the field is probably one of the few fields where an ideal future seems more like a theoretical dead end. And although that route to freedom sounds beautiful, how Blacks must inevitably navigate an anti-Black terrain must be answered in the meanwhile, lest afro-pessimism’s writings fall into the same trick of time as linear notions of progress.³⁸ In this chapter, I will analyze the potentiality of the flesh to build intracommunal relationships with Black communities, specifically Black trans* communities. In order to do this, I will present a comparison of *Habeas Viscus* by Alexander G. Weheliye and “Black Trans Narratives, Sex Work, and the Illusive Flesh” by L.H. Stallings in order to uncover the concealed realm of the flesh.

In *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye utilizes Giorgio Agamben’s conception of bare life in order to understand the political situation of Black bodies as unable to attain a capacity for full life under a constant state of racial terror. He begins the text by citing Spillers’ text about the unbelievable capabilities of violence: “The flesh, rather than displacing bare life or civil death, excavates the social (after)life of these categories: it represents racializing assemblages of

³⁸ Warren, Calvin L. "Black nihilism and the politics of hope." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.1 (2015): 215-248. 223.

subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds.”³⁹ The flesh is that which arises from the brutality of American chattel slavery as a new zone of social relations. The flesh, rather than reiterating itself as another site of death, affirms a type of afterlife, a resuscitation. To explore the realm of the socially dead is to unearth secrets buried deep, deep in the afterlife, with their excavation and display to the naked eye being nigh impossible because of who buried them and why they were buried. Weheliye affirms the prospect of liberation by death in the flesh as splitting “lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of new worlds” that can never be extinguished by the plight of anti-blackness. The emphasis of flesh altering material circumstances contrasts with Stallings’ speculative usage of the illusive flesh. She states, “Illusive flesh... serves as a counterphilosophy to embodiment about what the transaesthetic experience and representation of Otherly human bodies means to forms of life and being that exceed the biological. With black political traditions incapable of challenging the assumed materiality of sex and gender in the West, these discursive practices join Yoruba-influenced spirituality in the United States as black traditions willing to theorize illusive flesh as a form of metaphysical gender, less attached to the notion of a unified body.”⁴⁰ Stallings deemphasizes a philosophy that focuses on the biological aspect of transitioning from a static starting point to a static end point, thereby opening up illusive flesh to meaning outside of the confines of identity. Illusive flesh is flesh made immaterial that allows the reshaping of the self without the confines

³⁹ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. Duke University Press, 2014. 11.

⁴⁰ Horton-Stallings, LaMonda. *Funk the erotic: Transaesthetics and black sexual cultures*. University of Illinois Press, 2015. 206.

of ocular perceptions of the body because that body can never truly represent the self.⁴¹ Illusive flesh uses a diasporic perspective to elude the phenomenological implications of gender that would render it proscriptive as a category one can observe and then identify with instead of purely existing as an affective experience independent of the body.

The libidinal economy is a psychoanalytic concept that depends on the currency of Black flesh for its endless circulation. A libidinal economy posits that a circulation of sexualized fears and desires are the primary mode for how bodies are interpreted in the visual realm.⁴² This economy engenders affective responses to bodies observed with assumed concomitant functions, such as a woman possessing a female body or a man possessing a male's body. The concept of trans*ness disrupts the one-to-one symmetrical relationship between the reading of the body and the feelings it stirs. Moreover, Black trans* bodies hold the greater potentiality of detaching themselves from Western notions of embodiment that characterize any "identity" as static: "Plantinga's explanation of how we may or may not recognize ourselves in an-other world confirms the way social identity relies too much on the ocular and scopic. These markers of identity for a world-bound identity—identity that operates in a very specific temporal and geographically fixed reality. This is what transgender subjectivity based on the metaphysical opposes most of all, which is why transworld identity matters."⁴³ In order to divorce identity from its social congealment, Stallings portends that a recognition of the self is in another

⁴¹ I am referencing the self as a sum of ideologies and a confluence of feelings that are filtered through the material body.

⁴² Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. 7.

⁴³ Horton-Stallings, LaMonda. *Funk the erotic: Transaesthetics and black sexual cultures*. 209.

world—transworld identity—because of how individuals’ recognition of themselves ebbs and flows. Orlando Patterson, Jared Sexton, Calvin Warren and Frank Wilderson propose various conceptions of a new world because of the consensus that this world is insufficient for Black life. She illustrates a dynamism of the flesh that can detether markers of identity and alter a fixed reality, thus shifting the operating principles of this world. A transworld speaks to the afterlife of the flesh as a bastion of collective authenticity. This acknowledges that we simultaneously affect and create communities that contribute to our sense of sense.

This body exists in a social fiction. And in light of the body’s sustained acts of misrepresentation, one must look toward the other senses as generative of emotions from which we can describe the world of the flesh. In her analysis of the novel *Beloved* and the movie *Sankofa*, Stallings further expands the meaning of the flesh, “Morrison’s and Gerima’s use of flesh instead of skin engages different definitions of Man and embodiment, and the shifting meaning of flesh in and out of slavery demonstrates that flesh has several histories and narratives, some of them human, scientific, or cultural, some of them not. Most significant, though, is that the flesh has no ego.”⁴⁴ An ego equates to the mediation of desire; it is the limiter of those unabashed desires that fetters one’s sense of self to the seen possibilities of the body. The limitation of the ego, when faced with the reality of the body, can only induce heightened psychological trauma upon the subject for which it thinks because its world is constricted by structural factors, such as the different cuts of anti-blackness. Stallings’ brilliant move outside of the ocular allows for an exploration of the self not as a thinking thing that can rationally understand the world, but as a reservoir of desires—the id. I would like to divide the self into two components. First, the self at the level of the body is a shallow understanding of identity. That

⁴⁴ Ibid., 213.

self is almost entirely culturally inscribed through epidermal markers. This visual self is on the terrain of humanism that would affirm humanity despite differences. Second, the self at the level of the flesh is purely affect. Of course, these two selves have a dependent relationship with one another because our interpretation of external phenomena is filtered through the body. The fleshiness of Black trans* bodies arises out of the cognitive dissonance between the perceived body and what one feels. A pursuit of hedonism in the flesh disrupts pangs of realism. And it reorients reality around imagined possibilities: a seeing of the self-unseen.

The distinction between the physical body and immaterial flesh becomes apparent in the case of medical discourse around transitioning. To be clear, Stallings rejects the idea of transition beginning in a doctor's office. And, despite how often autobiographies use this trope, biological intervention does not equal trans*ness: "Several moments in Newman's text demonstrate why becoming one, whole, or who one really is does not mean a final, coherent, and legible gendered subjectivity reached because of surgical intervention."⁴⁵ A gendered being does not emerge after a surgical intervention for the Black trans*. Instead, the finite process of achieving wholeness through surgery is the grand hoax of this reality because of unresolved feelings of selfhood that are never reflected in the material body. Overall, the process of surgical intervention damages one's sense of self by dragging the imagined flesh to the material world, which results in one's immanent dissatisfaction. Flesh is what resists discursive descriptions of the body. A legible subjectivity cannot escape that facticity of non-existence for Black trans* bodies. Divestment from being brings into play the importance of affective relationality toward our own lack of existence and what that freedom of knowledge entails. An acceptance that legibility is an impossible project at the most or melancholia at the least.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 217.

Black slang contains the highest propensity for linguistic capture of indescribable flesh. Proper speech cannot speak to how Blacks relate to one another since it barely describes those in the category of human. This is not to say that Blacks who only speak in slang are speaking to a more essential blackness, but I am saying that slang – a product of the times – can loosely capture Black non-beings before shifting back into illegibility. Stallings analyzes a moment on RuPaul’s Drag Race in order to contextualize the sanitization of language: “Logo, a predominantly white and gay television network, does not exist in a world of niggas, bitches, and trannies, and this controversy highlights how prioritizing terms for and between nongender-conforming folks are a type of neoliberal management of bodies and people who are already out of place and time.”⁴⁶ Derogatory remarks such as “niggas, bitches, and trannies” reveals a varied semiotic system that arises *between* Black non-beings. This is not the replication of the gender binary for the first two examples because “niggas” and man are expected, if not required, to perform differently in civil society. From the perspective of the human, the concept of “niggas” terrorizes the man for its unruly, criminal tendencies. The aforementioned usage in a world of objects opens up the capacity for new, interlocking forms of meaning through *messy* interpretations and rich misinterpretations. The flesh is interior to language but is not captured by it. The disparity between women and “bitches” extends itself to a similar form of reasoning with “bitches” operationalized in direct opposition to a performance of black respectability. These normatively dirty words can be reclaimed as quickly as they can be redeployed against the Black in modernity as a type of otherworldly slur; they are unproductive, derogatory, and reaffirming. Yet, they move in a line of flight parallel to heteronormativity because of their coupling. RuPaul’s usage of the word, “trannie,” highlights his dramatic insensitivity to an “identity” right

⁴⁶ Ibid., 232.

next door to him—not because of him being a cis drag queen, but because of a more than slightly transphobic past.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the word is mired by sex work and wrapped up in freshly dead bodies indicating a closer relationship to the accumulated flesh than a feigned relationship with the fictitious body that the word transgender captures. Language is the road by which these forms of freedom can travel.

Black trans* bodies already contain sufficient vernacular to describe the realm of the flesh. I would be remiss to not mention Liyah Badd’s YouTube video titled “TOXIC ‘TRANS GIRLS’ 🍆 In the Community... Let’s Talk About It.” In this video, she uses a discourse germane to Black trans* life in order to critique intracommunal relations over the contradictory models of gender used by other Black trans* women. I have selected her as an individual and this video in particular because she speaks with a commanding intensity. And she differs from the YouTuber I previously analyzed, Kat Blaque, because she is wholly unfamiliar with seminal texts of queer theory or anti-blackness, thus shifting the origin of her knowledge as derived from her own lived experience. She tells stories using mostly anecdotes. I prefer this mode of producing knowledge because many texts conceptualize Black trans* bodies as objects of knowledge, which then accumulates their bodies as currency within academic institutions. The consequences of that accumulation are a Black trans* studies without Black trans* people.

I will perform a linear analysis of her video in order to translate her words into palatable academic discourse. The video begins with Badd laying prone on her pink bedsheets with a container of foodstuffs next to her. In the background is a television affixed to a wall above a

⁴⁷Framke, Caroline. “How RuPaul’s comments on trans women led to a Drag Race revolt — and a rare apology” *Vox*, 7 Mar. 2018. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/3/6/17085244/ruPaul-trans-women-drag-queens-interview-controversy>

desk with bottled water and lights on top of it. There is a small, pink poster next to the closed white blinds on her wall. All of these factors indicate that this is an amateur video where the YouTuber is there to spout the truth. She opens with a standard introduction, “What’s up ya guys. It’s ya girl Liyah”⁴⁸ that is cleaved by fast moving video clips over the sound of “Fendi” by PnB Rock featuring Nicki Minaj and Murda Beatz. The video clips are of the cult classic *Mean Girls*, and the split screen of Badd and Regina George implies she is *that girl* who is about to antagonize a fellow group of women. This casting of her as Regina George is juxtaposed with the title of “TOXIC ‘TRANS GIRLS’,” indicating that she will embody a level of toxicity in order to combat their normative notions of passing within that gender system. Her presentation of this information requires the knowledge of interplaying semiotic systems that are characteristic of contemporary civil society. She speaks, therefore, to a chosen few who can fully connect her web of scattered information.

She recounts a recent encounter with a trans* girl online who began to fling transphobic epithets in Badd’s direction. Because she is “surged” (completed some course of gender affirming surgeries) and Badd is not, the animosity toward Badd’s comfortability in her body is up for interrogation because of a false belief in the correlation between the body and the flesh. Badd, then, is an unruly body among unruly bodies because she threatens the coherence of the gender binary. Trans*girls who want to fully assimilate into the binary are threatened by others’ definance. Badd goes on to dethrone the importance of biological intervention for recognition as a different genre man, woman, neither, or both by using a video clip from an Atlanta-based sex worker, Ms. Cherry Thee Boom. While waving both hands and wearing a tight fitting, royal blue

⁴⁸ Liyah Badd. “TOXIC ‘TRANS GIRLS’ 🍷 In the Community... Let’s Talk About It”. Online video clip.

camisole top, she exclaims, “Girl, if you—if you’re not the girl before all of your motherfucking surgeries bitch, you’ll NEVER be the girl because don’t no surgery make no woman.”⁴⁹ Ms. Cherry Thee Boom looks off camera, complete. She compels us, the viewer, to look inward at our desires instead of at outward expressions of gender. Her use of “the girl” in place of “a girl” implies she is speaking not directly toward gender but to something beside it. “A girl” is able to express her gender in many different ways, but she will NEVER be “the girl” who embodies living in the flesh. The fissure between those two girls indicates that the second does not have to perform tasks in order to have that title bestowed upon it, which dislocates gender from its purported performativity. There is another component we are missing. This intracommunal conflict demonstrates that an uncertainty of one’s desires precludes a pursuit of an unflinching hedonism not bound to a discrete body.

Later on, Badd continues to usurp trans*girls who provide linear narratives of trans*ness. She says:

You can call me a [air quotes] brick, you can call me [air quotes] clocky, you can call me all these lil fucking gay, you know them lil gay lingo whatever the fuck that means, oh she a brick, she a brick... first of all, if you’re a woman, bitch, why the fuck do you even need to use words like that... a lot of these girls out here, you, know they have the physical image, you know the physical appearance of a woman, but it’s just like nothing has changed in here. [points at head] Nothing. Bitches still act the fucking same. They still act like dramatized, dramatic ass fucking gay boys.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The terms “brick” and “clocky” are germane to the survivability of transwomen and have a two-pronged function. The first illustrates how *unintelligible communication*, or communication that is not understood by those outside of a group, is crucial for transwomen to have in order to protect one another amidst unsafe spaces. They are words that permit expression between the matrices of death both in language and in the material world. The second, when flung at other trans*women, reaffirms an oppressive binary by forcing their assimilation into it. Badd’s use of air quotes as a mocking gesture of those two terms represents a detachment from the material world since full recognition was impossible here. From her initial statement of rejection, we receive the tools with which to deconstruct both race and gender, and she questions the necessity of these words (“brick” and “clocky”) for those who see themselves as “women” because they threaten other girls’ libidinal investment into the gender binary as a method of receiving recognition, especially of Black trans*women. Thus, a woman, a real woman, would be unconcerned by the unruly presence of a non-passing transwoman if their goal of womanhood is not contingent upon the exclusion of the latter. The slip of “bitch” as an appositive in her sentence indicates a referential gap between a bitch and the “women” whose identity they are attempting to impersonate. Badd concludes by dispelling the mirage constructed by the body’s physical appearance. The body belies the flesh, and a true transformation penetrates deeper than the skin. When she says, “nothing has changed in here,” pointing to her head, she is not commenting on the biochemical composition of the brain but at the affective realm in which gender is felt. One’s identity requires readjustment as the process of biological life unfolds, thus disbanding the notion of a lifelong self since birth. Instead, there are many violent births of the mind. Her last two sentences, though, are the most contentious as she shifts from explicitly condemning women while chastising gay men, to a combination of the two: “Bitches still act the

fucking same. They still act like dramatized, dramatic ass fucking gay boys.” Her hand, with extended pastel pink acrylic nails, makes a sideways swipe motion in the air to indicate a closing remark on the situation, a point of honesty. Upon first listen, perhaps she tacitly locks trans*women within the confines of gender performativity by intentionally misidentifying them as gay men. After a more careful inspection, she evaluates their performance as demonstrative of their uncertainty of self. Their performance pleases the eyes and ears while neglecting the other senses, and ultimately, its proclivity toward the ocular becomes its downfall. Badd, then, uses other senses in order to detect the feigned affect of womanhood that is not something natural. In referencing the affective world of the flesh, she senses they have no access to this repository. This exclusion is enunciated by her new language.

The self only exists within language. Language is capable of reproducing the same hegemonic power structures that a reinvention of language can also subvert. Through terms, such as “brick,” “clocky,” and “trannies,” one can observe a mutilation of the human by using recently created or ill-defined words that generates a communal spirit. In “The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study”, Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten broach the subject of language’s fugitivity: “The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape, ‘exit’ as Paolo Virno might put it, or ‘exodus’ in the terms offered by Hardt and Negri, fugitivity is being separate from settling.”⁵¹ Fugitivity is a means of fleeing from an anti-black world that continues the metaphysical pulverization of Blackness. Excepting the ontological fixation of fugitivity, the idea that a “felt and touched sense” exists in “language” and “fantasy” implies a prior ordering to

⁵¹ Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. "The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study." (2013): 1.

the systems of the world that is not premised upon ontology. Harvey and Moten, instead, speak to the realm of affect for its capacity to materialize fantastical worlds of created by groups. This is not to say the ideologies of these worlds are entirely free from anti-blackness—nothing fits the high criteria of freedom rendered by afro-pessimism—but the mapping of communities with language can aid in the navigation of the material world.

A new word is necessary to aptly grasp at the flesh behind Black trans*bodies. The term *doll* provides a satire of the human that reveals its unnaturalness from the standpoint of those who are farthest from its epicenter. The characteristics of a doll deconstruct identity because identity is superimposed upon its naked plastic; it is subject to assemblages of the human that determines its personhood within the political sphere.⁵² A doll is a mutable body that garners value from its ocular consumption. One's feelings about personhood are, thereby, projected onto that body for its arousal of rage, ecstasy, terror, admiration, loathing, disgust, and anxiety. But the doll, like identity, is an artificial creation that cannot truly exist in the phenomenological sense because of its uncanny perfection. The term's first users are a gaggle of twitter dolls: @orbodness. "I'm a positive doll now :-)." ⁵³ The circulation of the term is now common amongst Black trans* online circles and has flowed out to social media sites outside of Twitter, The term is often used to describe the feelings of the speaker with jovial tone, regardless of the content. Regarding the capabilities of the flesh, in the second chapter of the book, Weheliye

⁵² Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. 16.

⁵³ @orbodness. "I'm a positive doll now :-)." *Twitter*, 14 Jan. 2020, 2:55 p.m.
<https://twitter.com/orbodness/status/1217173371588431872>.

states: “Namely, in the same way that black people appear as either nonhuman or magically hyperhuman within the universe of Man, black subjects are imbued with either a surplus (hyperfemininity or hypermasculinity) of gender and sexuality or a complete lack thereof (desexualization).”⁵⁴ Although the meaning is typically tied to excess and assumed negative, I would like to invert the meaning of the hyperhuman as something that is positive for Black trans* bodies. It implies an exceptional presence and a thing that is hierarchically above other humans in regard to gender. They, in fact, perfected the performance of femininity and masculinity to the point of revealing its artificial origins. Furthermore, a doll is created out of what the human lacks, and to call Black trans* bodies doll-like is to assert their denuding of humanity for a better form. Black trans* bodies already have a discourse of the flesh that speaks to their everyday occurrences. The task of academia is to listen to this new grammar.

⁵⁴ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. 34.

Conclusion

This text I write begins and ends, in a figurative sense, with afro-pessimism as the field that was my first delve into critical theory. Its rhetorical prowess and broad implications lures in academics to take advantage of the almost infinite number of tools in its toolbox to deconstruct the material world around them in favor of an unflinching position – one that calls for the end of the world. Yet the “world” remains mostly intact, and I wonder if I have not, too, been lulled into a band of hermits whose theoretical webs hypnotize only other academics. Its shortcomings become apparent when we look at how these scholars frame intra-communal conflict. Its hamartia, that which is worse than incomprehensibility, is the Black trans* body that exhausts the theoretical vocabulary of far too many scholars.

Scholarly texts fail to come to grips with the Black trans* body as an object of study because of the nature of their production and consumption within the academy. The peculiarities of the Black trans* body are filtered through a writer’s ideology. This is not to say that there exists a perfect writer devoid of all ideologies who can accurately represent these bodies within academic settings, but this is rather to say that their interjection into scholarship tends to perform their own fungibility for the gain of whoever cites them. This looks like a Black trans* studies without Black trans* people. Specifically, the method of collecting evidence through archival research, novels, or other scholarly journals creates a non-responsive vacuum of knowledge that speaks for a group of people. The individuals written about from those archives tend to already be biologically dead. For this reason, I have selected YouTube as a contemporary method of gathering knowledge from people that are still alive and still speaking back to the structures we fantasize about within the academy. In order to escape a vacuum of knowledge, one must step

outside of the tired texts that have circulated for years and look at various, contemporary mediums that can sustain a dialogue.

There are three primary points of difference between YouTube and other forms of obtaining knowledge. First, the audio-visual aspect adds an additional layer of meaning to the videos themselves. The visuals can either emphasize or contradict the audible portions and *vice-versa*. Additionally, the inclusion of other mediums, such as captions, PowerPoint slides, and even miniature visuals playing simultaneously, creates a medium that is always commenting upon itself in some way. Second, the rather recent inception of YouTube as a platform means that most of its content creators are still alive, thus adding unto themselves as a text. The “text” has a literal life of its own since points in a video can always be later commented upon in future videos; additionally, the topics of videos are always new in some aspect, in comparison to that creator’s catalogue. Third, YouTube videos are not strictly academic in nature. They do not unfold within – purely within – academic institutions, unlike monographs and academic journals. This shifts their placement in academic literature to one that prefers strategy. The ultimate aim of many YouTube videos is to obtain as many views as possible; similarly, the ultimate aim of many academic texts is to receive as many citations as possible. Though this may not be the goal of all scholars or content creators, without views or citations both of them would cease production. These differences culminate in a source material that is rife with unfamiliar, unexplored meanings that many academics have yet to engage.

The overreliance of afro-pessimists on metaphysics to understand anti-blackness presents a tragic undoing of the field. There is no place for the Black in white ontology, and even if there were one, metaphysicians, such as Heidegger, have yet to fully understand the constructions of metaphysics. Thus, the field cannot advance beyond its theoretical foundations. Those

foundations, though incredibly enlightening, fail to aid one in navigating anti-black systems with their hermeneutic of general suspicion. I am arguing not that the material changes invoked can be either good or bad within a broader system of anti-blackness, but insofar that finding wellbeing or escaping suffering in some capacity is an undeniable good. And one cannot use the tools of afro-pessimism to address intra-communal conflicts, such as what is inappropriately referred to as simply trans* violence or gendered violence. The concept of intersectionality rests on humanist themes of recognition, thus making it unsuitable to visit those places of violence. As a result, I look toward affect, specifically in the school of psychoanalysis, as a method of interpreting the occurrences between anti-humans because, surely, something is felt at the moments of visually interpreting a Black trans* body. And that precedes the metaphysical foundations of afro-pessimism because pessimism only presents a unidirectional method of interpreting non-white to Black relations. Afro-pessimism makes the strategic essentialization of clumping together Black bodies for the purposes of understanding anti-blackness; however, that essentialization loses merit at the point of microscopic inspection into the lively, varied lives of Blacks.

To acknowledge anti-blackness as both before and after this essay is to bring into question the capability of writing to alter the representations it analyzes, thus shifting the paradigm of anti-black structures from which texts are borne. In my second chapter, Kat Blaque acknowledges, with a fatalistic tone, that we will likely never enjoy the queer utopia written about in texts or imagined in dialogue.⁵⁵ Saidiya Hartman, in the same vein, questions the value

⁵⁵ Kat Blaque. "Why Trans People Will Never be Accepted | Kat Blaque." Online video clip. YouTube, 14 January 2020. Web. 18 February 2020.

of these created narratives: “And how does one tell impossible stories?”⁵⁶ Yet, they persist in producing their texts for circulation despite knowing a dramatic shift in the world will never arise. They produce while knowing failure is imminent—or rather, more precisely, they write hoping they are incorrect. To “win” the game of representation is to litter the symbolic economy with positivistic figures of Black trans* bodies that would alter the structures creating a normative body in the first place; this is not the case: “Trans people are offered many ‘doors’—entrances to visibility, to resources to recognition, and to understanding. Yet, as so many of the essays collected here attest, these doors are almost always also ‘traps’—accommodating trans bodies, histories, and culture only insofar as they can be forced to hew hegemonic modalities.”⁵⁷ Gossett, Stanley, and Burton use the brilliant rhetorical strategy of analogy to present the problem of trans* representation as a trap door. Entrances, or doors, vary because there are multiple ways to penetrate the symbolic economy, such as visual culture and pop culture. The traps, though, are certain because of the constriction of representative tropes to fall within certain boxes and fulfill certain desires. To “hew hegemonic modalities” implies a constriction of the body in order to fit through the new door. That new body rendered permissible thereby trades off with wider acceptance of other trans* bodies that cannot easily assimilate into the gender binary. This doubly affects the dolls whose blackness already signifies deviance. Another “trap” is the one of visibility that forces black trans* bodies into a spotlight that furthers fetishization and violence.

⁵⁶Saidiya, Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14. 12.

⁵⁷ Gossett, Reina, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017): xv-xxvi. xxiii.

Embracing the capacity of the flesh over the material body forwards how the body falsely represents the flesh's desires and capacities. This misinterpretation turns the flesh into multiple "lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds."⁵⁸ This conception of freedom departs from the one-dimensional, all-knowing answer that the end of the world is the only plausible place of freedom. Multiple lines of flight posit that there are numerous ways to obtain this freedom, through methods such as defying gendered legibility. "Freedom dreams" hints at the utopia Blaque and Hartman both cannot bring themselves to believe in. "Practices of liberation" is a nefarious concept because liberation looks differently for different people. Although this practice of liberation is initially vague, Weheliye expands upon liberation as embracing the flesh for one's own personal liberation. Badd embraces this in asserting the comfortability of her flesh: "I'm not tryin' to be like the next bitch or tryna pass or have something to prove to the world cause I don't. I'm just Liyah. Period."⁵⁹ Yes, we can imagine the "possibilities of other worlds." No, we cannot change this one. One can only free one's ideologies from anti-blackness. Other worlds are secondary to this feat. This way toward freedom is already in the vernacular of the dolls; it is in the slang that slants the world that many have mastered. Afro-pessimism has no method of seeing or hearing them; it lacks a way to shift its static rendering of the world to one that is shockingly contemporary. The messy discourse of "trannies," "bricky," and "clocky" corrode the neat world of academia into one that is messy but nonetheless captures the matrix of violence Black trans* bodies are stuck inside of. Their

⁵⁸ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. Duke University Press, 2014. 11.

⁵⁹ Liyah Badd. "TOXIC 'TRANS GIRLS' 🍆 In the Community... Let's Talk About It." Online video clip. *YouTube*, 15 Dec. 2019. Web. 14 Feb. 2020.

discourse on the matter of violence is further proven by their biological survival. If there was not a word for their encounters, then they would never survive them.

The broader implications of my research include who we derive knowledge from within academic institutions and how the circulation of those bodies instantiates their own fungibility. I would like to maintain that there *should* be no Black trans* studies without Black trans* bodies. And regardless of one's standpoint on the metaphysical claims of afro-pessimism, those claims can be completely true in all instances except interpersonal affective relations between Black bodies. The discourse between those bodies goes unheard or misunderstood. And those utterances, like secret love letters, made all the difference.

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