

Neoliberal Disavowal and the Politics of the Impossible

In a relatively unheralded essay from *Sister Outsider* called “Learning from the 60s,” Audre Lorde presents her relationship to the dead in which seemingly mutually exclusive orientations to life and death converge.¹ Lorde begins this essay, a transcript of a speech at the “Malcolm X Weekend” organized by the Harvard-Radcliffe Black Students Association in 1982, in this manner: “Malcolm X is a distinct shape in a very pivotal period of my life. I stand here now—Black, Lesbian, Feminist—an inheritor of Malcolm and in his tradition, doing my work, and the ghost of his voice through my mouth asks each one of you here tonight: Are you doing yours?”² With this opening, Lorde launches a speech that performs a series of contradictory double functions. She *both* reinscribes a temporality of inheritance (“an inheritor . . . in his tradition”), with the associated affects of mourning, obligation, and the implication of a singular lineage, and instantiates an alternative heterogeneous temporality that fractures and makes multiple the possible futures that Malcolm X’s memory could invoke (“Black, Lesbian, Feminist”). She both memorializes Malcolm and gestures to the dangers of memorialization; she insists on the importance of inheritance while simultaneously undermining patrilineage.

By asserting that she is Malcolm X’s inheritor, Lorde acts audaciously, situating her lesbian feminist self as no less assuredly and authentically Black as any male in Malcolm’s lineage, against a quickly ossifying

memorialization of Malcolm as a charismatic, masculine, and patriarchal figure.³ She refuses to cleave “Black” from “Lesbian” and “Feminist,” working against the “pressure to express only one [part] to the exclusion of all others,”⁴ and in so doing, insisting that Malcolm’s legacy enables the suturing of these identities rather than their mutual exclusivity. In the context of what she described in an earlier essay as “the enormous energy . . . being wasted in the Black community today in anti-lesbian hysteria,”⁵ we can see that the forceful beginning to this speech is a deliberate intervention into a developing normative definition of Blackness in part constituted through a Black nationalist memorialization of Malcolm X—an effect, if not the overtly stated goal, of events like “Malcolm X Weekend.” She refuses any nostalgia about the 1960s, observing that while it was “a time of promise and excitement,” it was also “a time of isolation and frustration from within.” She specifically names disciplining and monolithic definitions of Blackness as contributing to that isolation, describing her sense at the time that “it was [her] own fault—if [she] was only Blacker, things would be fine.”⁶ She accordingly warns her audience of the present-day consequences of 1960s nostalgia, particularly as it coalesces around such figures as Malcolm X:

For while we wait for another Malcolm, another Martin, another charismatic Black leader to validate our struggles, old Black people are freezing to death in tenements, Black children are being brutalized and slaughtered in the streets, or lobotomized by television, and the percentage of Black families living below the poverty line is higher today than in 1963.⁷

In so doing, Lorde analyzes the 1980s as a Benjaminian “moment of danger” in which minority nationalist memorialization of the social movements of the 1960s can become the fuel for a multiculturalist manifestation of neoliberal power.⁸

And yet she goes further: she not only refuses any narrative that might dismiss her as an inauthentic subject (not Black enough because of her lesbianism or feminism) but also situates herself as the speaking authority, channeling “the ghost of his voice through [her] mouth” so as

to demand “are you doing yours?”⁹ It is not Malcolm’s ghost but the “ghost of his voice” that comes through Lorde’s mouth. It is a double remove, where not only is Malcolm gone but so too, potentially, is his “voice,” which exists only as a ghostly residue in her “mouth.” As Avery Gordon says of ghosts, “It is not a case of dead or missing persons *sui generis*, but of the ghost as a social figure. It is often a case of inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential.”¹⁰ Insofar as Lorde situates herself—Black, lesbian, feminist—as the exact nexus that Black nationalism must repress in order for its imagined community based on Blackness to cohere, she is unrepressing, and is thus coming back to haunt. The fact that she herself, Black, lesbian, feminist, is a sign of the “more than one story at a time” or the “spiraling affects” makes *her* the ghost. But she situates herself not so much as the ghost that haunts Malcolm but rather as one of the two ghosts that haunt the present formations of Black community. In this way, she implies that Malcolm X is himself “more than one story at a time” and that his ghost demands that we understand his legacy as discontinuous, contradictory, and multifarious. In so doing, she signals a connection between herself and Malcolm that is, in Gordon’s words, “anything but transparent and referential.”

Having “reclaimed” Malcolm X as her ancestor from those who would define his lineage more narrowly, Lorde goes on to support this assertion by re-reading the trajectory of his political vision. She writes, “In the last year of his life, Malcolm X added a breadth to his essential vision that would have brought him, had he lived, into inevitable confrontation with the question of difference as a creative and necessary force for change.”¹¹ This breadth, she observes, spurred him to reconsider several key beliefs: the role of women, his relationship to Martin Luther King and politics of nonviolence, and, most importantly for her essay and for this book, separatism, because he was in the process of rethinking “the societal conditions under which *alliances* and *coalitions* must indeed occur.”¹²

Lorde goes on to argue that in order for Malcolm’s vision of coalition to cohere, it means letting go of a monolithic conception of Blackness and accepting the multiplicity of his legacy. This does not mean dismissing

the shared history of racial violence that binds Black people. For while a heroic mode of minority nationalist memorialization can be incorporated into neoliberal power, so too can the dismissal of racialized violence or a containment narrative that posits Malcolm X's death as instigating, only to resolve, a U.S. national crisis of conscience. As such, rather than negate a Black nationalist impulse to mourn Black death as a consequence of a uniquely anti-Black violence, she affirms, redirects, and enlarges it. The murder of Malcolm X is a loss that must be thus memorialized, for the forces that murdered him are in no way lessened, but rather exacerbated in the moment of her speech. If mourning Malcolm means rededicating oneself to a critique of "the forces which dehumanize us from the outside,"¹³ she is certainly mourning him. Indeed, she characterizes Black history as "four hundred years of survival as an endangered species."¹⁴ In so doing, she identifies minority nationalist narratives of Black homogeneity as an important response to racist violence, writing, "Historically, difference had been used so cruelly against us that as a people we were reluctant to tolerate any diversion from what was externally defined as Blackness."¹⁵ Yet this response to violence can become a replication of the violence it is meant to protect Black people from. "In the 60s . . . a small and vocal part of the Black community lost sight of the fact that unity does not mean unanimity."¹⁶ Taking Malcolm's ghost and the multiplicity of his legacy seriously means acknowledging that "Black" is already a coalition of diverse constituents: "Unity implies the coming together of elements which are, *to begin with*, varied and diverse in their particular natures."¹⁷ This is the basis for her assertion that she, as a Black lesbian feminist, can speak with Malcolm's voice; to imply as she does that Malcolm's legacy is multifaceted is to imply that Black communities are already varied. And if Black communities are not homogeneously unified but are themselves made up of diverse and heterogeneous entities, they are themselves always already coalitional. As such, Lorde acknowledges the violence of anti-Blackness not to situate Black death as the ultimate injury, whether it be that upon which political claims can be anchored,¹⁸ or alternatively, that which cannot ever be remedied and thus subverts the very notion of the political,¹⁹ but to undermine any sense that any one people or history has cornered the market in suffering and violation.

Instead, her theorization of difference *within* Black communities leads to a theorization of coalition *across* boundaries of race, class, and nation; and for Lorde, this is particularly important in the 1980s. The aftermath of the revolutionary struggles in the 1960s means increased conservatism, retrenchment, and the incorporation of previously radical politics and actors into the structures of power in the 1980s. Coalitional practice, then, is “the force we need to face the multidimensional threats to our survival in the 80s. There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”²⁰

The diversity of Black communities, which we can recognize through the acceptance of the multiplicity of Malcolm X’s legacy, is far from being a liability to the unity of the race. Instead, it is the very quality from which coalitional strategies emerge. Lorde writes, “Each one of us here is a link in the connection between antipoor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and insurgent violence against Black people.”²¹ However, this connection requires an honest appraisal of the stakes of coalition, an appraisal of exactly what one might have to give up in order to advance the cause of social justice. She continues:

I ask myself as well as each one of you, exactly what alteration in the particular fabric of my everyday life does this connection call for? . . . In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of *any part of those who I call my people*? Insight must illuminate the particulars of our lives: who labors to make the bread we waste, or the energy it takes to make nuclear poisons which will not biodegrade for one thousand years; or who goes blind assembling the microtransistors in our inexpensive calculators?²²

Rather than define racialization as only a shared and uniform devaluation in comparison to whiteness, or along a fixed scale of devaluation with Blackness as the ultimate and exemplary category of abjection, Lorde demands that those in the audience—and, implicitly, we as readers—all take into account our own complicities with power over and against others. In so doing, Lorde articulates a politics that is not based on the

protection of self-interest or claims to injury, but on a critique of the uneven but connected dispersion of death and devaluation that make self-protective politics threaten to render others precarious. Speaking to Black students in the 1980s, Lorde marks the importance of “Learning from the 60s,” asking them to consider those who pay the costs of their inclusion. Referencing the social movements of the 1960s that made possible their presence at institutions like Harvard and Radcliffe, the epitome of racial and class exclusion, she exhorts them to remember—now that they have access, however fragile and contingent, to the college educations and white-collar jobs that would have been near unthinkable prior to desegregation and affirmative action—who makes the “inexpensive calculators” they may be using at those schools and at those jobs.²³

In observing that inequities and forms of devaluation exist within and between racial groups, Lorde does not dismiss the brutal history of racial violence and devaluation that subtends racial categorization but rather calls attention to new configurations of power that, in contingently extending protection and value to formerly categorically marginalized identities, “are unevenly sutured to older categories of race, gender, and sexuality.”²⁴ Lorde provides a rigorous, deeply materialist analysis that extends beyond Black communities as well as the boundaries of the United States, providing a transnational analysis of the material costs of our own comfort. However, rather than allow this insight—that any politics of self-protection requires subjecting others to violence—to foreclose political possibility, Lorde instead crafts an alternative vision of a politics not based on self-interest. An alternative imagination of community that does not depend on identification or equivalence is neither easy nor utopian, for a truly relational vision of community must mean being willing to jeopardize one’s own security for that of others. In so doing, she casts Malcolm X’s life and death in different terms; rather than allow the brutal fact of his death to limit the politics of Blackness to a circumscribed set of people, she defines Blackness as an analytic that allows us to see the ways in which power puts us all in unequal relation to each other. In so doing, Lorde wields Black feminism as a comparative method.²⁵

I begin with this moment from Lorde’s work because it offers a sense of political (im)possibility attuned to the manifestations of power in our

moment. Attempting to name what Lorde is doing, I realized that Lorde had a word for it herself: difference. “Difference,” as Lorde and others used it, has had many different meanings. For the purposes of this book, I use the term to reference a cultural and epistemological practice that holds in suspension (without requiring resolution) contradictory, mutually exclusive, and negating impulses. “Difference” names an epistemological position, ontological condition, and political strategy that reckon with the shift in the technologies of power that we might as well call “neoliberal.”

I define neoliberalism foremost as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past. It does so by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive respectability, *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death. Historically, it emerged as a response to the liberation movements of the post–World War II period—by which I mean movements for decolonization, desegregation, and self-determination, within and outside of the territorial bounds of the United States. As I describe in more detail below, these movements challenged the ideological tenets of white supremacy and Western civilization that undergirded settler colonialism, Jim Crow segregation, and franchise colonialism all over the world. In response to these movements, a new neoliberal order arose based on the selective protection and proliferation of minoritized life *as the very mechanism* for the brutal exacerbation of minoritized death. Neoliberal ideologies hold out the promise of protection from premature death in exchange for complicity with this pretense. In the pages that follow, *Death beyond Disavowal* finds the memories of death and precarity that neoliberal ideologies attempt to erase.

What I am calling “difference,” as Lorde and other women of color feminists wielded it, emerged as a political and ethical rejoinder to this neoliberal move that both brutalizes *and* affirms. Knowing that oppositional critiques of the state as wielded through minority nationalisms can become incorporated into the neoliberal discourses of the 1980s, for example, potentially through such events as “Malcolm X Weekend,” but also understanding that such oppositional critiques are still vitally

important against a consistently and increasingly violent state, Lorde attests to the importance of sustaining two oppositional political, epistemological, and ethical practices at the same time. This deployment of difference is particularly necessary in the contemporary moment in which the protection of racialized and gendered life ironically produces exacerbated death. This book is thus about how death can and indeed must be the basis of a politics in the contemporary moment, impossibly alongside the antagonistic pursuit of a politics based on the preservation of life. The theoretical and political practice of “difference” holds in suspension the ostensibly mutually exclusive states of life and death. In so doing, it remembers the exacerbated dispersal of minoritized death that neoliberalism disavows.

In the case of Lorde’s speech, difference inheres in her ability to both mark the uniqueness of anti-Black violence as well as insist that it is possible to connect this violence to those experienced by other racialized, gendered, devalued peoples. Difference inheres in her acknowledgement of Malcolm X’s significance to a Black people, while at the same time challenging the notion that there is “a” Black people, and in so doing, widening his legacy to include others. Further, Lorde’s mobilization of a politics based on self-critique over one based on self-interest is an example of a politics of difference that radically rethinks self and community. Jeopardizing one’s own security is always a fraught exercise, but it has particular significance and stakes at this historical moment, because security—or lack thereof—becomes exactly the site where power operates in the wake of the social movements of the post-World War II period.

In so doing, Lorde offers a politically useful alternative to racial exceptionalism—that is, the belief that the histories and conditions of particular racial groups are unique and incomparable, and that relational or comparative analyses between racial groups must necessarily eradicate or disenable an understanding of racial specificity.²⁶ Indeed, as many have argued, the self-consciously named “women of color feminism” or “Third World feminism” of the 1970s and 1980s, of which Lorde is an important contributor, emerged precisely to enable such a political analytic able to articulate coalitional practice based on, rather than in spite of, historical and material differences between and within racial groups.²⁷

The fact that Lorde makes this political intervention at an event named after Malcolm X is apropos: the assassination of Malcolm X is often deployed as the climactic event in a familiar narrative of those social movements, one that characterizes the liberation movements of the post–World War II period as radical, heroic (implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, masculine) resistance to white supremacy brutally crushed by state repression, assassination, and violence, and that consequently understands the period of the 1980s onward as apolitical and rudderless. Alternatively, the liberal, official nationalist narrative is one in which the crises marked by these social movements have been resolved, and those once-radical figures either have been incorporated into the U.S. security state or rendered “terrorists.”²⁸

I see this historical period somewhat differently—namely, as the latest phase of what Cedric Robinson has called “racial capitalism.”²⁹ As I go on to explain in more detail in chapter 1, these movements engaged in heterogeneous struggles against the conditions that bound racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference to forms of social and physical death. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, these “multiple anti-colonial social-protest movements and intellectual challenges of the period to which we give the name, ‘The Sixties,’”³⁰ were a challenge to a Western bourgeois conception of Man that colonizes the very definition of the human itself, and in so doing, required racialized categories of the nonhuman. Wynter continues, “One of the major empirical effects . . . would be ‘the rise of Europe’ and its construction of the ‘world civilization’ on the one hand, and, on the other, African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation.”³¹ Wynter notes that these movements were “co-opted, reterritorialized” in modes both “sanitized” and “harshly intensified.”³² This book traces how this reterritorialization happened precisely within these movements’ engagement with the “master code of symbolic life and death.”³³ At the same time, it identifies the discontinuous, ghostly, but not entirely devastated, remains of these struggles’ challenge to the symbolics of life and death, which I argue reemerge through *culture*.

In this process of reterritorialization, certain minoritized subjects and populations became recognizable as protectable life (what Michel

Foucault might call “biopolitics”) for the first time.³⁴ As I will go on to explore in chapter 1, while many of the struggles of the liberation movements were predicated on the notion that life and death were not mutually exclusive but were always mutually constitutive, those aspects of these movements were erased, dismissed, or outright extinguished. These social movements of the post–World War II period were so fundamentally concerned with the life/death binary because this binary was exactly what made racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference coterminous with social devaluation and vulnerability to physical death in the earlier era of racial capital. These social movements of the post–World War II period undermined the legitimacy of this form of racial capitalist modernity, exposing liberal democracy as a hypocritical ideological formation undergirded by white supremacy. In so doing, they inaugurated a new neoliberal racial order under which it became possible for some sectors of populations previously only relegated to death also to be recognized as worthy of life. These movements were made up of a number of differentiated and sometimes contradictory impulses and tactics, but this heterogeneity was occluded in the resulting incorporative phase, whether it came in the form of state-based civil rights in Western nations or post-colonial Global South nation-states managed by native elites. The management and containment of desegregation movements (which were themselves heterogeneous and strains of which were rooted in radical, labor, and internationalist organizing traditions), through the codification of civil rights legislation and the dominant narrative of civil rights respectability, became the technology through which radical movements, both within the United States and abroad, were disciplined.³⁵ Further, the more radical aspects of these movements were subjected to brutal state violence and repression, including assassination, incarceration, infiltration, and vilification.³⁶ Thus, while the project of making racialized life recognizable as a form of life that must be protected and encouraged to proliferate was only one of a number of connected tactics (and by no means the most important of such strategies), such a politics of recognition has become legitimated and institutionalized, so much so that it has become how these movements are remembered.³⁷

Thus, the varied strategies of these movements are narrowly remembered as contained by the most recognizable and articulable goals, commensurate with the logic of political modernity: that of claiming for oneself (and by extension, one's "people," imagined as discrete, coherent, and unified) the status of protectable life. As I argue in the section below entitled "Gender, Race, and Sexuality at the Neoliberal Shift," protectable life became sutured to reproductive respectability, with all the attendant gendered and sexualized implications. As far as these social movements were invested in respectable reproduction, they replicated the investments of modernity. The reaction to these radical social movements was thus twofold: the brutal crackdown by the forces of the state as well as the incorporation and affirmation of those aspects of these movements that were appropriable—that which replicated the normative investments of political modernity.

These critiques of race in turn became the vocabulary for a new mode of power that narrowly acceded to these social movements by extending biopolitical protection to certain legible and visible sectors of formerly marginalized groups. Thus, currently, we see racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects with access to capital and citizenship in ways that were previously unimaginable, whether through the emergence of a global Asian technological and professional class that utilizes citizenship "flexibly" (and that are accorded forms of pastoral care whether or not they are actually citizens of a particular nation), through the creation of a class of elite Global South nationalist state managers and bureaucrats in the wake of decolonization (a class that facilitates the neocolonial extraction of wealth from the Global South to the Global North), or through the creation of a post-civil rights-era African American middle class through the establishment of new categories of jobs in social welfare, policing, and government administration that positioned them as conduits for state violence against and disciplining of the racialized and immigrant poor.³⁸ Similarly, this era also witnesses the emergence of homonormative gay and lesbian identities that mark themselves as parents, tourists, homeowners, and taxpayers.³⁹ The existence of these formations do not alleviate, but rather exacerbate the conditions that lead to the devaluation

of poor, racialized, and sexual- and gender-deviant populations, and the relegation of these populations to premature death.

In other words, the liberation movements of the post–World War II period put the older political mode in crisis, but the reestablishment of a life-affirming politics by those aspects of these movements that have captured the dominant imaginary has meant that the mutually constitutive relationship between life and death—the fact that life for some must mean death for others—remains disavowed and thus unchallenged. The selective protection of certain racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects actually *further* obfuscates this mutually constitutive relationship between protectable life and ungrievable death.

Counter to conventional wisdom, the existence of these protected categories do not prevent, but rather exacerbate, the devaluation of others and their consequent relegation to death. This modality of power is particularly striking in the way in which racialized, sexualized, and gendered differences are both invisible *and* entirely structuring. Those whose lives are unprotectable, whose social and political statuses are so negligible that they do not merit recognition or protection, are referenced by terms like “prostitute” or “drug dealer.” “Homeless” or “welfare cheat” or “illegal” or “immigrant” are other such terms.⁴⁰ Only the most willfully naive of us could overlook the ways in which these categories are deeply racialized and gendered, yet in ways that allow for the disavowal of race, gender, and sexuality as criteria for precarity. Such names legitimate the wholesale violence against and criminalization of the racialized poor, all the more terrifying because such racialized violence happens without having to explicitly invoke racial, gendered, or sexualized discourse. The most obvious example of one whose life cannot be respected is the “terrorist,” which Sohail Daulatzai has observed is the twenty-first-century version of “savage.”⁴¹ The deployment of this name underwrites the violence of U.S. military devastation in the Middle East, the Pacific, Latin America, and Africa, and constitutes the illegibility of Palestinian deaths. This condition—whereby certain lives are deemed lives and others not, and certain deaths appear able to be mourned, and others not at all—is the generalizable condition of contemporary power, manifested globally.⁴²

This neoliberal technology of power, which Roderick Ferguson has so aptly called the “affirmation of difference,”⁴³ is one through which certain racialized, gendered, and sexualized populations are protected and certain “antiracist” ideas become acceptable and indeed even hegemonic. It does not supplant as much as it supplements, and thus enables, the more established role of racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference as the process by which death is dispersed.⁴⁴ In the wake of the liberation movements of the post–World War II period we have seen a new form of power that both affirms racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference, yet through this affirmation, is able to levy even more brutally exacerbated forms of death and destruction to poor, racialized, and sexually “deviant” populations. At the same time, decrying these deathly conditions can be institutionally incorporated, as I am acutely aware as someone who makes a living as a scholar and teacher of ethnic and gender studies. In this context, the racialized and colonized poor are rendered vulnerable so as to produce them as a form of surplus labor, and are also imagined as backward, homophobic, and patriarchal as a means of rendering them as morally bankrupt and excluded from a privileged liberal subjecthood.⁴⁵ These conditions are symptomatic of new epistemological and “commonsensical” ways of reading racial, gender, and sexual difference that emerged out of and as a reaction to the liberation movements of the post–World War II period: the cultivation of “color blindness” as well as outright racist hate, and correspondingly, greater discursive avenues to represent whiteness as victimization;⁴⁶ the racialization of ideologies as well as the racialization of bodies;⁴⁷ the establishment of white liberalism alongside white supremacy;⁴⁸ and the commodification and affirmation of minority difference alongside its repression.⁴⁹ Alongside this new form of (bio)power that “lets die,” outright deadly, necropolitical regimes that “make die” also proliferate. These two forms of legitimated death are not separable, but exist alongside each other. Prison abolitionist scholars and activists, for example, importantly remind us of one institution that is undergirded by the idea that certain populations are dangerous for societal security and quality of life.⁵⁰ Both are enabled by the limited incorporation and affirmation of certain forms of racialized, gendered, or sexualized difference, insofar as this incorporation

and affirmation preserves the fundamental process of Western political modernity—the ostensible protection of lives that enables the dispersal of death.

In this way, formerly uniformly devalued categories are now populated with those whose lives are protectable and those whose lives are not, but the basic bifurcation of life and death still remains. As such, the life/death binary retains its ability to legitimate the deaths of some to protect the lives of others. As to be expected, those subjects who were unruly toward the normativizing tendencies within these social movements—women of color and queer of color formations foremost among them—described exactly the dangers of this developing duality of power, and importantly, provided a strategy against it, based on the inevitability of complicity with power and the repudiation of protection. A recent generation of social movements scholarship⁵¹ that focuses on the interventions of queer and feminist activists highlights what Lorde herself also makes manifestly clear with her introduction of herself as “Black, Lesbian, Feminist”—that is, that the lives of those rendered marginal by race, gender, and sexuality are never only or entirely protected by those particular aspects of these social movements that limit themselves to claims for the protection of life. Thus, while acknowledging this moment as a violent state assault on radicalism, feminist and queer formations within these movements also understand this moment as requiring new kinds of politics and a different definition of what a movement is that address both the repression *and* incorporation of difference. As Lorde implies when she asserts that “the raw energy of Black determination released in the 60s . . . is still being felt in movements for change among women, other peoples of Color, gays, the handicapped—among all the disenfranchised peoples of this society,”⁵² positing the 1980s as a period of decline erases the vibrancy of the activist efforts in the era, many of which were instigated and led by women of color and queers, from welfare rights to reproductive justice to prison abolition to a renewed politicization of culture and art.⁵³

Lorde’s reminder of the forgotten, fetishized labor that produced the calculators used by the Harvard-Radcliffe BSU reveals how presciently she predicted the precise technology of our contemporary conditions.

Lorde's question to the BS—"In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of *any part of those who I call my people?*"—is an example of "difference" as a cultural practice that pushes past the limits of the political as it is conventionally defined. It articulates "difference" as a contradictory, *impossible* political and representational strategy that brings together and holds in suspension the conflicting goals of the preservation or protection of the political subject *and* the recognition of the others at whose expense that subject is protected. In other words, Lorde's query insists on remembering those whose deaths are necessary but forgotten, so that others may live.

In using "impossible" in this way to define Lorde's politics, I take up Gayatri Gopinath's and Kara Keeling's theorizations of impossibility. Gopinath defines the politics of impossibility as referencing "the range of oppositional practices, subjectivities, and alternative visions of collectivity that fall outside of the developmental narratives of colonialism, bourgeois nationalism, mainstream liberal feminism, and mainstream gay and lesbian politics and theory."⁵⁴ Keeling elegantly suggests why such alternative visions might be so impossible and yet so necessary by gesturing to the utility of affect, which while "bound to the ethico-political context of our times. . . . points toward the ways that whatever escapes recognition, whatever escapes meaning and valuation, exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality . . . and therefore threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses on which that reality relies on for coherence as such."⁵⁵ That is, affect is one of the forces that somehow manages to exceed the present-day conditions of possibility to gesture to "a different epistemological, if not ontological and empirical, regime."⁵⁶ The shift to the interrogative mode, as I have observed elsewhere, can be a shift into the realm of the impossible, the unanswerable, and the epistemologically unstable.⁵⁷ Lorde launches the impossible but necessary politics of "difference" by posing a question that can never be answered, but that must be continually addressed, enacting a temporality of suspension rather than a resolution.

Following theorists like Lorde, this book attempts to keep in dialectical tension two contradictory political imperatives: that of mourning death and of understanding death as proliferative. First, how do we describe the

ways in which racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference are produced currently? I propose that we track how these systems of difference operate by tracking how death gets deployed. How are some populations rendered more vulnerable to death? How populations are subjected to death still occur along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality, but in different configurations than in the era before the liberation movements of the post–World War II period. Yet there is a second problem: what does this mean, and how do we address it? What “politics” can adequately account for and address our current condition, and how is this even possible when the very definition of modern “politics” is based on the notion of self-preservation? This is to say that when we ask this question, we abut the question of what death means, what it means to be vulnerable. If we stop with only the first question, with what we are able to *track*, what we are able to *know*, we run the risk of relegating these vulnerable populations to being merely a problem to be fixed. We see them only as those we must bring into the realm of the living, rather than those who, in and through their very condition of vulnerability to death (their deathly existence) produce their own forms of meaning(lessness) and new definitions of (non)existence that expand our own narrow sense. Insofar as our ability to live protected lives *depends upon* their inability to do so, a politics that registers vulnerability to death simply as something to be eradicated and sees these deathly subjects simply as those we have yet to bring into the protection of life merely advances the validation of life that legislates their deaths. In so doing, we replicate the conditions that create these deathworlds by making *life* the only site of meaning or political possibility. This project thus asks: What are the various and proliferating meanings of death? What kinds of social (non)existence does “death” describe? Put another way, what kinds of knowledges, modes of being, affects, memories, temporalities, embodiments do these populations that are marked for death, that inhabit what Zygmunt Bauman calls “death in life,”⁵⁸ produce? And how may we apprehend those products? Are these different deathly modes of knowing and being always observable? Do they register on us not as presence, but as absence, or what Avery Gordon calls “ghosts”?⁵⁹ Is it (im)possible to build a politics around them? If so, how must we redefine what the political is and can be?

Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Neoliberal Shift

Neoliberalism is a structure of disavowal, an epistemological framing, a way of seeing and not seeing. It claims that protected life is available to all and that premature death comes only to those whose criminal actions and poor choices make them deserve it. This neoliberal disavowal legitimates the proliferation and exacerbation of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has described as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies.”⁶⁰ This exacerbated proliferation of death is by turns hidden and justified by an unprecedented access to protectable life for more and more sectors of populations once categorically denied access to this protection because of race, gender, or sexuality.

This neoliberal disavowal is a reaction against the crises brought on by the social movements of the post–World War II era. As Roderick Ferguson and I explain in a recent essay, while neoliberalism has been defined more narrowly to reference the espousal of a “free market” approach to governance most famously championed by Milton Friedman and the Chicago School, or more broadly to reference the extension of economistic definitions of value to all sectors of social and political life, we might more expansively define this term to reference the ideological and epistemological shift that occurred with the emergence of the current stage of racial capital following the worldwide liberation movements of the post–World War II period, movements that encompassed struggles for decolonization, desegregation, and revolutionary engagements over the state.⁶¹ These movements were, importantly, ideological and representational contests over the legitimacy of colonial and racial modes of power, upon which capitalist extraction of value was dependent. In the wake of World War II, the global imperial vacuum left by the decimation of Europe opened the way for decolonization movements across the globe. As Cedric Robinson has argued, “While the official world contestation, the Cold War, has been taken to have subsumed all other conflicts, it is now possible to cast the competition between the two imperial hegemon, the United States and the Soviet Union, as a historical sidebar to the

struggles to obtain or vanquish racial domination.”⁶² In this context, as Derrick Bell Jr. and Mary Dudziak have argued, the U.S. nation-state had to reckon with movements for racial liberation at home if it were to seem credible as a force for antiracism in a rapidly decolonizing world.⁶³ Thus began an era of what Jodi Melamed has called “official antiracism,” in which the U.S. nation-state and capital affirmed the rhetoric and sometimes the figureheads of liberation movements, while outright suppressing their redistributive aims.⁶⁴

What is often not considered in the scholarship on neoliberalism is the centrality of Black women’s sexuality to this shift. Here, we are indebted to Black feminist scholarship, which has importantly highlighted the ways in which discourses of respectability and the gendered and sexualized pathologization and criminalization of Black communities have undergirded neoliberal politics.⁶⁵ As many such scholars have documented, racial capital in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was premised on systems of enslavement and Jim Crow segregation that required the Cult of True Womanhood and Victorian ideals of sexual propriety, reserved for white women, and corresponding images of Black female deviance.⁶⁶ In the post-social movements moment, Black women are still narrated as sexually deviant, albeit in service of a different set of geopolitical and economic structures. Candice Jenkins observes that “the perceived inability of African Americans to conform to middle-class understandings of family and appropriate sexual behavior has hardly diminished since its origins during the ante-bellum period.”⁶⁷ Through precise, devastating readings of the 1965 policy brief known as the Moynihan Report and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Jenkins outlines the conditions that make intimacy doubly vulnerable for Black people. I bring her analysis to bear on the conversation on neoliberalism as context for why such punitive discourses of Black pathological sexuality circulate so steadily to this day.

Toward this end, I also return to the Moynihan Report, or more formally, “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,” authored by sociology professor and Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and published by the U.S. Department of Labor. While much

ink⁶⁸ has been spilled on critiques and defenses of the Moynihan Report and its ideological ilk that blame a host of social problems, from poverty to crime to violence, on the ostensible reproductive and domestic failings of poor Black women, it is not a conversation that has intersected much with those on neoliberalism.⁶⁹ However, I find in the Moynihan Report perhaps the clearest symptomatic distillation of the shifts in technologies of power that mark the past four decades, that era that has been called neoliberal. To restate, my definition of neoliberalism is as an epistemological response on the part of global racial capital to the growing illegitimacy of then-dominant modes of social relation, based on exclusion from institutions of citizenship and nationalism: Jim Crow segregation as the aftermath of chattel slavery, franchise colonialism, and settler colonialism. Worldwide movements for decolonization, desegregation, and self-determination challenged the viability of these social relations and the discourses of white supremacy and Western civilizations that subtended them. The response, of which the Moynihan Report is an exemplary case, was to not only invest racialized communities with what Foucault has called deductive or repressive power but also induct such communities into affirmative, productive biopower.⁷⁰ Neoliberalism thus can be characterized by the coexistence of diverse forms of power—both repressive and affirmative, necropolitical and biopolitical—at the same time.

In describing neoliberalism in this way, as a change in the distribution of respectability in response to the crises in racial capital as marked by the social movements of the post–World War II period, I contribute to contemporary scholarship on the nature of global capital.⁷¹ I do so by re-narrating a shift that has been explained as instigated by everything from changes in communication technology, to a crisis among Cold War superpowers, to the development of the atom bomb; in my re-narration, I center mid-twentieth-century movements for liberation.

As can be seen in the Moynihan Report, a crucial element of incorporating Black communities in the United States into biopolitics was to constitute them as populations requiring help and care (by narrating them as presently deviant), and in particular, help in attaining reproductive and domestic respectability and security. Access (or lack thereof) to

gendered and sexual respectability becomes the dividing line between those who are rendered deviant, immoral, and thus precarious and those whose value to capital has been secured through a variety of norms. The invitation to respectability becomes a way of regulating and punishing those populations it purports to help; thus, in the neoliberal moment, “care” becomes the conduit for violence, both epistemological and physical. The Moynihan Report warns of a grim future for African Americans that might not improve despite the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts because of the “breakdown in the Negro family.” This “breakdown,” by which Moynihan meant the high rates of mother-headed or “matriarchal” families without the presence of Black men, produces a variety of ills, which he described in the infamous phrase “tangle of pathologies.” Strengthening the Black family by encouraging patriarchally organized, heteroreproductive domesticity thus must be a priority for “national action,” according to the report.

While this aspect of the Moynihan Report is quite familiar, other less-analyzed parts of the report make explicit certain connections that we today might have forgotten—that is, that the regulation of Black female sexuality as ostensibly a means of bringing Black communities into the fold of respectable national culture was motivated by the United States’ precarious position in a Cold War struggle that became split along racial lines. The report opens:

It is in no way a matter of chance that the nonviolent tactics and philosophy of the movement, as it began in the South, were consciously adopted from the techniques by which the Congress Party undertook to free the Indian nation from British colonial rule. It was not a matter of chance that the Negro movement caught on fire in America at just that moment when the nations of Africa were gaining their freedom. Nor is it merely incidental that the world should have fastened its attention on events in the United States at a time when the possibility that the nations of the world will divide along color lines seems suddenly not only possible, but even imminent.

(Such racist views have made progress within the Negro community itself—which can hardly be expected to be immune to a virus that is

endemic in the white community. The Black Muslim doctrines, based on total alienation from the white world, exert a powerful influence. On the far left, the attraction of Chinese Communism can no longer be ignored.)

It is clear that what happens in America is being taken as a sign of what can, or must, happen in the world at large.⁷²

Moynihan situates struggles for desegregation and civil rights (what he calls the “Negro movement”) within the context of decolonization worldwide (including India and “the nations of Africa”), highlighting the internationalist imaginaries of U.S.-based movements (e.g., the potential influence of “Black Muslims” and “Chinese Communism”) as a threat to U.S. global power, or in other words, the United States’ influence over the terms of resource extraction and capital accumulation within the new world order.⁷³

The Moynihan Report thus makes perfectly evident its own context within a field of power that was reacting to the seismic shifts in social relations caused by the movements for liberation of the twentieth century. The Moynihan Report’s focus on what Sara Clarke Kaplan calls the “Black reproductive”⁷⁴ and its fixation with regulating Black female sexuality is no accident, but is symptomatic of a shift away from earlier social relations that produced racialized subjects as *universally* exempt from normative modes of reproduction, intimacy, and sexuality.⁷⁵ Instead, the Moynihan Report redistributed value and vulnerability *within* racialized communities. This did not diminish the allure of what Jenkins calls the “salvific wish” in Black culture, a strategy of protecting Black communities from the violences legitimated by narratives of Black sexual deviance by ascribing to propriety and respectability. Instead, the salvific wish became incorporated as a neoliberal mechanism through which categories of the devalued and unprotectable were produced, categories into which Black populations were predominantly relegated. Jenkins observes that the “productive (or affirmative) nature of power exists precisely at those moments when African Americans participate in their own victimization through the project of self-imposed sexual and familial propriety.”⁷⁶

The establishment of white liberal state policy and the conditional invitation of certain formerly marginalized populations into respectability

has been bolstered by, and has enabled, a discourse of rationality that equates capitalist development with political and social freedom. As I go on to elaborate in chapter 2, this invitation into respectability enables the more efficient extraction of surplus value in forms both economic and affective from populations rendered marginal and deviant. Such invitations to respectability have had different manifestations and effects in different parts of the globe. The United States (and other white settler colonial states) has “reformed” itself along the lines of what Jodi Melamed has called “a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity whose driving force has been a series of successive official or state-recognized U.S. antiracisms,”⁷⁷ or the development of white liberalism as an official state policy. This state-recognized nominal antiracism has the effect of eliding and thus exacerbating, rather than mitigating, state violence against racialized populations, becoming the foundational part of neoliberal disavowal. At the same time, a neocolonial world order contains formerly colonized territories (now nation-states in the wake of decolonization) through international debt and structural adjustment on the one hand, and militarism, increasingly narrated as a form of humanitarianism, on the other.⁷⁸ Liberal feminism and normative notions of respectable heteropatriarchal sexuality are now crucial to legitimating such relations of domination.⁷⁹ The process by which capital is extracted from the poor and redistributed upward, called “structural adjustment” in countries of the Global South, is often accomplished through what is called “privatization” in North America and Western Europe. A transnational Asian “model minority” and a new Black bourgeoisie, for example, can only now exist because of U.S. militarism in Asia, on the one hand, and the rendering surplus of poor people of color, warehoused in prisons or punitively regulated through welfare “reform,” on the other.⁸⁰ Alongside such brutal demonstrations of state violence, scholars have noted that NGOs and what has been termed the “non-profit industrial complex” are crucial to managing populations marked as deviant, and demonstrate the dispersal of regulation and governance beyond the literal apparatuses of the state.⁸¹

In this context, respectability, increasingly defined by the attainment of monogamous couplehood, normative reproductivity, and consumerist subjectivity, has become indispensable for determining those who are

protected and those who are precarious.⁸² Given this, we can now recognize the Moynihan Report as an exemplary document of neoliberalism. Roderick Ferguson has usefully situated the Moynihan Report as producing a discourse that legitimates the regulation of working-class women of color within a new global division of labor that took shape within neocolonial and neoliberal political economies based increasingly on a feminized proletariat and on domestic and service labor.⁸³ In conjunction with this argument, we can read the report as performing a *rhetoric* of care for Black communities that renders such communities more deviant and punishable.

In the face of this, what it means to struggle is immensely complicated. Fortunately, we have a rich tradition of thought and practice that attends to the ways in which, as Patricia Williams attests, “that life is complicated is a fact of great analytical importance.”⁸⁴ This tradition, upon which I rely heavily, has been called “women of color feminism,”⁸⁵ and this practice of engaging the complexity of life has been called “intersectionality.” It is in this context of neoliberalism that I reconsider the interventions of women of color feminism and queer of color critique, as articulated in activism, theory, and cultural production. Women of color feminism emerged out of this moment to articulate the violences of biopolitical incorporation. The major intervention of women of color feminism is not only the critique of the exclusion of minoritized populations from protectable life, but a critique of the dialectic of life/death that structures political modernity. I began this book with Lorde as an exemplary model of all three, but Lorde is one of a number of theorists and artists since the 1960s who have taken on these particular configurations of power. In challenging the politics of respectability, women of color feminists make a crucial intervention into the foundations of neoliberalism. Women of color feminism’s engagement with the liberation movements of the post–World War II era thus not only provides a localized critique of the masculinism and sexism of minority nationalist movements and of the racism and classism of mainstream white feminism but also offers an analysis of a broad historical process that was incorporating those elements of nationalist and feminist movements into a new modality of power at that very moment.

Of course, women of color feminism itself was not impervious to marginalization and containment, as in the late 1980s and 1990s, when the rise of multiculturalism misread women of color feminism as espousing a celebratory definition of “difference.” Referencing an even earlier era, Nick Mitchell demonstrates that the category “woman of color,” or “Third World women,” rather than creating a barrier to the domestication and management of feminism by the academy, enabled the institutionalization of women’s studies departments and programs within universities.⁸⁶ Women of color feminism, often referred to obliquely through the invocation of “intersectionality,” can thus be interpreted narrowly only as this defanged version, and dismissed as identitarian, antitheoretical, essentialist, or irrelevant.⁸⁷ I would argue that the techniques of neoliberal multiculturalism in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s to incorporate, minimalize, misread, or neglect powerful antiracist, feminist, and queer critiques was honed precisely against “women of color” as a category. This book is a part of ongoing efforts by a number of scholars and activists to challenge such revisionist misreadings.⁸⁸ Returning to Jenkins, the literary texts that she examines in her study are just a part of a larger field of political and discursive projects against neoliberal deployments of respectability as the legitimating principle for the distribution of life and death. We might think of such disparate but connected modes of Black feminist and women of color feminist activism as welfare reform, prison abolition, anti-sterilization campaigns, gender violence, and other such struggles as refusing the “salvific wish” for respectability and placing at its center the most devalued and non-normative subjects.

In this way, I understand what Roderick Ferguson has called “queer of color critique” as a related and coincident formation to women of color feminism.⁸⁹ If we think of “queer” not as an identity category but as a politics that eschews gender and sexual normativity, we must include not only those subjects who engage in same-sex sexual practices but also “a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires”⁹⁰—in other words, the “welfare queens” as well as the “punks” and “bull-daggers” of Cathy Cohen’s foundational essay.⁹¹ The central figures and texts of those we call women of color or Black feminist—Audre Lorde,

Barbara Smith, Cherríe Moraga, the Combahee River Collective, and so on—explicitly self-identify as lesbian and name a challenge to heterosexism and homophobia as central tenets of their political and intellectual practice.

Life and Death at the Foundations of Modernity

These conditions, in which adherence to and deviance from criteria of value (meaning life for some at the expense of others), in particular those constituted through reproductive respectability, are not new, but comprise the contradictions of the modern political order at its most logical extension. We know from the work of Michel Foucault that the modern political order is defined by exactly its politicization of life and death. In Foucault's analysis, it is differentiated from the earlier regime by its claim to protect and proliferate the lives of its subjects. Foucault observes that, beginning in the eighteenth century, modern political power became legitimated not only by its right to kill as in the earlier formation of "sovereignty" but also by a new biopolitical function to "make live," which meant taking up the proliferation and protection of life as its responsibility.⁹² Giorgio Agamben extends this idea to argue that, by creating a category of political life that is different from the simply biological or physical state of life, the modern state produces a new form of "bare life," in which one is physically alive, but one's life is politically unprotectable.⁹³ Agamben traces the implications of the separation between biological and political life in Western politics through the figure of the *homo sacer* in Roman law, the subject who can be killed but can not be sacrificed to the gods. In this figure, "human life is included in the juridical order . . . solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, its capacity to be killed)."⁹⁴ Both theorists thus level devastating critiques of liberal claims that the state exists to preserve life, instead demonstrating the ways in which the modern political sphere's creation of a category of protectable life implies a category of unprotectable life. For Foucault, for example, the very move to protect and proliferate life allows it to more efficiently disperse death through the *withdrawal* of this protection.⁹⁵ In Agamben's formulation, the once obscure and exceptional political figure of the *homo sacer* and its corresponding status of "bare life" comes to characterize the

function of the entire modern political order, with the Holocaust as its exemplary event. As such, the only allowable and legible goal or aim in this formation of the political order is to make claims on life, or, in other words, to act in the preservation of one's own life, which is always at the expense of others'.

While the uneven and limited extension of life to *certain* sectors of racialized, gendered, and sexualized populations that were previously unrecognizable as protectable life is a new maneuver, such a maneuver simply reconfirms the modern political order that makes the protection of life its primary legitimation. That is, this particular relation between life and death is not new, but is utterly commensurate with the structuring binary of racial capitalist modernity, which captured the symbolics of life and death such that they are not simply *biological* states of existence or nonexistence, but are powerful constructs that connect these physical states with political agency, epistemological legibility, and ontological coherence, or the lack thereof. When the social movements of the post-World War II period challenged the relationship between race and death, they exposed and addressed the foundational dialectic that structures modern politics: a disavowal of the ways in which the political protection of life is always predicated on the dispersal of death. The neoliberal incorporation of difference simply responded to this challenge by rendering uneven the relationship between death and racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference, but in so doing, reconfirmed the underlying relationship between life and death.

This process whereby the lives of some are protected at the expense of others is thus inherently, primarily, and always a racial and colonial project, a condition that scholars such as Orlando Patterson and Achille Mbembe have described. As Mbembe has observed, the condition of possibility for the European political entities's claims to protect life is to displace onto the colony the death-dealing upon which such entities depend.⁹⁶ Mbembe writes, "All manifestations of war and hostility that had been marginalized by a European legal imaginary find a place to reemerge in the colonies."⁹⁷ In other words, for Foucault, biopolitics produces death through the withdrawal of protection of life. Mbembe reminds us that the biopolitical order in Europe is dependent not on simply a withdrawal

of protection of life, but the outright production of death in the colonies. In a similar vein, Patterson demonstrates that the category of physical life that cannot be politically protected (what Agamben calls “bare life”) was invented through slavery. He observes that enslavement is characterized by a condition of “social death” wherein the enslaved exist socially only through the master; in other words, in Patterson’s formulation, the *slave* is the paradigmatic figure that allows for the separation of physical and social life (and the corresponding category of “social death”).⁹⁸ While slavery as a form of social death exists in many societies, the difference between Western and non-Western societies is an epistemological one, in that Western societies *disavow* the dependence relationship between the two existential states of enslavement and freedom, social death and social life.⁹⁹ This disavowal allows such political imaginaries to erase its racial and colonial brutalities and thus legitimate its self-definition as defenders of freedom and protectors of life. If the mode of legitimation for modern power is based on a disavowal of its power to inflict death in its very protection of life, this process is intimately dependent on producing such sites of disavowal through colonization and racialization. The histories of race and colonialism thus best exemplify the operations of modern power described by Agamben and Foucault, but are displaced by their focus on Europe.

While Patterson and Mbembe helpfully provide a critique of the blind spots of Western political theory, feminist and queer analyses best describe the contradictory structure of political modernity, which is organized not only through being the structuring exception but also by eradication through incorporation.¹⁰⁰ This is because the structure of eradication through incorporation is best exemplified by racialized reproduction and the related contradictions of consanguinity. As I have already observed, the Moynihan Report is an exemplary document of neoliberalism; the emphasis on racialized reproduction is not unique to the neoliberal moment, but subtends political modernity itself. Agamben argues that the “decisive event of modernity”¹⁰¹ is the moment when physical life becomes politicized through its *entrance* into the political sphere *as that which is excluded*, in a state of inclusion as the figure of exclusion, in particular, from the paternal consanguinity that underlies Western law.¹⁰²

However, as Scott Morgensen observes in a brilliant feminist critique of Agamben, this definition of bare life as “an exception (which is simultaneously an inclusion)”¹⁰³ in actuality best describes a condition that Agamben does not account for: the gendered and sexual histories of settler colonialism.¹⁰⁴ Morgenson writes that such histories constitute that which is “unimaginable in [the] theory of biopower.”¹⁰⁵ Settler colonial states, Morgensen argues, eradicated Native peoples not simply by excluding Native communities from the patriarchal consanguinity of national belonging through outright physical killing. It also did so by forcibly making Native women and their children “non-Native” in the eyes of the patriarchal state, by coercing Native women into consanguineous relations through rape and forced intermarriage, and through the foreclosure of Indian tribal identity under nineteenth-century Canadian law for Native women who out-married and for their children. In this way, “Western law incorporates Indigenous peoples into the settler nation by simultaneously pursuing their elimination.”¹⁰⁶

Morgensen describes this positioning of Indigenous populations within modern Western law as that of the “incompletely consanguineous,”¹⁰⁷ a term that I find immensely useful as a descriptor for the ways in which modernity is predicated on the disavowal of its racialized, colonized, and gendered conditions of possibility. Black feminists, for example, have described the gendered and racialized processes that have constituted Black women in the modern capitalist system as a kind of *forced* consanguinity that does not guarantee the protections of the state, but instead consigns Black women to the condition of “that zero degree of social conceptualization.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Hortense Spillers goes so far as to attest that “trying to understand how the confusions of consanguinity worked becomes the project, because the outcome goes far to explain the rule of gender and its application to the African female in captivity.”¹⁰⁹ As I will go on to examine in more detail in chapter 3, scholars such as Spillers, along with Hazel Carby, Jennifer Morgan, and others have theorized the implications of the property system of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chattel slave societies in which enslaved peoples were definitionally unable to inherit, or, in other words, were outside of consanguinity, *except* as they inherited their enslaved status from their mothers.¹¹⁰ Through this

principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, enslaved women were incorporated into the structures of inheritance for the precise purpose of disinheriting them and their children, for constituting them as exemplary exclusions.¹¹¹ When taking into consideration the *gendered* and *sexualized* nature of racialization, settler colonialism, and enslavement, we can see that the condition of bare life was constituted through a process that did not place these populations simply *outside* of the paternal consanguinity of the law, but by what Spillers has described as the “powerful ‘No,’ the structuring exception.”¹¹² Spillers’s definition renders the Black *female* enslaved subject the most exemplary representative of the contradictory nature of political modernity.

Listening to the Dead: Memory and Haunting in the Neoliberal Nexus

As we have seen through such documentary traces as the Moynihan Report, these racialized and gendered contradictions of political modernity are not curious historical remnants, but rather deeply structure our moment. Critics of neoliberalism have astutely observed that the “neo” in neoliberalism falsely implies that it constitutes a complete break from the past, which of course replicates the very disavowal of neoliberalism. In my view, our moment be characterized neither as a clean break from the past nor by a direct cause-and-effect relationship between past and present. The relationship between past and present is best described as haunting, in which certain elements of the past—and therefore, the present—are repressed and disavowed, but never entirely or successfully. Avery Gordon famously calls haunting “what it feels like to be the object of a social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity’s violence.”¹¹³ Neoliberalism can be seen as that social totality, a totality that is always paradoxically incomplete *because* it is vexed by its phantoms, the trace or residue of that which can never be fully erased, yet cannot speak. Because neoliberalism is so centrally a refusal to recognize its own violence, and a stubborn pretense that the racial, gendered, and sexual basis for the distribution of protected life and premature death has been remedied and leveled, it is structured by a deep disavowal. It holds out the promise of protection from premature death—most exemplarily in the form of reproductive respectability—in exchange for complicity

with this pretense. It's a difficult—impossible—bargain to refuse, given the stakes; it is what Gayatri Spivak has called, in a different context, that which “we cannot not want.”¹¹⁴

Neoliberalism's erasure of the connections between the violences of the past and those of the present gives it its power. Saidiya Hartman beautifully articulates the tragedy of the erasure of this connection between past and present. In an essay about the impossible desire to know the female experience of the Middle Passage, Hartman writes, “We stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand. We only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her.”¹¹⁵ All we have left of this girl—who is of course not just a girl, but is in Avery Gordon's words “a social figure”¹¹⁶—is what the archive holds, and because the archive is constituted of the documents of those who enslaved her, “the archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property.”¹¹⁷ Any narration of the past is thus impossible not because of our distance from it, but because the contours of our present depend on its erasure. Hartman writes, “I too live in a time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it . . . the perilous conditions of the present establish the link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized.”¹¹⁸ In our moment, the exacerbated dispersal of racialized, gendered, and sexualized death is erased and legitimated by the pretense that such unequal relationships to precarity are entirely in and of the past.

Yet if there is anything we have learned from the many beautiful theories of haunting, it is that this pretense is impossible, for the forcibly forgotten dead are never content to stay buried. If the archive is “a death sentence, a tomb,” then what this book tries to add is that death is not only an end, but also a beginning, that death can be proliferative and that we can converse with ghosts. As Lorde implies when she says that Malcolm's message was “amplified”¹¹⁹ by his death, and as she enacts when she situates his legacy as multiple, complex, and proliferative, death produces a variety of (im)possibilities. Hartman herself says as much when

she goes on to say, “I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story about *two girls* capable of retrieving what remains dormant—the purchase or claim of their lives on the present—without committing further violence in my own act of narration.”¹²⁰ Her way of enacting this desire is to “tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling,”¹²¹ a contradictory project that I would call aligned with the project of *difference* as Lorde and others theorized it.

For while our own desire resurrects these ghosts, and we thus are implicated whenever we tell the stories that we want to tell, we are also haunted by what these ghosts themselves demand that we speak. As Grace M. Cho observes, “The haunting effect is produced not so much by the original trauma as by the fact of its being kept hidden.”¹²² The repression, the disavowal, can never fully succeed; instead, it produces the haunting, which disorganizes any narrative even as it demands it. As such, if the dead speak, they do so in a way that simultaneously speaks and gestures to the impossibility of speaking, in ways that hold in tension these contradictory forces simultaneously, what I’ve earlier described as “difference.”

Each chapter of this book thus identifies neoliberalism’s modes of erasure and arrays cultural texts as ways of remembering—albeit in fragments and riven with ellipses—what neoliberalism attempts to forget: that is, that the protection of life is predicated on the dispersal of death. I start in chapter 1 by situating radical and revolutionary movements and their contradictory relationship to the life/death binary inherent to liberal modernity. In this chapter, I provide a genealogy of Chicana feminist responses to the ways in which certain minority nationalist elements of these movements mobilize a demand for a particular affect of mourning as a way to discipline feminist and queer critiques. I connect these Chicana feminist responses to two literary texts—Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Revolt of the Cockroach People* and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*—by situating the deployment of literary form (in particular, irony) as a mode through which these texts articulate the contradictory imperatives of recognizing death while valuing life. Through the use of irony—and, in turn, the refusal to be ironic—Acosta’s and Castillo’s texts *both* mourn

death in ways that align with minority nationalist affect *and* humorously puncture an overinflated sense of nationalist outrage over death when that outrage is used as a mode of discipline and control. *Difference* as aesthetic form inheres in these texts in the simultaneous existence of mourning and skepticism about mourning.

In chapter 2, I move to analyses of works by Audre Lorde and Cherríe Moraga, which likewise interrogate the moralism that infuses those aspects of social movements that become invested in respectability and legibility. Since neoliberal disavowal of gendered, sexual, and racialized precarity is so centrally predicated on respectability as the only avenue to security, a refusal of respectability is a powerful repudiation of neoliberal modes of power. I thus posit Lorde and Moraga as paradigmatic of woman of color feminist / queer of color theories of the onset of neoliberalism in the 1980s, which I argue is marked by the exacerbated extraction of surplus value from populations, modes of surplus value based not only on the economic but also the affective. Extending my engagement with Lorde in the introduction, I read several key essays from *Sister Outsider* to highlight the ways in which Lorde theorizes the importance of affect in enabling devaluation and abandonment in a neoliberal economy of surplus. In other words, Lorde argues that an economy dependent on devalued people uses affects like terror and loathing to create them; her response is to likewise wield affect as a source of power. I connect Lorde's politics of affect with Moraga's refusal to be morally defensible on any terms, whether normative or radical, as a means of critiquing respectability and legibility. I read two of Moraga's texts—*The Last Generation*, a collection of poetry and prose, and *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*—for how they engage with generationality and reproduction. In *The Last Generation*, Moraga theorizes writing as a mode of historical transmission for queer women like herself who are not biologically reproductive and thus cannot claim motherhood as a mode of gendered valorization. While her subsequent book *Waiting in the Wings*, which documents her pregnancy and motherhood, might seem to contradict her claims in *The Last Generation*, Moraga documents the ways in which, as a queer Chicana butch, her experience of motherhood is always one of nonnormativity and inadequacy.

Because reproductive respectability is, as I have argued, such an important mode by which political and social legibility and value becomes sutured to literal physical life, chapter 3 extends this analysis to examine queer possibilities and futurities that might emerge from Black feminism's theorization of reproduction and the queerness of what Orlando Patterson has called natal alienation. In particular, I interrogate why a slew of texts from the 1980s and 1990s, including Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora*, Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston*, Inge Blackman's *B.D. Women*, and Rodney Evans's *Brother to Brother*, look to the blues and jazz aesthetic of improvisation as a way of imagining a connection to foreclosed pasts and futures marked by contingency. Improvisation, which has been theorized as both invention and tradition, is an apt metaphor and method for describing the ways in which Blackness has been constituted through a simultaneously forced and foreclosed relationship to reproductive normativity. In this chapter, improvisation is my example of difference.

Chapter 4 meditates on how such a theory of queer reproduction might help us engage with the material and epistemological violences of the university, particularly as they manifest around the exclusion and extermination of Black feminist lives alongside the institutionalization of Black feminism. Following the lead of Barbara Christian, this chapter asks, what happens when academic generationality is interrupted by both cutting off of future generations of Black feminists through the abolishment of affirmative action and the premature death of Black feminists in the academy? This chapter examines the university itself as a biopolitical institution, and finds in Black feminism a vision for a different relationship to knowledge, futurity, and the political. Finally, in a brief epilogue to the book, I return to the questions that instigated this study in the first place, questions about the ethics of raising the dead, of inhabiting a temporality of progression and return and simultaneity, and of our responsibility to those whose deaths enable our lives.

In turning to women of color feminism as a framework and theory and to cultural production that remembers the continuing racialized, colonized, and gendered violences that neoliberalism disavows, this proj-

ect means to find something else besides despair or disavowal when faced with the ubiquity of death. To end this introduction where I began, I turn again to Lorde, who sets us on a task (in its simplest terms) to take seriously her characterization of “how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be.”¹²³ The pages that follow take inspiration from Lorde and bend toward the project of pursuing a complex liberation without any guarantee of a certain or knowable future.