

Chapter 11

“It’s Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel”

Democratic Living and the Radical Reimagining of Old Worlds¹

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When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.

—Ethiopian proverb

We don’t look to be ruled!

—Barack Obama²

INTRODUCTION

Every field of inquiry, regardless of its ideological positioning, holds a set of questions which, more often than not, inform the deep structure of disciplinary thought, demarcating the thinkable from the unthinkable, the thought from the unthought.³ Western philosophy, for instance, asks, What is the meaning of life? Or, what is the good life? Political scientists, on the other hand, ask, What is the ideal form of government? Or, how should we be governed? Indeed, political science seems particularly uninterested in how we should live or how we should be. Aside from freely casting judgment about why some lives matter more than others, political science as a field is singularly interested in how we shall be governed.⁴ It is, therefore, ironic that the president of the United States, as the chief spokesperson for the American empire, drew attention in his rhetorical flourishes to the very democratic impulse that his own government has sought to suppress, even if his administration inherited many of the structural mechanics from previous administrations. It is also remarkable that American political science, still largely informed by social contract and rational choice theories, almost always assumes that the people “consent” to

be ruled. This, indeed, is the grand narrative of the fictitious social contract.⁵ Classical social contract theorists, from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, however they differed in the specificities of their fiction, each conflated the transition to civil society with the desire to be ruled. Thus one could say that no other question concerns modern, political thought more than governability.

That singular obsession with how we shall be governed should be a cause of great concern, especially for those whom Sara Ahmed calls “willful subjects”⁶—those who do not look to be ruled, as well as those who actively refuse to be ruled, including making themselves unavailable for governing. Indeed, democratic living, as a way of collectivizing, concerns itself not with how we should be governed, but with how we should live and relate to one another.⁷ In an era characterized by neoliberalism, wars, and empires, not to mention extreme wealth inequality, mass incarceration, police homicides, and deportations, livability may be predicated on democratic living, a praxis that can provide an alternative mode of being and of conducting critical social inquiries, especially about the future of Black radical thought and praxis.⁸

This essay builds on Cedric Robinson’s critique in *The Terms of Order* of the political and political authority and revises James Scott’s treatment of “the art of not being governed”⁹ to draw attention to the multiple ways in which ordinary people and communities resist governing by state and non-state rule-making projects. Historically runaway slaves looked to the North Star not to be ruled by it, but to use its illumination as a guide to freedom. The practice of marronage is embodied democratic living (however momentarily) and the willful attempt to resist being governed. Through community building, where the terror and violence of racial capitalism and white supremacy were temporarily suspended, free men and women negotiated their own terms of living, and in the process, negated the terms of order.¹⁰ Following Avery F. Gordon’s suggestion that we need to “combine complex and acute social analysis with a vision of how some people have lived and do live today that is a model for how all of us could live,” and Cedric Robinson’s insistence that marronage (flight and fugitivity) proves the existence of Black radical consciousness and praxis, I look to the willful refusal to be governed as confirmation of democratic sensibility.¹¹ This sensibility, I argue, is an antidote to the chronic state

addiction that seems to affect many social and especially political theorists, and provides an imperative for thinking about and learning from Black radical thought and praxis.

A DETOUR: STATE ADDICTION AND UNGOVERNABILITY

Democratic living constitutes life forms that actively seek independence from rule making. This ungovernability from below constantly threatens the unjust peace of dominant orders, including settler colonialism, racial capitalism, white supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy.¹² While contestations among the elites are frequent, they do not represent ungoverning and are quite different from the active refusal to be governed from below. The federal government shutdown, out-of-control police and prison guards, and unregulated hyper-speculative finance, for instance, are not ungoverning at the top. Instead, they are a form of governance that incites instability as a consequence of its incompetence and delinquency. In contrast, ungovernability from below represents the inability of state and other dominions to assert control over subjects; the ungovernable, therefore, are those individuals and communities that render themselves unavailable for governing. In this way, the refusal to be governed is at the core of popular resistance to all forms of dominions.¹³

The famed, British-trained, American political scientist Richard Rose famously stated, “Analytically, the concept of ungovernability is a nonsense.”¹⁴ Rose argued that, first, “the question is *not whether* we shall be governed *but how*,” second, “ungovernability can only be a temporary phase of anarchy and of civil war,”¹⁵ and, third, “for better or worse,” being governed is a *natural* state, and being ungoverned is an *aberration* that needs to be corrected. This view naturalizes the idea of order and norms political authority as rational. Governability is thus ontological: we are the way we are governed, and being ungoverned is nonbeing. State evasion and other forms of avoidance of being governed are deviant behavior that necessitates disciplining, from reconditioning to total annihilation.

Ideationally then, the ungovernable has been conscripted as a problem-subject, and one that needs reform. Sociologists, for instance, often focus on problem-people and communities, those who have been normed and scaled as the gendered and/or racialized other. At one time or another, indigenous people, Arabs, Mexicans, Muslims, Africans, single women, and LGBTQ

people have been among the “other,” who have been thought of as problem people in need of being governed, tamed, subdued, and, in certain circumstances, annihilated altogether. It is presumed and argued that these ungovernable cannot be reasoned with; they are evil and will only understand the language of force.¹⁶ Similarly, certain spaces, especially urban spaces, are seen as ungovernable. The West Side of Phoenix, Harlem, Cabrini Green, Watts, Detroit, large swaths of the Global South, and the entirety of the Third World are problem peoples and spaces because they are ungovernable, appearing together as a an entire cosmology, a fearsome Black planet. The poor, Black people of Ferguson, Chicago, East Los Angeles, and Harlem—and anywhere there are ungovernable lives—are problem subjects, especially in communities where Black lives matter. The rational choice that follow entails everything the capacious apparatuses and technologies of violence have to offer, including “evacuation,” mass incarceration, deportation, tanks, guns, tear gas, and surveillance. In the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown and the ensuing protests, Ferguson became an ungovernable problem-space, with the majority of its people and even its police force deemed troublesome. Former attorney general Eric Holder was regularly dispatched to troubled/ungovernable regions, enforcing coherence on the progressively implausible imperial narrative about American exceptionalism.¹⁷ Then there is the frequent and increasingly amplified speechifying by the first Black president in defense of liberal democracies and their attendant ideologies, justifying the perpetual wars on the troublesome Middle East or South Asia or North Africa.

All the while, in political science, ungovernability scandalously continues to be dismissed as analytical nonsense. While the framing of the ungovernable is used, with great frequency and utility, to cast and organize people and lands, to justify and wage permanent wars and even genocide, in political science—the field tasked with helping us understand how we come by these policies—its mandarins persist in their views that ungovernability is conceptually nonsensical. This scandalous intent suggests an ideography that owes its pathos to and possessive investments on an epistemological ordering that relies on state addiction. This affliction is a pathology that renders its sufferers entirely dependent on the state for sensibility and intelligence. The symptoms are many and obvious: most prominent is the tendency to conflate government with governing, authority with leadership,

and rule with submission.¹⁸ State-centric analytics commit addicts to a certain notion of the state, even to the extent of the state becoming the very fiction that we fear.¹⁹

Take for instance the eminent architect of deconstructionism, Jacques Derrida, who conflated sovereignty with transcendence. According to Derrida, “sovereignty is in a certain manner un-historical, it is a contract made with a history contracting itself into the punctiform event of an exceptional decision without temporal and historical expansion. Thus sovereignty also withdraws itself from language.”²⁰ So it is: timeless and outside of history; moreover, there is, “no sovereignty without violence, without the force of the stronger, the justification of which—as the right of the strongest—consists in its power over everything.”²¹ The sovereign has power *over everything*, including life itself.

Rather than imagining the future in terms of democratic living, sensibilities, and formations of justice, state addicts leave us dependent on the state for means of expressions and terms of engagement. Their imaginary domains²² are thus entirely dependent on the state’s projections. The state’s memory becomes our own memory. Just as Orlando Patterson’s social death thesis fallaciously endows racial capitalism and white supremacy as cultural progenitors of Black life, so state analytics such as necropolitics²³ render life *sans* state, more often than not, chaotic, miserable and inauthentic.²⁴ Within the same frame of social death, as David Brion Davis has argued, Black enslaved people have “no legitimate, independent being, no place in the cosmos *except* as an instrument of [their] master’s will.”²⁵ Similarly, life *sans* state, as Hobbes declared in the *Leviathan*, is “evil, brutish and short.”

Yet, empirically and intuitively, we know better. If rules are not about norms but about discovering new forms of life, as Giorgio Agamben argues in *The Highest Poverty*,²⁶ then, in thinking about the modern state and rule making, the ungovernable and ungovernability are theoretical spaces that can help us think about life and the politics of living wherein ordinary people and communities assert their own renderings of life and living rather than those of the state, capital and other dominions’ terms of order. As suggested by the Ethiopian proverb, it is prudent to recognize those instances when subversion disguises itself as submission or obedience

because those who are oppressed cannot always exchange “a slap for a slap, an insult for an insult,” tear gas for tear gas.²⁷

Just as sounds are not always heard and fights are not always open, in the shadow of the real and fictive narrations of governmentality and the awesome powers of the state, there have always lurked individuals and communities embodying governing’s unsuccessful inscriptions *and* conscriptions. Individuals and communities remain frequently unscripted and unimpressed by the state, even as they live under constant surveillance and suppression. Life goes on, sometimes independently, all the while circumscribed by the so-called technologies of governing.²⁸ In short, the analytical problem with ungovernability is not about empirical verification, but about the epistemological investments in political order and a modern ontological commitment to governability.²⁹ This commitment to ruling conceals the fear of the ungovernable and ungovernability from below. So even as we now understand that power is diffuse and relational (à la Foucault),³⁰ state addiction ensures that; the state remains at the fulcrum of our understanding of political power³¹ and state reification persists³²—its promiscuous genealogy, its prodigious technologies, its capacious fantasies, and its monstrous realities.³³

Within the context of an ever-growing global war on terror, the resurrection of works by the Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt has granted little relief from our state addiction.³⁴ If anything, his intervention further ensures that the specter of the elusive state is finally vanquished. In its place is a state more capable than the technologies it possesses, more intelligible than the apparatuses it readied, and more autonomous than the subjects it has claimed.³⁵ Students of the Black Radical Tradition, however, are familiar with this phenomenon. Just as “every slave holder seeks to impress his slave with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory, and of his own almost [limitless] power,”³⁶ so, too, it seems, is the case with other dominions, including discursive ones. It is also the case that slaves did run away, and many ran away successfully!

Because the state presupposes the ungovernable, it points to ungovernability as the reason for its existence and its capacious fantasies, justifying both, even as *its very existence produces insecurity*.³⁷ But life as we know it is quite complicated.³⁸ That we can speak of

“governmentality”—as the conduct of statehood and a logic of governing—is precisely because *complex personhood* throws up ungovernability every time the state and other dominions mess with it. Population management is critical to the conduct of government precisely because the people have to be made into governable subjects. People have to be rendered governable because they are ungoverned as a precondition, and therefore are not legible to the state. It is not that our presence and complex person-hood incite governing. Rather, governing incites its prodigious technologies as it encounters life *countering it or independent of it*. Governing is a possessively jealous beast!

So Rose, however famed he was, must be famously wrong! Throughout history, as noted, individuals and communities have always resisted modernity’s state-building and rule-making projects. In addition to anti-state-building projects such as those by the hill peoples of *Zomia* (as documented by James Scott³⁹), campaigns for bodily and community sovereignty, sometimes understood as forms of self-government, are well documented. These are often *in reaction to* or *in anticipation of* state-building and rule-making projects. Maroon societies are thus the embodiment of this refusal of rule making. James Scott characterizes the hill peoples as runaways and fugitives.⁴⁰ In addition to these state-evaders, however, there is the motley crew of rule-evaders who elude rules and rule making that are outside of the state’s prerogatives. Runaways, border-crossers, gender-benders, and general nonconformists are such examples of *failures of or resistance to* codified practices of governing. These legacies of resistance,⁴¹ replete with women and men actively countering the many faces, structures, and technologies of violence, cruelty, and death, cannot be dismissed simply as nonsense. While we may never be able to completely escape state addiction and it would be foolish to stop interrogating the state altogether, *the state’s memory, however, must not be our only memory*. Those who seek a more just present and future must, therefore, remain vigilantly skeptical of this affliction in order to recognize *how others live*, especially other genealogies and life forms that are independent of the imaginaries of the state and of capital.⁴²

In *The Terms of Order*, Cedric Robinson calls for a social philosophy that rejects *the political* as an “ordering principle,” maintaining that social order is folklore of the state, political order is an alien concept, and social

leaders, more often than not, are “capricious, incompetent and mischievous.”⁴³ To demystify social order is also to interrogate how in the West, the very idea of freedom is singularly wedded to the idea of an autonomous and rational individual, yet the collectivity always requires governing.⁴⁴ By pivoting to ungovernability instead of the naturalness of the need to be governed, we expose the unnaturalness and illegitimacy of order.

People rendering themselves unavailable for governing trips up the system, more often than not, leading to crises of authority and further exposing elite incompetence and delinquencies.⁴⁵ Be it in Ferguson or Syria, the ungovernable withhold both consent and legitimation, and, in the process, render the state and its allies more transparently incompetent, brutal, and imperial. How many years has it been since the United States commenced bombing the Middle East? How long has patriarchy desired to tame the proverbial shrew? The ungovernable is thus an empirical verification of the ever-present democratic sensibility, belying the state’s and its enablers’ claims of intelligence, overwhelming force, and the power of exception,⁴⁶ not to mention the various economic, political, racial, or biological fantasies and life forgeries. As *midwives of civil strife*, the ungovernable are intent on impeding and negating the unjust peace of the organized practices that render subjects governable.

What Toni Morrison calls “rememory,”⁴⁷ particularly fugitive rememory, is a necessary tool in the evaders’ and rebels’ quest for wholeness, or what Robinson calls “the preservation of [an] ontological totality.”⁴⁸ As Robinson insisted in *Black Movements in America*, running away and community building in the form of maroon societies are powerful counterexamples of the conceit of slavery—the claims of naturalness of people as property and the arrogant assumption that a people, any people, can be controlled, dominated totally. *Totalitarianism frequently fails for a reason.*

FLIGHT, FUGITIVITY, AND TIME TRAVELS

The act of running away, of building independent communities, is a catalogue of slavery as an unnatural political, economic, and moral ordering. Community building, rather than nation or state building, provides a way of knowing about forms of life outside the state and other dominions;

marronage is thus a historical verification of life outside of the terms of slavery as a natural order.

Richard Price recorded that “for more than four centuries, the communities formed by ... runaways dotted the fringes of plantation America, from Brazil to the southeastern United States, from Peru to the American Southwest.”⁴⁹ Not only does the existence of these communities “dispel the myth of the docile slave” and embody the “antithesis of all that slavery stood for,”⁵⁰ it embarrassed plantation owners and historians alike, because their very existence defies what the enemies of Black people sought to achieve⁵¹—the annihilation of Black life and consciousness of a people who are unavailable for servitude and governing.⁵² Even at the risk of severe and brutal punishments, such as having their Achilles tendons cut or being slowly roasted to death, by running away permanently and in the form of “repetitive [and] periodic truancy,”⁵³ these Black women and men revealed an idiom of resistance against those who sought to govern them totally.

Indeed, flight and fugitivity struck terror against slavery as an institution and a way of life.⁵⁴ At the height of slavery in the United States, white plantation owners were so frightful that they enlisted the medical establishment for help. Among those physicians, Samuel A. Cartwright invented a mental illness to explain the true cause of Black people running away from captivity. He called it “drapetomania,” from the Greek terms “drapetes” (runaways) and “mania” (madness).⁵⁵ At the 1881 meeting of the Medical Association of Louisiana, Cartwright claimed that, for the most part, Black people are “very easily governed” and that drapetomania was simply “unknown to our medical authorities.” The claim of an easily governed Black people harkened back to the view expressed by one Santo Domingo plantation owner in a letter that made its way to Paris on the eve of the Haitian Revolution in 1791: “The blacks are very obedient and will remain so always.”⁵⁶ Cartwright himself was confident that drapetomania could be “entirely prevented,” and prescribed “whipping the devil out of them” and removing both big toes to make running away impossible.

As Assata Shakur reminds us, “To become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave.”⁵⁷ Rememory thus necessarily enlists fugitive history and is critical to becoming liberatory subjects. Flight and fugitivity are very much part of our social imaginary and contemporary repertoire of

resistance. In 2003, Aaron Patterson received a full pardon for a wrongful death sentence in 1989. A group of teenage Black girls who had actively worked to free Patterson gave him tips about adjusting to life in Chicago in the twenty-first century (including how to deal with car alarms and cell phones). They also taught him the Harriet Tubman Code—it takes one to free one—to which members of the Prisoners of Conscience Committee, an organization co-founded by Fred Hampton Jr., adhere. Patterson joined the anti-death penalty campaign. Around the same time, Sophia Sorrentini, on her deathbed in Santurce, San Juan, the widow of the self-educated co-founder of the Socialist Party of Puerto Rico, claimed her identity as a “*Cimarrona*”—the Spanish term for a runaway slave. She made her children promise to preserve their family home as a “Cimmarona space,” free and shared as part of the larger campaign against displacement and in living memory of Santurce as a free town.⁵⁸ This reclaiming of Santurce as free or the redeployment of the Harriet Tubman Code belongs to the practice of activating and enlisting fugitive memories for campaigns of freedom and justice that rely on marronage as a tactic of liberation. In chains or in handcuffs, there seems to be an overwhelming urge to run away. Drapetomania, indeed!

Marronage in the twenty-first century takes myriad forms, including school truancy, gender nonconformity, border crossing, bench-warrant avoidance, and prison abolition. Remarkably, however, it also resembles marronage in the nineteenth, eighteenth, and seventeenth centuries. In other words, the propensity to run toward freedom and community building away from conditions of bondage has barely diminished within the context of persistent labor exploitation, hyper-surveillance and unending incarceration. As Kelley suggests, the desire to turn to flight and fugitivity (as a form of escapism) is familiar to Black radical imaginaries and especially when it shows up as a dimension of Afrofuturism—a hope, a wish for a Black futurity that is contra-distinct from the present.⁵⁹ Ironically, recent studies on slavery and its contemporary afterlife⁶⁰ typically treat slavery as a past occurrence, a historical phenomenon, not a living, extant one.⁶¹ Even those who have sought to learn from slavery’s inheritance in order to interrogate its contemporary afterlife (e.g. mass incarceration), frequently treat slavery as a metaphor or, at best, an extended paraphrase (e.g., prison abolitionism).⁶² Just as racism is still a thing, *however much we wish it*

away, slavery remains with us today. Moreover, contemporary slavery is empirically proven to be much more than a metaphor, and the new Jim Crow, it turns out, is not very new at all. Much more than mass incarceration, it is also a systematic campaign of disenfranchisement, economic marginalization, and financial entrapment, including debt bondage and extreme social isolation.⁶³ So while the question “What does marronage look like in the twenty-first century?” can help us take stock of free towns, border crossing, gender bending, and other expressions of ungovernability, this same question requires another one: “What does twenty-first-century slavery look like?” Slavery in the twenty-first century, it turns out, is quite complicated.

It is not a small matter to note that our current world enslaves almost 30 million human beings.⁶⁴ Contemporary slavery takes the forms of human trafficking and forced labor, including debt bondage, forced marriages, and the sale of children. Some are born into slavery through hereditary rules, while others are captured, kidnapped, or kept for exploitation through financial entrapment. Some slaves are called bonded laborers, while others are called sex workers. Some slaves work in factories, others in nightclubs, the fields, or homes. Equally important, contemporary scenes of subjection include prevalent flight and fugitivity. For these women, men, and children, anti-slavery and abolitionism did not happen solely in the past, and marronage is not a metaphor. Running away is an act of survival and of literally making oneself unavailable for servitude and governing.⁶⁵

Just as slave narratives of the nineteenth century were critical to the anti-slavery movement, especially for the movement’s most radical expressions, such as those by Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, and Sojourner Truth, contemporary slave narratives are essential to the formation of anti-slavery consciousness and politics, including the praxis and consciousness of flight and fugitivity. While a thorough sampling of such narratives is beyond the scope of this essay, the narratives of Roseline Odine and Christina Elangwe are instructive.⁶⁶ Collectively, they tell a story of two Cameroonian teenagers and former slaves in Washington, DC, in the first decade of the twenty-first century. When she came to the United States, Elangwe was seventeen, Odine only fourteen, dreaming of becoming a designer. Odine and Elangwe knew each other because their captors socialized in the same circles. Both had been tricked into coming to the

United States with promises of education and babysitting jobs. As house slaves, Odine and Elangwe, rose at 5:30 in the morning and worked well into the night, without pay. Odine was enslaved for two and a half years, Elangwe for five. Their captors kept them from going to school, physically and verbally abused them, and performed indoctrination and mind control on them. Odine's male captor often sexually assaulted her. Elangwe was forbidden from speaking with her family in Cameroon. In Odine's own words:

I think I was a slave. Because if I sit back sometimes and think about it and have a flashback, it was terrible. There were several nights and days that I would sit all by myself and think about things I could do with my sisters. How we used to play together. I would cry because I missed them, hoping that one day I would get together with them again. Everything, my dreams, just crushed down and I wasn't going to get it. I wasn't going to reach it ...

Whatever opportunity I had, Christina and I got together and talked about running.

So they turned toward freedom.⁶⁷ Odine escaped first. In the midst of one of her captor's abusive verbal attacks, she ran away:

For some reason I wasn't thinking anymore—it was like my blood pressure was rising, my head was pumping inside. I had no shoes on, no jacket. I didn't think of anything, I just opened the door and ran out ... [*She ran, fell, blacked out, then came to consciousness.*] I kept telling myself, "That's it, that's it. I'm not going back in there. I'm not going back. That's it. I have nowhere to go, but one thing's for sure, I'm not going back."⁶⁸

Odine then enlisted others to help her free Elangwe and another slave of Cameroonian descent in the Washington, DC, area. Clearly, the Harriet Tubman Code is alive in our nation's capital. In Elangwe's words:

I was thinking about getting out but there was no way. I didn't know anybody, but I was just praying for one day to come when I could be free. I never knew when that day would be. I was just hoping and praying ... I talked to Rosaline on the phone and cried and tried to figure out what to do. But there was no means. If we leave, where are we going to go? We didn't know anybody, so just had to stay there. Until one day [Rosaline] couldn't take it in there anymore, she had to run away. When she ran, she opened the door for all of us.⁶⁹

Perhaps they suffered from drapetomania, or perhaps they were uninterested in state addiction or any form of governing! More than a century and a half ago, the runaway Frederick Douglass noted that running away promised a "deliverance from the evils and dangers of slavery."⁷⁰ Slavery's logic, however, requires flight and fugitivity be characterized as madness. Governing enablers and addicts must mark running away as madness so that they can dismiss ungovernability as nonsense. The alternative is to

recognize that marronage is the embodiment of the refusal to be governed, to render oneself totally unavailable for servitude. The alternative is the recognition that being governed or being a slave, as Robinson understood,⁷¹ is only *one* condition of our complex person-hood. The alternative is the recognition that being ungoverned is *not* nonbeing. Rosaline Odine, Christina Elangwe, and countless slaves before them who ran away, in Douglass's words, "hated slavery, always, and the desire for freedom only needed a favorable breeze, to fan it into a blaze, at any moment."⁷²

AN AFROFUTURIST PRELUDE TO TRAVELING

Janelle Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N,"⁷³ featuring the queen of neo-soul herself, Erykah Badu, is an elegantly produced, Afrofuturistic, and ironic riff on the arrogance of the twenty-first-century carceral state's explicit intention to quell subversive, irresistible, and definitively Black music and culture. The music video is set in a post-twenty-first-century (un)reality where Monáe, members of the group Wondaland, and her "dangerous accomplice, Badoul'da Oblongata"⁷⁴ (Badu) have been locked in a stark, walk-through diorama/gallery space by the Metropolis Ministry of Droids. We are informed by the Ministry that this so-called Living Museum is where "legendary rebels from throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation." The embodiment of the Ministry appears via a small monitor and confidently claims in her posh British accent (of course it's British!): "It's hard to stop rebels that time travel; but we at the Time Council pride ourselves on doing just that!" The lyrics and music video, which had over 16 million views as of December 2016, disrupt this conceit through "songs, emotions, pictures, and works of art," the very things that the Ministry failed to contain in suspended animation. Characteristics of Monáe's and Wondaland's brilliant use of ironic gender- and culture-bending mélange of historical iconographies, "Q.U.E.E.N" is visually stunning. It features a bold, iconic palette of black and white stripes, plaids and solid clothes, shoes and walls, and almost entirely Black people. Touches of red are reserved for Monáe's lipstick and crocheted alien sash, as well as the single red line from forehead to chin of Badu's Wodaabe/Bororo male-inspired face paint. Gold is limited to five items that conjure Afrocentricity and womanist power: Badu's armor-like arm cuff and alternating lion-like mane and bone-straight bob; Monáe's square earrings and a white skull with a single, sharp

gold incisor that serves as the needle for the “Q.U.E.E.N” LP. The tune’s get-up-and-dance groove and call-and-response lyrics are layered in an infectious R&B beat that suggest a dance tune meant for leaving your troubles on the floor. Yet, for the majority of the video, Monáe appears in elegant sci-fi-meets-*Emperor-Jones* militaristic garb, and this dichotomy is quite intentional. Later, in full James Bond mode complete with silhouette, dual spotlights against a white backdrop, flattering lighting, and with a bespoke tuxedo, Monáe appears and her lyrics turn explicitly politically and culturally provocative, if not outright revolutionary:

Are we a lost generation of our people?
Add us to equations but they’ll never make us equal ...

They keep us underground working hard for the greedy
But when it’s time to pay they turn around and call us needy
My crown too heavy like the Queen Nefertiti
Gimme back my pyramid, I’m trying to free Kansas City.

Key artistic interventions—from the opening voice-over that places this imaginary in the future, with Monáe, Badu, and Wondaland members as rebels captured in suspended animation in this diorama/prison *sans* walls—show the foolishness of those who believe that uprisings are one-time events, or that the powerful elites can contain rebels. Consistent with the theme of memory, Monáe, even in suspended animation, is impeccably coiffed, super fashionable, and seated on a white chair at a white table, about to sip tea while listening to two Wondaland members who were frozen as they performed (for whom?) wearing loincloths and smeared in white clay. Was she in this position before capture, or was she repositioned for eternity? The two young Black women who enter the sterile museum smirk at the Ministry’s claim and place *their* LP on the turntable; just like that, and despite the professed power of those who imprisoned the rebels, it only takes a little bravery and a single song to disrupt the Ministry’s conceit. As the song begins to play, on the LP, a fly—out of place in this setting—lands on Monáe’s hand. She blinks. She blinks faster. Moments later, the two young rebels tie up the security guard, Wondaland comes to life, and even the stuffy art patrons can’t help but dance because, as the chorus tells us, “the booty don’t lie.” All the while, Monáe insistently asks: “Hey sister, am I good enough for your heaven? Say, will your God accept me in my black and white? Will he approve the way I’m made? Or, should I

reprogram the program and get down?” After a Wondaland member (previously imprisoned in Plexiglas) is freed, he takes the manual typewriter from the exhibit and types over and over again: “I will create and destroy ten art movements in ten years.” Soon after, Badu and Monáe instruct the rebels and anyone else listening:

Baby, here comes the freedom song
Too strong we moving on
Baby this melody
Will show you another way
Been tryin’ for far too long
Come home and sing your song
But you gotta testify

Such radical performativity is a necessary part of the Black Radical Tradition, wherein the rematerialization of the “ontological totality” of Blackness requires the blending and bending of gender/sex/race structures and meanings.⁷⁵ Indeed, there is no question that Janelle Monáe is one of the most astute artists and cultural workers of her generation,⁷⁶ and “Q.U.E.E.N” merely cements her status as one of the many Black artists in the long tradition of what Fred Moten calls “the modes of radical performativity,” where “blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and performance of [Black] humanity.”⁷⁷ “Q.U.E.E.N” provocatively places Black aesthetics “in the break,” insofar as it posits the possibility of radical experimentation in which the “phonic substance” reconstructs Blackness as “a special site and resources for a task of articulation where immanence is structured by an irreducibly improvisatory exteriority that can occasion something very much like sadness and something very much like devilish enjoyment.”⁷⁸

But it is Monáe’s signatory and visceral call to arms “Hell You Talmabout” that functions as a primal scream of Black Lives Matter’s protest anthem against the epidemic of police murders, where we are *required* to Say Their Names! To simple, syncopated, electronic drumbeats, we are asked, “Hell you talmabout?” followed by the litany of names—“Walter Scott, say his name! Jerame Reid, say his name! Philip White, say his name! Eric Garner, say his name! ... Aiyana Jones, say her name! Sandra Bland, say her name!” From Emmett Till and Amadou Diallo to Trayvon Martin and Miriam Carey, Monáe and her fellow Wondaland artists implore us to Say Their Names! In doing so, they/us take part in not only recalling

our dead but also turning the vulgarity and violence of subjection into defiant acts of mourning and the necessity of resistance that follows. The fact that these men and women, frequently much too young to die, are grievable⁷⁹ and their ghosts are necessarily haunting, belies post-racial fantasies at the same time that they expose, at best, the legal impotence of the so-called justice system.⁸⁰

From art and architecture to ARTs (assisted reproductive technologies) and AI (artificial intelligence), to posthumanist ideography, futurist sensibilities frequently mask their fascist origins. As a historical phenomenon, futurism refers to an artistic and social movement that can be traced to early-twentieth-century modernism in Italy. As a social phenomenon, futurism can be understood as a belief in the future. Artistically, sociologically, and anthropologically, futurism emphasizes transformation rooted in the present world. In its modernist form, futurism almost always emphasizes technology, youth, and urbanity. While many scholars have credited Italian poet and propagandist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* with launching futurism, few dig into Marinetti's deep commitment to fascism.⁸¹ Published in 1909, the *Manifesto* conflates modernity with futurist society, offering a nationalist defense of Italy as a significant cultural actor and producer. It rejects the past as primitive and glorifies a technocratically advanced modernity, celebrating machinery, speed, industry, youth, masculinity, and violence. Indeed, it declares that "we will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women."⁸² Its explicit reification of war and rejection of liberal pluralism lent coherence to the emergent fascist ideological formations, including the Futurist Political Party, which later became part of the larger Italian Fascist Party. Marinetti would become one of the chief architects of Italian fascist politics, and in 1919, with Alceste De Ambris, he would co-author *The Fascist Manifesto* (1919), the first blueprint of Italian fascism.⁸³

In contradistinction to Western futurism, Afrofuturism is explicitly antifascist insofar as it provides an imaginary domain for radical democratic politics and life-forms outside of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and hetero-patriarchy. As Robin D. G. Kelley points out in *Freedom Dreams*, both space travel and fugitivity have prefigured prominently in Afrofuturist

cultural productions. Afrofuturism, as emblematic of radical performativity and freedom struggles, therefore, promises future imaginings that can “transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors, and more importantly enable us to imagine a new society.”⁸⁴ Time travel, especially looking to the past for memories of resistance in order to reimagine a just future, is thus radically different from a Western futurist fantasy in which Black cosmologies, Black epistemologies, and Black life world have been disappeared or merely acquired a functionary status of an appenditure. More critically and as Susanna M. Morris points out in “Black Girls Are from the Future,” there is a distinct tradition of black feminist Afrofuturism that “transgressively revises” mainstream icons and troubles “normative notions of race, fantasy, and power.”⁸⁵ Black feminist Afrofuturism thus grounds its imaginary domains within the larger intersectional matrix of race/gender/sexuality, even as it mixes and unsettles that same matrix while rebelliously time-traveling into a fugitive past.

As signs of declining US hegemonic dominion are everywhere, especially in various theaters of war,⁸⁶ Americans are treated to the elevation of Donald Trump, a proto-fascist whose administration-in-waiting is mostly staffed with generals, multimillionaires, and billionaires, some of whom are also political hacks and white supremacists.⁸⁷ It is within the context of our contemporary neoliberal antidemocracy⁸⁸ that we must consider and constantly retool various formations of Black radical consciousness and praxes, including Afrofuturism, as necessary antidotes to messianic billionaireism⁸⁹ and futurist racial fantasies, and as an affirmation of life, dignity, and the pursuit of wholeness. When an epidemic of police killings and white vigilante violence against Black and brown people, the dismemberment of communities of color, and the permanent installation of the national security state sustained by total surveillance, a militarized police force, and mass incarceration are the main preoccupations of daily life, one wonders why all of us, as “willful subjects,” have not time traveled sooner or more frequently, all the while awaiting for that favorable breeze, or for the fire next time.

Chapter 12

The Bruise Blues

Avery F. Gordon

This essay emerged out of conversations I routinely have about politics and images, or about the political and the aesthetic in the art world and in the movement to abolish prisons and policing, two different social worlds in which I work. It might be read as a field report by a politically engaged radical critic, providing a couple of useful notes for those similarly engaged with these specific questions of visual culture. By “politically engaged radical critic,” I refer to the description provided years ago by the anarchist writer Chuck Morse when introducing an interview he had done with Cedric J. Robinson, whom he thought exemplary. It is an eloquently articulated instruction. Morse writes:

It is the task of the radical critic to illuminate what is repressed and excluded by the basic mechanisms of a given social order. It is the task of the *politically engaged* radical critic to *side* with the excluded and repressed: to develop insights gained in confrontation with injustice, to nourish cultures of resistance, and to help define the means with which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of human potentialities.¹

In these conversations, some of which are public and some of which are not, the question, always urgent, of the representation of violence figures prominently. The specific figures vary, of course, depending on the moment. Recently, in addition to discussions about the highly mediated pictures of the desperate refugee, a problematic and decontextualized image of refuge and fugitivity deserving of greater attention,² the focus is on Black Lives Matter, on the renewed popular attention to police violence and anti-Black racism, and on what this moment of ferment means now and might portend for the future. In these conversations, the youthful or newly converted enthusiasm for the struggle and for the possibility of change “now that we know,” to quote Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is inspiring. At the

same time, the seasoned and the elders are also frustrated sometimes at both the historiography embedded in “now,” as in “only now?!?,” and at the comprehension or political epistemology embedded in “know,” as in, to quote Gilmore again, “know what?” In these conversations, important questions of political consciousness are being raised, including the routes, visual and otherwise, by which “the relationship between existential consciousness and truth systems” are disturbed and activated to abolitionist ends.³ These spirited conversations inevitably take us to the heart of how racial regimes operate and the conditions under which they change and might be abolished. To quote Cedric J. Robinson on his generative concept, explicitly elaborated in the context of cinema:

Racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power. While necessarily articulated with accruals of power, the covering conceit of a racial regime is a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly. But racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition. This antipathy exists because a discoverable history is incompatible with a racial regime and from the realization that, paradoxically, so are its social relations. One threatens the authority and the other saps the vitality of racial regimes. Each undermines the founding myths. The archaeological imprint of human agency radically alienates the histories of racial regimes from their own claims of naturalism. Employing mythic discourses, racial regimes are commonly masqueraded as natural orderings, inevitable creations of collective anxieties prompted by threatening encounters with difference. Yet they are actually contrivances, designed and delegated by interested cultural and social powers with the wherewithal sufficient to commission their imaginings, manufacture, and maintenance. This latter industry is of some singular importance, since racial regimes tend to wear thin over time.⁴

In what follows, and with these conversations in mind, I respond to an exhibition consisting of three commissioned works by African American artist Glenn Ligon titled “Call and Response”, which was on display at Camden Arts Centre in London, from October 10, 2014 to January 11, 2015.⁵ This response initially emerged out of a panel discussion in which Camden Arts Centre curator Nisha Matthews asked artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah, legal scholar and anti-police violence activist Eddie Bruce-Jones, art curator Gilane Tawadros, and me to address Ligon’s work in the context of “postracial futures and how we might keep alive utopian ideals of living together better ... in an age haunted by a history of racial oppression.”⁶

Two of the component works of the exhibition—*Untitled (Bruise/Blues)* and *Come Out #4 and #5*—reference a case of police brutality. Combining

the two works in a single exhibition put additional pressure on the already complex and contentious terms “post-racial” and “utopian” that launched the discussion. For many, of course, the term “post-racial” functions less as a desirable utopian ideal and more as a regulatory fiction: one that mystifies the existence and origins of racism and racial inequalities; that reproduces whiteness by making it the unspoken norm of the two most commonly accepted forms of post-raciality—colorblindness and diversity or corporate multiculturalism; and that justifies historical amnesia and its accompanying sanctioned ignorance. By the latter I refer, for example, to the general state of surprise in the United States and Europe at the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, and at the routine tactical behavior of urban police forces and the judicial system, which authorizes and protects them. I emphasize the word “routine.” Eric Garner died on July 17, 2014, from a chokehold. John Crawford III was shot to death by police officer Sean Williams in a Walmart store near Dayton, Ohio, on August 5, 2014, for holding an air rifle in the store. Akai Gurley died in Brooklyn after he was shot by police officer Peter Liang on November 20, 2014, in the stairwell of a public housing project. Tamir Rice died in Cleveland on November 23, 2014, the day after he was shot by police officer Timothy Loehmann, accompanied by his partner, Frank Garmback. Tanisha Anderson was also killed in police custody in Cleveland in November 2014. Yvette Smith was killed by police on February 16, 2014, opening her front door in Texas. In 2014, after NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo was not indicted for killing Eric Garner, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund tweeted the names of seventy-six unarmed men and women killed in police custody since the 1999 death of Amadou Diallo in New York City. *The Guardian* counted 1,140 people killed by the police in the United States in 2015, 578 of whom were white. As of the end of February 2016, we can add another 167 individuals.⁷

1. POLICE POWER

Glenn Ligon draws on Steve Reich’s 1966 sound composition *Come Out* in two of the three works in the exhibition “Call and Response.” Reich’s piece was, in turn, based on the voice of Daniel Hamm, one of six youths arrested for murder in 1964. When James Baldwin wrote a story for *The Nation* in 1966 about the beatings and arrests that took place on April 17, 1964, he

began his story not with Wallace Baker, Willie Craig, Ronald Felder, Daniel Hamm, Robert Rice, and Walter Thomas, known at the time as the Harlem 6, but with an account of what happened earlier in the day to Frank Stafford, a thirty-one-year-old salesman arrested and beaten badly by the police (he lost an eye); Fecundo Acion, a forty-seven-year-old Puerto Rican sailor; and two unnamed others who were picked up and celled together.⁸ In 1964 or 2017, even before we get to the names on everyone's mind at the ever-repeating moment, there are always the ones who came before. Baldwin, too, wonders how anyone could be "astonished" or "bewildered" that three months later, on July 16, 1964, a white policeman named Thomas Gilligan shot and killed James Powell, a fifteen-year-old African American boy, in front of his friends, prompting a rebellion and spilling, as Baldwin puts it, "the overflowed unimaginably bitter cup."

The violence of racial regimes is axiomatic whether we are talking about the taken-for-granted social divisions and economic stratifications produced by racial capitalism or whether we are talking about the harassed everyday life of young people of color, especially in cities where, as Daniel Hamm said back in 1964: "They don't want us—period!" The violence of racial regimes is self-evident whether we are talking about the systems of mass imprisonment that are used to manage surplus, disposable, and politically troublesome populations, or whether we are talking about the individuals, communities, and cultures vulnerable to intellectual trivialization and the continuum that runs from genocide to phased-in obsolescence. It takes enormous work by states, corporations, media and educational systems, civil society organizations, and individuals to keep racial regimes going and to transform them since they are, to quote Robinson, "forgeries of memory and meaning," and thus, despite appearances, fragile and always in danger of breaking apart.⁹

Police power or the power to police is a crucial element in that work. By police power, I don't mean only police officers or police departments and their more spectacular violence. Police power is a mode of governance, the discretionary power to dispose of present threats to the social order and to avert future dangers to it. The responsibility of the power for the future is important—predicting dangerousness is one of its main functions. Police power is always anticipatory in this sense, and its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European theorists viewed it as a means to achieve the political ideal of a harmonious state, its interior affairs all in good order.

Settler colonial regimes have been especially propitious laboratories for the development of a police power capable of effectively expropriating and protecting private property, including racial property such as whiteness, and protecting social order, as the case of the United States demonstrates clearly. In the antebellum United States, police power was an explicitly racial privilege. The state did not, in fact, hold a monopoly on the use of force, thus the right of slave owners and their deputies, such as slave patrols and labor overseers, to police at will and to usurp the judicial power to punish. In principle, police power defers or cedes the power to punish to the judge, although this principle, constitutional in nature, has a rather checkered history and one could argue that the prison, which concentrates police power, mocks the very principle itself.¹⁰

In the United States, this history has been passed down as the specific right of white property owners to exercise police power when threatened, colloquially known today as “Stand Your Ground.” As is well known, “line in the sand” and “the castle doctrine” were the legal grounds for the acquittal of George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon Martin; the genealogy of those legal rights is to be found in the post–Civil War history of the Black Codes, convict leasing, and lynching. Whether the individual right to bear arms is constitutional precedent or merely a practical requirement for exercising police power is a question for a legal scholar to answer. Political history suggests that the insistence on the right to bear arms is usually in the service of a struggle over the exercise of police power. This was the case in the American Revolution against the British. And it was the position of the Black Panther Party, made explicit on May 2, 1967, when several members of the party attempted to enter the California State Capitol building to oppose passage of the Mulford Bill, which had been designed to effectively end the Panther Police Patrols. Unable to enter the building, they were famously photographed holding their weapons on the steps of the Capitol building in advance of issuing a statement to this effect.¹¹

More generally, this history has been passed down as the restricted authority to determine what and who is a threat to the terms of order—in other words, to create crimes and criminals. Of course, Black people are not, by any means, the only object of such condemnation, to use Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s apt word, though they are rarely exempt from it.¹² Here, I note that police departments obviously do the bidding of other masters—Baldwin rightly called them the “hired enemies” of urban

communities of color—and the price they charge is exemption from being policed, which they receive, save in those exceptional situations in which to save police power an individual police officer might need to be sacrificed. It's for this reason that Nikhil Pal Singh uses the phrase “the whiteness of police” in his seminal article, whiteness signifying here not the ethnicity of the individual members of police forces, but the status that confers immunity from criminalization.¹³

These are complex issues. Here, I would like to emphasize the extent to which police power does the work of racial ordering that the state has formally outlawed in a post-civil rights or multicultural context in which we are, as the commonsense goes, post-racial, the definitive proof being, in the United States, the presidency of Barack Obama. I emphasize this for two reasons. One reason is the obvious implication that before we get to post-racial in any meaningful sense, we need first to understand the extent to which racism operates precisely through the presumption that it no longer really exists; criminalization, particularly given the elasticity that the notion of security has acquired, is not the only means by which this presumption is reproduced, but it is a crucial and highly flexible one. The second reason is the further implication that any meaningful notion of the utopian must address this condition or at least emerge in relation to it.

2. BRUISE BLUES

If we define the utopian not as it is commonly defined—as a homogeneous perfect future no-place—but rather as a standpoint for living in the here and now, then we might find meaningful instances of it in the history of social struggle.¹⁴ In the US Black Radical Tradition, the history of social struggle is, for obvious reasons, bound up with slavery and its afterlife, in which police power, unrelenting, is a continuous object of attention. In this context, the framework of abolitionism has political resonance, not as formal emancipation or liberal legal rights, but as what the writer Toni Cade Bambara described as being “unavailable for servitude” in the broadest sense of servility and availability. This struggle or process aims to establish the conditions of possibility for a free life for all, without misery or oppression. For abolitionists today, one of our most urgent demands is the abolition of police power in all its dramatic and routine manifestations. To view this demand as a political exigency and not “merely utopian” in the

show them come out to show them come out to show them come out to show them come out to show them come out to show them come out to show them come o

3. COME OUT AND SHOW THEM!

The abstraction works differently in *Come Out #4 and #5* and its monumental silence makes it seem more like a memorial. Substituting the phrase “come out to show them” for the roll call of the names of the dead usually displayed by war memorials, *Come Out* avoids the common and limiting presumption that only the dead can adequately represent the violence of police power and also avoids presuming that what happened is singular and safely in the past. *Come Out*, carrying its blues epistemology, presents us with refraining and shadow: the repetition of the phrase as singular incident such that it appears as density, structure, pattern; the shadowing of the phrase as multiple voices, some bright and loud, some inaudible, blacked-out. Repetition, shadow, and the call to future action: COME OUT AND SHOW THEM!

4. PRESENCE UNDER PRESSURE

Show them what? Possibly what’s living and breathing in the blind field that racial profiling presumes and produces. Perhaps because I started with *Bruise/Blues* and had just come out of what I experienced as a memorial to the Harlem 6, I was predisposed to see *Live*, Ligon’s multi-channel video work that removes the sound and disarticulates Richard Pryor’s 1982 performance *Live on the Sunset Strip*, as the third response to the call of the same event.²⁰ I found it a surprisingly beautiful rebuke to the criminal anthropology that underwrites police power today and whose origins are in nineteenth-century racial science. Without the space here to elaborate, suffice to say that criminal anthropology’s most well-known inventors, such as Cesare Lombroso, found in their ethnology colleagues’ research into the racial ordering of Western civilization support for their belief that the criminal, in whom Lombroso found traces of the “apish atavism” of our primitive past, was a distinct and inferior race of men and women. The implications of this scientific belief in innate criminality are significant for understanding the extent to which criminalization is a form of racialization. Race, in the sociological and commonsense way we tend to use it, not only explains who is most likely to become a criminal—that is, who is most

likely to be criminalized—it also describes what the criminal becomes, that is to say, a specific race of men and women. Or, to put it another way, police power produces race—it is a medium of racialized statecraft—as much as it relies on already existing racial categories. Natural-born criminals were imminently classifiable and thus logical subjects for surveillance: Lombroso and the early criminal anthropologists were convinced they could identify a member of the criminal race by certain visual signs or stigmata, such as longer arms, woolly hair, precocious wrinkles, excessive hand gestures, or the use of unintelligible argot. Lombroso was especially obsessed with prostitutes and anarchists.²¹

In the case of African Americans, the double racialization has been ascriptive.²² African Americans are treated as a criminal race, whose ontology—what they were, what they are, what they could be—is reduced to its essential criminality, their supposed basic nature. This is one reason why criminal profiling is more or less the same as racial profiling, a brutal reduction of human differences into the evident visual stigmata of the body of the known criminal, a threat to the order of things. This is also one reason why all attempts to deal with police power—from stop and search to arrest to imprisonment—as if it were possible to reform it by eliminating its “abuses” of the “innocent”—is a trap and will fail. The ideological legitimacy of police power rests on its claim to make the distinction between innocent and guilty accurately, fairly, and justly, notwithstanding the fact that the whole history of crime belies this claim. Abolition starts elsewhere, politically, culturally, aesthetically.²³

There’s a certain erotic feeling in watching Pryor’s body in the dark with the sound off, especially watching him touch himself in that repetitive gesture where he moves his hand quickly back and forth from heart to crotch, which lends to the repetition of the phrase—“come out come out come out to show them”—a different meaning and complicates the heterosexual masculinity Pryor is famous for performing. The memorial is cold, this room is warmer. I’m remembering having seen this performance before or parts of it seem familiar, something is coming back to me. I’m loving those fabulous gold shoes set off by the yellow rosebud in the pocket of the red/orange suit, out-of-fashion color jumping up all over the place not as skin but as pure provocation to the self-determination of blaxploitation. I’m watching intently Pryor’s expressive face, full of frowns, rarely smiling, like a professor. You’d never know he was telling jokes unless you

already knew or caught the funky chicken dance moves when even he can't stop himself from laughing at himself, at you, at us. I'm caught up in those moments when lip-reading, I can hear his voice: angry—"bullshit"; showing off—"motherfucker"; concluding the riff—"alright"; taking the piss—"holy shit!" I'm moved profoundly by the beauty of Pryor's hands constantly fluttering here and there, etching an elaborate sign language, a poetry of call and response without spoken words, which reminds me of James Drake's equally moving video installation *Tongue-Cut-Sparrows*. (Drake's 1998 work is based on the sign language women used to communicate with the men inside the El Paso County Detention Facility, who were almost entirely Latino immigrants serving time for violations of immigration rules. Drake had seen the women and asked them if he could film them and if they would select a piece of literature and sign it to the men inside. They agreed.) The performance ends when Pryor steadies his fluttering hands, reaches into his pocket to light a cigarette, and raises his fist.

In that room, surrounded by the celebrity famous for his critical and uncompromising words, now cut into scenes of silent gestures, the unique individual performer transformed into a set of disarticulated visual signs, the effect is exactly the opposite of the reductionism and dehumanization of the racial profiling Pryor understood all too well. Rather, there's an exquisite delicacy of touch and being, what Bennett Simpson described as "the gritty particularity of presence under pressure."²⁴ Something we might just call respect, in the capacious Zapatista sense of dignity, which is how the film *Live on the Sunset Strip* ends, credits rolling, with Aretha Franklin singing her famous standard of the same name.²⁵

5. WE ARE THE ONES WE'RE WAITING FOR

The Black Radical Tradition brings to the now ubiquitous images of the police killings of Black men and women something much more than ahistorical calls to reform police departments. It brings the history and ongoing struggle against racial capitalism and the requirement to specify the nature of the radical thought that is adequate to confront what Cedric J. Robinson once called "the nastiness" that is everywhere too evident today. "The Black Radical Tradition," Robinson wrote, "was an accretion over generations of collective intelligence gathered from struggle."²⁶ This

collective intelligence harbored a critique of an entire civilization or way of life. In Robinson's hands, it presumed a commitment to a politics in which the struggle to transform the world as we know it takes place through means that embody the alternative values, practices, and institutional formats we desire and for which we bother to struggle. As Robinson never ceased to remind us, this tradition is as much an invention as it was a discovery of something already there and fully formed, even if part of the struggle was to make it obvious that living and breathing in the enlightened civilization's blind field was precisely that collective intelligence at work. The Black Radical Internationalist Tradition, to appropriate Barbara Ransby's naming, is a living tradition, a moving tradition, that changes and takes shape as it opposes and negates racial, class, and gender regimes that themselves mutate, including police power. While marronage might be its first principle, one of the key watchwords of this tradition is movement.²⁷

In the movement to abolish police power and the carceral state, abolition feminism has grounded a radical imaginary that keeps the tradition moving. Abolition feminism is not a sub-program or an identity; it is a methodology and a practice, a way of seeing, thinking, and acting that above all makes connections. Abolition feminism makes analytical connections between seemingly disparate institutions, functionalities, and technologies of power and domination—imprisonment and debt, for example—and political connections between seemingly unrelated oppositional and resistant struggles—opposition to racialized policing in the United States and Palestinian self-determination, for example. And abolition feminism makes human connections—solidarity—between seemingly divided and disconnected peoples and places—landless people and deserting soldiers, for example. As a methodology, abolition feminism treats race, gender, and sexuality as “forgeries of memory and meaning,” that is to say, as interlocking and normalizing constructs that are unsustainable fabrications and thus whose natural history is always literally falling apart. And abolition feminism embodies a way of being, working, and living—a version of the personal as political—that tries to be better than the petty ambitions, narcissism, and sectarianism that characterize too much political culture today. This feminism has a steady and sturdy moral compass that easily crosses national and nationalist borders, if it is not self-consciously internationalist, and which it uses as a guide while building the social, economic, and political infrastructure that makes a life without

slavery, exploitation, confinement, and repressive normalization possible for all.

This is the picture or the image of the radical abolitionist practice and the future it brings. It is not in the image of our being smashed up the side of the head or shot to death by the police. At the 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Danny Glover ended his public testimonial with these words:

June Jordan said that we are the ones we are waiting for. There's no one else but us. Myself, you, none of us are absolved of this responsibility. We are not Gods, but we are many. Since we are not Gods, we can be great and we can be a great many.

In his perhaps least read book, *An Anthropology of Marxism*, Cedric J. Robinson reclaimed socialism for all those whom Marxism had excluded from its history and its future, including heretical women, slaves, peasants, nonindustrial workers, and intellectuals, on the grounds that “a socialist discourse is an irrepressible response to social injustice.”²⁸ Robinson found confirmation for these grounds not in “the fractious and weaker allegiances of class” but rather in a kind of divine agency. This divine agency is not a God, but, like June Jordan’s great many, it carries the power of the “history and the persistence of the human spirit” in the face of “domination and oppression.”²⁹ As we face the challenge of realizing the political and aesthetic representation of this audacious power, we can draw on the great work and legacy of the Black Radical Tradition and Cedric J. Robinson’s crucial contributions to its inventions.