The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness

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Abstract The essay thinks radically differently about the concepts of black and trans*. *Trans** and *black* thus denote poetic, para-ontological forces that are only tangentially, and ultimately arbitrarily, related to bodies said to be black or transgender. That is to say, they are differently inflected names for an anoriginal lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology. Manifesting in the modern world differently as race and gender fugitivity, black and trans*, though pointed at by bodies that identify as black or trans*, precede and provide the foundational condition for those fugitive identificatory demarcations. The author seeks to demonstrate the ways in which trans* is black and black is trans*. In what ways, and to what extent, is there a "blackness" present within "trans*-ness," and vice versa? What is the effect of these analytics? This essay hopes to address these questions but also leave them suspended in black/trans* liminality.
Keywords blackness, trans*-ness, para-ontological, fugitive

> By black here, I don't mean a particular skin color or identity, a certain vocal affectation, musical aesthetic, or capacity for rhythm (though I *do* mean all those things, too). Instead, I mean blackness as a radical refusal of the movement of reconciliation, and thus, of whiteness. To be black and to be made black is to take seriously the work of refusal, which is an antagonism, a thorn in the side of the sovereignty of whiteness. . . . To become black is to remain in instability, is to remain in solidarity together in instability. To become black is to be against the movement beyond sociality for the sake of becoming logical and reasonable. To become black is to refuse being made a something—to be and become nothing. Not because nothing is an absence or a lack of life, but precisely because nothing is the abundance and multiplicity out of which life is formed.
> —Amaryah Shaye, "Refusing to Reconcile, Part 2"

I want to argue that "in the beginning is 'trans'": that what is original or primary is a not-yet-differentiated singularity from which distinct genders, race, species,

sexes, and sexualities are generated in a form of relative stability. . . . Fixed kinds
such as the trans-gendered, trans-sexual, or trans-animal body are expressions of
a more profound transitivity that is the condition for what becomes known as
the human.
—Claire Colebrook, "What Is It Like to Be a Human?"

As I read the 341-page *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Weed and Schor 1997),
swooning over the invigorating erudition of top-notch queer theorists, I
began to wonder, quite seriously, whether this formulation of "theoretical concept
1 meets seemingly disparate, but actually not really, theoretical concept 2" would
work for blackness and trans*-ness. Could a similar volume, perhaps also com-
prising collated essays from a special issue, be fashioned under the appellation
"Blackness Meets Trans*-ness"? After fantasizing about being the one to edit this
volume, perhaps alongside other, more dexterous scholars than I, I conceded that
such a volume, quite simply, could not exist. Blackness cannot meet trans*-ness;
trans*-ness cannot meet blackness. But why not? Black transgender people exist, a
friend of mine said, as I thought out loud with her in a local café. My answer then
was not as articulate as I would have liked, so I will respeak now, at this much
more thoughtful and thought-fed moment: because blackness and trans*-ness,
different yet intimate primordial kin, arise from the underbelly, the "under-
commons" that absently saturates the conditions upon which subjectivity rests.
Blackness and trans*-ness mark, as J. Kameron Carter says of blackness, "a
movement of the between . . . an interstitial drama on the outskirts of the order
of purity. [They mark] an improvisatory movement of doubleness, a fugitive
announcement in and against the grain of the modern world's . . . investment in
pure being." In short, borrowing again from Carter, I designate black and trans*
as, "to invoke [Nahum] Chandler once again, 'paraontological'" (2013: 590).

I am embarking on a cogitative journey through the para-ontological
annals of the stuff of life and nonlife. Like W. E. B. Du Bois and his intellectual
comrades William Shakespeare, Honoré de Balzac, and Alexandre Dumas, here in
the forthcoming essay I sit with Fred Moten and Hortense Spillers, Alexander
Weheliye and Eva Hayward; I move arm and arm with Amaryah Shaye and Claire
Colebrook—among many others, some of whom are the editors of this special
issue. With these thinkers, I come to blackness and trans*-ness by way of refusal,
fugitivity, anoriginality, para-ontology, and eruption. *Trans** and *black* thus
denote poetic, para-ontological forces that are only tangentially, and ultimately
arbitrarily, related to bodies said to be black or transgender. They move in and
through the abyss underlying ontology, rubbing up alongside it and causing it to
fissure. Trans* and black, however, as fundamentally para-ontological do not

discredit the materiality of ontic subjects who are characterized by and through these identificatory markers. The relationship between my usage of these poetic forces and subjects identified with/as black or trans* must be handled with care. But indeed, as Kai M. Green (2013: 289) writes about those who identify and are identified as black, epidermal hue and racial (and sexual and gender and class) situatedness in history "cannot predict the politics of black people. So while race, class, gender, and sexuality will no doubt inform the way a person walks through the world, it will not provide a predetermined outcome as much as we might like it to. This is especially true when our politics or the leadership we endorse is limited by scenario." In short, racial identification will not determine one's relationship to power, thus making epidermal blackness in this case not an a priori determinant of politicality. This is what Hortense Spillers, quoting George Lamming, says "we definitively know now": "the nature of power [is] unrelated to pigmentation, that bad faith [is] a phenomenon which [is] independent of race" (quoted in Spillers 2012: 936).

Such is the case, too, with people who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. Cathy Cohen writes, "People may not like this, but without an intentional politics, I don't see trans as inherently radical. I think there are many instances where marginal individuals are inserted into traditional institutions or movements and they do something to change the dynamics but they don't necessarily change these spaces and entities in a radical way that is open and more equitable." Cohen goes on to say, "I'm interested in trans feminist politics in the same way that I'm committed to a black feminist politics that is tied to a transformative liberatory agenda" (Cohen and Jackson 2015). To an extent, this is true, though I would nuance Cohen's assertion with gender-nonconforming bodies' situatedness in a gender-normative space, a hegemonic grammar that utterly disallows the very possibility of transgender; thus their very existence in a space that is constituted through the assertion of the impossibility of trans* and nonnormative bodies is, by virtue of their inhabitation of public space, radical. This could also be said to be the case with black bodies occupying space implicitly coded in and through whiteness. No doubt, in some cases, black people or transgender folks sedulously work toward assimilation through buying into a proper black or transgender citizenship. And this entails "fading into the population . . . but also the imperative to be 'proper' in the eyes of the state: to reproduce, to find proper employment; to reorient one's 'different' body into the flow of the nationalized aspiration for possessions, property[, and] wealth" (Aizura 2006: 295). Surely, then, the two can appear at times in opposition to one another, as in those who identify as transgender and are conservative, antiblack (people), neoliberal, and so forth; and those who identify as black may be deeply transphobic. While these combinations arise, I maintain that even amid disruption one can harbor

comforting compartments of hegemonic stability. Black and trans* are both disruptive orientations indexed imperfectly by bodies said to be black or trans* and thus can succumb to logics of white supremacy and cis sexism. The anoriginal blackness and trans*-ness that bodies cite exceed bodyness and thus can never be "captured" in perfect entirety, leaving room, as has been historically evident, for moments of clash between black people and transgender people, and their imbrications.

What I wish to delineate regarding the relationship between blackness and trans*-ness (as analytics) and black and trans* bodies is the tangential and ultimately arbitrary connection between them, yet the metonymic nature of what can be said to be black and trans* bodies' positionalities. That is to say, as Spillers says of black culture (though, I would assert, the logic can apply to trans* folks as well), black and trans* bodies speak to and as metonymic flashes of the poetic forces of blackness and trans*-ness insofar as they are imagined as "an *alternative* statement, as a *counter*statement to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, identif[ying] the cultural vocation as the space of 'contradiction, indictment, and the refusal'" (2006: 25). They are instances, not archetypes, of this fugitive, lawless force we might call "black and trans*."

As well, this is not to collapse blackness and trans*-ness, diluting their uniqueness and utility as analytics for different, though related, disciplinary fields. They are, rather, nodes of one another, inflections that, though originary and names for the nothingness upon which distinction rests, flash in different hues because of subjects' interpretive historical entrenchment. That is to say, they are differently inflected names for an anoriginal lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology. Manifesting in the modern world differently as race and gender fugitivity, black and trans*, though pointed at by bodies that identify as black and/or trans*, precede and provide the foundational condition for those fugitive identificatory demarcations. In short, what I seek to do is, as my title suggests, demonstrate the ways in which trans* is black and black is trans*. Though I cannot cause the fictive "Blackness Meets Trans*-ness" volume to materialize as an academic tome, I can come close by showing how they perennially speak with, through, alongside, and back to (or, alternatively, black to) one another over there on the "outskirts of the order of purity."

I. The Trans*-ness of Blackness: A Burning Paris

To address the first clause of my title, "the Trans*-ness of Blackness," my aim is to articulate the anoriginality of that poetic, creative, fugitive force known as blackness. It bears a slight textured kinship with Michel Foucault's understanding of literature, that "third point" that is external to language and literary works and

that describes an "essential blankness" (notably, I kept misreading this as "essential blackness") in which the question of "What is . . . ?" is "originally dismembered and fractured" (Foucault et al. 2015: 47). Blackness here, in another sense, riffing on Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept, is an undercommons, a subtending and subverting sub- where fugitives dwell, reveling in chaos. It is "not a coalition" but rather "an absolutely open secret with no professional ambition" (Moten and Harney 2014: 188)—a burning Paris, perhaps.[1] As an undercommons, blackness is a no/place that simmers alongside, or on the underside of, discernible ontology. It is a no/place, a spaceless space that renders governability ungovernable; blackness "means to render unanswerable the question of how to govern the thing that loses and finds itself to be what it is not"; blackness is the modality of constant escape, of flight, of a "held and errant pattern" that eludes (Harney and Moten 2013: 51, 49).

Additionally, blackness marks a "*break* in the passage of syntagmatic movement from one more or less stable property to another, as in the radical disjuncture between 'African' and 'American,'" says Spillers (2003: 262). As disjuncture, it rests on a modality of not only being in the interstices but also of breaking and uprooting by virtue of its escape. Or, blackness "lays in the cut," as the vernacular saying goes, and stalls the very logic of social syntax as, for example, Black Lives Matter activists—bold irruptions of corporeal, unapologetic blackness—congealed across highways to forestall traffic. Sociality as manifested in the zip and zoom of automobiles oblivious to, and thus constitutive of, the plight of blackness was socially lacerated. Blackness is "a strategy that names the new cultural situation as a *wounding*" (Spillers 2003: 262), and in this constant wounding, this constant cutting, it is the "abeyance of closure" (Carter 2013: 595). Blackness rests in the in-between, and this "between" is also a movement of flight, of escape, of fugitivity from the confines of ontological pinning down. The pinning down requires fixation and definable locations, but as in-between, blackness is that elusive interstitiality; it is that "posture of critical insurgency" about which Spillers speaks, but unlike Spillers's conceptualization, blackness cannot be achieved or arrived at (2003: 262).[2] Excessive of the logic of sovereignty—governability, logic qua logic—is blackness, and it is always smoldering, fissuring, crackling.

But why? Will blackness ever rest? No, because via its interstitial position, its undercommonality, it is perennially refusing impositions. Amaryah Shaye, whose epigraph graces the beginning of this essay, thinks of blackness, relatedly, as a "besideness," and through that besideness blackness operates "as a refusal of the unitive logic of reconciliation" (2014b). Blackness says no, then sidesteps the conversation, the imposition, and keeps it movin'.

It has also been shown, perhaps most recently, provocatively, and cogently by Michelle Wright, that thinking of blackness as "a determinable 'thing,' as a 'what' or 'who'" proves problematic (2015: 2). Blackness must move and be thought in motion. Though Wright conceives of her blackness in *Physics of Blackness* through space and time (spacetime) and through her notion of "epiphenomenal time," I am concerned more with thinking of blackness as fugitive, as volatile, as, to use her language for James Baldwin, "quantum." But although Wright is thinking differently than I am, she is, to be sure, not thinking deficiently or contrastingly. A black interlocutor she is. Her blackness, too, is a node of fugitivity. Thus, in this sense I do not part with her—her expansion of blackness as not solely affixed to the Middle Passage slave ship or linear causality indexes a kind of capacious fugitivity, as she says of Olaudah Equiano's black when-and-whereness, "creat[ing] the greatest number of Blacknesses that are possible and viable" (Wright 2015: 25). Where I do wish to supplement and critique Wright is her particular handling of Spillers's work, namely, Spillers's landmark article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Within *Physics of Blackness*, Wright argues that Spillers's "Mama's Baby," in part, expresses that in order to resist the white supremacist "controlling images" imposed upon black women, black folks must return "to the heteronormative gender and sexuality roles that preceded enslavement" (80). This, however, is misguided on two fronts: first, black sexuality cannot be heteronormative, at least in the context of US white supremacy, because, as we learn from Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black* (2004), black people might be "heterosexual [or homosexual] but never *heteronormative* [or homonormative]" (87). Second, Spillers does not seem to be proffering a (impossible) "return" to heteronormativity; indeed, Spillers asserts something far more queer, far more, one might tentatively argue, trans*. At the end of "Mama's Baby," the penultimate paragraph reads:

> Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an "illegitimacy." Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of "yes" to the "female" within. (Spillers 1987: 80)

There is a marked fugitivity in Spillers's black female as she "breaks in upon the imagination" with a force that is "both a denial and an 'illegitimacy.'" The illegitimacy that is blackness, that is lawlessness, is in full effect, historically, with

black women. But if we home in on the last sentence of the above quote, we can better understand Wright's interpretive misstep. Spillers does not wish to return to heteronormative gender; on the contrary, there is something decidedly non-normative, something even transgender, about Spillers's black heritage advancing "the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within." Heteronormative gender maintains a strict, exclusionary gender binary that Spillers, here, is undoing—transing, even. Spillers's conception of African American culture, since the mid-seventeenth century, is a tale "between the lines," which is to say, a tale that is black, that is even trans*; it is a tale in which "gender, or sex-role assignation, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff, sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge for the African-American female" (1987: 79). Quite far from advancing a return to heteronormativity, Spillers describes a black trans* lineage within African American culture. Indeed, Spillers's claims "transly" resound in black, queer, gender-nonconforming Afrofuturist janaya (j) khan's (2015) writing when they[3] say that black trans women are integral to black liberation, the "fulcrum" of it, its "nucleus." And those who have ever taken high school biology know how consequential the nucleus is for the functioning of the entirety of the cell. Blackness, and the liberation of its corporeal bearers, is fueled by its trans* nucleus.

It may seem, though, like blackness is always and already tied to black/African American bodies, since I have been relying heavily on Spillers's and others' theorizations of African American culture. But blackness here, I want to reiterate, bears a vexed and tense relationship with black people/bodies, which is to say that there must be a highly textured conveyance of the "'para ontological distinction' between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black" (Moten 2008: 1744). Alexander Weheliye's work is helpful here: in a footnote in his 2008 article "After Man," Weheliye writes, "It is crucial to disarticulate blackness from black people, since not doing so accepts too easily race as a given natural and/or cultural phenomenon rather than an assemblage of forces that must continuously re/produce black subjects as nonhuman" (333). In other words, "blackness" is not natural—or inherent or commonsensical—to "black people." Weheliye goes on to say in "Engendering Phonographies: Sonic Technologies of Blackness" that despite the necessity of disarticulating blackness from those who are said to be black, it remains that "Blackness as a category of analysis does not disappear black bodies" (2014: 182). So blackness as a poetic force is both linked to and disarticulated from black bodies. Weheliye, though, remains in the intellectual camp of thinking "Blackness [a]s an effect of Western modernity," which does not acknowledge, too, the anoriginality of blackness (181). But I maintain that blackness is not reducible to a colonial imposition or modern racial categorization. Certainly, it is metonymic and manifests in the world, but, too, it is anoriginal, nothingness.

For the remainder of this discussion of blackness, of the first clause of my title, I want to home in on Fred Moten's work, as his is the most generative and direct articulation of blackness, fugitivity, and nothingness. Fred Moten: that "black motherfucker" who, like Curtis Mayfield, will continue to remain a believer—in blackness. Moten crystallizes blackness in the most beautifully tortuous way. For him, as it is for me, when we speak of blackness we are speaking of those "irruptions of that 'thematics of flight'" (toward which Spillers moves as well) and that Kantian "nonsense" that constitutes the lawless freedom of imagination's lawlessness (see Moten 2007: 218, 220). Varying Nahum Chandler's thoughts a bit, Moten has said that "blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, . . . it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space"—or, if I may vary Tina Campt's thinking (Campt 2014), blackness is the quotidian practice of refusal to "be"; that is, affirmation of its nothingness.

Blackness is already here, and it is the disagreeable, the subversions of the stasis giving intelligibility to one's validity as "human" or Sylvia Wynter's over-represented "Man" (which she calls an "ethnoclass" but is also, a bit more accurately, an "ethnogenderclass"). Blackness cannot, and refuses to, attain the agreeable because such a category is predicated on an exclusionary "human" and defers to a fixed rigidity that aligns with propriety, decorum, and the like. "We are disruption," blackness says—disruption of syntax via black vernacular, disruption of racializing ocular logics via the "fantastic" blackness of someone like Rachel Dolezal,[4] disruption of the commonsense violence constituting hegemony via, say, slave insurrections—"and [we] consent to disruption" (Moten and Harney 2011: 987–88).

Always moving, always the elusive thing escaping, blackness manifests as "that desire to be free, manifest as flight, as escape, as a fugitivity that may well prove to veer away even from freedom as its telos, [and] is indexed to anoriginal lawlessness" (Moten 2007: 223). Itself a proxy for "the inadequacy of mechanistic explanation" (223), blackness stands in as a perennial refusal of lawfulness— indeed, of law—and is unable to acknowledge the law. The law can never grab blackness; blackness, in nursery rhyme fashion, is the Gingerbread Man, so run, run, run as fast as you can, but you will still not catch blackness. It is always escaping.

But this constant refusitive escape, as Moten says, "is uneasy." But "perhaps constant escape is what we mean when we say freedom," Moten muses; "perhaps constant escape is that which is mistreated in the dissembling invocation of freedom and the disappointing underachievement/s of emancipation" (2007: 242). And perhaps he is right. If one were to look at the nexus of when blackness meets a bastion of institutional, one might say academically hegemonic, power,

the workings of blackness become a bit clearer. And of course, that nexus is black studies, and Moten avers that "Black studies is a dehiscence at the heart of the institution and on its edge, . . . graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. The cultivated nature of this *situated volatility*, this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret" (2008: 1743; emphasis added). Black studies—the study, that is, of blackness—is volatile, characterized by volatility and dehiscence, a cut, a Spillers-like wounding. It is the instantiation of a critique of the West, of imperialism, of hegemony. It remains, because of its blackness, "unresponsive to the governance that it calls and the governments that it rouses" (1745). As shown by the 1969 Cornell "crisis of the American university," black studies is fugitive. At Cornell University in 1969, after experiencing white supremacist vitriol in the form of cross burning, epithets, and curricular erasure on the annual parents' weekend, over eighty members of the university's Afro-American Society (AAS) occupied Willard Straight Hall—then an administrative building—and ulti- mately demanded an end to campus racism and the creation of an Afro-American Studies Center. The takeover lasted thirty-six hours in total. In an attempt to take the building back, white Delta Upsilon frat brothers entered Willard Straight and brawled with AAS students in the Ivy Room before being subsequently ejected. Fearing for their safety, or keenly acknowledging the insurgent social life that is blackness, AAS members brought rifles to defend (or enact) their blackness. In the end, as a *Newsweek* magazine article titled "Universities under the Gun" (Elliott 1969) indicated, the making of the Afro-American Studies Center was expe- dited because "students wanted an autonomous program" (Lowery 2009; see also Downs 1999).

This historical anecdote is meant to show how volatile and disruptive, irruptive, eruptive blackness is, especially when met with hegemonic institutions, viz whiteness. To think about blackness, or to engage in thinking black, in black thought, is to bring to the fore that interstitial space of volatility and to utterly threaten to disintegrate the hegemonic polarity between—well, you name it: humanness and thingness, humanness and machine, law and unlaw, and so forth. The AAS's demand for, essentially, a black studies program brought insurgency in the flesh to the whiteness of the academic institution, which portended and metonymically cited the lawlessness of para-ontological blackness. Study of blackness is "the anoriginary drive . . . the runaway anarchic ground of unpayable debt and untold wealth, the fugal, internal world theater that shows up for a minute serially," and this is a (para-) ontological issue that destabilizes everyone's purportedly stable claim to ontology (Harney and Moten 2013: 47). The gun- wielding black bodies in Ithaca, New York, in 1969 were themselves demon- strating the subversivity, the fugitivity, of the anoriginal lawlessness driving para- ontological subjects.

II. The Blackness of Trans*-ness: Roots Need Not Apply

If the previous section characterized blackness's undoing of the human, and its disruption of systematicity, this section delineates similar effects of trans*-ness. So if trans*, too, is not simply a descriptor of a body, then tell me, what is it? Because we know that corporeal representation and identificatory proclamation is not enough, trans* denotes a disruptive, eruptive orientation; it denotes "unpredetermined movement," Kai M. Green writes, and is "a tool that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation" (2015b: 191, 196). It is a mode of worldly inhabitation that fugitively engages history and space by reveling in excess, constantly refusing to limn ontological overflows—akin, perhaps, to what Matt Richardson would call the "good and messy." It is for this reason that I use *trans** instead of simply *trans* or *trans-*. Though Mel Y. Chen (2012: 137) uses the "prefixal trans-" to show that it is "not preliminarily limited to gender," and Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore note that the hyphen "marks the difference between the implied nominalism of 'trans' and the explicit relationality of 'trans-,' which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix" (2008: 11), *trans** is intended to be even more disruptive and to highlight its own dehiscence. And the asterisk is "starfishy," a regenerative cut that pulls the body back through itself, moving closer to oneself through the wound that is (on) the self—a cut that itself is that Butlerian crucial bread of possibility[5] (Hayward 2013; Hayward 2008: 72); too, it is "fingery," a "multipointed asterisk" that "both points and touches" so that it "repurposes, displaces, renames, replicates, and intensifies terms, adding yet more texture, increased vitalization" (Hayward and Weinstein 2015: 198). Additionally, however, it is celestial. Beyond our discernible stratosphere is the galactic backdrop of all that we know to be possible. Colloquially, and tellingly, known simply as "space," it is empty yet full, and it is the very condition of possibility for, essentially, that which is possible. More tellingly, it is full of stars, for which the asterisk in *trans** is a metonym. If stars stipple the pregnant celestial void, and if "almost every element on Earth was formed at the heart of a star" ("Are We Really All Made of Stardust?," 2016), then *trans** denotes the ubiquity, the transitivity, the fundamentality of the primordial force of unfixing openness. In the beginning was, in fact, trans*—because in the beginning stars floating without laws set in motion that originary trans*-ness, the fundamental openness of our world.

So while I am certainly speaking about those "refugee[s] without citizenship" known as transgender and gender-nonconforming people (Bird 2002: 366)—and as we learn from Bertolt Brecht, "refugees are the keenest dialecticians. They are refugees as a result of changes and their sole object of study is change" (translation quoted in Jay 1986: 28; and we learn from Jared Sexton that refugees bring about the "urgent renewal of categories"[6])—I am more so speaking about

what Claire Colebrook calls "transitivity." Transitivity is the beginningness that underlies the (gendered) conditions of possibility that allow for distinction. If we permit the loose and tangential link of transgender and gender-nonconforming bodies to stand in here as illustrative examples of trans*, transitivity can be said to highlight how, rather than being a "special test case that might provide the normal and normative with a basis for a renewed sense of its own difference," metonymic trans* subjects, and any dialogue about distinctive corporeal categories, are "preceded, conditioned, and haunted by a condition of transitivity" (Colebrook 2015: 228). Transitivity is the prepersonal singularity preceding normative predicates like race and gender. In this singularity's potentiality, it is characterized by instability, stabilizing only in talk of regulated legible corporeal identities. Therefore, Colebrook argues, transgender, transsexual, tranimal, and so on, bodies are not supplements to the discourse of the human but, when starting from the human, the displacement of it. "In the beginning is transitivity," says Colebrook, "and it is the subsequent metalepsis and fetishization of identity that displaces this force" (229). And this is akin to Eva Hayward's *trans-*: it is a disruptive perturbation of the process of purification, much like Carter's description of blackness as the interstitial drama performed on the outskirts of the order of purity. The affixation of the asterisk onto *trans**, in a sense, opens up openness. Relating this to Internet searches, as blogger and trans* activist Sevan Bussell (2012) notes, the asterisk tells "your computer to search for whatever you typed, plus any characters after"; it tells the cyber*space* to further open the already "open, and always, opening" prefixal *trans** (Tolbert 2013: 7).[7]

Trans** is also weighted with its etymology as all words are, and *trans** (or, *trans-*) is prefixial—across, to the side of (para-), beyond. *Trans** is elsewhere, not here, because here is known, ontologically discernible and circumscribable. By now we know that *trans** suggests, and has suggested, the unclassifiable and illegible, but I would assert that it also suggests the pervasive moving non-movement that precedes that which is human, that which is animal, that which legibly is. Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein (2015: 196) note the asterisk's designation of the primacy of, not the human, but the "*event*ualization of life." That is to say, *trans** denotes its own antefoundational status, its own fugitivity insofar as it—by being prefixally *trans** and suffixally an asterisk and thus incompletely completing itself, disallowing the stabilizing force of an ontologizing root word— refuses rootedness. Syntactically and linguistically, *trans** is its own nonroot, its own para. Roots need not, indeed cannot, apply. Hence, its own nominative paradoxically marks its perpetually moving unnamability:

> If trans* is ontological, it is that insofar as it is the movement that produces beingness. In other words, trans* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes

through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans*
is prepositionally oriented—marking the *with*, *through*, *of*, *in*, and *across* that
make life possible. Trans*life works purposefully crabwise to ontological claims;
trans* can be ontological to the extent that it is the movement across precisely
vitality itself. (Hayward and Weinstein 2015: 196–97)

"Trans* is both movement and the force of materialization that may become
matter, but only prepositionally so," Hayward and Weinstein go on to write (197).
Trans* is an operation, though not a mechanistic one, of locomotion and agi-
tation, troubling and troubling ontologized states. This point, then, is an
important one to make explicit: the starfishy, fingery, celestial asterisk "is the
agglutinating asterisk and prefixial nature of trans that always materializes
prepositional movements . . . is *moving mattering*. As such, trans* is not *not*
ontological but is rather the expressive force *between*, *with*, and *of* that enables the
asterisk to stick to particular materializations" (197). Force, a metonymic one, is
what trans* is, like blackness, expressly provoking ontologization by moving
beneath it and to the side of it and through it. Trans* breaks open—ever the
fugitive who despises hir confinement, who, indeed, can't be confined—even the
categories of transgender via engaging in a kind of "guerrilla" (em)bodying
through "burrowing in and virally *disrupting* the smoothness and closure on
which power depends" (Stone 2014: 92; emphasis added). Trans* is that refusal to
be itself, to be sure of itself, to be sure that it is where it's at.

   Trans* as transitivity, as a prefixally trans- fugitivity, enacts what C. Riley
Snorton calls "transfiguration" (Snorton 2011). As an analytic of radical desta-
bilization that "gesture[s] toward a space of transition as a site that allows us to
understand the queer relationship between" feminist universality and particu-
larities, trans*/transitivity as transfiguration operates in the space of liminality, of
*trans*ition, which is the very site of the most radical destabilization. And this
transitive/transitional space, Snorton writes, "serves as a place where particular
assumptions about gender and its mapping on the body come under such scrutiny
as to implode." This implosion, like blackness's volatility, is a disruptive and
irruptive undercommon subversion. And this transitive, undercommon sub-
versivity, as LaMonda H. Stallings says of hip-hop (Stallings 2013: 135), trafficks in
a queer above- and below-ground fluidity wherein examining the "nook and
cranny spaces of transitional bodies" and subjectivities disintegrates the onto-
logical demarcations of ontic ontology. A transfigurative transitivity unmakes
ontology via its para-ontology. What Snorton is responding to in his essay
"Transfiguring Masculinities in Black Women's Studies," from which the analytic
concept of transfiguration is taken, is the proclivity for black male feminists to
buttress a gender binary and conflate "male" with being in possession of a penis,

compounding an uncritical self-reflexivity. What Snorton wishes to undo is that very assumption of penis equals male, in pursuit of a more expansive deployment of black feminism.

So if Snorton critiques the genitally normative categories of gender that black (male) feminists often unwittingly uphold, in an effort to "trans*blasphemously" concretize my theorizations, if you will, I wish here to also obviate the conflation of trans*(gender) with racial whiteness. Indeed, as Jasbir Puar explains, value is extracted from (trans*) bodies of color in order to produce transgender whiteness. Drawing on the work of Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, Puar's project in "Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled" (2015) is to always imagine an affiliation between disabilities, trans*, racial, and interspecies discourses through her concept of "becoming trans," which is to say, quite controversially, that boundaries are porous insofar as they engage the force of ontological multiplicity and, ultimately, make an end goal an always shifting impossibility: "There is no trans" (46–47, 62). Puar writes, "Trans becoming masquerades as a teleological movement, as if one could actually become trans. Trans is often mistaken as the horizon of trans and, as such, is mistaken for becoming trans as linear telos, as a prognosis that becomes the body's contemporary diagnosis and domesticates the trans body into the regulatory norms of permanence.

"*Becoming trans*, then, as opposed to trans becoming, must highlight this impossibility of linearity, permanence, and end points" (62–63). One might initially castigate Puar for erasing transgender subjects. After all, to say "there is no trans" is a rather provocative and contentious claim for a queer theorist to make. But Puar is in fact suggesting something rather profound. One cannot arrive at trans* precisely because it is movement, excitation, and agitation. To "be" trans* is an impossibility since trans* is a radically unstable non/site laying the antefoundation for the possibility of Heideggerian *Dasein*. Trans* is "force" and "intensity" rather than identity, fixed or otherwise (Puar 2014: 80). Trans* is not linear, permanent, or an end—it is in fact the impossibility of these things. "Sometimes the shit stays messy," Maggie Nelson writes of her partner Harry Dodge, who insists of their gendered subjectivity, "*I'm not on my way anywhere*" (Nelson 2015: 52–53). Nelson and Dodge vocalize the impossibility, the nonlinearity of (gendered) identities. Thus "becoming trans" references this perpetual disruptive movement, this messy shit. Linked historically to the Greek philosophies of Heraclitus and Aristotle, becoming denotes the undoing of stasis, of being-as-such, tied to a known and knowable fixed identity, thus marking a transitive perpetual motion. It is in no way teleological, linear, regulated, or logical. There is no "trans*," which is to say, seemingly oxymoronically, there is no

legible or identifiable manifestation of trans*-ness. Trans* is that lawless anoriginality that refuses to be captured or ontologically limned.

Metonymic trans* bodies, metonymic black bodies,[8] are the maroons who "know something about possibility." As Moten and Harney assert, speaking to and with a kind of trans*-ness/transitivity and blackness, "They are the condition of possibility of production of knowledge" (2004: 105). Trans*-ness, and trans*-ness's blackness, is the beyond of politics and distinctions and legibilities already in motion—perpetual motion—and, from the "way, way below," from the non/text of that "hidden transcript," exacts a kind of infrapolitics that is before and beyond (see Kelley 1994).[9]

III: That Alternative Groove We In

> Amiri Baraka's work is in the break, in the scene, in the music. This location, at once internal and interstitial, determines the character of Baraka's political and aesthetic intervention. Syncopation, performance, and the anarchic organization of phonic substance delineate an ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work. . . . The black radical tradition . . . constitutes its radicalism as a cutting and abundant refusal of closure. This refusal of closure is not a rejection but an ongoing and reconstructive improvisation of ensemble; this reconstruction's motive is the sexual differentiation of sexual difference.
>
> —Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*

Both the blackness of trans*-ness and the trans*-ness of blackness un/mark, in a slight recapitulation of Katherine McKittrick's phrase, "demonic non-ground." McKittrick's "demonic ground" describes "perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life" (Weheliye 2008: 323). A demonic ground is ground that is fugitive and unstable, "a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable outcome," "a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity" (McKittrick 2006: xxiv). For blackness and trans*-ness to un/mark a demonic nonground is a creative use of language to describe the thereness and not-thereness of the ground that is not a ground—a ground that, in not being a ground, is the condition for groundedness—which, in other words, is black and trans*. The demonic nonground resonates with Evelynn Hammonds's "black (w)hole,"[10] situating it in a black feminist genealogy, and also highlighting the accusatory, light-bearing, critical (etymologically, "demonic" or "satanic") abyss underlying the order of purity. It, too, is a space of liminality, of volatility, and in that liminality/volatility it is productive, forceful, and destructive of the human-as-man. I might alternatively call this demonic space "virtual," as virtuality is of a voidal non/space in which there is a "lively tension, a desiring

orientation toward being/becoming" that is aptly described as an imaginative "scene of wild activities" (Barad 2015: 396).[11] But though demonic and virtual, there is also something sonic here in the liminality, something echoing Moten's "Black Mo'nin'" or "break," or Claudia Rankine's (2015) mournful condition of black life.[12] Or maybe this is simply to say, there is something rhythmically and interstitially poetic here.

I have been calling blackness and trans*-ness poetic forces throughout this essay, echoing Fred Moten. In this sense, they share a disciplinary affiliation with Amiri Baraka. Though one imagines Baraka would have never given much thought to his relationship to trans*-ness, Moten sees in Baraka's work the epitomization of musical interstitiality. As an archetypal black radical, Baraka dwells in the break, the undercommons, and refuses the foreclosure of his unfixing poetics. And in this refusive posture, the fugitive posture is syncopated, uneven, differing and differential. And syncopation, like the break writ large, is a gapped chasm, which itself is, as Moten writes of black mo'nin', "the difference within invagination between what cuts and what surrounds, invagination being that principle of impurity that . . . is constantly improvised by the rupturing and augmentative power of an always already multiply and disruptively present singularity" (2003: 202). That rupturing, disruptively present singularity is what I have called "blackness," what I have called "trans*-ness."

It stands, though, that in their poetics, in Baraka's, blackness's, and trans*-ness's musicality, there exists, too, a rhythmic force. We are surrounded by rhythms reverberating throughout the vibrations of worldly inhabitation, but the prevailing rhythm, the one that seeks to circumscribe our para-ontological cacophony, is what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call a "killing rhythm." But, as they assert, "at the heart of its [the killing rhythm's] production is a certain indiscretion . . . a haptic resonance that makes possible and impossible this killing rhythm, the undercommon track that remains fugitive from the emerging logistics of this deadly rhythm and will exhaust it" (2014: 185–86). Simmering beneath the killing rhythm of hegemony is that indiscretion and fugitivity that I am calling "black" and "trans*." They reside in the undercommons, refusing the logic of logic, which is another name for the killing rhythm. "If logisticality is the resident capacity to live on the earth," Moten and Harney write, "logistics is the regulation of that capacity in the service of making the world, the zero-one, zero-one world that pursues the general antagonism of life on earth." Logic, hegemony—or as hegemonic racial and gender analogues to black and trans*, white and cisgender—attempts to create logical individuals, and this is to be firmly immersed within the symphonic trap of the killing rhythm. The killing rhythm seeks structure, fixity; it seeks "to beat out that rhythm over the undercommon track that keeps its own measure" (Moten and Harney 2014: 187–88).

And the alternative rhythm facing fatal melodic extermination is, in other words, black and trans*.

The end, the demise of this logical individual who sings to the tune of the killing rhythm is, Moten and Harney assert, "flesh/blackness" (189). It is also a kind of trans*-ness, I'd add, a fatal cut, a dehiscence, a rupture to the stitches of circumscription. Characterized as a "spooky action," Moten and Harney enunciate the para-ontological sociality of blackness, and by my own extension, trans*-ness. They write:

> What one might call the social life of things is important only insofar as it allows us to imagine that social life is not a relation between things but is, rather, that field of rub and rupture that works, that is the work of, no one, nothing, in its empathic richness. The social work of social life is no work at all, but the madness remains; rub and rupture all but emerge, but in nothing like an emergence, as something imprecision requires us to talk about as if it were some thing, not just discrete but pure. . . . This "thing," our ~~thing~~, the alternate groove we in, the devalued and invaluable local insurgency, disobeys our most loving invocation. This gift of spirit gives itself away and zero-one is left embittered. (188)

Blackness and trans*-ness: that "alternative groove we in," a groove that underlies grooviness and undoes it, opening it up again and again. What I have attempted here is a "grave-robbing" stratagem, as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson (2014: 161) might say, a stratagem that insists on the necessity to "exhume tools that might help us explain what has been going on in our own backyard." I insist on this work, and my scholarly corpus in general, as a black trans* studies methodological approach to "uncovering the skeletons of racism, misogyny, and other systemic violence and piecing them together" as a way to think through the very world in which we live (161). It is an alternative song, one that moves to an alternative groove, or perhaps a groove that does not even adhere to the sonic tenets of grooviness. But that is good, because what has passed for rhythm has been structured on a necessary, constitutive "killing." In this alternatively groovy vein, blackness and trans*-ness are things, discursively marking their thereness and not-thereness, their very linguistic volatility, their elusion of syntactical nominatives, which themselves, ultimately, are a form of fixing. Ever the artfully escaping air from the enframing of life, blackness and trans*-ness embitter the binaristic zero-one formulation that is ontology. "Catch me if you can—but you can't and you never will," say blackness and trans*-ness as they skip away, holding hands, perhaps, laughing all the way (ha ha ha).

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Notes

1. See the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston. The film is a documentary about New York's underground drag scene in which genderqueer folks of color vogue, mop, perform "realness," and destabilize all that one thinks they know about gender performativity.

2. Spillers writes that "a posture of critical insurgency must be achieved. It cannot be assumed." But I might also submit that since blackness underlies possibility, it *can* be assumed, as it is the foundation of everything's foundation. In Amaryah Shaye's words, "Blackness is a thing, is a space, *that already is*" (2014a). As anoriginal, it can be assumed on the grounds that it is always, and has always been, before.

3. khan uses the singular *they* gender pronoun, so I am honoring that preference here.

4. See, for example, Kai M. Green's (2015b) piece, "'Race and Gender Are Not the Same!' Is Not a Good Response to the 'Transracial'/Transgender Question or We Can and Must Do Better"; Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides's (2016) article, "When We Enter: The Blackness of Rachel Dolezal"; and Rogers Brubaker's (2016) book, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*.

5. A reference to Judith Butler's quote that "possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (2004: 29).

6. In "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," Sexton writes, quoting Giorgio Agamben, that

    > the refugee [i]s a limit-concept, a figure that "at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed." This urgent renewal of categories is made possible by the conceptual crisis of the nation-state represented by the refugee insofar as she disarticulates "the trinity of state-nation-territory" and "the very principle of the inscription of nativity" upon which it is based. The refugee is the contemporary political subject par excellence because she exposes to view "the originary fiction of sovereignty" and thereby renders it available to thought. (2010: 31)

    This provides insight into my purposes of thinking about anoriginality and the (lawless) conditions for distinction and the destabilization of normative categories.

7. As well, Avery Tompkins notes that, pertaining explicitly to transgender discourses, "proponents of adding the asterisk to trans* argue that it signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals. Trans* is thus meant to include not only identities such as transgender, transsexual, trans* man, and trans* woman that are prefixed by trans- but also identities such as genderqueer, neutrios, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and genderfluid" (2014: 27).

8. On the subject of bodies that are deemed trans* and their always already indexation of blackness, we can turn even to the "bathroom debate" and its antitrans* discourse as it indexes the legacy of racial slavery and is mired in the afterlife of slavery, bathroom signs, and their (violent) gender-normative regimes mimicking the "Jim Crow era['s] refer[ences] to 'men,' 'women,' and 'colored'—dramatizing how the Lacanian 'sexed body' is always already a racialized body and a colonized body, and how Black and/or indigenous peoples have always figured as sexual and gender outlaws to be disciplined and punished" (Gossett 2016). In short, "we can't think the gender binary outside of the context of racial slavery," which is to say, quintessentially, in the US context, the context of blackness's many enslaved afterlives (Gossett 2016). Transgressions of gender—really, of the fundamentality of "the human" and its racial and gender normative predicates—index both, by necessity, blackness and trans*-ness. Blackness is inextricable from trans*-ness.

9. "Way, way below" references Robin D. G. Kelley's introduction title: "Writing Black Working-Class History from Way, Way Below." Additionally, Kelley borrows *infrapolitics* from James C. Scott, a political anthropologist who conducted extensive research on peasants in Malaysia from 1978 to 1980. As well, *hidden transcript* is also taken from Scott and is defined by Kelley as "a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. . . . The veiled social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in everyday forms of resistance—theft, footdragging, the destruction of property or more rarely, in open attacks on individuals, institutions, or symbols of domination" (1994: 8).

10. In reference to Evelynn Hammonds's 1994 article "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in which she seeks to unearth the reasons for the silence around black women's sexuality.

11. In full, Karen Barad writes:

    > Virtual particles are not in the void but *of* the void. They are on the razor's edge of non/being. The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The void is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what might yet (have) be(en). Vacuum fluctuations are virtual deviations/variations from the classical zero-energy state of the void. That is, *virtuality is the material wanderings/wonderings of nothingness; virtuality is the ongoing thought experiment the world performs with itself.* Indeed, quantum physics tells us that *the void is an endless exploration of all possible couplings of virtual particles, a "scene of wild activities."* (2015: 396)

12. These are in reference to Moten's chapter "Black Mo'nin'" and his notion of "the break" in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, and Claudia Rankine's *New York Times* article "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" (2015). Black Mo'nin' for Moten is the sonic resonances of images, the blackness, if you will, of racialized trauma. The break is that generative, black liminal space in between. As Valorie Thomas (2012: 50) writes in her chapter in *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, the break "is a transformative technology that mirrors the vitality, dissonances, and underlying coherence of diasporic cultural processes." Lastly, Rankine argues that, simply, the very condition on which black life is grounded is mourning—mourning the death, essentially, of the appearance of blackness in public spaces coded as white. All these are interstitial spaces that musically and tonally resonate.

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