

Introduction

AGAINST THE CLOSET

Racial Logic and the Bodily Basis/Biases of Sexual Identity

[The] erotic . . . [is] our deepest knowledge, a power that, unlike other spheres of power, we all have access to and that can lessen the threat of our individual difference.

—Gina Dent, *Black Popular Culture*

I envision a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I am talking about a politics where the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work.

—Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens"

Gayness . . . exist[s] under the mask(s) of blackness.

—Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead*

Like many researchers of African American identity and U.S. expressive culture, I had hoped to produce a straightforward examination of blackness—an abstract racial designation as elemental and vital as blood, as socially formative as nationhood. I wanted to trace the making and meaning of a racial identity that is clearly mere theorization, ideological innovation, and yet terribly potent in its ability to make its meaning manifest in the “real” world through myriad denigrating social, material, and psychological effects on millions of black Americans. I wanted to explore blackness's essence, its fungibility, its nothingness, and the sheer weight of its possession. But for so many reasons I found this to be an impossible task, especially without bringing to

bear on racialized blackness a broad conception and application of “queerness,” or transgressive sexual theorization—for not only does sexuality fundamentally underlie racial logics, but, more to the point, racial identity is itself conceived, regulated, and disciplined through sexuality—through sexual practices, violations, and norms.

A consideration of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is illuminative here, demonstrating the relevance of the erotic or the sexual—the sexually normative, the sexually abusive, the sexually divergent or defiant—to the creation of race and to the acquisition and maintenance of power. Although her narrative is ostensibly one of slavery, Jacobs presents her experiences in and escape from bondage as a tale of sexual pursuit, sexual harassment, sexual compromise, and sexual freedom. For her, incidents of sexual abuse serve as both metonym and metaphor for the lived experience of American slavery. While it is becoming increasingly commonplace to locate the emergence of codified sexuality in reified notions of gender and sexual difference, Jacobs’s text demonstrates the interimbrication of racial and sexual ideologies in the making and maneuvering of exclusionary political and social apparatuses. *Incidents* also makes clear that, as early as the antebellum period, African American writers, spokespeople, and cultural producers sought to narrate the struggles of black life, revise dominant ideologies of racial difference, and agitate for personal and collective liberation through an appeal to sexuality. As Jacobs’s narrative exemplifies, depictions of rape, of coerced concubinage, of forced reproduction—of bereft, sexually abused black girls—serve as truly apt metaphors for the violence and violation of embodied black slavery. There is power in the erotic, and in sexual non-normativity, to narrate a world—or, more specifically, to narrate the world of particular marginalized, minoritarian subjects and to remake it.

In the U.S. cultural imaginary it is quite nearly impossible to separate ideas about race from ideas about sexuality. As Michel Foucault famously put it, sexuality is a “dense transfer point for relations of power.”¹ In the United States, the ideological regimes that disqualify black people from participating fully in American civic and political culture exploit heteronormativity as the index of both inclusion and exclusion. Because sexuality, as Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp posit, “both generates wider social relations and is refracted through the prism of society,” sexuality serves as a useful lens for investigating the constructions and contradictions of power relations organized around multiple axes of difference, including gender, class, and especially race.²

Taking, then, Jacobs’s literary, liberatory deployment of transgressive sexual representation as fundamental to the development of African American forms

of literary expression, political intervention, and cultural self-fashioning, this book advances a new architecture of race in which race operates as *erotics*—that is, part destiny, part desire. Accordingly, this book asks: what would it mean for racial embodiment and experience if, instead of belonging to the realm of the external, the phenotypical, the material and instead of heavy-handedly fueling the operative forces of compulsory interpellation, race moved inward and operated for the racialized subject primarily from an internal site of instinct, impulse, intuition, longing? What, furthermore, might be the productive effects of representations of deviant sexualities on African American cultural identity, and might these representations inform an emancipatory political project that undergirds an entire literary tradition?

Guided by a logic of investigative inquiry, though not necessarily of resolute finding, *Against the Closet* analyzes African American literary and cultural production of different epochs to analyze the ways in which black writers have deployed constructions of transgressive sexuality tropologically to challenge popular theories of identity, pathology, national belonging, and racial difference in American culture. This book reads genres from the slave narrative to science fiction and such authors as Harriet Jacobs, Pauline Hopkins, William Faulkner, James Baldwin, and Octavia Butler alongside and against contemporary queer, feminist, and critical race theory to illuminate how race, politics, and sexuality intersect in the social and racial ordering of U.S. culture and in the making of African American literature and expressive culture. A fundamentally irrational force, sexuality has the power to wrest individuals from their ideological investments and thus to begin to level the playing field of human interactions, despite existing social asymmetries. This study attends to the liberationist impulses and disruptive impacts underwriting representations of sexual deviance and alternative domesticities in black cultural productions, even as it historicizes pivotal moments at which ideologies of sexual normalcy and sexual pathology have supported racism and the unfair distribution of rights and resources in American society.

My primary goal in this book is to undertake and to advance a radical reconsideration of the dominant scholarship on black American literary engagements with sexuality—one in which homosexuality, lynching, interracial love, sadomasochism, and incest are understood principally as tropes that gain currency in African American literature and expressive culture of different historical periods. Treating in each chapter a different form of sexual aberrance across a range of texts, I show that the depiction of sadomasochism, or incest, or any other expression of “perversity” is a deliberate utilization of the metaphors of sexuality that, when read closely and particularly,

(1) speaks to the psychodynamics of particular racial injuries, (2) exemplifies or explodes generic conventions in popular literary and expressive forms, and (3) illuminates the exigencies of African American social life and political aspiration during specific historical periods. Less to make a claim about the linear development of a representational structure than to produce a lucid and rigorous study, my analysis proceeds chronologically. I identify four critical periods in African American experience: slavery, post-Reconstruction, civil rights and black power, and the post-civil rights era, tracking the emergence of a specific sexual trope in African American literature that works to represent and remedy the unique challenges of that moment.

Specifically, during slavery, under a totalizing regime of domination, sado-masochism figures prominently in African American writing to represent the internal operations of slavery and its sadistic social and performative requirements. Sadomasochism refers in my analysis to slavery's "sadistic" institutional protocols and what I read as their "masochistic" textual reproduction in slave narratives. As such, sadomasochism both dramatizes the despair of stolen personhood and presents strategies for redefining agency and autonomy. During the post-Reconstruction era, lynching emerged as a powerful trope for figuring the solidification of whiteness through state-sanctioned racism and extralegal forms of racial terrorism. Lynching exposed, even as it perpetuated, the charade of black emancipation. During the civil rights era, literary representations of interracial romance presented idealized versions of interracial cooperation and anticipated the tranquil domestic space of a racially unified nation. The turn to black homoerotic love in the late era of black power, specifically in the work of James Baldwin, imagines a self-sustaining black community that can accommodate difference, an avowal of black humanity and political solidarity that does not require racial proscription. Finally, in the late twentieth century, incest appears repeatedly in the writing of prominent black female authors. Literary depictions of incest speak to racism's profound and incessant injuries to black women and children, epitomizing the disintegration of the black family under the pressures of the legislative retrenchment of civil rights, reinvigorated black patriarchy, dwindling communal supports, negligible economic resources, and urban decay.

This study is indebted to black feminist literary criticism. Ann duCille, Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate, and Frances Smith Foster are notable scholars of nineteenth-century black women's writing. It was their pioneering work that first posited black literary constructions of erotic desires as allegories for political desires, domestic spaces as instantiations of social and racial relations. For more than twenty years, the scholarship advanced by these scholars

—and most recently by Candice Jenkins—has emphasized heteronormativity under the rubric of (domestic, cultural) respectability as the primary analytic for reading the imaginative deployment of sexuality in black American literary products. Bringing to bear theories and histories of sexuality and black queer studies, *Against the Closet* makes the case that a strident distrust and disavowal of heteronormativity—as a regulatory ideal, an elusive construct, a dangerous component of hegemony—underlie the African American literary tradition, even as it recognizes the anxious efforts of black cultural workers to refigure blackness as (hetero)normative so that black Americans could enter the cultural mainstream and enjoy the full benefits of unqualified citizenship. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and proceeding to traverse the entire twentieth century, this book shows that it is within constructions of sexual perversions that we find the most searing, astute illustrations and indictments of race-based inequality in the United States. Charting the long history of black American letters, my study unfolds to illuminate the potential of transgressive erotics to constitute a representational structure that expresses the longings of African Americans to achieve individual and collective freedom. The very utility of this representational apparatus, evident in the long history of black American political resistance via textual production, is its repeated challenge to hegemonic whiteness's attempt to fasten to black people sexual and racial pathology, along with the negations of personal worth, human capacity, and rights-bearing citizenship that such pathologies both imply and secure.

By engaging black feminist historiography, queer theory, and critical race theory, I hope to dislodge queer studies a bit from its primary disciplinary location in gender studies and to resituate it more firmly within the study of race or, more specifically, in the history of African American articulations of identity formation, expressive culture, and political resistance. *Against the Closet* joins a growing cadre of studies dedicated to the exploration of sexuality and race that have emerged between the late 1990s and the current millennium, moving ultimately, however, in a different direction.³ While many scholars of sexuality and African American studies readily acknowledge the coterminous invention and regulation of codified racial and sexual identities, the interrelation of these categories within the symbolic system of cultural signification has not been recognized in the main. For me, simply historicizing the intersection of race and sexuality does not exhaust the critical and political potential of their alliance. My goal in this book is thus to move beyond the mere historicization or redemption of same-gender sexuality in the African American context. The analyses taken up in the various chapters of this book do not centralize same-gender eroticism as their exclusive focus per se. Neither am I invested

in solidifying racialized queerness as identity; rather, this book examines modern epistemologies of sexuality to distill their specific implications and socio-political utility for racial blackness, for black cultural expression, and for ongoing attempts at black freedom. My goal is to harness the insurrectionary potential of an expanded, reformulated queer theory in the service of a radical and collaborative politics of race.

Notably, sexuality is crucial in *Against the Closet* for its many operations: as a constitutive element of identity, as a source of pleasure, as an organizing principle in the allocation of power, as a disciplinary practice or methodology, and as a liberatory political enterprise. The centrality of sexuality to this book's development and execution is owed finally to three basic tenets that undergird its focus and, for me, operate at the level of fact: (1) that race is the most important factor in the formation of (both individual and national) identity in the United States;⁴ (2) that sexuality is a crucial component of racial difference;⁵ and (3) that the creation and representation of difference in general is both a fundamental crisis in U.S. literary and cultural production and a vital instrument in the development of U.S. political practice. *Against the Closet* pursues a deep and wide-ranging examination of African American articulations and topological deployments of sexual transgression toward manifestly political ends. Accordingly, I look unflinchingly at a range of non-normative sexual practices—including those that are enabling and those that are violating—to uncover not an erotics of liberation but a politics of liberation rendered in sexual terms in African American expressive culture.

The queer subject of this study is not exclusively, or necessarily even, the woman-loving woman or the man-loving man of our common understanding, although the lesbian and the male homosexual delineate and concretize in useful ways the genealogy, epistemology, and iconography of queerness in the U.S. cultural context with which this study is preoccupied. To be clear, the queer subject here is not defined wholly by sexual or identity practices and politics.⁶ My queer subject is drawn from the various characters I encounter in the texts that I read throughout this book: the gang-raped black girl, the infantilized black man, the pedophile, the unwed teenage mother, the extraterrestrial, the castrated victim of lynching, the gun-toting revolutionary, the victim of domestic violence, the religious fanatic, the incest survivor, the lynch mob, the slave. In other words, the queer subject of this book inhabits social (and sometimes sexual) margins, throwing into crisis and into relief our most precious and pervasive ideations of the normative, along with the ideological, economic, and political apparatuses in which the violences of normativity operate.⁷ This book emphasizes the ways in which dominant ideologies of

racial difference and divergent sexuality function, usually in combination, in the service of a racially stratified and asymmetric social sphere. More important, it demonstrates the ways in which depictions of sexual deviance constitute in African American literature and expressive culture a recurrent, usable, emancipatory representational apparatus.

Sexuality and Race

For the better part of the past two centuries, both ordinary and specialized knowledge regimes have characterized black people as maladaptive social and sexual deviants. This characterization has justified the devastating and unrelenting marginalization of African Americans.⁸ Because black identity establishes and exposes the limits of whiteness as identity category and ideological apparatus, the myth of black social and sexual deviance has also made black people, black suffering, and black cultural expression objects of intense interest and longing in the culture at large. To be sure, African Americans have been relegated to a lowly social status from the earliest arrivals on American shores; however, that status had been based in part on enslavement and not race alone. Ideologies of racial blackness, replete with predominantly negative beliefs about it, came to full fruition during the post-Reconstruction era, when segregation was institutionalized, minstrelsy gained in popularity all over the country, an emergent advertising industry profited primarily from derogatory stereotyped images of black people, and lynchings occurred nearly every week for three decades. According to historians of sexuality and scholars of African American studies, the development of discrete sexual categories in the late nineteenth century coincided with the discursive and legislative deployment of racial blackness to support coercive regimes of race-based social stratification between citizens. The linkage between the invention of blackness and that of alternative sexualities was cemented through the popular sciences of the late nineteenth century, including anthropology, psychology, and sexology, which established and circulated discourses of sexuality and race via similar, if not identical, ideologies about identity, normalcy, and pathology. These discourses of racial and sexual pathology contributed significantly to juridical measures (ranging from antimiscegenation laws to legal segregation) and acts of racial terrorism (such as lynching) that prevented black Americans from accessing the full entitlements of citizenship.

At the turn of the twentieth century, African American identity was biologically determined and legally constrained. It was defined primarily in relation to a set of anatomical markers of difference, including facial features, skin

color, hair textures, and genitalia. Popular discourses and legislative processes that served to mark African American bodies as racially distinct also served to limit black participation in political and civic life. In 1877, the U.S. troops left the South as the government turned to the reunification of the fractured union after the Civil War. This period, generally called post-Reconstruction, was one of the bleakest in African American history. William Gleason summarizes, “Where Afro-Americans had expected first-class citizenship, they were offered [instead] segregation, discrimination, exploitation, and contempt. . . . [This historical moment] marked the nadir in the quest for equal rights.”⁹ To reunify the country after the Civil War, the government conceded to the South, granting most states the sovereignty to preserve or to develop racist legislation in every area of political and social life, including voting procedures, property laws, miscegenation laws, and hiring practices. In 1883, the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which prohibited discrimination against black people in public facilities, was overturned by the Supreme Court. One decade later, in 1896, the ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* allowed states to provide separate accommodations for white and black people in transportation and other public facilities. By legalizing the race-based division of public spaces, the Supreme Court mandated the physical separation of the races in the South.

Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that the racially volatile era of early-twentieth-century American culture inaugurated the racially tinged era of the spectacle.¹⁰ Examining the emergence of the advertising industry, the popularity of minstrelsy, and the frequency of spectacle lynchings, she argues that new modes of production within capitalism enabled racial stereotypes to become firmly entrenched in the popular imagination. The railroad, cinema, and photography provided the means of disseminating negative images of African Americans quickly, and, unlike in earlier historical periods, these images were primarily photographic or cinematographic. For example, photographs of charred, dismembered, lynched black bodies that appeared in national newspapers helped to create and sustain the belief that black Americans were less than human, unqualified for full citizenship, and unworthy of full integration within the body politic. Furthermore, the “spectacle” itself granted authority to the onlooker to remain concealed and unnamed, even as she or he defined the “object” or “objects” in view. This relationship takes on particular significance in terms of racial placement when we consider that in early-twentieth-century visual culture, the spectator was generally presumed to be white, and the spectacle was generally black. Concretized in the era of the spectacle, language (or concepts) and visibility operate together to produce racial categories and to locate individuals within them. Even before raced individuals are

stereotyped and evacuated of their internal lives and personal differences, they are noted and named because of their visibility. Since the early era of the spectacle, U.S. culture has depended in part on a “regime of looking.”¹¹

The late nineteenth century is widely regarded as the period that saw the proliferation of discourses relating to sexuality, as well as its rigid regulation. In this moment, taxonomies of sexual desire and behavior found a visual supplement—if not a corollary—in representations of racial difference that were enacted and enforced by legal statutes, pseudoscientific studies, and commodity culture. While it is generally recognized that sexual pathologies characterized by insatiability and excess (such as rape, cross-racial desire, and incest) have long contributed to the construction of blackness, what I intend to make evident here is the extent to which the very notion of racialized sexual pathology depended on emerging discourses of homosexuality.¹² Amid the cultural hysteria of the late nineteenth century around tracking, policing, and codifying racial difference, juridical processes and the pseudoscientific discourses labored to make sexual alterity visible—first by naming it and then by locating it on the body—and relied on racial concepts to do so. In this moment, homosexuality was transformed from a set of preferred sexual behaviors to the basis of an emergent identity, and, like race, its deviance was thought traceable to and interpretable on the body. “Homosexuality [was] a condition of, and therefore an identity of particular bodies,” writes Siobhan Somerville, echoing Foucault’s famous quip, “the homosexual was now a species.”¹³ Even when covert or left undeclared, sexual difference was signaled (in cinema and advertising, for example) through the visual register of representative difference between the races. It is important to keep in mind that, despite taken-for-granted assumptions about (homo)sexual identity (including undertheorized notions of the closet) that posit the invisibility of sexual difference, historical evidence suggests that the initiatory classification of sexual aberrance incorporated a logic of racial and corporeal identity by which to make it visible. Transgressive sexuality was subject to and defined by a set of conventions related to appearance, particularly in the arena of race, by which to make it known.

Judicial prohibitions against homosexuality, demonstrated by the widely publicized trials of Alice Mitchell and Oscar Wilde, necessitated readily available bodily representations of the homosexual in culture. The same modes of production within capitalism that helped to lodge racial stereotypes in the cultural imagination, particularly the press, scientific journals, photography, and cinema, disseminated imagistic representations of the “sexual pervert,” as well. Under the “regime of looking,” the semiotics of dress, behavior,

reputation, and bodily appearance became crucial for determining the (sexual and racial) identities of individuals.¹⁴ Once visible, non-normative sexuality was subject to the social exclusion, ridicule, and regulation that go hand in hand with corporeal demarcation. As Somerville astutely summarizes, “Those whose bodies were culturally marked as nonnormative lost their claim to the same rights as those whose racial or sexual reputation invested them with cultural legitimacy.”¹⁵ Efforts to police sexual divergence when it emerged in the late nineteenth century included marking and defining it so that it could be outlawed, its borders secured.

In the United States, the outlaw, the criminal, is made intelligible, and notorious, by referencing blackness. Biological determinism—the belief that certain bodies are mentally inferior, socially inadequate, and predisposed to criminality and, moreover, that these conditions are legible on these bodies—was prevalent in nineteenth-century scientific discourse and evident in state practice. Evolutionary theory, sexology, and eugenics provided both justification and fuel for the racist practices of legal segregation at home and U.S. imperialism abroad.¹⁶ Both homosexuality, in its association with sodomy, and black sexuality, in its association with insatiability and excess, were believed to be inappropriate, maladapted, and underdeveloped (read: primitive) expressions of sexual desire. The entwinement of illicit sexuality and a predilection for other forms of social deviance was promulgated by scientific investigations that alleged that the size and shape of genitalia predetermined both illicit sexual and violent propensities. As Lisa Duggan notes, media coverage of sex crimes generally furnished sexologists with case studies.¹⁷ Sciences that treated human anatomy as a legible text worked to concretize racial and sexual difference through comparative studies of the brains and sexual organs of black and white people. For example, black men were (and in some cases still are) popularly believed to have larger genitals than white men, and this corroborates their characterization as beastly, brutal, sexually rapacious, and dangerous. Because women are generally accorded the status of “the body” in culture and are imagined as the repositories of sex (sexual desire and sexual activity), sexologists focused primarily on women’s bodies and sexual behavior to arrive at conclusions about sexual attitudes, behavior, and identities in the culture at large.¹⁸ Black women were (and still are) believed to be sexually insatiable and irresponsible, immoral, and incapable of both decency and delicacy. This characterization springs from a number of sources: the pervasiveness of rape and concubinage during slavery, which itself guaranteed that black women could not fulfill the dictates of modesty and chastity; enduring disproportionately high numbers of out-of-wedlock births in black

families since Reconstruction; the continued exploitation of the sexualized black female body in popular culture throughout the twentieth century; black women's traditional labor outside the domestic sphere; and black women's historical interrogation of and resistance to the norms of marriage and patriarchy.¹⁹ Sexologists and medical scientists alleged that supposed genital irregularities (e.g., enlarged labia or an elongated clitoris) that predisposed white lesbians and prostitutes to sexual deviance were standard features of black women's sexual organs.²⁰

Sander Gilman traces meticulously the development of theories about genital irregularities and illicit sexual behavior of (white) lesbians and prostitutes that referenced and reinforced existing theories of black female genital malformation. He suggests that the prostitute was believed to be “an atavistic form of humanity whose ‘primitive’ nature [could] be observed in the form of her genitalia”—or, in other words, in the anomalous labia that are said to be a standard feature of the black woman's genitalia. He reveals the common conception to be that “the primitive is the black, and the qualities of blackness, or at least of the black female, are those of the prostitute.”²¹ In discussing lesbian sexuality, he suggests the same: sexologists believed that “the overdevelopment of the labia . . . [led] to those ‘excesses’ which are called ‘lesbian love,’” and he concludes that “the concupiscence of the black is thus associated also with the sexuality of the lesbian.”²² It is important to note that Gilman is not simply identifying a casual, observable association among white lesbianism, white prostitution, and black female sexuality but, rather, positing a causal, meaningful one. The criminalization of lesbianism and prostitution was effected in part through sexologists' claim of their bodily and behavioral kinship with black women, the archetypes of sexual deviance.

To further illustrate the interconnection of the pseudoscientific investigations of female bodies and the deployment of racial concepts to interpret sexual behavior, I refer to a passage taken from the book *Sexual Racism*. The sociologist Charles Herbert Stember attempted in the late 1970s to produce a hierarchy of physical beauty and sexual desirability based on racial differences. His work is reminiscent of Havelock Ellis's, and it is relevant here because, although it belongs to the area designated social sciences and not sexology per se, it incorporates and activates a similar logic found in sexology studies: it purports to determine sexual behavior and explain sexual object choice by reading the anatomies of women through the lens of racial difference. Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, I show the confluence of racial thought in the late nineteenth-century sexologists' and late twentieth-century sociologists' accounts of sexual difference. Stember writes:

It would seem that the man's focus on the beauty of a woman's face occurs because it has a broad symbolic meaning—that in some way stands for the woman herself, in a way that the rest of her body does not. What it must convey to be attractive it seems is the opposite of what exists in the lower part of her body—"dirt" in its widest sense: excretion, bodily odors, and the general character of the genital-urinary-excretive areas. . . . Any hint given in the all-important upper part of the woman that there lurks in the lower part an odiferous, slimy, dark, wet organ in between her legs, or to be precise, between her organs of excretion, tends in a very important sense to render her less attractive sexually. We have seemingly split our image of the woman into polarized extremes of upper and lower parts. Her physical "attractiveness" in a real sense is based on her facial features diverging as far as possible from anything suggesting the genital area and its adjacent organs of excretion. She must look, smell, and feel like the antithesis of anything suggesting dirt, sex, sin or "animal" attributes.²³

Theorizing about why white women are deemed more attractive in general among both white and black men, Stember proposes that white women are more attractive because in Western culture women's sexual desirability is indexed by a representative disjuncture between the female face and female sexual organs.

Explaining how this cultural standard determines black women's inability to qualify as attractive, Stember continues:

The notion that facial features must be perceived as "antigenital" throws light on the criteria of female beauty found to have such widespread currency. It serves to explain the existence of a hierarchy of female beauty in which the black woman appears at the lower end. It is not alone her skin color . . . conceivably associated with the color of excrement, but her thick lips and wide nostrils, suggesting the vulva itself. The hair of the black woman as well is in its texture much like pubic hair, and carries the same association. The black woman, in other words, projects in her face, hair, and skin—her upper half—the explicit image of her lower half.²⁴

According to Stember, a woman's face—and presumably her overall physical appearance—should not conjure an awareness of the "odiferous, slimy, dark, wet organ in between her legs" lest she lose the ability to arouse the sexual appetites of men. The disdain for the female body and genitalia is sufficiently virulent and self-evident here as to not warrant, I think, any additional comment. Two other things, however, do strike me as noteworthy. First, regard-

less of the woman's face and its capacity to distract attention from her genitalia, her genitalia are presumably the ultimate object of men's sexual interest and a definitive site of sexual intercourse. It is useful, then, to consider the extent to which cultural narratives of sexual arousal and sexual activity depend on the associations Stember denigrates—namely, the intimation of something hidden, as in the “lower” unseen part of the woman's body, and (or as) the fantasy of the dark, or the black. The very “dirt” or darkness that Stember associates with female genitalia in his explanation of its failure to attract men's sexual interest is precisely what makes female and black bodies (and particularly black female bodies) the culturally designated repositories for sexual ideology, fantasy, and activity. Numerous eroticisms traffic in tantalization of the dark, the unseen, the hidden, the down-low.

Second, in the discussion of black women's faces, Stember postulates that the upper part of black women reflects and discloses their blatant, lower sexual parts. Black women are wholly genitalized, visualized here as manifestly sexual and debased. Stember, however, does not describe any particular black woman's face to substantiate his claims. Instead, he refers to readily available caricatures of black faces in general. The associations of brown skin with excrement and curly hair textures with pubic hair are neither causal nor self-evident, although Stember's regard for them as “conceivable” has the effect of naturalizing them. Those similes derive from and have gained currency in racist lore, particularly prevalent in slavery and later in popular (consumer) culture. Important also, in Stember's formulation, the racial characteristics associated with whiteness (i.e., straightness of hair, narrowness of nose) are sufficient to mitigate the association of the white woman with overt sexuality. Blackness itself, then, serves as the signifier of sexual activity—transgressive or otherwise.

To add another dimension: theories of homosexuality share with common conceptions of black sexuality a central focus on asses, on anality—or, as Sigmund Freud would have us believe, a crude psychosexual, psychosocial underdevelopment—and improperly (per)formed gender. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud famously cast homosexuality as an expression of mental illness, as arrested development at or regression to an early stage on the path to “healthy” adult sexuality and, by extension, sociality. Notably, the so-called primitive psychic mechanisms that centralize anal sexuality in the homosexual in Freud's (il)logic have also been used to define generally the sexuality of the black. Here I allude, on one hand, to Freud's and Havelock Ellis's claim that homosexuality is more prevalent among people of color.²⁵ Freud wrote, “Inversion is remarkably widespread among many savage and

primitive races.”²⁶ Ellis wrote, “Looking at the phenomena generally, so far as they have been recorded among various lower races, we seem bound to recognize that there is a widespread natural instinct impelling men toward homosexual relationships.”²⁷ Ellis goes as far as to record, “Inversion is extremely prevalent among the American negroes [sic], far more prevalent among them than among the white people of any nation.”²⁸ Here my second contention becomes clear: in early psychoanalysis and sexuality studies, instead of simply indicating individual perversion or maladaptation to the social and sexual requirements of adult maturation, anal sexuality takes on a cultural resonance, indicating the primitivity and perverse propensities of embodied racial subjects in general.²⁹

In the collective cultural imagination, notions of an ass-centered or generally anal sexuality haunt even heterosexual desiring and coupling between black people. The purported anality of blacks’ sexual desire is everywhere evident in contemporary popular culture and visual culture.³⁰ In movies and music videos, young black women are frequently depicted as having large asses, while young black men are frequently depicted in hot pursuit of them. Instead of being regarded as a secondary sexual organ, black women’s asses have been treated for the past century as the main focus of (black) men’s sexual interest, the supposed effect of a cumulative and widespread racial and cultural retardation. The historical Western fascination with black women’s asses is, of course, evident in the enduring iconicity of the Hottentot Venus.³¹ Linking the medical theories of black sexuality to nineteenth-century aesthetic practices, Gilman illustrates the ways in which black women’s butts, represented by the Hottentot Venus, captured the white imagination: “When the Victorians saw the female black, they saw her in terms of her buttocks and saw represented by the buttocks all the anomalies of her genitalia. . . . This fascination with the uniqueness of the sexual part of the black focuses on the buttocks over and over again. . . . The presence of the exaggerated buttocks points to the other, hidden signs, both physical and temperamental, of the black female.”³² It is important to note here that black women’s sexuality symbolized in nineteenth-century scientific discourses only the excesses of white women’s sexuality, whereas it figured black women’s and men’s sexuality as a whole. In other words, the enormity of black women’s asses purportedly revealed the primitive (read: anal) sexuality of black people generally. Again, this anality marks a regressive sexuality that, while not exclusively evocative of homosexuality, is nonetheless queer.

Finally, Freud contended that anal sexuality, when properly regulated by the phallic system, is diverted into the pursuit of wealth—the generation of “valu-

able” material—or mastery over capital. Under the theorization that the sublimation of anality precipitates capitalist accumulation, black men’s inability to procure sufficient capital for the secure economic provision (and patriarchal ordering) of their families would seem to reveal a lingering (infantile) anality, or, rather, the failure of full anal effacement under the phallic order in the African American context. Dominant psychoanalytic discourses that seek to explain social and subjective development via early psychosexual maturation present the black and the queer as similarly underdeveloped. Repurposing those pseudoscientific discourses of the late nineteenth century, sociologists throughout much of the twentieth century have blamed African American existence at the bottom rung of the social scale for the production of sexual and gender nonconformity in the black American context.³³ Ultimately, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth century, racial difference has provided the landscape and the logic for defining and delineating the pathological from the normal in both the sexual and social arenas in U.S. culture.

Gender and Race

Because a primary objective of *Against the Closet* is to understand the significance of sexual logics in the solidification of race as a most meaningful social category (one especially determinative of the material lives of masses of black people living in the United States), this section delves further into sociological discourses of the twentieth century. Unlike psychoanalytic and sexological discourses of the nineteenth century, which emphasized sexual desire and behavior, sociological discourses of the twentieth century foreground gender. In other words, the strongest queer resonance in black sexual and familial arrangements results less from the supposed anatomical excesses and behavioral perversions of black sexuality than from the common characterization of black people as gender-noncompliant—a debased, impoverished, dysfunctional nation of butchy black women and sissified black men. It is important to note that unwantedness is a defining characteristic of marginalized experience, or, in explicit racial terms, what Patricia Hill Collins calls “social blackness.”³⁴ Circuits of desire are particularly meaningful in the African American context because desirability, both in social and political contexts and in cultural production, is a crucial part of ascribing individual and communal value to blackness. Moreover, desirability in the realm of the social is a key factor in determining who gets recognized in the body of the citizenry and who may thereby access the entitlements of citizenship and the resources of the state. In

what follows, I read closely Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family* to elucidate the repercussions of sociological theories of black non-heteronormativity on contemporary black material and political life.

In 1965, Moynihan published *The Negro Family*, the notoriously controversial Moynihan report, which solidified the conceptualization of black American gender, sexual, and familial arrangements instead of structural oppression as the basis for black Americans' poverty. A trained sociologist, the assistant secretary of labor, and one of the chief architects of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society Program, Moynihan produced *The Negro Family* as a document to support Johnson's War on Poverty policies. In the report, Moynihan grappled with the conundrum of continued generational poverty in black urban communities despite gains in civil liberties, access to education and employment, and a growing black middle class. Moynihan found that, although African Americans had made notable progress collectively, single parenthood, joblessness, crime, and other manifestations of poverty continued to rise. Using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and from several U.S. Censuses, he attempted to address this dilemma and to rectify welfare policies that served only households headed by single parents. Moynihan recognized that policies that denied welfare benefits to families in which fathers remained present perpetuated one of slavery's most deleterious legacies: the removal of black men from, and the decentralization of the father function in, black families. Unfortunately, Moynihan soon veered from his original contention to theorize a "tangle of pathology" in black families that was "the principal source of the most aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation."³⁵

Overall, Moynihan's text hinges on common conceptions of the perverse sexuality and gender inadequacy of black men and women. (In)famously, he postulates, "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the *fundamental* source of the weakness of the Negro community at present. . . . Unless this damage is repaired, all effort to end discrimination and poverty and injustice will come to little."³⁶ Through a series of maneuvers, Moynihan denies the centrality of structural racism in the perpetuation of poverty in urban black communities, and he denies ultimately the extent to which racism itself undermines the cohesion and sustainability of black family life. As Roderick Ferguson so aptly contends, "While racist prejudice might be irrational, there were objective differences that prevented black achievement. For the sociologist, African American familial arrangements and their nonheteronormative disfigurements spawned those differences."³⁷ Moynihan's hypothesis minimizes the effects of discrim-

ination in employment, disparities in educational opportunity, housing segregation, and the general psychic toll of racism and its attendant material effects on black Americans. Moreover, as his report diverges from its initial objective of arguing for increased access to needed resources for poor black families, it becomes a study of black sexuality—or, more specifically, the negative relation between the sexual practices, patterns, prerogatives in black communities and the failure of black people to achieve social equity and economic parity with white Americans. To cite an illustrative example, Moynihan analyzes criminal tendencies in youth and claims that the primary determinant of criminal behavior in young people is the inability to delay gratification. He writes, “Children who hunger for immediate gratification are more prone to delinquency, along with other less social behavior. . . . Inability to delay gratification is a crucial factor in immature, criminal, and neurotic behavior.”³⁸ Moynihan predictably proceeds to explain that delayed gratification is acquired in homes in which the father is present and functional, presumably by virtue of children’s subjection to operant paternal regulation. The implication here is that children bred in households headed by women will develop criminal propensities. Notably, Moynihan simply overlooks the sociopolitical and material factors that contribute to criminal behavior, emphasizing instead the misdirection and mismanagement of desire. In sundry lists, graphs, and statistics, he presents a bleak picture of black life in which premature mothering, out-of-wedlock births, and desertion by husbands dog potentially functional black families.

Since much of the backlash, and criticism, of Moynihan’s report has focused on his pathologization of single black mothers, it is useful to attend to his depiction of black men and its wider gender implications and effects on black families and communities. In essence, Moynihan casts black men as infantilized patriarchs who are too lazy, criminal, or intellectually deficient to serve as responsible heads of black families. An illustration: high unemployment rates for black men, which Moynihan blames for their frequent desertion of families, is not caused by workplace discrimination in his account but by black men’s overall masculine inadequacy. This characterization is most clearly evident in Moynihan’s discussion of the U.S. military and its benefit to black families in the form of stable employment, educational benefits, and character development. The logic goes something like this: black men would have jobs if they served their country, were proper citizens, were real men. In Moynihan’s assessment, the armed forces are “the only experience open to the Negro American in which he is treated as an equal: not as a Negro equal to a white, but as one man equal to another man in a world where the category ‘Negro’ and ‘white’ do not exist. . . . a world away from women, a world run by

strong men of unquestioned authority, where discipline, if harsh, is nonetheless orderly and predictable, and rewards, if limited, are granted on the basis of performance.”³⁹ Disregarding all racial disparities in the U.S. military, Moynihan presents it as an alternative, if not the ultimate, well-run patriarchal household. Ferguson summarizes this maneuver succinctly: “The Moynihan Report cast racial exclusion as fundamentally feminizing. If exclusion is the trace of feminization, then equality can only be won by recovering the heteropatriarchal loss suffered under racism.”⁴⁰ Deploying the language of paternal rule—authority, discipline, reward—Moynihan suggests that the military can counter the effects of infantilization resulting from excessive maternal leniency and paternal disregard in the black household. Citing their frequent failure on “objective tests and standards,” however, Moynihan contends that black men are frequently rejected from the armed forces, unable to serve because of their low intelligence rates and inadequate masculinity.⁴¹ In other words, the presumed inferiority of black men undermines their best chance to achieve gender normativity in any social context. In a rather unexpected twist of logic, Moynihan concludes, “How this group of Americans chooses to run its affairs, take advantage of its opportunities, or fail to do so is none of this nation’s business.”⁴² No longer advocating social programs to alleviate deleterious conditions in impoverished black communities, he encourages the nation to abdicate all responsibility for this group of sexual and gender miscreants. What begins as an impassioned plea on behalf of African Americans whose lives and life chances have been shortchanged by racism becomes a treatise on the characterological and cultural maladaptation of African Americans in the related realms of sex, gender, reproduction, and familial organization.

William Connolly describes identity formation among citizen-subjects: “identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. . . . Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.”⁴³ This explanation of identity is key to understanding the construction and preservation of whiteness through a dialectal relationship of simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of both racial and sexual others. It is my contention that both blackness and queerness are used to shore up whiteness; both function as its exiled and abased excesses. Both blackness and homosexuality pose a threat to whiteness in that each impedes the continuous propagation of white generations and violates the unity and integrity of the white family as the basic unit of capital acquisition and consolidation in the American political economy.⁴⁴

Furthermore, both blackness and queerness disrupt the symbolic systems of the English language and of cultural signification generally. With the word for biological sex serving as the word for gender performance and the word for sexual object choice, a system of heterosexual desire and activity is organized and naturalized as the only possible outcome of “sex” itself. Anything “queer”—that is, non-heteronormative—is rendered illegitimate and excluded from the symbolic system. “Forced into the margins of a symbolic system that refuses it, the homosexual can only impinge upon the heterosexualized center, not as a coherent ‘I,’ but only negatively as a figure of excess or absence.”⁴⁵ Homosexuality is relegated to the space outside normativity and intelligibility. Defined always in the negative, it becomes that which heterosexuality is not. Moreover, it becomes the so-called deviance against which heterosexuality is defined and legitimated.

Blackness functions similarly in relation to whiteness. It is the exiled, the negated, the outside-of-the-black–white-binary that brings whiteness into being and delineates its contours. As Robert Reid-Pharr argues, “The Black has been conceptualized as the inchoate, irrational non-subject.”⁴⁶ In the American cultural imaginary, the figure of the black is the abjected, contaminated, and chaotic opposite of the white. Understood historically, in the nascent American Republic composed of dislocated Europeans from varied countries, blackness provides the delineating contours for the emergence and consolidation of whiteness as a necessary component of (individual and national) identity and as the basis for group claims to privileges as both coherent subjects and New World citizens. Wahneema Lubiano states the case plainly in the introduction to *The House That Race Built*: “the basic character of the United States not only harbor[s], but depend[s] upon, a profound violation of the spirit of democracy, and that fundamental violation is racism.”⁴⁷ Originally a slave, an “irrational non-subject,” the figure of the black delineates the contours and produces the inevitable failure of an archaic, propertied, masculine whiteness. Here the formerly enslaved, marginally enfranchised, “irrational non-subject”—the abject—threatens the very basis of the white citizen-subject’s coherence and social entitlement and provides a potent lens for rethinking and reorganizing the sociopolitical schema, with incumbent considerations of culture and class. Such critical rethinking and political reorganizing is the work taken up in the pages of *Against the Closet*.

The Steps Ahead

A crucial foundation of the work undertaken here is my belief that new epistemologies and key revisions within domains of knowledge that have emerged in the fields of queer and feminist studies over the past two decades have much to contribute to the understanding of race. *Against the Closet* proceeds from the belief that there are genuine ideological, sociopolitical, and material advantages to using black feminist theory, queer articulation, and political mobilization in concert with histories and theories of race. Such a critical maneuver supports the development of a progressive methodology that anchors politics in various identificatory practices and, more importantly, that anchors identifications in political exigency. Further, by linking theories of sexual non-normativity to matters of race, and by understanding how sexual alterity has historically underwritten constructions of blackness, we are able to perceive the political instrumentality of transgressive erotics in black American cultural production.

Chapter 1, “‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives,” argues that the generalized consensus among scholars of sexuality that sexual taxonomies emerged in the late nineteenth century should be reconsidered. Continuing my work of tying the invention of aberrant sexualities to already operant racial logics and racist institutions, I explore the period and the practice of embodied black slavery as the pivotal axes around which early ideologies of sexual difference coalesced and cohered. The brutal enslavement of black people; their legal definition as three-fifths human; and the social, economic, and legislative practices of slavery influenced U.S. cultural notions of the citizen, the person, and the heterosexual, as well. The ungendering of African Americans in slavery marks a representational structure that resurfaces in later theories of sexual inversion. Chapter 1 also demonstrates the sophistication with which early African American writers harnessed the representational power of transgressive (specifically, sadomasochistic and homoerotic) sexuality in support of their efforts to abolish American slavery. I argue that the authors of slave narratives concede to race-based notions of sexual criminality by showing the sexual depravity of white masters, not of enslaved black people.

Chapter 2, “Iconographies of Gang Rape: Or, Black Enfranchisement, White Disavowal, and the (Homo)erotics of Lynching,” reads representations of lynching in the post-Reconstruction period. It treats *Contending Forces* by Pauline Hopkins and *Light in August* by William Faulkner alongside and against each other. Although Faulkner is not a black American writer, I have chosen to

include him in the chapter on post-Reconstruction black literature because of my sense of his rightful inclusion in the African American literary canon. As a writer who both assimilated and influenced many features of twentieth-century African American writing, Faulkner expanded commonplace notions of race writing. The importance of this critical observation is not to be overlooked, as African American writing does not emerge in a cultural and literary vacuum but engages always intertextually with dominant writerly practices and output. Moreover, as a brilliant purveyor of American history in racial terms and as a great aesthete in the realm of literary production, Faulkner is key to my study of narrative stylization, particularly as it is inflected by racial iconography and sexual non-normativity.

This chapter illuminates the ways in which imaginative depictions of lynching function to call our attention to the proliferation of lynching as the white communal effort to fix racial hierarchies in the absence of slavery's organization and operational logic. In other words, lynching functions as a disavowal of black humanity and as a will to whiteness in the post-Emancipation period. To address the issue of racial indeterminacy in Hopkins and Faulkner, I open chapter 2 by making the case that miscegenation speaks to the general (bi)cultural and political status of African Americans in the post-Reconstruction period as endowed with citizenship rights, on one hand, but bound by pseudo-slave Southern codes, on the other. To underscore the effect that representing lynching has on formal aspects of the novel, I demonstrate that scenes of lynching haunt and upset narratives of sexual normalcy in both black and white literary contexts. Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, for instance, situates the lynching of black men alongside the rape of black women, thereby subverting the conventional marriage plot of early black fiction. Faulkner's *Light in August* depicts lynching as a gruesome, sexually charged cross-racial encounter meant to recover an already imperiled white masculinity but that, in its very homoerotic enthrallment, puts white masculinity into further crisis. By emphasizing the rape-lynch alliance in Hopkins and the homoerotic underpinnings of lynching in Faulkner, my hope is that chapter 2 will further our understanding of lynching as a kind of racialized gang rape, a profound expression of communal sexual perversion—specifically, one in which the victim of lynching is gruesomely violated for the psychic satisfaction of a whole host of participants and spectators.

Such a project as this would not be complete without a chapter on James Baldwin, the visionary twentieth-century author, political spokesperson, philosopher, and prophet of his people. Chapter 3, "Desire and Treason in Mid-Twentieth-Century Political Protest Fiction," situates Baldwin along with Ann

Petry in relation to the mid- to late-twentieth-century civil rights struggle to understand how, from abolition to Black Power, theories about sexual propriety, heteronormative family, and empowered masculinity have informed the development of political programs in the black, and larger American, community. Opening with an analysis of Petry's final novel, *The Narrows*, I explore the synecdochic operation of cross-racial romance in African American fiction to measure racial progress since the post-Reconstruction era and to highlight remaining social and economic barriers to integration. Baldwin's novel *Another Country* instantiates his ideological alignment with and political investment in the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Through depictions of pained, long-standing interpersonal relationships that confront and even cross racial, sexual, and class boundaries, *Another Country* advocates a historical reckoning that would enable egalitarian cooperation—and possibly even reconciliation—between racial groups that contentiously inhabit the same country. Baldwin's final novel, *Just Above My Head*, promotes among African Americans the practices of self-love, interdependence, and self-determination, principles that, I argue, are rooted in Black Power philosophies. In moving from the North to the South and to Europe and back, Baldwin attempts to document and decry America's exclusionist, and even exterminationist, policies with regard to African Americans and the devastating (psychic and material) effects of these policies on black people. Chapter 3 contends, ultimately, that Baldwin depicts (and links) the black esthete and the homosexual as figures of cultural reformation, as those who most embody and influence the journey toward personal freedom and widespread social and political reform in both the Civil Rights and Black Power eras.

Chapter 4, "Recovering the Little Black Girl: Incest and Black American Textuality," continues my critique of racial prescription by analyzing representations of incest in the late-twentieth-century writing of black female authors. Considering an array of late-twentieth-century texts, including *Imago*, the last novel of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, Sapphire's *Push*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Gayle Jones's *Corregidora*, chapter 4 illustrates how ideologies of black motherhood and girlhood that arose during slavery to excuse rampant rape and the forced removal of black children from their mothers find their contemporary correlates in stereotypes of the welfare queen and the unwed teenage mother.⁴⁸ I focus on these figures to highlight the impacts of Civil Rights retrenchment and the waning popularity of a largely masculinist black nationalist agenda on black families in the late twentieth century. In other words, by emphasizing the hierarchy of familial relations obtaining in

father–daughter incest, as well as the failure of Civil Rights legislation and refigured patriarchy under black nationalism to produce meaningful improvement in African American lives in U.S. inner cities, I critique phallogentric racial struggle and refute the nuclear, heteronormative model of family as a requirement for black social advancement. I show, moreover, the incredible utility—and versatility—of the incest narrative, on one hand, to critique society for its egregious neglect of black women and girls, and, on the other hand, to offer progressive paradigms for (racial) survival after conquest.

Against the Closet is characterized by an ambitious and productive unwieldiness. Its historical reach stretches across two centuries; it deploys varied and, at times, seemingly oppositional methodologies to read African American experience and expressive response; and it attempts to unearth a radical strain of sexual representation in African American literature generally. Despite its chronology, this is not a historical study that traces the linear rise and fall of a creative, politically engaged literary enterprise. Rather, it presents a series of snapshots that show the consistent deployment of one. The intellectual and political aims compelling, propelling this study are neither self-evident nor uncomplicatedly consistent. I am at once beholden to identity politics, particularly for their force of mobilization under the rubric of social justice, even as I am highly skeptical of taxonomies of difference and various nationalisms. This book cannot be categorized according to strict disciplinary boundaries or one discursive regime. I fruitfully engage the domains of African American studies, psychoanalysis, sociology, queer theory, and gender studies. I, moreover, use a performative theory of blackness that recognizes its ability to serve as a signifier that accumulates different meanings in different cultural and literary contexts and to carry a whole host of assumptions. This project might be best described, then, as an aggregate study, gathering smaller historically and textually discreet examinations into a composite whole.

As literature has operated historically as the main vehicle of African American political struggle and public self-fashioning, *Against the Closet* is at its core a study of black American writing. I examine the ways in which African American writers have explored and attempted to come to terms with difficult notions of identity, sexuality, and racial difference by both representing and challenging them within fictive worlds. In reading literature produced at different historical moments, my goal is to illuminate how literary constructions of sexuality demonstrate aesthetic innovations to the literary form and reflect transformations in the social and political character of the United States. In each text under consideration, I investigate whether representations of ra-

cially inflected sexual transgressions necessarily lead to ruptures in literary conventions or whether established literary forms have the tenacity to impede those disruptions.

Emphasizing the racialization of transgressive sexuality and sociality, this book proceeds with the understanding of race's primary function as an ideological enterprise that, on one hand, supports socioeconomic and political stratification and, on the other hand, provides a most potent means to resist it. Although I do attend to issues of defining and categorizing sexual desire and sexual practice, my point is not to determine whether a figure or sexual arrangement can be properly labeled "queer." What I argue instead is that ideas about sexuality derive from and contribute to racial ideologies. My aim in this book is to assess and explain the imaginative purposes of representing sexual difference in (mainly) black American fiction to show how particular representations affect—that is, sustain or undermine—existent beliefs about race.