

INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A RADICAL THEORY OF THE BLACK AVANT-GARDE

What becomes possible when blackness wonders and wanders in the world, heeding the ethical mandate to challenge our thinking, to release the imagination, and to welcome the end of the world as we know it, that is, decolonization, which is the only proper name for justice?

—DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA

It follows that black freedom is embedded within an economy of race and violence and unfolds as an indeterminate impossibility.

—KATHERINE MCKITTRICK

The endeavor is to recover the insurgent ground of these lives.

—SAIDIYA HARTMAN

RUINED

The poem begins with ash and ends in song in search of a language and a name. In the fourth section of the poetry book that doubles as the biography of an unnamed, black, queer southern boy, Saeed Jones's poem "Postapocalyptic Heartbeat" tells of life after ruin, insurgent life repeating itself after each and every predictable, awful demise. Jones's collection *Prelude to Bruise* reads like a gorgeous kaleidoscope of impressions—bits of narrative here and there—that invoke and inflect the sounds and colors and sensations of hor-

ror and loss. Many of the poems grapple with the difficult formation of an “I” seemingly damned or destined never to become one. The southern queer black subject of *Prelude* is simply called Boy. Bending and breaking, ceasing and beginning again, examining and meandering, unfolding and innovating, Boy does emerge somehow, unapologetic and resplendent. “Postapocalyptic Heartbeat” stands out from the other poems in the collection for its insinuation of the black communal and collective, for its allusion to the historical and always-present peril of black life. This poem evokes the devastations of isolation and invasion; snuffed-out life in militarized zones; ritualized lynching; bodies thrown overboard and out of windows; world-ruining empire. The poem takes the form of direct address and longs for a second person, who is at once an individual intimate and a collective audience, gone or yet to come:

Drugged, I dreamed you a plume of ash
 great rush of wrecked air
 through the towns of my stupor.

 I saw us breathing on the other side of *after*.¹

Opening at the site of wreckage, presumably in the aftermath of catastrophe, breath. Contaminated by ash that is simultaneously a life-giving other (the poem’s “you”), bursting air pulsates through the deadened subject and its abandoned remembrances, “the towns of my stupor,” to produce a vision of insurgent life, gathered, “us breathing on the other side of *after*.”²

In content and arrangement, “Postapocalyptic Heartbeat” reaches for and records a directive, a map, a strategy, a guideline for existences bound and threaded by catastrophe. “I didn’t exactly mean to survive myself,” the speaker in the poem discloses after repeated self-willed falls from windows. After each fall, the speaker’s audacious—if barely audible—heartbeat reflects the subtleties of black living in ruin without end.

After ruin,
 after shards of glass like misplaced stars,
 after dredge
 after the black bite of frost: you are the after,

 a song in a dead language.³

The broken shards, which bespeak the shattering of something formerly integrated and whole, are nonetheless beautiful and luminescent like stars—

though these displaced and disordered stars are not those of the shared sky. Frostbitten flesh is flesh that has frozen to death. The secret of the speaker's perseverance is clearly not to be found in his singular battered self, nor in the numerous wrecked cities of his past, but in the arrival of "you," simultaneously his love(r) and his people. By collectivizing the speaker's journey, "Postapocalyptic Heartbeat" implies that, as death does not undo itself, but may be reconstituted and managed in song and memory, there is neither redemption nor reparation for black subjects after ruin. The Middle Passage, racial slavery spanning continents and lasting centuries, the intractability of racism as logic and force for disparately dealing out death and life, mass black impoverishment and immobilization, the slow and steady liquidation of black populations the world over—these cannot be firmly settled in the temporality of the past or the prior.⁴ Ruin hijacks chronological time, nullifies normative temporalities, withholds the promise of closure or fulfillment, and negates redemptive futurities. For black subjects, after ruin, there is only relation, repetition, and the beautification of remains.⁵

I open with this brief critical encounter with Saeed Jones's "Postapocalyptic Heartbeat" to illuminate generally the concerns of this book and to indicate the speculative orientation of its scholarly and creative methods. As Jones narrativizes the burgeoning life of a black queer southern boy not in literary prose but via abstract poetics, *Millennial Style: The Politics of Experiment in Contemporary African Diasporic Culture* explores the deployment of aesthetic experiments in black cultural production to represent political annihilation, social ruin, and abbreviated black life in the decades since African Americans gained (yet again) formal equality before the law. Like Jones's poem, this book is a map—or, rather, its method is mapping. Its cartography stretches, sketches, and interweaves elements of the genealogical, the material, the political, the epistemological, and the cultural to say something about living and aching—and the unyielding combination thereof—that come from being and being borne of the black.

The genesis of this study is a flash point, a brief moment of arrival and the promise of steady, settled life quickly beset by the usual crises, losses, and terrors that typify racialized existence and racist intransigence. It was in August some years ago now when eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was killed by the police in Ferguson, Missouri, his body left in the street for hours, his mother, somehow not deranged by grief, asking pedestrians and shocked onlookers not to circulate on social media the images of her dead child. Less than a year prior, queer activist women of color had taken to Twitter to decry the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, with

the simple hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. It was the most compelling and most heart-wrenching speech act of the decade: the actuation of a wish, phenomenon, or ritual by virtue of its mere utterance. Black people across genders were dying at the hands of police, sometimes on camera—black death gone viral. African Americans mourned publicly; a nation erupted; a global conversation started.⁶ Students on college campuses took over administration buildings to demand recognition of the Global Movement for Black Lives. Everywhere people were in the streets, in protest, and on social media, with distressed urgency. This time was unique in all of modern history by virtue of the black man in the office of the presidency of the United States. And yet it was the simple fact that Barack Obama and Michael Brown overlapped in nation and in time that I felt driven to accept, for once and for all, that things in this despicable, despicable place would never, ever really be better. The achievement of true equality, of the conditions, chances, and simple duration of black lives, would neither be secured nor guaranteed by any legislative achievement, juridical reform, or legal redress. The symbolic manifestation of racial equality, as embodied by an African American in the highest political office of the United States, did little to eradicate racism or to improve the psychosocial, material, and political conditions under which black lives are lived. Freedom would not come—at least not of the liberal democratic but stunningly close to white supremacist, neofascist kind—for those whose generational enslavement gave rise to the shape of Euro-American democracy; the purported ascent of reason over godliness; the racialist, racist contours of the human; the emergence of the citizen (as the proper subject and beneficiary of liberal governance) as white, propertied, patriarchal.

Never in modernity—this period that founded new empires and global economies through the transatlantic shipment, sale, and forced labor of millions and millions of Africans—have we secured or even approached durable black freedom. No language has been suitable to describe it; no political party or movement has succeeded in sustainably achieving it. We live now in the chronological future, in the afterward and the aftermath, of black liberation struggles undertaken over two centuries.⁷ Nevertheless, so many of us are murdered—shot in homes shielding babies, strangled to death in chokeholds, tasered and pulverized into corpses—by US state agents. Some of these deaths are caught on camera, globally disseminated, and viewed ad nauseum. But neither massive witnessing nor global protest has prevented or curtailed the sickening accumulation of black corpses. There are so many of us, captured and engaged by the millions, who are immobilized, unseen, dying slowly. Those of us who are not warehoused often live and raise chil-

dren, themselves always susceptible to capture or removal or early demise, in food deserts that are simultaneously environmental wastelands. So many of us have been barred from suitable housing, equitable health care, utilizable education, decent employment, and an inviolable self-concept. And so few of us have ever experienced life as a safe and sustainable undertaking, enterprise, or even possibility.

Millennial Style is the culmination of a meditation that began that horrific season (which is perhaps all seasons) of dead black children and the resultant call, proclamation, plea for black lives to matter. It was around that time that my only child received the diagnosis of a devastating illness, chronic but not fatal. With intermittent trips to the hospital, a team of medical professionals on speed-dial, the energy to encounter repeated flare-ups like the first occurrence, the illness could be managed. His life would be impacted but not wholly dismantled, not lost altogether. But that wasn't really true, was it—an illness on top of racial blackness; burgeoning, brash masculinity; young adulthood; Muslim identity? Wouldn't a chronic illness, the condition of debilitated and attenuated living, further compound the vulnerability of one who belongs already to those targeted for early death within necropolitical, white supremacist regimes? Certainly, my child was (and is) in my locked grasp, but carceral logics, normative hypersurveillance, and militarized policing evolved decades ago at the intersection of the war on drugs and the war on terror could get a grip on both of us. I turned to the cultural producers, the writers, the visual artists, the beauty-makers, the transformers of and within the African diaspora and—with all of the language available to me and every bit of critical capacity brought to bear—I pleaded, "What's next? What now?" And they answered.

The late Nobel laureate Toni Morrison writes, "Certain kinds of trauma visited on people are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the good will of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination."⁸ *Millennial Style* enlists contemporary black cultural production for the translation of trauma into meaning, for modalities of expression beyond the futility of political and politicized representation, for guidelines and guideposts to living in the ongoing catastrophe that characterizes black life in modernity. With combined interests in formal experiment and in movement—the movement of global capital, the transnational circulation and consumption of black images and black cultural products, the migratory patterns of African-descended people, and the philosophical linkage between unmooring and the attainment of (an always tenuous) individual agency—this book explores the ways in which desire and disaster, which

seem in racial, relational, personal, and political terms to be coextensive phenomena, simultaneously shape and resist narrative and visual representation. The study pursued in this book is animated by two overarching questions: (1) What compels the impulse toward the experimental, the avant-garde, and the abstract among contemporary African diasporic cultural producers who are generally expected to represent the truth of racial harm and to (imaginatively) remediate it?; and (2) How might abstractionist expressive modes—that is, in contrast to realist or mimetic modes of representation—conjure and convey the tactics and nuances of black sociality, solidarity, and survival in modern contexts best characterized as disasters without end?

Millennial Style proceeds via an interrogation of the interrelation of political terror, social abjection and aesthetic abstraction in contemporary African diasporic cultural production. This book is thus an earnest—if at times heart-heavy—attempt at reckoning with black art- and world-making practices that take seriously the denial of progressive change or futural improvement for black subjects living in and after ruin (of our times, of our lives). It tracks the decline of mimetic realism as the presumed most suitable and most reliable modality of representing racial injury and of imagining (and iterating the promises of) political remedy. Following the expressive forms it analyzes, *Millennial Style* looks beyond aggrieved appeals to the state (rendered corrupt, defunct, inaccessible, or inoperable) for social remedy, sustainable material conditions, and political redress under conditions of normalized state-manufactured ruin. It proceeds with suspicion about sentimentalism as the predominant affect underpinning (and generated by) black cultural expression, particularly in literature and visual art manifestly oriented toward socioracial, material, and political improvement for black subjects. Throughout the analyses that fill this book, I challenge literalist reading practices that treat black cultural production sociologically—that is, reading for supposed truths of racial subjectivity and collectivized racist injury and inattentive to the formal innovations and stylistic praxes of African diasporic literature and visual art. I refute, moreover, cultural criticism that is presumptive (or consumptive, really) about the availability of black subjective interiors and the transparency of black life-worlds.

Taking its cue from and building upon Phillip Brian Harper's provocative contention that "abstractionism [is] the most powerful modality for Black representation," *Millennial Style* advances Harper's account of black abstraction by conceptualizing its practice in specific relation to racial abjection and by tracking specific aesthetic modalities or maneuvers within and beyond US borders.⁹ I theorize four specific aesthetic strategies or expressive

praxes—Black Grotesquerie, Hollowed Blackness, Black Cacophony, and the Black Ecstatic—that, while neither exclusive nor exhaustive, have become, I argue, the most predominant and pervasive aesthetic modes across literature, visual art, and film in contemporary black cultural production of high experiment. I focus specifically on these aesthetic modes for inquiry and theory due to their unique capacity to signify and operate multiply, as innovative expressive techniques, affective resonances, relational models, and as radical, if subtle, political interventions. Via recombinant art techniques such as substitution, collage, contortion, and inversion, *Black Grotesquerie* renders the boundary between black living and black dying porous and mutable; it shifts the concern of black life from politics and performances of survival to gestures and technologies of continuance (of keeping on) by textualizing catastrophe as the context for black being and by materializing the preservation of blackness within and beyond ruin. *Hollowed Blackness* conveys the ubiquitous experiences of pursuit, capture, and containment for black subjects, alongside the emotional strain of hollowness or hollowing out. In black expressive texts, the configuration of *Black Hollows* advances a black abolitionist aesthetic that alters liberationist ideologies of fugitivity by reimagining its primary architecture from the outward and external outdoors to the interior and internal hollow. *Black Cacophony* is the enraged, despairing, lust-filled, deranged, nonmelodic sounding off of black pain and black want in African diasporic literature. It is a tactic of textual representation that exposes both the insufficiency and superfluity of language for capturing exploited or discarded black life while insisting, in its sentient soundings, that such life matters. Across literary and cinematic platforms, *the Black Ecstatic* reveals willful exuberance to be the affective disposition and relational ethic that enables black life and liberation in the midst of ongoing terror, crisis, and loss. It is a queer expressive modality that aestheticizes black mystery and synthesizes fleeting moments of black communion into an exhilarating eternity.

What remains of this introduction unfolds in pursuit of three goals: first, to offer, in conversation with black feminist and black queer studies scholars, a theory of black avant-gardist practice that commits radically to an improved world for the planet's most devastated, injured, and neglected populations; second, to highlight the affective and relational undercurrents of black life-worlds as they are imaginatively rendered by the assembly of cultural producers in *Millennial Style*; and, third, to describe in specific detail the four pervasive, abstractionist aesthetic strategies in post-civil rights black expressive culture (grotesquerie, hollowness, cacophony, ecstasy) that relate and respond to new (updated and abstracted) regimes of globalized racial ter-

ror. These four aesthetic strategies, or expressive modes, offer a glimpse into the tactics of black solidarity, sociality, and survival that subtend contemporary African diasporic art forms and constitute the core inquiry of *Millennial Style*.

BLACK EXPERIMENT

Analyzing work by a rich array of contemporary black authors and visual artists—including Toni Morrison, Wangechi Mutu, Saeed Jones, Colson Whitehead, Alexandria Smith, Alexis de Veaux, Essex Hemphill, and Barry Jenkins, among others—*Millennial Style* studies the ways in which contemporary black cultural producers interrogate realism as the proper artistic modality for conjuring black life in the post–civil rights moment. These cultural practitioners resist, I argue, the requirement for racially affirmative portrayals of black people and manifestly politicized accounts of black suffering. In other words, their aesthetic experiments critique the politics of representation, even as they register the life-diminishing impacts of racialized state violence in the current moment. I show how these visual artists and writers do this by rupturing, renovating, and resignifying the formal features of traditional protest literature and visual propaganda—or, to put it plainly, by deploying and further developing the black avant-garde. The avant-garde engenders strange and at times sublime aesthetic encounters that summon uncommon affective responses, different cognitive capacities, and alternative hermeneutics. The black avant-garde iterates an aesthetic repudiation of spectacularity—in its record of ruin *and* promise of progress—in twenty-first-century black expressive culture.

That the principle evaluative metric applied to black cultural forms is political instrumentality, and that social protest has historically conditioned African American cultural production, are virtually axiomatic critical assessments to this point. The long-standing mandate for racial authenticity as a principal evaluative criterion in black expressive culture has dual components: racially affirmative (or racially “real”) representation, and a set of generic conventions, dating back to the slave narrative, that infuses political aspiration with expressive form. In many ways, the slave narrative inaugurated African Americans’ formal entrance into American letters. As a body of literature that responded to the most extreme form of corporeal, civic, and social death, the slave narrative was manifestly politically motivated. Its content and its form—specifically, the authenticating documents that precede the narrative proper, attestations of authorial competence and sincerity,

and frequent deviations from the central narrative to detail atrocities regularly practiced on slave plantations—attest to the humanity, the civility, and the moral and intellectual capacity of black people. In documenting in linear fashion one enslaved subject's journey from bondage to freedom, the slave narrative purported, and in every way attempted, to represent the lives and political aspirations of the entire race, to get and to remain free. Despite the abolition of slavery, the persistence of lethal forms of race-based socioeconomic and political exclusion, with their concomitant effect of African Americans' psychological and literal annihilation, have kept the commitment to black social advancement and positive racial representation foremost in black expressive culture.

While, in the twenty-first century, the logics and implications of race have supposedly shifted, continued antiblack state violences and the systematic discard of impoverished black people expose racism as a lethal apparatus of psychosocial and material asymmetry that supersedes the legal remedy of recognition politics. Notably, the signal achievement of the civil rights movement was the inclusion of African Americans in formal US politics, made manifest through voting rights and the greater representation of black people in all spheres of legislative governance. Increased black participation in the formal mechanisms of liberal democratic politics over the last half-century has not guaranteed the removal of institutional, civic, socioeconomic, and psychic barriers to black American advancement. The mere presence of black congressional members, mayors, governors, and the like neither demonstrates nor ensures meaningful sociopolitical transformation in which the most vulnerable racialized subjects gain conditions of ordinary thriving. This book recognizes that representations of political crises in black life no longer inhere in *or adhere to* established literary or (visual) media forms. Rather, as forms of racialized economic, social, and political harm have itself become less formal and more abstract—the move, for example, from legal segregation to segregation produced via educational disparities, deindustrialization, redlining practices—the aesthetic techniques and expressive modalities used to tell stories of black lives and aspirational freedoms have themselves become more abstract.¹⁰ It is, therefore, no longer critically useful or viable to invest verisimilitude in black cultural production with the potency and the promise of inclusive political representation.

In “Mathematics, Black Life,” Katherine McKittrick compellingly describes how blackness structures the economics and the sociopolitical systems of existence, semiexistence, and nonexistence in racialized modernity. The mathematics in her title refers to the quantification of black life, the brutal

economics—“breathless numbers . . . the mathematics of the unliving”—that undergird racial enslavement, mass warehoused black life unto/until death, scientific and statistical data recording lessened and lost black life, and the sketchy archival remains of black persons and populations.¹¹ Characterizing blackness in modernity, she writes:

While the tenets and lingering histories of slavery and colonialism produced modernity as and through Blackness, this sense of time-space in interrupted by a more weighty and seemingly more truthful . . . underside—where Black is naturally malignant and therefore worthy of violation; where Black is violated because Black is naturally violent; where Black is naturally less-than-human and starving to death and violated; where Black is naturally dysselected, unsurviving, swallowed up; where Black is same and always and dead and dying; where Black is complex and difficult and too much to bear and violated.¹²

McKittrick captures a historically imposed racial hierarchy so deep and abiding that it has the power to delineate simultaneously subjecthood and its abrogation. Modernity’s principal promises are a progressive temporal schema, perpetually advancing and accretive, and the subject’s right to accumulation and increase in and over progressive time. The modern conception of the subject is ultimately possessive and propertied where being and having and taking collide. Rooted in transatlantic slavery, the conquest and reterritorializing of the globe, and the management or removal of its various populations, the subject and the white emerge in modernity at the same time and as the same thing. On the other hand, the black, the imminently killable nonsubject, is stuck in stasis, occupying the status of metaphysical negation, always vulnerable to demise or disappearance or to being taken or had. McKittrick invokes the inherent vulnerability of blackness as “violated”—in life and, in her language, on repeat.

Millennial Style pursues two objectives: the development of an analytics of blackness that does not replicate its violent negation, and the performance of expressive modalities of blackness that do not reiterate the murderous frames of its capture. I consider the importance of understanding the economization of black life—statistical enumeration, recorded documents, lists and ledgers, archival residue of black demise—for these provide the bases for political complaint, creative strategies of survival, the reformation of relational ethics, and insurrectionist ideals of black study. Ultimately, however, emancipatory schemas do not inhere in accounts of the black dead and dying, whether historical or statistical. “It follows,” McKittrick surmises, “that black freedom is embedded within an economy of race and violence and unfolds as an in-

determinate impossibility.”¹³ For black liberative possibility to manifest, its grammars and tactics must be nondeterministic, unanticipated, experimental—implausible, even. More specifically, within the realm of expressive culture, to dismantle the given order, to undo the effects of ongoing catastrophe, to expose the particularity of each successive disaster, and to etch pathways to implausibly free black futures require the summons and practice of the black *avant-garde*.

I am cognizant of the risk of using *avant-garde* as a term for conveying innovative artistic endeavors and de/reforming maneuvers within contemporary African diasporic aesthetic practice. Within the discipline of art history and criticism in particular, the term typically designates Euro-American art that, while profoundly rejecting the status quo, also eschews meaningful interaction with the everyday, the popular, the social.¹⁴ Implied in the designation *avant-garde* is nonreferential aesthetic experimentation that is manifestly disinterested in or disengaged from societal concerns and political grammars. The term is also often associated with white cultural elitism—some of which exploited the so-called primitivism of black cultural forms—of the modernist era. My conceptual recoding of *the avant-garde* updates and politicizes the term via the modifier *black* to reflect the strategic deployment of abstract, antirepresentational practices within contemporary African diasporic cultural expression.

I regard the elasticity and broad applicability of the *avant-garde* in part by thinking with Hal Foster, who disassociates the *avant-garde* from any particular movement, time period, artistic strategy, or expressive style. He defines the *avant-garde* broadly as experimental cultural production that encodes a radical rearticulation of the artistic vis-à-vis the political. Foster contends:

The *avant-garde* is defined in two ways only—as vanguard in a position of radical innovation, or as resistant, in a position of stern refusal to the status quo. Typically, too, the *avant-garde* is understood to be driven by two motives alone: the transgression of a given symbolic order (as with surrealism) or the legislation of a new one (as with Russian Constructivism). However, the *avant-garde* that interests me here is neither *avant* nor rear in those senses; rather, it is imminent in a caustic way. Far from heroic, it does not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one; instead, it seeks to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, to activate them somehow. Far from defunct, this *avant-garde* is alive and well today.¹⁵

Rather than regarding the avant-garde as a dated artistic movement, Foster emphasizes its imminence. He tempers its association with pure aesthetic innovation and complete societal disavowal. I am persuaded by Foster's contention that the avant-garde neither resolutely rejects the awful status quo with which it contends nor does it aim to wholly reinvent the world. Instead, the avant-garde pressures the present, exposing and exploring its (socio-economic, psychic, cultural, political) fissures, disforming when not reforming them. I invoke the black avant-garde to name African diasporic cultural production of recent decades that scavenges sociopolitical wreckage, studies the preludes and afterwards of each successive disaster in black historico-political life, and innovates artistic practices that engage the ruined world and reveal how (always vulnerable, imminently killable) black subjects might continue to endure it.

While the majority of the literary, visual, and filmic texts that I explore were produced in the twenty-first century, its inquiry examines more broadly black cultural production following the civil rights movement. It is worth noting here that *Millennial* in the title of this book is not meant to signal expressive styles or strategies that belong exclusively to African diaspora production of the twenty-first century, though the overwhelming majority of the literature and visual art that I study are post-2000 productions; nor is the term meant to refer to aesthetic praxes developed and deployed exclusively by the millennial generation of black cultural producers—though some of the literary, visual, and filmic texts herein analyzed were indeed produced by black millennials. Rather, I use it to indicate the set of historical and political circumstances out of which both this generation *and* these aesthetic praxes emerge, most specifically the historical and political circumstances inaugurated by the Reagan era. Deploying *Millennial* as a historiographic rather than a generational or subjective classification allows me to avoid positing a vanguard that is presumably best poised to meet this moment's challenges. As a historical marker, *Millennial* delineates the notable socioeconomic and political shifts of the last century—specifically neoliberal retrenchment and neofascist ascendancy—that have shaped the current moment of societal and racist destruction.

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of multicultural discourse and multicultural representation in media and education alongside the steady withdrawal of civil rights gains, the erasure of social safety nets for marginalized and impoverished black and brown communities, financial deregulation, and the deleterious and robust rise of the prison industrial complex. The popularization of the discourse of multicultural-

ism and the emergence of the so-called culture wars in the 1980s obscured the aims of racial justice rooted in material redistribution and sociopolitical equity.¹⁶ As inclusive politics increasingly implied tokenism and representative visibility, there was a concomitant abatement of any national commitment to the amelioration of the socioeconomic and psychic aftereffects of racial slavery and legal segregation, to equitable opportunity in all domains of human aspiration, and to reparative political inclusion. Resurgent white supremacy informed the policies of Reagan's administration, which dismantled social safety nets, defunded food and housing programs for impoverished people, and reversed critical civil-rights-era affirmative action legislation.¹⁷ I encounter the (turn to the) twenty-first century as a period reflective of tremendous information, communication, and data technologies; the normalization of austerity measures and intensified material precarity for the masses; perpetual imperialist war on Muslims under the guise of the war on terror; domestic warfare against black and brown people instrumentalizing abusive policing and carceral containment; and the historic election of the first self-identified black president succeeded by a wholly unqualified and belligerent white supremacist one. And I proceed with the recognition that the groundwork for the conditions of the current century were laid by the political and economic policies, in the United States and abroad, of the decades that closed the last one.

My focus on the avant-garde refers to artistic production that gives rise to new aesthetic experiences, encourages thought restructuring, imagines alternative modes of sociality, and inspires unanticipated political interventions. A brief note on related terminology is useful here, though each of these terms will receive more in-depth treatment in subsequent chapters. I use the terms *experiment* and *experimentation* to delineate the general orientation, method, and approach to art. Rather than any attempt at verisimilitude or representing "the real," the writers and visual artists at the center of this study are practitioners of literary, visual, and filmic experiment. I use the terms *abstract*, *abstraction*, and *aesthetic abstraction* to comment on the literary and visual art objects themselves, to name the cumulative effect or style of the art produced. It is important to note that in this study abstract/abstractionism does not necessarily signify complete conceptualism. In the creative objects under consideration, there is generally some retention of the figural—by which I mean the evident subjective, bodily, material, historical, political referent or remnant—in the artwork produced. This referential retention is key to the aesthetic strategies of decomposition, estrangement, (re)assembly, disorder, resignification that drive artistic innovation and radical political imag-

inings in contemporary black expressive culture. I investigate the practices and poetics of structural ambiguity in imaginative texts of the black everyday that transgress and transform the boundaries among cultural production, social organization, and embodied and political life. Furthermore, I offer a conception of contemporary black life that reckons truly with the intricacies and continuities of political terror, a robust reappraisal of black aesthetic praxis, and a promiscuous reading of the archive of African diasporic cultural production in the twenty-first century.

UNDERCURRENTS

In an autobiographical essay written for *Ebony* magazine titled “Infinite Ache: My First Mother’s Day without Her,” Saeed Jones describes the first year of mourning he spent in the wake of his beloved mother’s passing. She had died unexpectedly shortly before Mother’s Day. Over the twelve months spread between the day assigned for honoring mothers, Jones struggled with perpetual, unbearable grief. “I would stand up and cry,” he remembers, “until there was nothing to do but lay down and cry. I would wake up with tear streaks on my face and the moment I remembered why, I’d start crying again.” Mourning her loss, finding new ways to manage her constant and forever gone-ness, was, for Jones, impossible. During that first year, he discovered that the magnitude of his suffering was matched only by the depth of the life-giving bond between his mother and her queer black boy; it also defined their new relation. I use the example of Saeed Jones’s literary record of filial love to illustrate both the conceptualization and the deployment of black queerness as analytic and method in this book. What warrants emphasis here is how the powerful attachment undergirding this filial relation departs from the normative structures and affective ties of the heteropatriarchal household, offering an occasion for a thick and dexterous conception of queer/ness within African American relational rubrics and aesthetic praxes.

Jones’s relationship with his mother yielded the most important blueprint for his being and for his queer black becoming. He characterizes the connection reconfigured by maternal death in terms of awe: “Awe at the undeniable fact that I will forever be the son of a fiercely beautiful woman. Awe at knowing just how exquisitely she prepared me to live and write my way into this world.” Jones owns and celebrates the fact of this, using the occasion of Mother’s Day to record textually the fierceness and the fearlessness of his mother. “Love, mother love in particular, is not free,” he muses. He includes part of a letter his mother had written to him while he was a boy away at camp in

which she'd said, "I love you more than the air I breathe." When love is more powerful than breath, it entails great risk; it creates even as it attenuates life. Jones concludes, "A love like that is worth an infinite ache."¹⁸ The love that sustains tenuous black living and yet calls for and culminates in interminable aching stretches in Jones's work black queerness beyond identity and individuated patterns of erotic desire. Following Jones, black queerness is deployed methodologically and hermeneutically in my readings of specific experimental black texts beyond the designation of specific erotic practices, subjectivities, or political agendas. Rather, black queerness enmeshes all manner of racialized being and longing with fluid temporalities, ethical affect, and suturing sociality.

Throughout *Millennial Style*, I proceed with the notion of the black as a sentient entity, a form of life, and a modality of living whose defining characteristic is that of nonpossession. By virtue of its undoing through the totalizing (embodied, social, and political) dispossession of enslavement and the violent temporal and geographic dislocations of the Middle Passage, the black emerges in modernity as a being divested of the right of and capacity for possession, including of normative attributes like sexuality and gender. In this book, as within black life-worlds generally, queerness signifies, on one hand, subjective and sexual formations and, on the other, affective and relational orientations. Black queerness is embodied—that is, operant and expressed through bodily forms, desires and movements—but uncontained by the fixtures of identitarian logics and the spatiotemporal limits of geographic boundedness and chronology. It is this broad understanding of black queerness that interests me and that informs my engagement with it as an episteme throughout *Millennial Style*. As Jafari Allen so powerfully reminds us, "Unbelonging is, paradoxically, powerfully constitutive."¹⁹ At its most conceptually capacious and politically relevant (for me and for this study), black queerness designates forms and formulations of nonsovereign being, temporality unbound by teleology, and reparative sociality. Additionally, it makes each of these the basis for a new black critical discourse.

In *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*, Stephen Best reassesses the scholarly inclinations and political orientations of black cultural criticism and interrogates the instrumentalization of historic racial injury as the foundation for black aesthetics, cultural belonging, and political endeavor in the present. Notably, his impassioned renunciation of "the melancholy affective history project that has prevailed in [African-American] cultural criticism" attends simultaneously to black cultural output and the academic disciplines that have been built around it.²⁰ Inspired by the work

of Wendy Brown, Best cautions against forging US democratic projects that are reliant upon melancholic investments in histories of transatlantic slavery and the mobilization of “wounded attachments” to redress abominable racial harm.²¹ He calls into question the intellectual and political utility of recuperative identitarian projects in African American cultural studies aimed at historical recovery, mythic black belonging, and (barely accomplished) racial advancement. Best urges ultimately for the disarticulation of black studies

from the historical accretions of slavery, race, and racism, or from a particular commitment to the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present. In spite of the many truths that follow our acceptance of slavery as generative of blackness, as productive of the background conditions necessary to speak from the standpoint of blackness, *None Like Us* begins in the recognition that there is something impossible about blackness, that to be black is also to participate, of necessity, in a collective undoing, if not, on the occasion that that should either fail or seem unpalatable, a self-undoing.²²

Racial slavery and persistent, pervasive antiblackness shape the histories and impact the current life experiences and outcomes of black subjects. Best urges, nonetheless, more inventive reckonings with the fractures, losses, and impossibilities that, as a result, beset black subjects and black social life beyond any meaningful claim or capacity for restoration.

To get at the profound internal fragmentation and social unbelonging of blackness—its historic lack of a sustained and unified polity and the lack of integrated wholeness within black subjectivities—Best turns to queer theory, particularly its negative, anti-relational strain. In so doing, he assigns himself “the task of drawing out the connections between a sense of impossible black sociality . . . and strains of negativity that often have operated under the sign *queer*.”²³ While I do not share Best’s enthusiasm for anti-relational theories of subjective and social negation within queer studies as a framework for theorizing black desire (whether personal or political) that is alienated, unfounded, thwarted, impossible, I am, indeed, moved by his bold assessment that queerness underwrites any persuasive account of black radicality in contemporary African American cultural criticism. In this regard, Best’s work joins, to my thinking, with recent work by such scholars as Kara Keeling, Tavia Nyong’o, and Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, that underscores the queer undercurrents of blackness.

In *Queer Time, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling examines the cultural deployment of the technology, imagination, and speculative futurities to picture black and queer liberation in the aftermath of racial slavery and in the midst of racial capitalism. Her reinstallation of the promise of freedom to come for vulnerable black and queer subjects—in time, after the future—proceed from theories of queer spatiotemporality. Keeling specifies the conceptual usage of queer in her study not in terms of ontology but of epistemology, concerned with “life and death questions of apprehension and value production.”²⁴ Keeling’s expansive and refigured notion of the queer foregrounds taxonomies of human valuation in the production of knowledge, providing an analytic linchpin for her investigation of race, temporality, and the financialization of human life. She writes:

The production of “queer” is violent, material, and excessive to the management and control of sociability. “Queer” is palpable, felt as affect. It is also not only an imposition but simultaneously a becoming. . . . “Queer” is a long-haul proposition available in any-instant-whatever. Queer’s proliferation of connections among disparate, qualitatively different things pile up, indifferent to its ability to measure or completely capture them. Capable of being modulated to the demands of Capital, queer nonetheless stubbornly works on and through bodies, establishing relations between them and thereby connecting them across time and space.²⁵

Queerness is embodied in form and movement, gesture and shape. Although queerness is under the sway of capital, it can move in opposition to it. Furthermore, even as it escapes the normative dictates and confines of sociability, queerness can operate as potent connective tissue across social domains.

In her breathtaking book *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora*, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan studies the queer feminist poetics of black women writers across the African diaspora. Attentive to the ways in which black women authors throughout the diaspora writers have deployed the “nuaential” and “interstitial” to subvert the formal conventions and genres of literary expression, she theorizes distinct black queer feminist poetics—for example, the biomythic and choreopoetic—to show how they advance “complex, antinormative models of black womanhood that critique multiple power structures and interpretive conventions at once.”²⁶ Sullivan intentionally weaves and unweaves the intersecting threads of black experience across numerous axes and arenas of difference, including sexuality,

gender, history, geography. In so doing, she posits the importance of holding together black and queer historiography as a critical practice that attends to the always interimbricated, multifaceted, and reciprocal histories of black and queer life. She writes: “For many queer writers of the African diaspora, blackness and queerness are not separate identificatory markers; rather, they are contiguous signifiers of a difference that defines temporal and social experience. In their worlds, there cannot be black history without several forms of queerness, and there cannot be black queer survival without several concurrent black histories.”²⁷

Expansive, critically and politically generative concepts of queer/ness are rooted in genealogies of black thought. In *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, Tavia Nyong’o analyzes the methodologies and maneuvers of queer of color critical thought to articulate the gestures, patterns, praxes, and rhythms of black life in a viciously antiblack world. Nyong’o’s study moves astutely past decades-long dichotomous debates within queer theory—specifically around anti-relationality and anti-normativity—by exposing the curated (and even whitewashed) genealogies of the field. Through both his critique and his citational practice, Nyong’o emphasizes “the place of theorists of color, and black theorists specifically, in the intellectual and political genealogy of what we now call queer theory.”²⁸ He summons “the speculative powers of blackness, which are non-identitarian” to simultaneously broaden and sharpen critical and commonsense notions of the queer and to harness the aesthetic and political utility of queerness as long-standing features of black expressive culture and black liberative endeavor.²⁹

Millennial Style examines experimental black aesthetics as a mode of queer art production, as the holding (or hoarding) of black mortal and material resources against the injuries and inevitabilities of social death, as the fashioning of relational ethics in the face of sociopolitical domination, as exuberant black diasporic world-building in perpetually perilous times. This study navigates the tension among theoretical strands of negativity and anti-sociality within queer studies; nihilistic structural critiques within black studies; and the material and political need for the vulnerable to find community and build solidarities. I turn to black avant-garde aesthetics as a rich reservoir for imagined enactments of an improved world for persons and populations that are subject to continual diminishment, discard, dissolution. These are the themes of numerous poems in Saeed Jones’s *Prelude to Bruise*, particularly in the poems that conjure his mother. By depicting his mother as the blueprint for his formation, Jones records the constant vigilance—the impossible maneuvering on behalf of bequeathed but abjured black life—that de-

finest black filial relations and that render them, in this time and place, both nonheteronormative and nonpatriarchal. In this stunning book of poetry, a chronicle of the burgeoning subjectivity of a southern black queer boy, it is the lost black mother that lends Jones's poetry its haunting edges and caressing reprieves. I conclude this section by lingering in those healing spaces. The title of this poem, "Mercy," is also the text of its intermittent one-lined stanzas:

Her ghost slips into the room wearing nothing but the memory
of a song; thin as a note lost in a little girl's throat,

mercy.

If fog had a sound

if the moon decided to hold its breath

if she ever heard the way I cry out in my sleep

mercy.

She knows I'm not well, sees the dark circling my eyes,
one more inheritance,

mercy.

Her stare traces me

and a hand reaches out but Mama, I don't know the words.³⁰

In this poem the mother who has left the world, or who has been taken from it, finds a way to reverse the passage, to inhabit the rooms where her left-behind child is stuck in isolated, ceaseless grief. Even the legible inscription of falling apart—darkness encircling the eyes—is a treasured legacy. Transcending the passage of time and the finitude of death, the ghostly mother returns to restore and (re)shape her queer black son. She inspects and caresses her grown child. And, in so doing, the gone mother teaches him to resonate with mercy, to heal with mercy, to release with mercy. She guides him to the apprehension and appreciation that things are impermanent; they come and they go. And in that rush of movement, the push and pull of what passes by and passes on, what we can do, and perhaps must do, is to anchor ourselves and one another with(in) mercy.

AGAINST REPRESENTATION

Millennial Style turns to literature, visual art, and cinema produced by vulnerable, imminently killable black subjects, and the marginalized among even them—black people from across the diaspora who have suffered racist injury, displacement, gendered harm, confinement, disease, debility, shortened and stolen life. Because blackness carries within it the hallmarks of subjection, subalternity, and nonsovereignty, black subjects cannot appear under the rubrics—whether ideological, political, juridical, or cultural—of agentic, a priori personhood.³¹ Moving beyond standard beliefs and practices of racial representation organized around identity, sentimentality, and inclusive politics, the artists who populate this study take a more radical and visionary approach to the production of black literature and art. I track the emergence of distinct aesthetic practices, the demolition or renovation of form and genre in black cultural production via the deployment of these aesthetic practices, and their unique instantiations of durable black life and radical political possibility. This book joins an emerging cadre of recent scholarly texts that analyze experimental black expressive formations, which are radically redefining and reorienting the field of African American literary and cultural studies.³² Whether theorizing postblack or postsoul aesthetics, black subjectivity and sociality unencumbered by the injurious past of racial slavery, or the speculative and fantastical orientations of black literary and cinematic futures, this recent criticism turns toward the liberative possibilities of black experiment.³³ I refine and advance such field-altering work by distilling the black avant-garde into specific experimental modalities—Black Grotesquerie, Hollowed Blackness, Black Cacophony, and the Black Ecstatic—that have become, I argue, most preeminent and pervasive. In the chapters to follow, I explore each expressive modality in detail, pairing different expressive forms, such as, fiction and sculpture, poetry and cinema, digital exhibit and memoir, to study the work of cultural practitioners across the African diaspora.

Adducing black feminism's theories of the flesh and Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque, chapter 1, "Black Grotesquerie," reads together Kenyan American visual artist Wangechi Mutu and African American genderqueer author Marci Blackman to make the case for Black Grotesquerie as an expressive mode that undermines the prevailing social order by confounding its representational logics. Black Grotesquerie reconfigures the terms of contemporary black struggle by rendering the boundary between (black) living and (black) dying porous and negotiable. As an expressive practice, it infuses the materiality of the black body with the textuality of the art object.

The acceptance of catastrophe as the context for black being, the practice of living on in outmoded shapes, the appetite for the unbearable underside of enjoyment, the determination to make last what has already been ruined—all are the signal features of Black Grotesquerie. Rather than merely signifying excess, dread, or decay, Black Grotesquerie delineates an aesthetic practice of contortion, exaggeration, substitution, inversion, corruption. As such, it is an expressive practice of formal disintegration and recombinant gathering—the assembly and aestheticization of remains—to open pathways for as-yet-unrealized and as-yet-unimagined black futures.

The second chapter, “Hollowed Blackness,” pursues an investigation of racial confinement and affect via attention to Black Hollows and the black subjects who move into; sequester, enfold, or hide themselves in; or emerge, burst forth, or arise from them. By *Black Hollows / Hollowed Blackness*, I refer to (1) the material perimeters of caverns, ditches, basements, closets, attics that sometimes serve as sites of escape, momentary relief, or passage for black people fleeing racial and gendered horror and (2) the emotional state of hollowness that indicates black shock, emptiness, fatigue, doneness. Building on Katherine McKittrick’s theorization of the “garreted” enslaved person in flight alongside Kevin Quashie’s mandate that black studies attend to quiet black interiors, I read together the visual art of Alexandria Smith, the poetry of Aja Monet, and the fiction of Colson Whitehead. Taking seriously the ways in which racialized and gendered systems of captivity and control (from the plantation to the checkpoint to the prison) operate through the tyranny of compulsory visibility—that is, through techniques and technologies of ubiquitous surveillance, tracking, disclosure, and capture—this chapter rethinks abolitionism and reconsiders the spatial terrains of black freedom. Foregrounding the movements and maneuvers of the most terrorized and aggrieved black subjects, this chapter ultimately redirects the critical site of fugitivity from (the expanse of) the outdoors to (the interstitial zone of) the hollow.

Putting forth a theory of black sonic radicality and resistance, chapter 3, “Black Cacophony,” examines depictions of screaming, howling, blabbering, moaning in both canonical and avant-garde black expressive texts. In so doing, it develops a theory of *Black Cacophony* as an aesthetic of noise *within* language, at its limits. My analysis proceeds from the premise that, for New World black subjects descended from the middle passage, what remains of and replaces a narrative of origins is a legacy of indecipherable sounds—or what Junot Díaz calls “the screams of the enslaved,” and Toni Morrison calls their “roaring.”³⁴ Reading cacophonous moments in literary depictions of

New World slavery and its afterlives, this chapter pursues two critical objectives: first, to illuminate the ways in which dissonant, evocative sound registers the affective dimensions of black experience, while complicating racial epistemologies and conventional narratives of racial harm; second, to show how language, when divested of its primary purpose of communication, is objectified and made available for scrutiny and for imaginative design. At the edge of discourse, or in its exhaustion, are the sonic resonances of form. Black Cacophony is a technique of textual representation that marks the superfluity *and* the insufficiency of language for capturing exploited or discarded subaltern life while insisting, in its sentient soundings, that such life matters.

Finally, the fourth chapter, “The Black Ecstatic,” proffers ecstasy as the site of queer of color desire, relational practice, and utopic possibility to develop what I call the *Black Ecstatic* as a hermeneutic for analyzing post-civil rights black queer expressive culture. As an affective and aesthetic practice, the Black Ecstatic eschews both the heroism of black pasts and the promise of liberated black futures in order to proffer new relational and representational modes in the ongoing catastrophe that constitutes black life in modernity. As an aesthetic modality that deploys the practices and poetics of structural ambiguity—or, to use Ernst Bloch’s words, “experiments in demolition”—the Black Ecstatic reveals how the labors of loss may lead to undocumented spaces and unanticipated experiences of freedom.³⁵ Against the backdrop of civil rights retrenchment, the war on drugs, the AIDS crisis and the emergent US carceral state, this chapter analyzes the recent film *Moonlight* and the poetry of black gay writer and AIDS activist Essex Hemphill. In so doing, it shows how, across literary genres and media platforms, the Black Ecstatic instantiates formal innovations to black queer expressive forms and encourages willful exuberance as an affective disposition and relational ethic that enables black life and liberation in the catastrophic present.

Millennial Style emerges at a time of crisis, where crisis is indistinct from the ongoing conditions of everydayness. Its critical scaffolding embeds and builds upon queer of color critique, critical race theory, and black feminist politics to reckon with and to register the interrelatedness of aesthetic abstraction, social abjection, and the global reach of political terror in the current moment. In her monumental *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva construes blackness as a fundamentally (and fruitfully) nonsovereign life form that can neither instate nor instantiate itself within the discursive and representational frames of modern citizen-subjectivity. She explains:

No matter how fluid, hybrid, or unbounded, when addressing a collectivity the racial has already inscribed as subaltern, the cultural acquires a descriptive sense that does not and cannot communicate interiority, as is the case with the nation, the historical signifier. It does not and cannot precisely because it remains fully within a scientific (anthropological) terrain of signification. As such, it reinforces the effects of signification of the racial: exterior determination. In short, it cannot institute a transparent (interior/temporal)—that is, self-determined—“I.”³⁶

Rather than lamenting blackness’s representative impossibility within dominant discourse, juridical paradigms, and political schemas, da Silva recodes this inability as black queer trans insurgency vis-à-vis modern subjectivity. In “Hacking the Subject,” a later essay, she extols “blackness’s ability to disrupt the subject and the racial and gender-sexual forms that sustain it, without sacrificing the latter’s capacity to expose the fundamentally violent core of modern thinking.”³⁷ Blackness exposes the white supremacist foundations of entitled, white, normatively gendered, legal, patriarchal personhood. My methods in *Millennial Style* are inspired in part by da Silva’s theorization of hacking as a hermeneutic for black study. She suggests: “Hacking here is de\composition, or a radical transformation (or imaging) that exposes, unsettles, and perverts form and formulae. . . . Hacking is a kind of reading, which is at once an imaging (in Benjamin’s sense, in reference to the work done by the dialectical image) and a composition (as description of a creative act), but also recomposition of elements, in the sense the term has in alchemy.”³⁸

I want to emphasize da Silva’s use of the word *alchemy* to register the reshaping, entwining, esoteric engagement between the imaginative texts in this book and my readings of them. I proceed by deploying a method of creative and speculative criticism. Retrieving into the dominant culture’s discourse the abstract practices of those denied subjecthood, inheriting a murderous history and living in a murderous present, requires acts of deformation and of experiment as well. My writing throughout this book purposely employs experimental strategies, such as collage, lyricism, speculation. My doing so reflects my recognition and regard for black avant-gardist practice as powerfully resistant to interpretive capture and to absorptive disciplinary regimes. Rather than aim for definitive authority and interpretive closure, my analyses of experimental black texts open them up in wonder and in a quest for a critical language and scholarly praxis within which to illuminate the barely visible, nearly impossible horizons of black freedom that these texts imagine.

I am guided by and adherent to the artistic practices, subversive possibilities, and innovative political interventions found in contemporary African diasporic literature and visual art. By exploring how abstract aesthetic practices upend the predominance of political sentimentality and formal realism in African diasporic expressive culture, I illuminate the centrality of the avant-garde to political modes of storytelling and visual representation *and* to the undercurrent of racial politics in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century black cultural production of high experiment. My cumulative offering in *Millennial Style* is a promiscuous reading of the archive of African diasporic cultural production in the new century, a conception of black temporality that reckons truly with the continuities and intricacies of political terror, and an exploration of the black avant-garde—which commits radically, if nonspectacularly, to an improved world for the minoritized, the neglected, the abandoned, the exhausted, the annihilated, the black.