

Writing Black Beauty

First, a story.

—Terrion L. Williamson (2016, 1)

I have inherited my mother's copy of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. Hers is a hardcover edition, its pages browned with age. On the inside cover is a cryptic inscription, "To Carolyn, Love Peter," and a date: June 1977. The first time I saw the book, it was sitting on the warped, dusty bookshelves in my parents' basement. Many years later, when I was an undergraduate in the midst of an intellectual coming-of-age facilitated by black feminist theory, I borrowed the book, eventually making it part of my library. This year, I come to the book again. I am in a city that is new to me, teaching at a university that is new to me. Though I have read *For Colored Girls* many times, I decide, for a reason I cannot name, to teach it for the first time in my undergraduate black feminisms course. And it is then that I reencounter Peter. I am puzzled by this inscription because I have never heard of Peter. The word "love" also surprises me, as does the date, three years after my parents' wedding. I have an impulse to call my mother and to ask her to unlock this mystery for me: Who is Peter? Why did he think Ntozake Shange's choreo-poem, with its pronouncement that "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't conquered yet," would be an appropriate gift for my mother (Shange 1997, 45)? How has this book survived for so long, a kind of treasured possession, in the company of my parents who, while committed to the project of holding onto objects treasured or not, are not readers? I feel the charge, and even the shame, of my own desire to know something that isn't mine to know, even as I realize that these questions are not meant as an accusation but as a deep curiosity about my mother's life. But my mother's memory is spotty these days, a confession that I never imagined would find its way into an academic piece of writing but one that haunts my personal

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life. There are places in my mother's memory that are worn away from something—I'm not even sure what to call it. Perhaps it is age, or perhaps illness. I have come to realize that naming it is less important than *that it is*, and I fear that if I call her and pose these questions, I will be met either with shy silence or, worse, with forgetting. It is better to not know, I decide, than to confront her not-knowing, and so I live with the book and the mystery, my mother and Peter, what Patricia J. Williams might call "*her shape and his hand*" (Williams 1991, 19; emphasis added).¹

For Williams, *her shape and his hand* refers to her great-great-grandfather, Austin Miller, a celebrated white lawyer, and her great-great-grandmother, an enslaved woman and Miller's property. She writes, "I see her shape and his hand in the vast networking of our society, and in the evils and oversights that plague our lives and laws. The control he had over her body. The force he was in her life, in the shape of my life today" (Williams 1991, 19). *Her shape and his hand* captures the "afterlife of slavery," the historical and intimate dimensions of the relationships between "her" and "him," and how seemingly irreconcilable presences come to constitute Williams's sense of herself (Hartman 2008a, 6). I borrow the phrase *her shape and his hand* and inflect it differently because I am interested in the presence of a man I do not know, a woman I imagine exclusively as my mother but who has lived lives that far exceed both what I know and what I can imagine, and a history that is being eaten away by neurological changes I cannot fully understand. I use this phrase to describe a history I do not know and that is not mine to know, a history I might not ever be able to access. I am, then, using the phrase to track both a history that is lost to me and a history of loss.

Her shape and his hand is also a call for forms of writing that can describe a *her* who is largely outside of the archive and a *him* whose public life is well documented. It is an argument that doing justice to her, him, and their complex interplay in the past and unfolding present requires a different kind of scholarly prose, a kind of writing that, in this article, I call *beautiful*. I use the amorphous and slippery term *beautiful* to describe certain writing practices, though I do not mean beautiful as a form of valuation. Instead, I use it to describe the aesthetic properties of contemporary black feminist theoretical work and to capture an ethical commitment that this kind of

¹ Avery Gordon takes this up at length in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. She notes, "*I look for her shape and his hand*; this is a massive project, very treacherous, very fragile. This is a project in which haunting and phantoms play a central part. This is a project where *finding the shape described by her* absence captures perfectly the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes it mark by being there and not there at the same time" (Gordon 1997, 6).

writing project evidences, particularly its aspiration to move the reader (even as it might move the reader in a variety of ways, or may not move the reader at all). While Williams coined this phrase in 1991, her performance of beautiful writing is one that has been more recently and more urgently taken up in the critical-memoir and poetic scholarship of black feminist theorists including Christina Sharpe, Nicole Fleetwood, Terrion Williamson, and Karla F. C. Holloway, among others. These authors practice forms of writing that are, as Williams notes, “an act of sacrifice, not denial. . . . What is ‘impersonal’ writing but denial of self?” (1991, 92). They mobilize their prose—often risky, personal, and sacrificial—to make readers feel, and even to make us feel otherwise, to ask us to situate ourselves in the text. Of course, the author is never certain how writing will move—or will not move—readers. As Ruth Behar writes in her engagement with vulnerable ethnographies, “Writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly. I would say it takes yet greater skill. The worst that can happen in an invulnerable text is that it will be boring. But when an author has made herself or himself vulnerable, the stakes are higher: a boring self-revelation, one that fails to move the reader, is more than embarrassing; it is humiliating” (1996, 13). This uncertainty might be one of the risks at the heart of beautiful writing, and it is this willingness to risk, as I argue later in the essay, that might be precisely what makes this form of writing politically and ethically useful.

Yet, I argue here that beautiful writing is mobilized in the service of something even greater than risk; the effort to do justice to *her shape and his hand* is an effort to do justice to loss, and contemporary black feminist theory argues that beautiful writing is the form required to develop cartographies of black women’s losses. When I describe a black feminist preoccupation with explicating loss, I describe loss capaciously to capture absence, erasure, what is missed and missing, what is taken or stolen, what is unknown and unknowable. I mean loss to signal experiences of invisibility and dis-possession, to capture institutional arrangements that render black women unseen and disappeared, to describe persistent feelings of loneliness and alienation that are structurally produced, and to name black feminist theory’s persistent attention to ghosts, to the palpable presence of the past in the present. Beautiful writing, then, uses its commitment to risky disclosure, to moving prose, to “sacrifice” in the service of capturing something it would not be able to otherwise: the fundamental nature of loss to black female subjectivity.

In emphasizing contemporary black feminist theory’s commitment to beautiful writing, I am necessarily making an argument about the distinc-

tiveness of recent—for my purposes, post-2000—black feminist theoretical investments. Of course, black feminists have long used innovative forms—including the blues, the biomythography (Lorde 1982), the choreo-poem, and the diary (Williams 1991)—to describe and theorize black female subjectivities. My interest here is in how contemporary black feminist theory has mobilized the beautiful form as a strategy for theorizing loss, insisting that loss is only knowable through a proximity to beauty. Contemporary black feminist theorists have, then, transformed the very meaning of theory (again) by emphasizing the need for a new scholarly language—the beautiful—to capture loss, by suggesting (again) that the form of theory matters and that certain forms might be necessary to get us closer to the objects we wish to explore and understand.

If this essay was born of a desire to understand a form of writing that marks contemporary black feminist theory, it was also born of my own desire to put the tools of my trade to work in the service of understanding (my) everyday life. Put differently, I wanted to understand how a set of unknown but palpable presences—my mother, a man I do not know, my own curiosities—shaped my experience teaching *For Colored Girls* in my first class at a new institution, the first time I taught black feminist theory to a room full of students who are mostly *not* black women and who seemed mostly ambivalent about the identity category that organizes our inquiry. I wanted to understand what it means for me to hold the book that my mother held, the book that Peter held, and to hold that same book out as an offering to my students, one that attests to black feminists' long investment in doing justice to what can be sensed but not named. More than anything, I am interested in how my encounter with my mother's *For Colored Girls* was shaped by a series of losses, including some I cannot name—her memory, a history I cannot know, the questions that can be posed but not answered—and by a series of unexpected losses: my experiences in a new city, at a new institution, are marked by unfamiliarity, by the loss of the institutional (and even affective) familiarity of my previous job. The academic mobility that has come to mark the desired career trajectory of my academic cohort—the recently tenured—is marked, paradoxically, by losses that can wear the guise of progress: mobility, greater salary, handsome research budgets. This essay, then, asks: How does a practice of beautiful writing, engaged in by black feminist theorists, encompass and redirect these kinds of personal losses as ones that move with and are moved by the collective political work of the field?

A black feminist commitment to the side-by-side-ness of the beautiful and loss takes on great political significance in a moment saturated by scholarly discourses on Afropessimism and black death. What might it mean, this

black feminist archive asks, to approach loss not with an emphasis on blackness as always the space of death, mourning, and grief? What might it mean to presume that black women *have* something to lose, rather than that they are subjects who are constituted by having already lost everything, including status as human? And what might it reveal about loss that getting next to it seems to require beautiful language? I treat beautiful writing's engagement with loss as a critical rejoinder to Afropessimism, which presumes the already (social) deadness of black bodies. If Afropessimism is a tradition that has centered the impossibility of the black human, it is necessarily in tension with a longer black feminist tradition that has centered survival, wellness, care, friendship, and intimacy as strategies of safeguarding black women's bodies and fundamental humanity. My interest here is not in casting aside Afropessimism—though I do question its commitments to theorizing gender robustly—but instead to suggest that a contemporary black feminist theoretical archive, and a commitment to lingering on its strategies of writing beautifully, offers a different way of understanding the relationship between blackness and loss. When we fail to consider, to feel *through*, and to engage black feminist beautiful writing, we fail to see that there are other theoretical traditions that have grappled with the relationship between blackness and loss; these include both past and more recent black feminist investments in sitting with and alongside loss without the presumption that black bodies are themselves only constituted by and through loss.

From "critical fabulation" to the beautiful: Or, notes on the archive

Beautiful theoretical writing is often staged as an antidote to both conventional academic writing and to conventional conceptions of archives. As Christina Sharpe writes, "Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter has called our 'narratively condemned status'" (2016, 13). What if, Sharpe asks, we insisted on what we know? What if we refused forms of thinking, writing, and disciplinarity that produce our "annihilation," that discount sensual, spiritual, creative, and corporeal ways of knowing? What if we responded to the fetishization of objective, neutral writing with a commitment to creative form, to experimentation, to writing otherwise, *and* housed that critique in the parameters of theory, effectively jamming the machinery of conventional theoretical production? Nowhere has this attention to alternative archives and experimental, creative, and sensual form been amplified with greater clarity and force than by black feminist scholars laboring in the field of black

women's history. This group of scholars—including Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Jennifer Morgan, and Emily Alyssa Owens—have highlighted where the conventional archive fails to do justice to particular subjects—especially women of color—and their trauma, pain, violence, suffering, agency, pleasure, and interiority. For example, Marisa Fuentes asks “How do we narrate the fleeting glimpses of enslaved subjects in the archives and meet the disciplinary demands of history that requires us to construct unbiased accounts from these very documents? How do we construct a coherent historical accounting out of that which defies coherence and respectability? How do we critically confront or reproduce those accounts to open up possibilities for historicizing, mourning, remembering, and listening to the condition of enslaved women?” (Fuentes 2016, 1). These critical questions have led historians to consider the violence of the archive, to focus on what it omits, excludes, or can never know. Jennifer Morgan echoes these concerns, noting that “the archive is the troubled genesis of our always-failed effort to unravel the effects of the past on the present; rather than verifiable truths, the archive—and its silences—house the very questions that unsettle us” (Morgan 2016, 187). Indeed, Morgan posits the historical effort itself, at least as it is concerned with historicizing slavery and enslaved bodies, as “always-failed,” as mired in “silence” (187).

If the archive is “troubled” and becomes the location of our “always-failed efforts” and our critical desires, rather than a space of singular truth, the project of writing history must have a fundamentally different ethical and political valence. In the midst of a field that has long privileged epistemic certainty, speculative method and “critical fabulation,” methods of “imagining what cannot be verified,” have emerged as historically grounded ways of doing justice to systemic absence and as strategies of tracing how archival absences are shaped by race, gender, class, and sexuality (Hartman 2008b, 12). As Saidiya Hartman notes, “critical fabulation” is a method oriented around the *might* and the grammar of the subjunctive. It endeavors “to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis ‘what happened when’ and by exploiting the ‘transparency of sources’ as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives, . . . to describe ‘the resistance of the object,’ if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity” (2008b, 11). Critical fabulation endeavors to respond to what is not in the archive, what could never be in the archive, and even to *who* is not in the archive, by listening differently and writing otherwise. Here, the archive is a location both of historical possibility and violence, potentiality and trauma, and the task of

the historian is to develop strategies for writing, and strategies *of* writing, that attend to this paradox, that reflexively grapple with the historian's own longings, and that consider the ethics of historical research.

Other critiques of the conventional archive have emerged from the interdisciplinary field of affect theory, inviting us to imagine "archives of feelings" that capture the fleeting and the ephemeral, and thus effectively unravel conventional conceptions of the archive (Cvetkovich 2003). This work on unconventional archives, which often unfolds alongside an attention to the everyday, though often rooted in queer theory, often names black feminist theory as a crucial predecessor, suggesting black feminist theory's long-standing investment in multiple forms of knowing and embodied archives. Importantly, affect theory is also a scholarly tradition that has taken seriously the practice of writing as a creative and political endeavor, as a way of capturing the complexities of its varied archives and objects of study. Kathleen Stewart, for example, describes her pedagogical focus on writing: "Writing that is open to the world takes what it lights upon: the tendons of a scene, the elements of an actual field forming up. It matters if something is red or yellow, or if a leaf turns the atmosphere from summer to fall in a minute when the wind blows. As a practice, writing makes itself a sensitivity to the capacities of whatever's throwing together" (Stewart 2017). For Stewart, scholarly writing can be "open to the world" and can make possible rich forms of critical inhabitation that enable us to "get into what's going on and [to] stay there long enough to begin to think about living now." In other words, different kinds of writing make visible and even palpable the "emergent, sedimented, or occluded" (Stewart 2017).

In the wake of these varied critiques of the archive, critical memoir has emerged as a genre that draws on the always-imperfect record of memory to capture embodied archives, to register feelings, memory, sensations, and desires as dense archival sites that can be mined for different kinds of knowledge production.² This investment in embodied archives draws on black feminist theory's (and performance studies') long-standing investment in experiential knowledge and memory to disrupt the fetishization of objectivity and facticity. If critical memoir is imagined as a writing practice that puts political and intellectual pressure on the conventional archive,

² Crucially, the turn toward critical memoir is part of a larger cultural moment. We inhabit one of the golden eras of black memoir. Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, Margo Jefferson's *Negroland*, Clifford Thompson's *Twin of Blackness*, Caille Millner's *The Golden Road: Notes on My Gentrification*, and Rosemary Freeney Harding and Rachel Harding's *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering* have all recently made memoir the preeminent form for theorizing the interconnections among race, gender, and inequality.

as a way of remembering the past and inserting our critical desires *of* the past in our accounts, it also entails risk. If “going public”—Ann Cvetkovich’s term—runs the risk of being cast as unscholarly or unrigorous, it has even more severe consequences for women of color scholars (2012, 161). Patricia J. Williams describes the experience of presenting her critical memoir work at an academic conference. She writes, “The response is generally warm, but a friend of mine tells me that in the men’s room he heard some of them laughing disparagingly: ‘All this emotional stuff just leaves me cold.’ Since the one who is reported to have said this is not only in love with power but is also powerful, I go back to my computer to find a way of saying it just for him” (Williams 1991, 19–20). Memoir’s engagement with felt life, and its refusal to embrace fictions of neutrality and objectivity, comes at deep costs for black women in particular, whose emotions are constantly policed and regulated, and whose intellectual competencies are regularly questioned. This is the case even as black women are frequently imagined as bodies of collective suffering, as bodies that perform national grief (and, at times, redemption).

While I have named the professional challenges of going public and how they are distributed in racialized, gendered, and sexualized ways, there are emotional risks as well: what does it mean to name oneself as the subject of inquiry? To write about those we hold dear? To make one’s emotions the subject of scholarly writing? Indeed, Williams’s notion of writing as sacrifice is not without cost both to the subjects of her analysis and to her self; indeed, part of the labor of the academic/personal binary is to shield the personal, the interior, the private from scrutiny. Yet part of what makes the writing that I am invested in beautiful is its willful risk taking, its sense that there are risks worth taking, and that this risk taking is a constitutive political and aesthetic project of black feminist theory.

A rumination on beauty

If black feminists have reconceptualized the archive to center desire, longing, memory, and experience, they have also developed self-conscious forms of writing that I term *beautiful*. It is, in many ways, unsurprising that black feminist theoretical work would launch its political and ethical engagements in beautiful writing because black feminism has always been a project about writing, including its troubling of theory (and its call for theorizing; Christian 1987), its practices of self-definition (Walker 1983), and its self-reflective forms of theorizing that make visible critical ambivalence and scholarly desires (duCille 1994). The work that I am invested in here—recent beautiful black feminist writing that aspires to move its reader—necessarily trans-

forms our understanding of what black feminist theory does as a political project and broadens a scholarly understanding of the political work of beauty. In thinking about writing as a location for staging the black beautiful, I am advancing and transforming a long-standing black feminist conversation on the political dimensions of beauty. Black feminists have long examined how a white supremacist patriarchal culture has viciously placed black bodies, particularly black female bodies, outside of discourses of beauty, constructing black female bodies as deviant, monstrous, and grotesque (Wallace-Sanders 2002; Hobson 2005; Willis 2009). One of the labors of black feminist theory has been to recover black female flesh from discourses of alterity, to insist on the black body beautiful. Deb Willis, for example, has created a “retroactive manifesto on beauty” that responds to the erasure of images of black beauty by archiving images of black beauty, by creating a rich counterhistory that insists on black female beauty (Willis 2009, xxxii). To name the black body beautiful, then, is to resist and upend the regimes that mark it as deviant and monstrous.

My interest in beautiful black feminist writing is its investment in advocating for black beauty, and black women’s beauty, apart from the body, expanding our collective conception of where black beauty is found, staged, performed, and articulated. In so doing, I suggest the expansive political potential of black beauty beyond critiquing the long-standing exclusion of black women from discourses of the beautiful. When I describe the beautiful, I am interested in writing that is self-consciously invested in language and treats writing itself as part of its project of meaning making, that seeks to move its reader. Of course beautiful writing is also a matter of technical skill, but I am particularly interested in emphasizing the “act of sacrifice,” the deliberate connection between writer and reader and the vulnerability of the writer that this writing makes possible as part of its critical and political investment in engaging its reader affectively. My understanding of the possibilities of moving work draws on scholarship by Deborah Gould and Jennifer Doyle. Gould’s work on “moving politics” aspires to capture the affective dimension of social movements, examining how social movements—particularly AIDS activism—do their political work through making us feel. As Gould indicates, “the movement in ‘social movements’ gestures toward the realm of affect; bodily intensities; emotions, feelings, and passions; and toward uprising” (2009, 3). It is not only the case that social movements are constituted by actors whose attachments to the movement are affective but also that the collective capacity for imagining, dreaming, and envisioning the politically possible (what Gould calls the “political horizon” [3]) are fundamentally shaped by emotion. If Gould traces the crucial affective life of social movements, arguing that our capacity to be

“moved” contributes to the cohesion and imaginativeness of collective social engagement, Doyle investigates the emotional life of challenging—or difficult—art. Her interest is in a set of aesthetic practices that are largely imagined as political and as difficult precisely because of what they demand from viewers, which includes an affective engagement, the capacity to be emotionally moved. She notes, “The artists I work with turn to emotion because this is where ideology does its most devastating work. . . . The artists that interest me turn to emotion, feelings, and affect as a means not of narcissistic escape but of social engagement” (Doyle 2013, xi). Difficult art can be unsettling, upsetting, challenging. It can elicit tears, anger, grief. It seeks to get under our skin, to provoke an emotional reaction. As Doyle recognizes, this is work that can “leave us in a strange space,” that “pushes the spectator away and draws her in at the same time,” and that—even in its difficulty—is “deeply moving (for some, including myself)” (xi). Like the work Doyle and Gould describe, the beautiful writing I examine invests in the political potential of moving and being moved.

If I seek to expand black feminist commitments to making black beauty visible and to argue that the risky vulnerability of the writer, alongside the desire to move the reader, is the hallmark of recent black feminist beautiful writing, I am also invested in building on a body of scholarship that aspires to consider beauty as a project of justice, even as that body of work often unfolds apart from black feminism and black women. Elaine Scarry argues, “The claim . . . that beauty and truth are allied is not a claim that the two are identical. It is not that a poem or a painting or a palm tree or a person is ‘true,’ but rather that it ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error” (2013, 52). Scarry seeks to rescue beauty from critique, namely the sense that beauty is a kind of distraction that “makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just” (58). Instead, she argues, beauty enlists us in the project of seeking justice “not only by requiring of us constant perceptual acuity—high dives of seeing, hearing, touching—but by more direct forms of instruction” (62). Because beauty prompts a desire for *more* beauty, it invites us to cultivate practices of care, tenderness, and love that make beauty possible. In other words, we know beauty’s presence because it unleashes our desires. She writes, “What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it. Beauty brings copies of itself into being” (3). It is this desire to create a

world that makes repeating beauty possible that is the ethical impulse that undergirds beauty. This view of beauty's political project is echoed by Ivone Gebara, who notes, "If justice is fundamentally about creating right relationships, beauty is in many ways the incarnation and measure of the integrity of those relationships. It is a kind of aesthetic love, an invitation to nurture the creativity and integrity of every created thing. It is an invitation to salvation" (2003, 24). In likening beauty to love, creativity, integrity, and salvation, Gebara reveals that beauty is not merely aesthetic but an invitation to imagine a world hospitable to beauty's possibilities, arrangements, and touch.

My interest in both Scarry and Gebara is in their shared commitment to beauty's political and ethical work, their sense that beauty—however amorphous it is, however complex it is to define—contains within it an ethical impulse to create conditions that allow more beauty to flourish. While Scarry's book is not invested in the racial dimensions of beauty, what I draw from her work is a sense that beauty is itself politically productive, that it performs ethical work, that it works on us through enlisting us in the project of imagining a different world. Ultimately, I draw on Scarry's rehabilitation of beauty's ethics and embrace her conception of how beauty can produce new ways of seeing and longing to be seen, new ways of imagining the ordinary. If Scarry argues that reimagining beauty makes possible a desire to repeat beauty's presence, I see it working differently in black feminist theory. Black feminist work has a history of producing productive ruptures, tears, and breaks through writing. These tears are spaces of loss, violence, and wounding, and also spaces that can be healed but never rendered invisible through practices of intimacy, radical vulnerability, and love. Ultimately, beautiful writing *does* something, and it seeks to do something to its reader.

Loss

"The country in which you disembark is never the country of which you have dreamed. The disappointment was inevitable. What place in the world could sate four hundred years of yearning for a home? Was it foolish to long for a territory in which you could risk imagining a future that didn't replicate the defeats of the present?" (Hartman 2008a, 33). Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* is, in many ways, a rumination on loss as constitutive of black diasporic subjectivity. It thinks loss in multiple dimensions—theorizing personal and historical loss as intersecting. Hartman narrates her trip to Ghana, one motivated by a desire "to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in

the balance. . . . Unlike Alex Haley, who embraced the sprawling clans of Juffure as his own, grafted his family into the community's genealogy, and was feted as the lost son returned, I traveled to Ghana in search of the expendable and the defeated. . . . I would seek the commoners, the unwilling and coerced migrants who created a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas" (Hartman 2008a, 7). Of course, as in any compelling memoir, what Hartman seeks is not what she finds; it is, instead, a story of desires that are unfulfilled, of silences, absences, and the necessity of her own imagination for finding what she sought. If, as Hartman notes, "I thought the past was a country to which I could return," what the memoir reveals is that the fantasy of return is always simply that, a fantasy (15). The living, the surviving, the enduring requires a reckoning with the loss of the country, the homeland, *and* the fantasy of return. Hartman's text also suggests that loss is in the multiple, that the loss of the homeland is also the loss of mother, and that "losing your mother" is both about the loss of the motherland and the specter of a material mother who haunts Hartman's journey. In other words, for Hartman, the memoir is as much about the breaks and ruptures in family lines that slavery produces (and the desire to repair those ruptures) as it is about the desire to find a motherland.

As Hartman suggests, loss is always in the plural; it moves on multiple registers. In this vein, Karla Holloway begins her analysis of black mourning stories by turning to the loss of her son. She writes:

I could not have imagined that the series of insistent ideas . . . which invaded my serenity many years ago (well before my son's life took its tragic, final turn), would find its articulation in this manner. I do not tell his story for judgment or absolution. I tell it instead because it too has the characteristics of an "incident report" that is, finally, community property. Although I neither sensed nor expected that the book I imagined while standing at the edge of an island facing a too-blue sea would eventually find its space so intimately and so tragically mediated through the lives of those I love the most, I have found that I have had no recourse but to give my son's story and the one I imagined in that expanse of sea and sky their earned, shared space. (Holloway 2002, 8)

It is the "earned, shared space" that is characteristic of how black feminists think about loss. For Holloway, it is unthinkable to imagine black loss—historical, political, spiritual—without considering her son's place in that larger context, and it is impossible to excise her son from her scholarly engagement with black mourning. To name his loss is always to reference other losses and to recognize the intimate connection among various scales of loss.

This rich conception of loss also allows black feminist theorists to capture how loss indexes other feelings, including desire and love. As Elizabeth Alexander writes in her memoir, *The Light of the World*, “Perhaps tragedies are only tragedies in the presence of love, which confers meaning to loss. Loss is not felt in the absence of love” (2015, 3). For Alexander, the feeling of loss is inextricably bound to love, and loss garners its weight from the love that preceded it. David Eng suggests that loss is always haunted by a question—“what remains?” (2003, 1). He notes, “what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained” (2). For Eng, an investment in the remains constitutes a “politics of mourning” that he characterizes as “active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary” (2). Drawing on Alexander and Eng, I trace a black feminist investment in how loss always indexes what remains, and in how an investigation of the interplay between loss and what remains has come to mark contemporary black feminist scholarship. Yet I do not imagine an interest in the remains as a politics of mourning but instead as a sign of what Avery Gordon (1997), channeling Toni Morrison and Patricia J. Williams, terms “hauntings.” Hauntings are both deeply personal and deeply social; they are ghostly presences that jam the machinery of normative temporality as past and present seep into future. Hauntings, a sense of the palpable if not visible presence of something that is actually constitutive of black female subjectivity, has then come to shape the black feminist project of writing, not just in its content but in its very form.

On proximity

“Everyone in this photograph is now dead,” Christina Sharpe writes, describing one of the three photographs that end the first chapter of *In the Wake* (2016, 23). The image is one of Sharpe’s father clutching an infant, Sharpe’s mother looking with a mix of wonder and amusement at the baby, and two young children—Sharpe’s siblings—sitting on the floor. The picture stands as evidence of the book’s central argument: blackness is marked by its proximity to death, and it is crucial that black subjects retain a proximity to the dead as a loving strategy for defending the dead. If *In the Wake* is a rumination on the labor—the “wake work” (13)—required to manifest care and to practice defense, the book reveals that writing is a crucial part of this labor. As Sharpe notes, “the orthographies of the wake require new modes of writing” (113), and the book performs these new modes of writing through a commitment to beautiful writing that makes possible the proximity Sharpe advocates. Sharpe makes visible the labor of constructing

the book's beautiful form, noting, "I am trying to find the language for this work, find the form for this work. Language and form fracture more every day. I am trying, too, to find the words that will articulate care and the words to think what Keguro Macahria calls those 'we formations.' I am trying to think how to perform the labor of them" (19). Here, Sharpe reveals both that her project is as much one of form—of caring language—as it is of theorizing the wake, and that describing the wake's "orthographies" (74) necessitates certain kinds of language. Sharpe's willingness to make visible the labor, the quest "to find the language for this work," suggests that part of the labor of "wake work" is the search for the forms required to stage defense, care, and proximity.

Death has long been central to black feminist engagement with loss, as black feminist theorists have held space for the material and fleshy bodies that have been taken, stolen, or simply killed by virtue of state violence or neglect. In recent years, death has been the primary form of loss that black feminists have attended to, particularly with the rise of Black Lives Matter in the US political conscience and Afropessimism in the black studies academic conscience. Yet what distinguishes Sharpe's *In the Wake* is that it is less interested in theorizing the dead (or in arguing that the place of black bodies is the position of social death) and more interested in what it means to be proximate to the dead. What happens if we refuse both forgetting *and* remembering the dead, positions that always figure the dead as part of our temporal past, and instead sit beside the dead? What happens when a black feminist engagement with death is one centered on intimacy and proximity? What kind of language is required to describe and advocate for those forms of intimacy? In a social moment in which the black dead are still imagined as black men, and black women are imagined as protectors of black male children, wives of slain black men, and mothers of dead black boys, black women are more likely to be imagined as proximate to the dead than as the dead themselves.³ Sharpe's work refuses this long-standing gendered logic, imagining an ungendered black subject as performing caring, loving proximity to death.

Crafting proximity requires different kinds of forms, and Sharpe's book offers a catalog of forms that black feminist intimacy with dead flesh might take. Sharpe champions a kind of "undisciplined" work, a "blackened knowledge, an unscientific method," a method of "sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena" (2016, 13). The book stages its undisciplined investments by unfolding its central argument through echo and resonance, a decided commitment to antilinearity, to unscientific method, and to track-

³ I trace this at length in earlier work. See Jennifer C. Nash (2016).

ing and gathering. For example, the wake, the book's key analytic, unfolds slowly. The reader must follow the analytic—gather it—through the manuscript, watching its varied meanings unfold, often through italicized interventions that read more like fragments of poems than like firm definitions. At the beginning of the book, Sharpe indicates, the wake is a critical hermeneutic, a “problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world” (5). Yet the reader quickly learns that the wake also constitutes a way of living, breathing, doing, thriving, and creating alongside and around the fact that “state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on” (7). In other words, the wake is a form of consciousness cultivated from and through the experience of being noncitizen(ed). Yet, the wake is far more. Sharpe offers the following definitions at various moments in the book's first chapter:

The track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow (3)

Wake: a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking (10)

Wake: grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life (11)

The italicized definitions are their own rupture; they are whispers that present themselves at various moments in the text, which require the reader to gather and hold various conceptions simultaneously. The wake is a practice (remembrance), an affect (grief, celebration), a relationship to time (what is left behind), and a form of touch (a literal rupture or disturbance).

These definitions, which appear at various moments over the course of the book's first chapter, seem to enact the kind of “disturbed flow” (3) the wake describes, acting as italicized interventions in the otherwise so-called standardized text, making the wake's disturbance something the reader is always in proximity with. Moreover, if the wake is an argument for a blackened temporality, for the constitutive element of hauntings for blackness, for the constant interplay between past and present, the book's presentation of it performs that kind of temporality. Definitions repeat themselves and echo earlier definitions. As Sharpe notes in her endnotes, “Some definitions, phrases, and quotations (like, for example, the definitions of wake) will repeat throughout the text of *In the Wake* and will be marked by italics. I imagine these italicized repetitions as a reminder, a refrain, and

more” (135). The wake becomes refrain, like the repeated line that ends a stanza of poetry, and also like a whisper that accompanies the reader through the text. This refrain, which endlessly upends the temporality of the book by insisting that the reader return again and again to the definitional work of the wake, makes plain one of Sharpe’s investments, a phrase she borrows from Michel-Rolph Trouillot: *The past—or more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past* (Sharpe 2016, 9; repeated on 55; see also Trouillot 2015). We are never outside of the past, Sharpe reminds us, even the past tense of the book. The labor of the haunting refrain, the chorus that repeats itself sometimes emphatically and sometimes quietly, is a performance of the kind of time that Sharpe advocates marks blackness and that permits a distinctive, important, and loving proximity of to the dead.

These discursive strategies—antilinearity, echo, resonance—that perform the wake and make visible the kinds of writing wake work necessitates are practices of proximity. Indeed, when Sharpe advocates that those invested in wake work become undisciplined, she champions practices of writing that refuse the violence that we are so often required to perform to satisfy standards of academic excellence (including denying embodied knowledges, supporting racialized conceptions of evidence, and neglecting the subjective dimension of scholarly writing). She emphasizes that these refusals enable us to get next to the dead, to treat loss as both constitutive of black life and as something we must remain close to in order to treat what has been lost, *who* has been lost, with love and care. The labor of staying close to the dead, of intimacy with those deemed lost, requires an aesthetic and political investment in a different kind of writing, in a writing that embraces beauty as a tactic, a strategy, and as a practice of care.

Being together

Nicole Fleetwood writes, “I have this photographic collection of Allen and De’Andre aging, maturing, changing in prison. The images of Allen, now almost twenty years into his life sentence, accumulate, from an angry and scared teenager to a depressed man in his twenties, now to a resigned but hopeful man in his late thirties, anticipating each time he goes before the parole board that he will be released” (2015, 505). If Sharpe invests in certain forms of beautiful writing to “defend the dead” (2016, 10) and to suggest the political and psychic importance of intimacy with the dead, Fleetwood’s work deploys beautiful writing to insist on a proximity to those constructed as socially dead, as disposable. Indeed, Fleetwood’s article begins as a rumination on proximity with her incarcerated cousin, an intimacy

made possible by their ongoing practice of exchanging photographs. Their exchange forms the basis for a longer scholarly engagement with prison photography as a “practice of intimacy and attachment between imprisoned people and their loved ones,” a strategy for marking time together (2015, 490).

Yet, as Fleetwood’s analysis indicates, it is not merely photographs that produce an insistence on black life over and against the set of forces that work to relegate black bodies to the space of social death. Indeed, it is writing—and writing from an archive of memory—that makes possible a refusal of state-produced exile and a radical form of being together. While Fleetwood theorizes the archive of memory as rooted in a commitment to the “anecdote,” a methodological tool that does its work alongside everyday experience, that aspires to “personalize and generalize,” her writing reveals that anecdote is given meaning, context, and substance through memory (492). For instance, in her analysis of a photograph of herself, her cousin Allen, and her mother, she writes “There is one image of Allen that unsettles me” (507). In the image she describes, Allen reminds her of her uncle, David, who spent a period of his life in prison and then, after his release and a few decades battling addiction, he died as the result of drug abuse and exposure to Agent Orange during Vietnam. Fleetwood writes, “I want to erase these connections from his face. I want to alter the image—to paint his face over with a cold stare, a mischievous grin, something other than that look of resignation, of being caught up in a narrative that is bigger than the self” (507). Here Fleetwood is theorizing both the affective power of the photograph (to contain both who is represented and who is not there but who is remembered) and the fundamental relationship between the photograph and memory. In other words, for Fleetwood, the photograph’s meaning is attached to who is *not* represented but who she senses is there, and it is memory that enables her to interpret the photograph’s dense meaning, including histories of state-produced violence. It is Fleetwood’s memory that enables her to trace for the reader the intimate connections between a look on Allen’s face, and David’s, that allows Fleetwood to theorize what can underpin a “look of resignation.”

For Fleetwood, beautiful writing is also a method for capturing the practices of love, tenderness, and “carceral intimacy” that produce belonging. It is, then, a method that requires a commitment to disclosure. Her analysis asks what happens when we—our families, our loved ones, ourselves, our memories, our experiences of loss—become the archive? And what happens when that archive, including the images of relatives that Fleetwood analyzes, is reproduced in scholarly journals for intellectual (and political) consumption? What happens when the snapshot and the memories it churns

up become the archive of the socially dead and a critical practice of fostering connection with them? Indeed, as Fleetwood argues for the affective labor of vernacular prison photography, she also deeply positions herself—as photographed subject, as recipient of these photographs—in her analysis. For example, in one photograph Allen, Allen’s mother, and Allen’s aunt (Fleetwood’s mother) pose for a photograph. The staged background conjures an image of a vacation, of a sunset taken from a cruise. Fleetwood writes, “Every time I look at this photograph, I know that it was taken in a prison, but I also have to tell myself that Allen, as an adult, has never taken a vacation. He has never watched the setting sun aboard a ship with relatives by his side” (497). The photograph labors to remove the signs of the carceral even as it is produced under conditions of surveillance (and, as Fleetwood reveals, under direct surveillance by prison guards). In this moment, as Fleetwood’s analytic work circles around the work of fantasy in prison photography, it also reveals the tragic undercurrents of that fantasy—the image of vacation is one that Allen has never had. The fantasy comforts and provides fictions of belonging while also revealing what has never been. The work of the beautiful writing is to make clear the kinds of radical intimacy the photograph can engender, and the labor of the author’s disclosure, self-revelation, in forging an understanding of the photographs that make possible intimacy and proximity.

In another calculated move of disclosure, Fleetwood describes her initial grief at encountering Allen’s pictures. She writes, “I dreaded opening an envelope from him if I could feel that the contents included something akin to the thickness and flexibility of photographic paper. . . . Over time, I learned to prepare myself for an onslaught of feelings that always settled into a lingering sadness and sense of helplessness. After a brief and steadied glance, I would store the envelope in the suitcase under my bed” (488). The tucked-away suitcase with “memorabilia from Ohio prisons” sent from Allen and other relatives during periods of incarceration and the sense that a portrait can produce the weightiness of “helplessness” are evidence of the psychic weight of state-sanctioned removal on the lives of incarcerated subjects’ loved ones (488). Fleetwood then describes a decision to hang the photographs Allen has sent her around her house, to greet them, and “after a while, they no longer unsettled me. They were just there, along with all the other possessions and images in my cluttered life” (489). Her recollection of the feelings of “helplessness,” of “sadness,” of the “onslaught of feelings” is a reminder that we—as scholars—can be undone by our archives and that the life-making work of being proximate to the socially dead does not come without complex emotional labor. What happens, she asks,

when grief and loss, exile and removal, become part of the quotidian, integrated into the “cluttered life?” What happens when the photographs that both produce care and stand as evidence of violent removal and dispossession become one of the things of ordinary existence? Indeed, this integration of the dispossessed into the clutter of everyday life is perhaps the greatest evidence of the radical possibility of proximity and intimacy as strategies that refuse dispossession—and that require the work of beautiful writing to chart such movements.

On risk: Or, notes on an ending

In the texts that I describe, beautiful writing becomes a method for staying close to loss and for exploring the centrality of loss to black female subjectivity. It does this work through a form—critical theory—that has often discredited the felt life, the black female subject, and embodied knowledge. The work of beautiful black feminist writing is not to argue for eschewing loss, for avoiding it, or for creating conditions that make loss less possible; instead, these texts urge us to stay as close to loss as possible, to sit in it, as a strategy for understanding the messy places where race and gender coincide to (re)produce the category of black womanhood. This writing suggests that an engagement with black women’s personhood requires a deep understanding of loss in all of its registers and scales. Part of what beautiful writing does, then, is to make visible that black women have something to lose, and thus it upends the prevailing Afropessimist notion that we are always already subjects who are marked by being/having lost. In the face of a political and theoretical project that presumes black death, beautiful writing insists on a longer black feminist tradition of survival, wellness, and care (even while navigating the commodification and sanitization of these terms through their various take-ups by capitalistic regimes). Though the work that I am invested in thinks deeply about the ongoing relegation of black bodies to places of social death, it refuses to rest in that place, choosing instead to theorize black life “in the wake.” It is this interest in living in the midst, but living nonetheless, that is one of the greatest frictional points between Afropessimism and contemporary black feminist theory. Black feminist theory refuses unwellness as a position and always adheres to precisely the analytic that Afropessimism would suggest necessary excludes black bodies—life. This body of work asks—again and again—what if it is a radical proximity, rather than a necessary death, that comes to define black female subjectivity; what if this proximity, this intimacy, is staged as a generous from of collectivity and world making that always resists the presumption of our dead flesh?

This willingness to stay close to loss is always risky work—emotionally, creatively, intellectually, and politically. Beautiful writing often does its work through revelation and disclosure, even when that revelation is mediated, calculated, and partial, even as revelation can unfold with a deep respect for what Elizabeth Alexander (2004) terms the “black interior,” for a kind of “mystery” (Abdur-Rahman 2012, 152) and privacy that has been argued to be a necessary space of radical “quiet” for black subjects (Quashie 2012). In so doing, beautiful writing does something else—it demands something of its writer. It requires that the writer grapple with the ethical, political, and personal questions of the “act of sacrifice” that constitutes beautiful writing. It requires a deep engagement with questions such as these: For whom do I make these disclosures? What do I owe the people who are closest to me? What of their privacy? What do they lose when I tell the story that I will call “mine” even though it is always necessarily ours? And what does it mean if black women’s truth tellings come through the sometimes exhilarating and sometimes exhausting process of disclosure?

This essay began with a rumination on my mother and loss(es), on an encounter with an object that made visible what I could not know and might not ever know. It began with a desire to understand *her shape and his hand*, the life of a woman who existed long before I did, who might have had erotic entanglements that I cannot even imagine, and the specter of an unfamiliar man. This essay was born of sentences scrawled in the corner of a notebook that I deemed not academic at least in part because of the kinds of disclosures they made, because it seemed closer to something I called *memoir* than to something I have been trained to call *theory*. The permission I have given myself to write this, and to allow its journey into the relatively sheltered world of academic publishing, hinges on the wholly imagined privacy of the scholarly journal, a venue, I convince myself, that my mother and those closest to her are unlikely to encounter. Yet even as I offer myself this reassurance, I find myself deeply conflicted about how an act of scholarship staged in the face of my own desire for promotion—part of the “frenzied ritual[s] of academic legitimation”—is made possible through a revelation that might fundamentally violate the privacy my mother would necessarily desire (Williams 1995, 219). This is a complex calculus, and one that I can neither resolve nor theorize my way out of. I can only uncomfortably inhabit it. Perhaps this arithmetic of risk and disclosure, this endless weighing of the distance I hope this essay will travel versus the privacy it may betray, is its own form of black feminist ethical struggle that beautiful writing makes possible.

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